At the Crossroads: The Embedding Work of Market Participants in and Around Markets

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Abstract

Market participants stand at the intersection of at least two perennial contexts: their target market and their experience in other social spheres. A question remains regarding how market participants manage this position at the crossroads and how it affects their market activities. Thus far, market sociology has paid scant attention to these issues. To more closely investigate the enmeshment of market participants in multiple contexts, this article introduces the concept of embedding work and applies it to self-employed market participants, who engage in embedding work in two directions: They establish equivalences to target markets and biographic experiences, and at the same time, they draw distinctions from these contexts. Case studies of nascent entrepreneurs in Germany illustrate how embedding work impacts the choice of target markets and the maneuvering within these markets. The article contributes to market sociology by dealing with the embedding of markets in other social contexts as mediated by market participants.

Keywords: *Sociology of Markets, New Economic Sociology, Harrison C. White, Qualitative Methods, Self-Employment, Embeddedness*

Introduction

- 1.1 Market participants engage in multiple contexts. On one hand, they observe and interact with competitors in their target markets, make investments and devise product and marketing strategies. On the other hand, they also previously and concomitantly engage in other contexts. They arrange production, for example, and they must run the firm, which, in turn, requires combining materials, technologies, principles of knowledge and people (Smelser 2013). Furthermore, market participants may interact with nonmarket spheres, via politics (Fligstein and Stone Sweet 2002), corporate social responsibility (CSR) activities (Hiss 2006) and inter-organizational struggles and efforts at coordination (Emirbayer and Johnson 2008). Put differently, market participants stand at a crossroads between their target market and other (nonmarket) spheres. This article investigates how market participants manage their position at the crossroads and how this influences their market activities.
- 1.2 Despite considerable advances in market sociology (Fligstein and Dauter 2007, Lie 1997), current research devotes little attention to the question of how (individual or organizational) market participants move through and combine engagements in manifold societal spheres. The present article contributes to market sociology by raising two questions: First, the article asks how market participants come to choose their target market among the multitude of potential target markets. Second, it investigates how market participants maneuver within these market positions against the background of experiences from other contexts. To investigate such processes more closely, I introduce the concept of *embedding work*. Through embedding work, market participants develop and maintain their vulnerable co-positioning in multiple contexts. The concept of embedding work builds on the common sensual insight in market sociology that markets are not self-contained, self-sufficient entities, but rather substantially embedded in other social processes, such as politics or culture (Fligstein 2001, Levin 2008). With reference to self-employed persons it demonstrates that market participants act with respect to both, endemic market processes (such as niche seeking) and other logics and considerations. They draw on, fend off and translate influences and resources from elsewhere and thereby (each in different ways) embed markets in processes beyond markets. Thus, the concept of embedding work enlarges the scope of market sociology and offers an additional perspective on markets that evolves around market participants and not around markets as aggregates.

1.3 I develop and exemplify my approach in three steps. The following section expounds how the three main strands of market sociology address market embedding and, in particular, market participants as carriers of such embeddings. Section three develops the concept of embedding work by drawing on Harrison C. White's thinking. It provides the analytical grid for analyzing empirical processes around market participants at the intersection of markets and nonmarket contexts, such as personal trajectories. Drawing on a study on nascent self-employed entrepreneurs (Pongratz *et al.* 2013), section four presents the embedding work of nascent entrepreneurs in Germany. With reference to these case studies, the section discusses the benefits of the embedding work concept. The final section summarizes the argument and points to directions for further research.

Embedding and market sociology

2.1 The present article addresses the interrelations of market and other contexts as mediated by market participants. It addresses the question of how market participants manage their position at the crossroads of markets and other social spheres and how this process influences their market activities. What does sociological research on markets say about these issues? The following brief overview shows that while market sociology has dealt with the issue of embedding in manifold ways, it has thus far failed to provide a comprehensive approach to the task at hand. To develop this conclusion, I now present the approaches to embedding in the three main strands of market sociology.

