

**Paper presented at the 24th Annual International Labour
Process Conference (ILPC)**

April 10-12 2006

Stream: Work-Life Boundary

Title: **Coupling in Transition. The Development of the
Relationship between Organisation and their Members**

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Coupling in Transition

The Development of the Relationship between Organisations and their Members

Abstract

New forms of employment are linked with a number of problems at different levels. At the societal level, questions of social security, pension problems, or the role of trade unions emerge. At the individual level, the social and psychological costs of highly individualised work arrangements come into focus. At the organisational level, too, practical as well as theoretical questions emerge. More specifically, this phenomenon touches on the issue of *drawing distinctions and boundaries* between organisations and their environment and thus – *boundaries between work and private life*.

This paper deals with the issue of structural coupling between organisations and individuals, especially new kinds of ties between organisations and individuals. The core assumption is that coupling has changed dramatically during the last decades. On the one hand, it has tightened for core staff members. On the other hand, it has loosened for marginal staff members. This leads to a polarisation within the workforce and new tasks for both management and social policy. Changes within the different dimension of coupling are assumed, too.

First, we introduce the concept of structural coupling. It focuses on the closeness of relationship and the degree of mutual influence between organisations and individual actors (Orton & Weick, 1990; Staehle, 1991; Weick, 1969, 1976). Tight coupling indicates that they are closely intertwined in their decisions. Loose coupling indicates a type of relationship where the decisions of one actor have very little consequence for the decisions of the other. Thus, in a tightly coupled relationship the decisions of one partner reduce the other's degrees of freedom much more than in a loosely coupled relationship.

Usually, the criterion for 'belonging to the organisation' is membership. In other words: organisations make their boundaries clear to their environment by signalling who belongs 'inside' and who does not via membership. Thus, organisations can act as 'collective actors' (Luhmann 1994; for a similar perspective see Coleman 1986 who talks about corporative actors) that make their drawings of boundaries highly visible and plausible for their environment. In such a traditional context, three types of media are primarily used to develop a highly complex system of jobs: (1) law, especially the working contract, (2) power, especially subordination, and (3) money, especially wages and salaries. We assume that this will not be the rule any more. Even if organisations still prefer tight coupling of personnel, they will use different media, or, to be more precise, different media and/or different means within the existing media.

Secondly, empirical evidence for the transition and polarisation of coupling will be provided. We analyse data of the Vienna Career Panel Project (www.vicapp.at), comparing different dimensions of coupling between business school graduates of different cohorts (1970, 1990, 2000). Coupling will be measured via work time, subjectively perceived degrees of freedom and hierarchical embedding. Relations between coupling and subjective and objective career success will be analysed additionally. Eventually, the impact of selected organisational and environmental variables on the form of coupling will be discussed.

1. New Context, New carriers, New boundaries?

Sweeping economic, technological and social changes during the last two decades have transformed the organisation of work. In the past few years the share of atypical employees has grown immensely. In the European Union, 42 million people (27 per cent of the total working population) have so-called atypical employment relationships (CIETT 2000): non-permanent or temporary contracts, freelance contracts and temporary employment relationships. At the same time the gap between various groups of employees has broadened.

The system governing work relations can be contained in various modes, thereby configuring different types or forms of work contracts. Long term employment and permanent forms of contracts with regulated hours of work, stability and security as well as the prospect of vertical advancement are diminishing. An “erosion of normal forms of employment” (Jurczyk 1998, Martin 2002) is observed: Stability, vertical advancement and employment security that defined industrial careers are disappearing. Greater flexibility performance demands and inter-firm mobility characterize twenty-first-century employment (Craig and Hall 2005: 115).

The share of fulltime employees in Germany has obviously sunk: While in the middle of the 1980s more than three quarter of the employees had a “normal” fulltime employment, at the end of the 1990s the share of this group sunk to 62 percent (Hoffmann and Walwei 1998). Thus atypical employment affects more than one third of the workforce. One group within these forms are self-employed without any employees of their own. Since the mid-nineties, the number of this group has risen sharply: About two millions of this type of self-employed exist in Germany, 20 percent of them coming into that status during the past five years (Leicht and Phillip 1999). Nearly half of the companies founded in the nineties in Germany were “single person” enterprises (Weißhuhn and Wichmann 2000).

As for atypical employment, Germany is not unique, as two even more striking examples indicate: consider Canada, where the number of self-employed increased by 119 % between 1982 and 1998 (compared to a 53 percent increase in paid employment). Whereas 66 % of new businesses that started between 1989 and 1996 had “paid employees”. Approximately nine-tenths of the job growth has come from entrepreneurs who work alone (Robertson and Mueller 1999). In Ireland self-employment has risen 60 % in 1982-1997, compared to a 27 % rise in employment (Euro-Business-Publications 1998).

Prior findings suggest that there is a higher share of self-employment among people with both low and high education. The newly self-employed are more likely than paid employees to fall into the lower and the higher earnings groups. One of the main causes for the rise in self-employment is not the new opportunities opened up by technology but a long-term decline in the opportunities available in the wage and salary sector (Kuhn and Schuetze 1999: 16f).

These new forms of employment are linked with a number of problems at different levels. At the societal level, questions of social security, pension problems, or the role of trade unions for defending the positions of these persons emerge. At the individual level, the social and psychological costs of highly individualised work arrangements come into focus. At the organisational level, too, practical as well as theoretical questions emerge. The ability of current labour law regulations to cover these arrangements, the possibilities and the limits of influencing and controlling human resources that are located ‘outside’ the organisation, questions of motivational tools for persons, the issue of loyalty, the short and long term effects of such arrangements for the qualification of the individual as well as for organisational learning or – similar to issues known from the network organisation debate (Nohira and Goshal 1997; Sydow and Windeler 2000) – the coordination of legally independent units are just a few examples of issues emerging here.

The focus of this paper, however, is on the impacts on the construction of boundaries between work and private life: Given the tendency of a polarisation of the workforce in terms of their coupling with organisations, which consequences for their dealing with boundaries between work and private life can be assumed? To approach this question, we will take a three-step approach:

1. We introduce a model of career fields which distinguishes four ideal types of fields according to the dimensions of coupling (tight vs. loose) and configuration (stable vs. unstable). Within this model, we will concentrate on the dimension of coupling, refine it and theoretically discuss modes of coupling between organisations and individuals.
2. We will introduce empirical findings of the Vienna Career Panel Project (ViCapp) which analyses the careers of Business School Graduates – a very specific sample. Hereby we focus on results on career fields and coupling between individuals and organisation. We identify three dimensions of coupling, its antecedents and consequences, and test our assumption of polarisation.
3. Finally we will discuss consequences of polarisation of coupling for the construction of work-life-boundaries.

2. A Typology of Career Fields

The proposed ideal-typical subfields of career (figure 1) are the results of the interplay of two dimensions: coupling and configuration:

- The *coupling* dimension focuses on the closeness of relationships and the degree of mutual influence between the focal actor and the other actor(s) in the field. Tight coupling means that actors are closely intertwined in their decisions. By loose coupling on the other hand we understand a type of relationship where decisions of one actor have little impact on the others' decisions.
- The *configuration* dimension focuses on changes in the configuration of relationships between the focal actors and other relevant actors over a longer period of time. A stable configuration implies that neither the social environment nor the tasks of the focal actor change rapidly or frequently.

Combining these two dimensions results in a four-field-typology (Mayrhofer et al. 2004: 485).

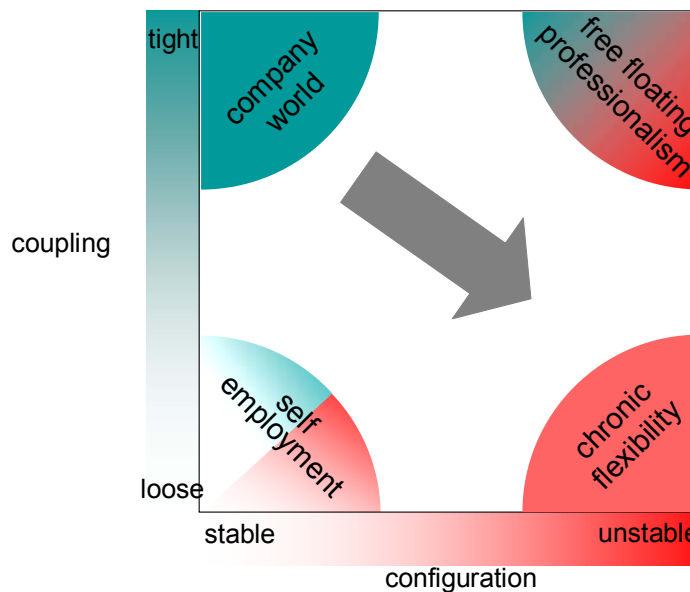


Figure 1: Subfields of Career

In this typology four ideal types of careers were identified. They can be labelled as following:

Company world (CW) is the field typically reflected in the traditional organisational career. It refers to the structure of jobs in an organisation where there are few other points of entry than at the bottom. The hierarchical movements (as well as the respective increase of income) are generally linked to seniority (Burchard 2000). The key resource is hierarchical position. The configuration is stable as there are comparatively little turnovers of actors in this field and coupling is tight with a high interdependence between the actors in this field.

Self employment (SE) is another field of career which is usually comprised by individuals working outside organisations. Typically, they are either self-employed or entrepreneurs. The relationships are comparatively stable and the coupling is loose. Autonomy and interdependence are highly valued, therefore being dependent on a small number of actors is avoided. The key resource in this subfield is the professional or role ethos and barriers to prevent entry to these fields do exist.

Free-floating professionalism (FFP) usually refers to specialists working for different customers – but not at the same time: They have relations with only one customer at a time, the customer being in most cases an organisation. The relation is temporary and leads to a sequence of more or less frequent changes in the set of customers. Therefore configuration is unstable. The main goal is an increase in interdependence, especially via recognition as an expert. Hence the key resources are knowledge and reputation.