Network approaches

2.2 With respect to markets, network analysis has developed along two lines. The first line views networks as an umbrella under which to approach markets and market participants. What market participants do and what they (can) achieve depend on their networking activities and on their position in networks, respectively (Burt 1982, 1992; Podolny 2001). In a classic study, Brian Uzzi (1996) investigates relations between apparel manufacturers and their business partners upstream in the New York garment industry. His results establish a link among market performance, market dynamics and the types of ties maintained (embedded or arm's length) (ibid: 677-679). For networks analysts in the first group, the market–nonmarket boundary runs through the personal networks of market participants – either within a particular tie (e.g., in multiplex ties to business partners and friends) or through (ego-)networks, separating different network areas from one another (e.g., a family network is distinct from a business network). The focus on markets is inward oriented, as nonmarket elements (such as trust or contacts with friends) are only examined with respect to market outcomes. Indeed, Granovetter argues that nonmarket issues enter 'when economic and non-economic activities are intermixed' and 'non-economic activity affects the costs and the available techniques for economic activity' (Granovetter 2005: 35). This line of research favors ties to and for markets over ties reaching beyond the market and it focuses on the economic performance (rationales) of market participants. The concept of embedding work contributes to this line of research with its interest in the ongoing struggles associated with taking a market position in the first place.

2.3 The second line of network research begins from a slightly different reading of embeddedness, pushing the concept in the direction of a relational sociology (Emirbayer and Goodwin 1994). Led by Harrison C. White and associates (Godart and White 2010; Fuhse 2015a,b; Mische and White 1998; Mische and Pattison 2000), this interpretation of embeddedness explicitly includes mutual observations as a form of embedding. In his ground-breaking study, White (1981) defines markets as 'self-reproducing social structures among specific cliques of firms and other agents who evolve roles from observations of each other's behavior' (ibid: 518). Market participants observe each other through the volume produced at a particular quality level to identify niches (their market positions). In relatively stable markets, these niches combine to form a market profile, a function that shows revenue conditioned on volume. This market profile is common knowledge in the market. It is simultaneously an outcome and a mechanism. This argument goes directly against economic arguments, as it suggests that markets bring about not one equilibrium in which demand and supply meet but rather a distribution of different quality/volume ratios. White (2002) elaborates on this approach to markets as a general framework for production markets and as an application of his social theory (White 2008). In this work, he particularly focuses on the development of market profiles and on embedding in up- and downstream markets and competing markets (White 2000, 2002a, b). In this way, he acknowledges the importance of contexts outside that of a specific target market, although primarily at the aggregate level of markets (not at the level of market participants or, as he would have it, market identities). Consequently, his empirical work on markets overemphasizes economic aspects in the constitution of market participants. As I argue in the following section, these are restrictions in empirical studies but not in theory. In fact, White's social theory provides ample resources to tackle the embedding work of market participants comprehensively (cf. section 4)

The Performativity School

2.4 The Performativity School begins with the assumption that social phenomena are best understood as associations between human and nonhuman entities (Latour 2005; Callon 1986). Instead of digging for 'deep' social structures underlying observable practices, performativists favor a flat ontology (Mützel 2009). The social is simply 'what is glued together by many other types of connectors' (Latour 2005: 5). Methodologically, one has

to address the social by a 'tracing of associations' (ibid.) in order to reconstruct the emergence and stabilization of actor-worlds, such as hybrid networks of modernity (Latour 1993) or markets (Callon 1998b). As with any other figuration, markets have to define and relate their constitutive entities toward efforts at translation (Callon 1986). Three elements are central: goods, agencies and encounters (Callon and Muniesa 2005). The association of these elements creates relative stability, which in turn gives room to social processes that are typical for economic markets: 'Once organized and hence locked-in, the market becomes calculable by the agents. Once the work of standardization (at least partial) of calculating tools is well on its way, each agency is in a position not only to calculate her decision but also, by construction, to include at least partially, in her calculations the calculations of the other agencies' (Callon 1998a: 50). Markets become coordination devices through which agents pursue their interests in calculations, interests conflict, and these conflicts are resolved in transactions involving prices (ibid: 3). Continuous intrusions of noneconomic issues challenge the stabilization of markets. Such 'overflowing' (Callon 1998b) must be addressed to maintain relative stability and expectability. Market worlds are ongoing collective achievements.