Chronic flexibility (CF) seems to be quite similar to Free-floating professionalism mentioned above since careers are also characterized by frequent job changes. The fundamental difference lies in the disappearance of the boundaries of a domain of expertise. This means that changing from one job to another does not only imply a change from one organisation to another one but also from one industry to another one, from organisation to self employment etc.. Besides, individuals in CF might hold several jobs at the same time. Configuration is

highly unstable and at the same time coupling is loose. The key resources may be defined as the capacity to conquer a new domain as fast as possible.

It is crucial to keep in mind that the underlying “logic” in a field is defined by the extent of coupling and configuration and its characteristic is more important than surface labels. Likewise not all people working in an organisation belong to the subfield company world and vice versa. This view allows a “cross-sectional” look at careers emphasizing an arena within which careers unfold that does not solely rely on “traditional” concepts. “Instead, it focuses on the interplay between the individual agent and a set of practices that can cut across all ‘visible phenomena’ like professions, organisations, labour markets etc.” (Mayrhofer et al. 2004: 483).

This typology provides a framework for analyzing careers that have become more diverse. Though traditional careers starting with a specific kind of training in one’s early career stages, then following predictable and stable career paths within well defined fields of expertise, sometimes even within the same organisation, are still important in business life, this model helps to deal with new forms of career, also with a greater variety of combinations of private and professional activities (Auer 2000, Schmidt 2001). Drawing boundaries between working and private life obviously differs between Company World and Chronic Flexibility.

3. Traditional and New Forms of Coupling

Metaphors used in career research like the “nomadic career” (Cadin, Bailly-Bender, & Saint-Ginie, 2000; Cadin, Bender, Saint-Ginie, & Pringle, 2000), the “boundaryless career” (Arthur, 1994; Arthur & Rousseau, 1996) or the “protean career” (Briscoe & Hall, 2002; Hall, 1996; Hall & Mirvis, 1996) emphasize the decline of organisational commitment, of job stability and of career predictability. Overall flexibility is indeed on the rise, though there is no dramatic universal trend towards more instability in industrialized countries (Auer & Cazes, 2000). Further on we will concentrate on the coupling dimension. Rather than an overall loosening, we suppose a polarisation within the workforce: On the one hand a share of employees with tight coupling, on the other an increasing share with rather loose coupling.

According to Social Systems Theory, which postulates a basic closure of organisations and members as parts of the organisational environment, *structural coupling* is the mode or relating autopoietically closed systems with the environment, thus combining self-reference and external-reference. Structural coupling enables social systems to disregard many parts of the environment, e.g. many aspects of their members’ psychic systems. Given the enormous number of possibilities, they are impressed only by very few ‘instances’, e.g. by role behaviour and individual task performance. Indifference is the standard reaction to most of the environmental incidents. It is very sharply selective towards the environment as well as towards its own possibilities of ‘reaction’ (Luhmann 1988b: 35).

Nevertheless organisations regulate their boundaries through the definition of memberships which are embodied in contracts. Traditionally, individuals are regarded as tightly coupled to the organisation if they have the status of members. This issue is combined with the form of coupling. As Weick (1969, 1985) pointed out, the form of coupling is always a form of influencing. Being on the payroll is one of the major indicators of organisational membership. Additionally, labour contracts indicate whether individuals ‘belong’ to an organisation or not – and if they do, they fill certain positions within an organisation. In such a traditional context, three types of media are primarily used to develop a highly complex system of positions: (1) **law**, especially the labour contract, (2) **power**, i.e. subordination, (3) **money**, i.e. wages and salaries.

For a long time, tight coupling between the individual and the organisation and a stable configuration of individuals and relevant collective actors, especially employers, was the rule. Although there were national differences, the implicit assumption was that stability and mutual loyalty were essential ingredients of a well functioning working relationship. The concept of life long employment in Japan (Coles 1979) or the reward of high seniority in firms are examples of this. Exclusivity of –comprehensive whenever possible– inclusion was the implicit or explicit ideal or even rule. The concept of the ‘company man’ (Maccoby 1978), organisational socialisation procedures (Kasper 1992; Schein 1984; Hall 1987) that result - ‘I am an IBMer’ - in culture-adequate ‘indoctrination’ or career concepts which rely more or less solely on internal labour markets, internal advancement and few changes between organisations are illustrations of these assumptions.

The growth of personnel leasing, fragile employment relationships, outsourcing/subcontracting, virtual organisations, IT-mercenaries and the like are indicators of this change (D'Amours & Crespo, 2004; Houseman, 2001; Marsden, 2004). Organisations as well as individuals increasingly (have to) substitute tight coupling in favour of more flexible and free-floating forms of working relationships. Chronic flexibility seems to be on the rise. Even under these conditions organisations have to solve the core problems of using personnel in the context of a market economy following capitalistic principles: how can they secure a high degree of influence on the – ideally high, continuous and reliable – performance behaviour of these individuals, how can organisations use hidden reserves and tacit potential while at the same time being able to adapt smoothly and flexibly to changing demands? Will organisations easily relinquish achievements like control or calculability? Will they abandon the advantage of being recognised as a collective actor because of the changed ways of coupling? Will they accept a less clear picture of themselves for the sake of cost advantages that are linked with more flexible forms of coupling and less stable arrangements of configuration? In single instances, this may be the case, for instance, if an organisation does not want to be associated with its personnel for reasons of marketing or liability.

Generally organisations still prefer tight coupling of personnel, but use different media and/or different means within the existing media. Thus, crucial determinants for the survival and success of organisations, such as committing individuals to the organisation, getting performance from them and controlling their behaviour, will still be a major consideration – but reached by a different route: by functional equivalents for the previously most prominently used means. Working contracts, directives/subordination and power:

Within the medium of **law**, performance based contracts substitute the labour contract. Thus, organisations no longer merely have an option for the performance potential, but relate their own input into the exchange relationship to actual performance achievements. As a consequence the medium of **money** gains importance. It can be used with a high degree of variability and in a very fine-tuned way. Concrete performance and not performance potential and subordination is bought (Luhmann 1988b: 309). Thus, money is the functional equivalent to hierarchical subordination or directives in exerting micro-control. The medium of **power** is used less frequently, or, to put it more precisely, power is more disguised because money takes over the role of the fine-tuning instrument. In terms of the Luhmannian differentiation between personnel power and organisational power (Luhmann 1975), personnel power is mainly affected by these developments. Organisational power, on the other side, which relies much more on the specific situation of the labour market, is less influenced by that and still exerts macrocontrol in the sense of Hirschman’s exit option (Hirschman 1970). One medium of fine tuning – organisational power via attractive positions - is replaced by another: money. New types of membership and new types of jobs seem to be emerging. As a consequence the hitherto clear binary coding of member/non-member is replaced by a more gradual and

differentiated model that knows different types of (new) members/(new) jobs. Models like the coalition approach or the stakeholder concepts can be regarded as early heralds of such developments.

This new forms do not change the fact that organisations still demand commitment and loyalty from their personnel, they still want to use their potential. The ‘rhetoric of inclusion’ (Bardman 1995) is still en vogue: Individuals are recruited as entrepreneurs, decision makers, as heroes or scapegoats – nevertheless, from a systems theoretical point of view, they are ‘only’ a topic of communication that secures redundancy and latency (Luhmann 1988b). This leads to a kind of camouflage. It is the expectation structures and not individuals that are crucial for organisational decisions. Nevertheless, organisations demand inclusion from their members, most often: exclusive inclusion: “Thou shalt have no other firm beside me.” This fiction – if shared – leads to positive effects. The professional performance of individuals can be used ‘exclusively’ and the coupling between individuals and other social systems can be defined as joint blind spot, thus avoiding too complicated and conflicting expectation structures. If you define a person as ‘yours only’, then all the problems arising from multiple constituencies are ‘his/hers’ only. Of course, this inclusion has been a temporary one even in so called standard or traditional working arrangements. Nevertheless, this temporary component has become more prominent because of the new developments and the semantics of flexibility and deregulation.

For organisations, this means that in the future they will have to face additional forms of self employment and membership compared to the ‘traditional’ versions. Free floating professionalism, chronic flexibility, gradually modified firms of membership seem to become more important. Nevertheless, organisations still try to develop tight coupling and stable configuration through the illusion or fiction of exclusivity of inclusion in order to secure crucial contributions from their personnel. Thus, they transcend the ‘traditional’ binary options into the market logic – membership/non-membership, payment/non-payment (Luhmann 1988a: 230f), loyalty/exit (Hirschman 1970).

4. Method, Sample & Measures

Started in 2000 and supported by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF), the Vienna Career Panel Project (ViCaPP) attempts to explore the professional careers of business school graduates in Austria. The panel consists of three cohorts of graduates from the Vienna University of Economics and Business Administration (WU Wien) who completed their studies around 2000, 1990 and 1970, respectively. The 2000 cohort also includes a sample of polytechnic graduates. The following table presents the size and age distribution for the samples upon which the following analyses are based.

<i>Cohort</i>	<i>2000</i>	<i>1990</i>	<i>1970</i>
<i>n</i>	367 (54% male)	205 (61% male)	69 (84% male)
<i>Mean age</i>	32,2 years (± 3.6)	41,1 years ($\pm 3,4$)	61,2 years ($\pm 4,0$)

Table 1: ViCaPP-Sample (Percentages and age based on valid responses)

The women were about one year younger in the 2000 cohort, half a year in the 1990 cohort, and about two years in the 1970 cohort.