2.5 Market participants enter markets in a process of translation that relates them to other (human and nonhuman) agencies in the market-world and separates them from an unspecified outside (Callon 1986: 19). Owing to this process, a particular kind of agency (an agency that is different from, e.g., reflexive or disinterested agencies) emerges: a calculative agency. The calculativeness of these agencies is highly preconditioned (Callon 1998a). First, calculative agencies have to distinguish different states of the world. Second, they have to rank these different states, and third, they have to know how to bring about these states. These preconditions are enshrined in a market world, and its devices to enable calculating as a complex collective practice. Markets are 'collective organized devices that calculate compromises on the value of goods' (Callon and Muniesa 2005: 1229), and calculation may be unevenly distributed within a market (Beunza and Stark 2003). In general, the Performativity School is particularly strong in showing the co-determination of markets, market participants and goods traded in market encounters. Performativists demonstrate that market participants must be constructed to perform adequate market transactions and understood in relation to these market-worlds. They emphasize the embedding of market participants in markets and their disembedding (their 'disentanglement') from nonmarket contexts, but it leaves implicit the analytical counterpart of this disembedding work, i.e., continuity toward nonmarket trajectories and distinctions within market contexts. Moreover, Performativists' engagement with external influences on markets is selective, such as e.g., the role of economic theory (MacKenzie and Millo 2003) or experts (Cochoy 1998) in market-making.

Field analysis

2.6 Similar to Performativists, field analysts can draw upon an encompassing, consistent social theory when addressing markets. Markets are fields and, as such, are characterized in principle by the same processes as other fields in the social sphere (Fligstein and McAdam 2012; Bourdieu 1996, 1998; Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Markets are partly autonomous social structures at the meso level (Bernhard *et al.* 2012). They establish order for otherwise unlikely and highly premised economic transactions (Beckert 1996, 2009), and similar to other social fields, markets impose a common set of beliefs (Enjeu or conception of control) on market participants (Swartz 1997). When relatively stabilized, markets develop an internal bipolar power structure underlying competition and conflict (Bourdieu 2005; Fligstein 2001). Markets differ from other fields in that the strategic pursuit of personal goals is not more or less disguised but cherished as an integral element of the *Illusio* (Bourdieu 2005). They strongly depend on other social spheres to develop and maintain their relative autonomy. Field analysts are particularly interested in the intersection of markets and politics (Fligstein 2001). Political fields set rules (e.g., on merger acquisitions), guarantee basic institutions (e.g., property rights) and sometimes directly influence supply and demand (in, e.g., the housing market) (Bourdieu 2002). Not surprisingly, economic agents may develop demand for and interest in political regulations to engage in both material struggles (e.g., for market share) and in symbolic struggles about the rules of the game (Fligstein 2001).

2.7 Agents enter markets by taking a position in markets' hierarchical (bipolar) structure. Theoretically speaking, this encounter is an encounter of habitus and field position, which interact to produce practices (Hillier and Rooksby 2002). It is also an encounter of two vessels of social structure: the internalized or subjective structure in the form of the habitus (including taken-for-granted assumptions and dispositions, among other things) and the objective structure inscribed in field positions. The two do not always engage neatly with one another (cf. arguments on the so-called hysteresis effect, ibid.). More important for our argument, however, is that this encounter thematizes the embedding of market participants. Agents follow market-specific strategies, e.g., they try to attain or maintain a dominant market position. These moves in the market game, nonetheless, depend on market position, which is (via a homology of position takings) at least partly predisposed by positions an agent takes in other fields and in the overarching social space (Bourdieu 1985). In turn, what happens in the market field may influence other social spheres—for instance, price characterizations may mark social status (Wherry 2008), and agents may export convertible (economic and social) capital (Bourdieu 1986). Field analysts (although admittedly, primarily those from a Bourdieusian lineage) thus stress that market participants do not 'fall

from heaven'; rather, they also figure into other areas of the social sphere. They have a history and a trajectory that influences and is influenced by their market role. What is less clear from a field perspective (as [Lahire 2011](#) recognized) is how agents move through different fields and how such movements affect their habitus. How do agents manage to, on one hand, adapt their habitus to particular field positions while, on the other hand, stay true to the consistency insinuated by the concept? In other words, the field gives little guidance for the detailed empirical analysis of embedding work.

Table 1.