A wide range of variables was collected in all three cohorts, including psychometric and sociodemographic variables as well as data on professional development (for an overview see, e.g., Mayrhofer, Meyer, & Steyrer, 2005). The variables that are of interest here refer to

various aspects of **structural coupling** between organisations and individual employees. Six variables were chosen:

1. **Security and calculability of career-related prospects** (very secure vs. very precarious)
2. **Subjection of career-related prospects to specific external actors and/or constraints** (very dependent vs. completely independent)
3. **How easily another adequate job could be found should the need arise** (very easily vs. not at all)

These three variables represented the dimension of coupling as defined in the theoretical framework. In addition, three further variables reflecting structural coupling were included in the following analyses:

1. **Closeness and intensity of professional relations** (very close vs. not at all close)
2. **Amount of energy invested in one's job** (0% – 100%)
3. **Work hours per week**

Two further variables were used to measure the stability of the configuration:

1. **Stability / instability of professional relations** (very stable vs. very unstable)
2. **Stability / instability of tasks** (very stable vs. very unstable)

All of the abovementioned items except work hours per week were measured by a 11-point Likert scale.

The four **career aspiration scales** were developed within the framework of ViCaPP, consisting of 33 items contained in the ViCaPP questionnaire. Participants were asked to rate the items on a four-point Likert scale ranging from “very desirable” to “not at all desirable”. Initially, an item pool with 51 items was compiled, with 12 to 15 items belonging to each one of the four career fields according to our theoretical framework. Apart from the usual criteria like item discrimination, item intercorrelation, and item facility, a validity criterion was available as well. This validity criterion was represented by a separate part of the questionnaire, where participants were asked to indicate their preference for one of the four career fields (based on short descriptions of each field). Item selection aimed at optimising internal scale consistency and scale validity. All four scales meet commonly accepted standards regarding these two criteria. Three of the four scales have consistency values > 0.80 (see table 2). As for validity, the contingency coefficient between indicated preferences for one of the fields and the scales is 0.61. Given that the validity criterion itself obviously has low reliability, the obtained validity value can be assessed as quite high.

Career Aspiration Questionnaire (KASP) <i>ViCaPP</i> (designed for the project) <i>Norming based on</i> <i>N = 330</i>	Career Aspiration – Company World <i>People who score high on this scale ...</i> strive for a position of responsibility and influence and a long-term career within one organisation. Sample Item: <i>Feeling part of an organisation.</i> $\alpha_{(ViCaPP - N = 326)} = 0.86$
	Career Aspiration – Free-Floating Professionalism <i>People who score high on this scale ...</i> want to be under contract to one or a few organisations for special and challenging tasks, staying with the same organisation only for a limited

<i>Number of Items: 33</i>	time. Sample Item: <i>Managing projects without being too tightly connected to an employing company.</i> $\alpha_{(ViCaPP - N = 328)} = 0.71$
	Career Aspiration – Self-Employment <i>People who score high on this scale ...</i> seek “traditional” self-employment, i.e. offering a range of quite standardised products and/or services to a relatively stable clientele. Sample Item: <i>Turning a business idea into a profitable company.</i> $\alpha_{(ViCaPP - N = 326)} = 0.81$
	Career Aspiration – Chronic Flexibility <i>People who score high on this scale ...</i> aspire to a “freelancer” career with different projects for various clients and ever-changing work contents. Sample Item: <i>Always taking on new tasks in various fields of activity.</i> $\alpha_{(ViCaPP - N = 330)} = 0.82$

Table 2: Scales and Measurements - Career Aspirations

In order to assign the participants to one of the four career fields, their values on the four aspiration scales were first converted to percentile ranks and then to z-scores by means of area transformation. The scale on which each graduate attained the highest z-score then determined the field he or she most aspired to.

5. Coupling observed: Preliminary Empirical Results

5.1. Career Field: Aspirations and Allocation

Career aspirations could be defined as a cluster of needs, motives and behavioural intentions which individuals articulate with respect to different career fields. Career aspirations measure the strength of an actor’s intention to be active in a particular career field. The notions in our approach show similarities with the notions of ‘career anchors’ from Schein (1977, 1994), who differentiates between managerial competence, technical functional competence, security, creativity, and autonomy/independence. Our understanding of career aspiration is narrower, with the target of measuring the intention of actors to become active in different career fields. It represents a type of mental self selection.

Figure 2 specifies the number of graduates aspirations towards one of the four career fields. With regard to the dimensions coupling and configuration, especially the 2000 cohort shows a high share of graduates tending towards loose coupling (Self-Employment, Chronic Flexibility).

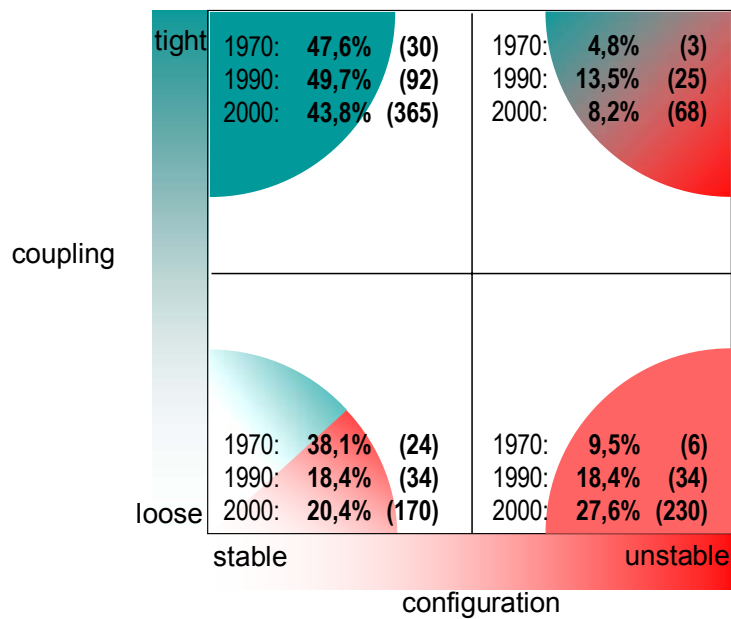


Figure 2: Career Aspirations in the ViCaPP-Cohorts

Looking at the actual allocation within the four career fields in Figure 3 (separated by the theoretical means for the coupling and configuration scales, as shown in the graphic) reveals that the relative majority still "belongs" to Company World. Comparing the cohorts, we see an increasing share of graduates working in unstable configurations (Free-floating Professionalism, Chronic Flexibility), whereas the dimension of coupling shows less differences between the three cohorts.

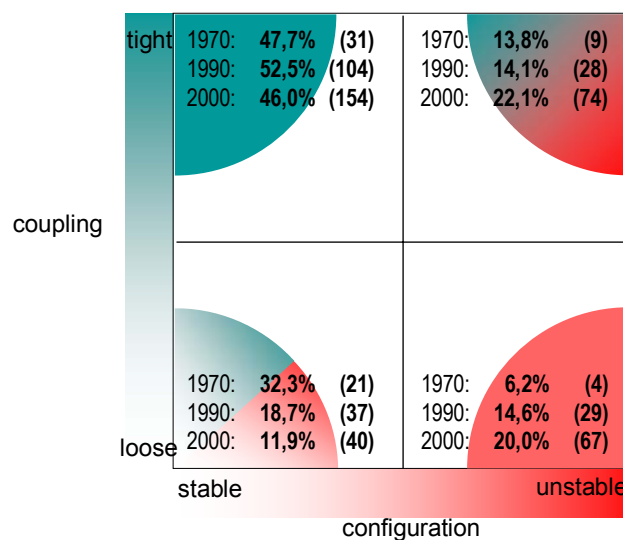


Figure 3: Field Allocation in the ViCaPP-Cohorts

5.2. Dimensions of Coupling

The following table shows the results of a PCA for the six coupling items described above for the former graduates' sample (1970 & 1990 cohort). The resulting three factors (64% of variance explained) represent three different aspects of coupling.

The first factor stands for a "locked-in" form of coupling: career perspectives seem insecure, there are few alternatives, and the professional network offers no help either, being too loose and non-committal. The second factor represents a performance- and commitment-based sort of coupling. The third factor comes closest to the definition of coupling presented above: actors being tightly intertwined in their actions and decisions. The following table shows the factor loadings for all three factors (loadings < 0.3 have been omitted).

	<i>factor 1</i>	<i>factor 2</i>	<i>factor 3</i>
Security of career-related prospects	-0.80		
Difficulty to find an adequate alternative job	0.67		
Working hours per week		0.83	
Amount of energy invested into job		0.74	
Subjection of career to external actors and/or constraints			0.82
Closeness and intensity of professional relations	-0.52		0.56

Table 3: Factor loadings for coupling items in the former graduates (70s & 90s)

The results for the 2000 cohort are not presented in detail here, as they were not included in the subsequent analyses, being restricted to the very first entry stage of their careers. A PCA for the 2000 cohort yielded a three-factor solution, too. While the *locked-in* and the *performance* factor (factor 1 and 2) were almost identical, the *entanglement* factor (factor 3) was "replaced" by a factor uniting *subjection of career to external actors and/or constraints* and *difficulty to find a an adequate alternative job*. It could therefore be termed a "dependence" factor that does not include the security aspect.

An analysis of the correlations between the three coupling factors for the former graduates (1970 and 1990 cohort) and some career outcomes and situational variables shows that in terms of desirable outcomes (and based on our PCA), coupling is a "two-edged sword". While the *locked-in* factor is negatively linked to both career outcomes and situational variables, the opposite is true for the *performance and commitment* factor. *Entanglement* seems to be a rather "neutral" factor concerning situational variables and career outcomes, especially for the 1990 cohort.

	locked-in	performance. commitment	entanglement of actors	
Hierarchical position		0.24		1990 cohort n=185
Career satisfaction	-0.28			
Income	-0.26	0.37		
Growth of organisation	-0.18			
Growth of branch	-0.17			
Strong position within branch		0.23		
Hierarchical position	-0.36			1970 cohort n=55
Career satisfaction	-0.42		0.45	
Income		0.41		
Growth of organisation	-0.23	0.39		
Growth of branch		0.34		
Strong position within branch	-0.22	0.24	0.29	

All presented correlations: $p < 0,05$ in 1990 cohort, $p < 0,10$ in 1970 cohort (2-tailed)

Table 4: Correlations between coupling factors and career outcomes/situational variables

A closer look at the relationships between situational variables and coupling suggests that these relationships between coupling and both situational variables and career outcomes was somewhat more important for the 1970 cohort, but the effects have not substantially changed. Being "trapped" in a sagging organisation contributes to *locked in* coupling in both cohorts, as does a declining branch for the 1990 cohort and a weak position within the branch for the 1970 cohort.