Market participants...	Network approaches		Performativity approach	Field analysis
	Structural strand	Relational strand		
... in market contexts	Networks as part and parcel of market strategies	Mutual observations guide jockeying for positions on a market profile; self-containedness by mutual observation	Markets enable calculative agency; self-containedness by mutual co-constitution and disentanglement	Partly autonomous market fields offer a set of unequal (power) positions; participation via common beliefs and engagement in material and symbolic struggles
... in other contexts	The nonmarket context can be market resources, considered to the extent that they are brought to bear in markets	Markets up- and downstream are relevant external contexts (at the aggregate level)	Disentanglement from other contexts precondition for markets; incorporation of external elements, e.g., economic theory	Macro level: focus on the market-politics nexus; Micro level: Intersection of habitus and field positions

2.8 This brief overview summarizes perspectives and emphasis in approaches to market embeddedness from different research strands of market sociology (see table 1 for an overview). All approaches assume or argue that markets are relatively self-contained entities. In other words, they all agree that, on one hand, distinct social processes characterize markets and that, on the other hand, these figurations interact with outside processes. Thus, in one way or another, all three strands in market sociology address embeddedness issues. However, they do not offer a comprehensive conceptualization of market embedding as mediated by market participants. Market sociology examines this either selectively or with insufficient analytical tools (as in structural network and field analytic approaches, respectively), or they dedicate themselves to aggregate-level processes, be they primarily economic (as in relational network and Performativists approaches) or political (as in field analysis) in nature. As a consequence, they do not conceptualize how market participants interweave adaptations to inner-market processes with logic and considerations derived from embeddings in prior or concomitant social spheres. The concept of embedding work refers to this interweaving of contexts. It offers a perspective on the embedding in and around markets that centers on market participants and not on markets as aggregates.

The embedding work of market participants

3.1 In this section, I develop theoretically the assumption that market participants find themselves at the crossroads of markets and contexts beyond markets. The aim is to provide an analytical concept for detailed investigations in the embedding work of (self-employed) market participants. I elaborate the concept of embedding work within Harrison C. White's thinking. In particular, I combine two strands of his writings – White's market sociology and his social theory – whose combination so far has not been sufficiently explored ([Diaz-Bone 2010](#)). Thus, the concept of embedding work builds on market sociology and enlarges its scope by taking one of its approaches further. In the following, (a) I introduce the two constitutional practices of embedding work. I then show how market participants relate to (b) markets and (c) personal contexts beyond markets (both understood from White's perspective) through these constitutional practices.

a) Constitutional practices of embedding work

3.2 Maintaining a position at the intersection of markets and personal contexts beyond markets is an achievement. It requires constant work on behalf of self-employed market participants. They tap and redirect resources; they draw boundaries, build bridges, translate ideas, and transmit influences or orient one area of life to another. Analytically speaking, such activities fall into two categories: practices dedicated to *establishing* equivalences and those dedicated to *drawing distinctions*. These categories of practices are reminiscent of White's (2008) definitions of coupling and decoupling. Empirically, *establishing equivalences* comprises, for example, processes of adaptation to the rules of the market game. Nascent entrepreneurs must learn how to anticipate consumers' needs and how to present, sell, pack, and distribute a product or service in familiar ways so that customers know what it is and what products or services it competes with ([Callon et al.2002](#)). They need to observe competitors in market analysis and sometimes need to cooperate with them. Furthermore, market participants establish equivalences to prior life and outside their target market. Whatever self-employed entrepreneurs do with respect to markets relates to these areas of life: They choose their target market according to long-held interests and hobbies, they benefit from earlier professional experiences when sketching their appearance on markets, and they use their self-employment to position themselves in other social contexts, for

example, when talking to friends and family members.

3.3 *Drawing distinctions* is just as relevant for embedding work as establishing equivalences. Empirically, self-employed market participants invest in distinctive practices when they signal to customers how their products or services are different from or superior to those of their competitors, invent new ways of distributions or offer innovative products or services. Likewise, they might want to keep their life prior and outside their self-employment away from their market activities because they prefer either to keep their work and private lives separate or to distract themselves from frustration and hardship in other areas of life, which may be achieved by separating private from professional networks. Therefore, one has to bear in mind that – though analytically separable – practices of distinction and equivalence often go hand in hand empirically. Take, for example, marketing strategies: They are intended to persuade consumers about what is special about an offer (drawing distinctions), but they do so against the background of common features of a group of products or services. Therefore, marketing is always also about signaling to what category of products the offer belongs (establishing equivalences).

b) Embedding in markets

3.4 In Western capitalist societies, markets abound not only as organizing principles of distribution (Polanyi 1977) but also as normative orientations (Foucault 2009) and in empirical form (White 2000). Markets come in different forms and sizes. They vary, for example, in dynamics between status and value markets or fixed-role and switched-role markets (Aspers 2011), in competition (Samuelson and Nordhaus 2005), or moral and institutional contexts of market activities (Beckert 2012, Dobbin 1994, Hall and Soskice 2001; Zelizer 1978). In this article, I follow Rosenbaum's (2000: 465-474) approach and contrast market exchange with other social forms, such as bargaining or gift exchange. Market exchange is voluntary and specific, typified and regular, and, last but not least, competitive. Real-life markets all share these features, although the 'degree of marketness' (ibid: 474) varies with, for example, the nature of the products traded. In analyzing markets, I stick to White's relational and discursive approach to markets. From this perspective, market processes are basically similar with regard to entering, adapting and upholding market positions, even across varieties, along Rosenbaum's constitutive dimensions of market exchange. The empirical study on self-employment deliberately included different kinds of markets to abstract from market specificities and to be able to identify common features of embedding work, as well as variety in embedding practices. In the following, I argue that White conceptualizes markets as, first, disciplined discourses with, second, characteristic dynamics of niche-seeking.

3.5 (1) Discourse and uncertainty in markets: As in any other social context, markets are constituted meaningfully in discourses (White 2000). Three elements mark White's (2008) discourse model: ties, stories and identities. All three are co-constituted in empirical acts of storytelling because stories establish identities (e.g., persons, car manufacturers or nation-states) and tie them to other identities in circulated storylines (Stanley 2009, Tilly 2002, Tarim 2009). This approach offers a toolkit to disassemble social phenomena into basic elements (ties, stories, and identities) and processes (storytelling in discourses) that can then be used to assemble complex, interwoven and dynamic relational settings of identities. A social theoretical premise that is highly consequential for White's market sociology is that discourse (and, therefore, the emergence and maintenance of identities) unfolds against the backdrop of uncertainty (Fuhse 2015b). In market discourses, uncertainty is omnipresent as a condition of existence and as a discursive theme. To offer something in a market, market participants must make commitments by buying upstream products, running advertising, organizing the production process (including hiring people), and so forth (ibid: 7). They make such commitments under uncertainty. They do not know whether customers will be willing to buy their products at the price, quality and volume offered, and they depend on what competing market participants will offer in the same time period. As against other discourses, market discourses share common features, the most characteristic and general of which is the market profile. Market profiles emerge out of various kinds of stories that address strategies, competitive advantages, and observations of competitors, market champions and market failures, among other factors. Such stories presuppose and thus constitute identities as sources of action in a market (Fuhse 2015a). A consequence of White's thinking is that market *participants* must be considered market *identities* once they enter a market. As market identities, they are subordinated to market discourses, which constitute who they are and where they are located in markets, and they must overcome their existential uncertainty by engaging in that discourse.

3.6 (2) Niche-seeking and relationality: The driving force of markets, then, is overcoming uncertainty under the condition of market discourses. Market identities jointly overcome uncertainty by sending signals to other market participants and by receiving signals from them. Each market identity strives to create a niche for its offer so that, in aggregate, they 'minimize uncertainty by forming a market as a collection of niches based on signals observed in their commitments' (White 2008: xiii). Out of mutual observations and signaling, the market profile emerges. It consists of a set of stories that together produce a market-specific logic of positioning identities against one another. The market profile flags market niches consistently along certain dimensions, such as

revenue and cost (White 1981). In White's model, niche seeking is primarily a disciplined discourse among mutually observing and competing producers. Nevertheless, stories may – and very likely will – concern customers and their preferences. This approach to markets is thoroughly relational: markets are not made by individuals with their interests, preferences and rationales, but rather by the jointly constructed web of discursively mediated interdependencies in overcoming uncertainties. This emergent dynamic between market participants (as identities) forms the background of the research interest in embedding work. I want to know how market participants (as identities) interweave with this background and what they bring to these discourses that does not emanate from market discourses proper.