In contrast, the *performance and commitment* factor is positively influenced by all three situational variables in the 1970 cohort, but growth no longer seems to stimulate commitment in the 1990 cohort. The *entanglement* factor shows no correlations with situational variables except for a positive relationship with the company's position within the branch for the 1970 cohort.

The same tendencies apply to the relationship with career outcomes. While the *locked in* factor has a negative relationship with career satisfaction and objective career success in both cohorts (hierarchical position in the 1970 cohort, income in the 1990 cohort), the *performance and commitment* factor is positively linked with income in both cohorts, and additionally with hierarchical position in the 1990 cohort. For the older 1970 cohort, *entanglement* shows a positive relationship with career satisfaction, suggesting that the mutual interdependence of actors somehow increased professional well-being then, possibly due to the feeling of security and stability it offered.

5.3. Polarisation of Coupling

The following section concludes the empirical analyses and deals with the hypothesis that there is a polarisation of coupling, i.e., the gap between more tightly and more loosely coupled actors has widened over time. The following table presents the mean differences between "low-end" and "high-end" groups¹ of all cohorts for each coupling variable (z-transformed for better comparability) in the first job year (career entry).

Mean difference between "low-end" and "high-end" groups; z-transformed values	1970	1990	2000
Security of career-related prospects	1.55	1.67	1.67
Subjection of career to external actors and/or constraints	1.59	1.56	1.68
Amount of energy invested into job	1.97	2.38	2.51
Difficulty to find an adequate alternative job	1.46	1.50	1.66
Working hours per week	1.73	1.93	1.98

Table 5: Mean differences between "low-end" and "high-end" groups for all coupling variables and each cohort.

Although the differences do not appear spectacular, they obviously lend support to the idea of a tendency towards polarisation of coupling: in most cases, the differences are larger for the "younger" cohorts than for the "older" cohorts. One must also take into account that the data stem from a very homogeneous sample of highly qualified business school graduates, with a high probability of "making it into the core staff".²

Fragmentation of established organisational and employment relationships is also reported elsewhere (Grimshaw et al 2005: 264). The permeability of the boundaries within the staffs in organisations visualises this trend. Atkinson (1984) proposes that employers seek an optimal balance between functional, numerical and financial forms of flexibility through segmenting the labour force into core and peripheral (marginal) groups (see Figure 4). Due to environmental dynamics and intensified competition organisations have taken up reorganisational activities such as outsourcing, downsizing and M&A in order to adapt to the situation (Hellgren/Sverke 2003: 215). The results are smaller core workforces and reduced hierarchies.

¹ Via median split and/or comparison of lowest/highest third.

² The analyses were restricted to employees of organisations, with self-employed persons filtered out. This homogenised the sample even further.