- 3.7 Regardless of the concrete offer or market, all self-employed market participants (as identities) are confronted with a similar task: They have to define a niche on the market profile for their product in constant observation of and reaction to the current state of discourse. This brings us back to the constitutional practices of embedding work. Establishing *equivalences* to target markets refers to storytelling that qualifies a product or a service as similar to other products offered in that market. Comparability ensures that peer suppliers and customers recognize a product as competing with a set of other products (cf. Callon et al. 2002). Establishing *distinctions* in target markets refers to storytelling that highlights the specificities and merits of a product compared with other products, whatever these might be: new attributes or a new combination of attributes, differences in quality/price or new potential for conspicuous consumption. Collectively, stories of distinction and equivalence form the basis of niche seeking along the market profile. Both processes are co-constitutive: Only if the comparative field is indicated (equivalence), distinctions stick, and vice versa, only if market identities and products stand out as distinct will they be able to settle within an array of comparable competitors. Thus, White's perspective hints at a balancing act. If a product is too different from others on the market, it might not be acknowledged as belonging to that market by costumers and competing producers. It is more likely to fail, face repositioning in other markets or trigger new markets. If the product is too similar to existing products, it might not attract enough attention of customers and peers and will be suppressed by competing products.

c) Embedding beyond markets

- 3.8 Market participants engage in markets as market identities; they are, however, also invested in contexts beyond markets. In the case of firms, multiple embeddings beyond the target market are attributed to and mediated by organizations; in the case of self-employed entrepreneurs, multiple embeddings are attributed to and mediated by individuals. To come to terms with this multiple embedding of self-employed market participants, I complement White's (2002) market sociology with his concept of styles (White 2008). According to White, the social realm is a complex conglomerate of countless, sometimes interwoven social contexts of all sizes. Identities switch from one social context to the next. Switching contexts implies coupling to one and decoupling from another context – a process that computer users exemplify when they leave a social network (decoupling) to join an online community of some sort (coupling). On their way through the social, identities move *horizontally* to social contexts at the same level (as in the example of computer users) as well as *vertically* to blend with (or decompose into) other identities at higher (lower) structural levels. Identities become *styles* if these movements through time, settings and situations (i.e., their coupling to and decoupling from social contexts) display a certain rhythm. Styles leave traces with 'specific patterns or matrices of perceptions, appreciations, and actions' (White 2008: 119). Quite different social phenomena at different scales may turn into (or be considered) styles: conversations, rationality, fashion, trades, and, most important for our argument, individual or collective agents. In what follows, I will – with a view toward the empirical part of this study – concentrate on personal styles, that is, styles that are attributed to individual agents and that are different in manifestation (but not in principle) from other actorhood styles (such as nation states or organizations) (Meyer 2010).

- 3.9 As styles, market participants move through the social realm by switching horizontally and vertically through numerous local contexts and bring this track with all its experiences, potentials and limitations to markets when attempting to erect a market identity. Therefore, styles are persistent and relevant contexts for market participants, who have to invest in embedding work for their personal styles. Efforts at *equivalence* continue what makes a personal style unique in its passage through time, different settings and different situations. Equivalences allow for access to style resources such as professional knowledge, organizational capacities, interaction routines or networks. Efforts at *distinction* from its personal style create room for the maneuvering of the market identity against prior and concomitant involvements in contexts outside the focal market. Such freedom is a precondition for adapting to the dynamics of niche seeking along market profiles. Again, embedding in a style is a task of balancing distinctive and equalizing drives. If the new identity is too restricted and preordained by its personal style, it may fail because it lacks adaptability to the new context. If the new identity is too decoupled from its personal style, the flow of resources within the style might be hampered. Such a case arises, for example, when a self-employed person founds an enterprise on a market that is totally new to him or her and that does not allow him or her to draw on business contacts from prior employment or on familiarity with current market stories.

In sum, (self-employed) market participants embed at the intersection of (in our case, personal) styles and market positions – or to be more precise – a market niche (or identity) within a relational setting of market niches and crystalize around such points of intersection as a result of sustained attempts at control. Their permanent embedding in markets presupposes embedding work, which establishes equivalences and distinctions toward, first, a target market and, second, a personal style. Embedding work is inevitable for the permanent entrenchment of market identities as elements of both personal styles and markets. At the same time, it links markets to personal contexts. Table 2 gives an overview of the concept of embedding work.

Table 2.