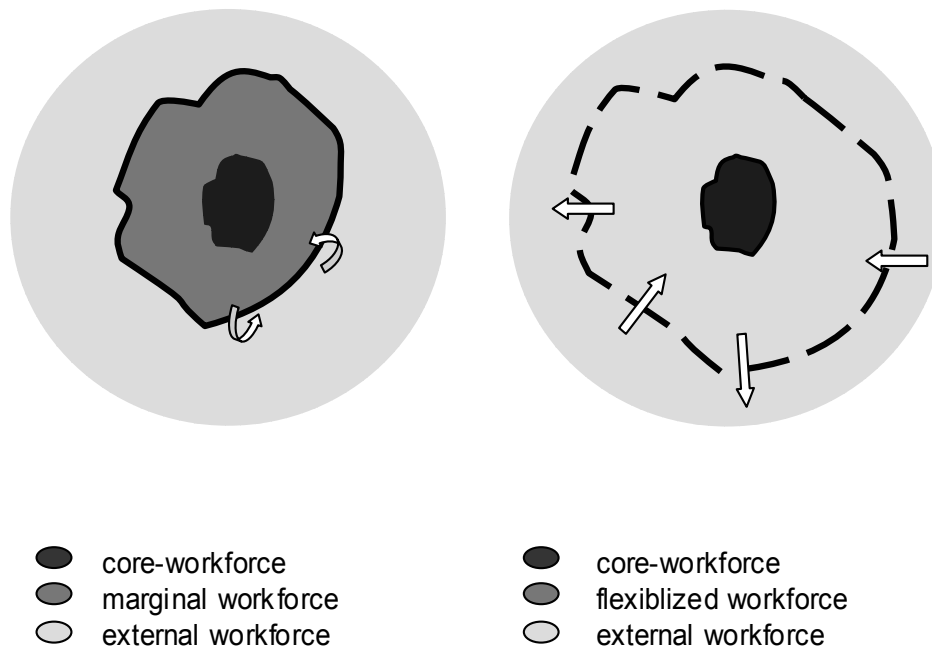


Figure 4: Flexibility and the boundaries of organisation

On the one hand, boundaries between the marginal workforce and the external labour market become more permeable through these various forms of contracts. The barriers of admittance still exist but flexible forms of contracts make these barriers more permeable in both directions: in and out. We now talk about “flexibilized workforce”. On the other hand, the boundary between the marginal and core-workforce becomes impervious (Bendl/Schmidt 2004). This fits well with our empirical results: The core workforce represents the group of tightly coupled employees based on commitment and investment of time and energy, whose careers – i.e. advancement, compensation, benefits – still depends on employees’ physical, cognitive and emotional attachment to organisations, on seniority and loyalty.

In accordance with this development, firms now offer employability rather than employment security and it is interesting that within this new flexibilized workforces we find two different forms of coupling: (1) There is the one group of tightly coupled employees due to insecurity of their job perspectives and the lack of alternative job offers. (2) The other group are those who are loosely coupled with the organisation.

These discussions around flexibility signal deep changes that influence the future framework for HRM within organisations and have been part of ongoing discussions (Osterman 1987; Lepak/Snell 1999; Wächter 2002), but these discussions have less focused on the forms of individual coupling and their consequences.

5. Consequences for Work-Life Boundaries

Grimshaw et al (2005: 262ff) argue that established models of organisation and employment, based on the assumption of a single employer and a unified organisation, have diminishing relevance and value where standardised employment conditions based upon full-time, permanent contracts with a single employer are accompanied and supplanted by a plurality of other forms and arrangements. Work is fragmenting and boundaries between organisations are blurring. They are permeable at both the intra- and the interorganisational levels (Yan/Louis

1999: 26). Yan/Louis (1999: 43) trace and highlight the migration of important boundary-related activity from the organisational to the work unit level in the context of current organisational realities.

At first glance, the notion of **blurring boundaries** is associated with a tendency towards loose coupling: Loosening the relationship between individuals and organisations by soaking membership rules makes it more difficult for individual actors to distinguish between occupational and private spheres. Empirical results, however, show at least for our sample that tight forms of coupling remain important. More than this, comparing different cohorts of business graduates, for a significant share of them there is even a tightening of coupling observable.

Even the way work is defined will gradually change as boundaries between job, between organisations, and between work and family become more fluid and ambiguous (Schein 1996: 83). Organisations adopting high-performance practices also adopt flexible working time and career-break practises, thereby giving employees more scope to adapt work demands to family or non-work aims. Tight coupling means not only an increase of commitment and energy spent into the job, but also losing alternatives and feeling locked-in. Thus, non-work domains might get marginalized.

Work and non-work spheres are discussed as separated versus integrated. Separation, which implies little or no interaction between the two domains was traditionally associated with blue-collar workers who were thought to disengage from work during non-work-time (e.g. Piortkowski 1979). Hall/Richter (1988) presented boundary flexibility as an employers strategy of 'respect' which is appropriate where a blurring of the boundary between work and non-work life is an exception. An alternative conception of work-life 'integration' depicts a more flexible boundary where individuals have greater control over how they manage their work and non-work lives (Scholarios/Marks 2004: 56).

As long as the coupling is tight employees have the possibility to choose between individual strategies like separation or integration, although the work sphere might soak up energy, time, and emotional devotion. Recent findings show that also managers, who by and large could not get rid of the myth of being another ideal type of those who separate work and especially family domains, show various distinct life-orientations and ways of dealing with the work-non-work-tension (Kasper et al. 2005). Other findings of Scholarios/Marks (2004: 68) support the image of a flexible boundary between work and life which can be controlled by workers. They also suggest that aggregated perceptions of fair treatment, of which perceptions of work-life balance may be one, will benefit organisational outcomes such as actual turnover through positive employee attitudes.

Based on our findings about the dimensions of coupling, the following assumptions can be made on individuals' influence on the construction of boundaries: (1) The 'positive' dimension of tight coupling, i.e. commitment and energy invested, allows different strategies like separation or integration of work- and non-work-spheres. (2) This freedom of choice is mere fiction within the group of the locked-in individuals due to insecurity of their job perspectives and the lack of alternatives. (3) The group of rather loosed coupled individuals is confronted with various forms of blurring boundaries: on the one hand blurring boundaries between internal and external labour markets (Figure 4) and on the other between work and non-work domains.

The group of loosely coupled individuals is characterised by a high autonomy of occupational development and a rather minor importance of job-related relations. As long as these people can make use of the advantages of flexible forms of employment without any risks of low income, low social security or low stability of employment, they will be winners of flexibility.

Without freedom of choice and discretionary space for enacting and constructing borders, the blurring of boundaries boundaries between work and non-work-spheres becomes a boomerang and precarity becomes a dominant factor. Decreasing social security and volatile employment will destroy the illusion of autonomy.

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