		Analytical definition	Empirical examples ¹
Market	Equivalence	Indicating market membership by product comparability and mutual observations of competitors	Making market analysis, packing and labeling products in familiar ways
	Distinction	Defining and signaling product/service specificities to move into a market niche	Stressing the quality advantage of a product, inventing new form of distribution and product innovations
Personal style	Equivalence	Market positioning integrates into relatively consistent and characteristic personal profiles across different social contexts	Drawing on earlier professional experiences in the target market, pursuing long-held interests in self-employment, using friendship networks
	Distinction	Partial insulation from personal style creates room to maneuver in market position-takings	Self-employment as an avenue of self-development, separation of private and professional networks

Embedding work in practice

Data and method

4.1

The study draws on a research project on a self-employment subsidy for unemployment benefit II recipients in Germany (the so-called Einstiegsgeld) (Pongratz *et al.* 2013). The project was co-financed by the Federal Ministry of Employment and the Federal Employment Agency and conducted through cooperation between the [author's institute] and the [institute] between 2010 and 2014. The group of researchers conducted 40 narrative interviews with self-employed individuals approximately six months after the establishment of their ventures. Case selection proceeded in two steps. The first step of case selection was designed so that socio-demographic characteristics varied along the dimensions gender, age, migration background, education and duration of prior unemployment. This information was taken from administrative data provided by the German Federal Employment Agency. The inquiry included diverse entrepreneurial projects. The aim was to include a variety of personal trajectories, entrepreneurial projects and market contexts. This variety would be a precondition for identifying common features of embedding work in different markets. All 40 interviews, which were selected in this manner, were transcribed and complemented with a) interview protocols containing notes on the interview situation (e.g., locale and descriptions of nonverbal reactions or apparel), b) socio-demographic details (e.g., age, working experiences or the number of people living in the household) and c) network maps and alteri lists (i.e., lists of socio-demographic details on partners in ego-networks and their connections to one another; Herz *et al.* 2015).

4.2

The second step of case selection aimed at choosing most relevant cases for extensive qualitative analysis. The choice was grounded on a content analysis of the 40 cases. All forty interviews were thematically summarized according to deductively derived categories (in cooperation with Institute for Social Research, ISF e.V. Munich). From these thematic summaries emerged a key dimension along which the empirical cases could be organized. We called this dimension 'feel for the market' and defined three graduations (good, average, and little). The dimension refers to how nascent entrepreneurs interact with target markets, whether they, e.g., tried to organize market feedback for their supply and reacted to it (having a good feel for the market) or whether they (often implicitly) avoided such market tests (having little feel for the market). The interviews were then qualified along this dimension, and for each graduation of the dimension, at least two cases were selected and nine detailed case studies were compiled (see table 3 for an overview).^[1]

Table 3.

Characteristic	Gender	Migration back-ground	Age	Education	Prior unemployment	Industry	"Feel for the market"
Case							
Ms. Tizian	Female	No	30-40	Higher education	> 1 year	Artistic paintings	Good
Mr. Carsten	Male	No	50-60	Middle	> 1 year	Food	Low
Ms. Robert	Female	Yes	30-40	Higher education	< 1 year	Sport	Good
Ms. Hagen	Female	No	50-60	Middle	< 1 year	Recruitment agency (mostly)	Good
Ms. Heinz	Female	No	50-60	Low	< 1 year	Artistic photographs	Average
Mr. Mahmud	Male	Yes	50-60	Higher education	< 1 year	Ad gallery	Low
Ms. Georg	Female	Yes	50-60	Higher education	> 1 year	Fashion	Average
Ms. Owen	Female	No	40-50	Low	< 1 year	Furniture	Good

The interpretation method for the extensive case studies combined narrative biographical methods (Rosenthal and Fischer-Rosenthal 2004) with small story research (Bamberg 2006) and relational network theory (White 2008; < a href = "#mische2011"> Mische 2011). Data analysis began with a narrative biographical analysis of the objective life courses and the introductory narrative of the interviewee (cf. Rosenthal and Fischer-Rosenthal 2004; Schütze 1983 for details). Subsequently, the rest of the interviews were thematically coded and passages were identified for further detailed analysis. These passages were then subjected to sequential text analysis using positioning analysis as methodological guideline (Bernhard 2015). The different materials (objective life courses, narrative analysis of introductory statements, sequential analysis of text passages and network maps) were integrated into written case studies of approximately 10-15 pages each.

This methodological procedure is particularly suited to the analysis of embedding work. First, the systematic selection of most different cases offers access to commonalities across a variety of socio-demographic characteristics, personal trajectories, target markets, types of interaction with target markets and types of self-employment. Second, methods of data collection and analysis were especially designed to render processes of embedding work highly visible. Interviewees were invited and allowed to explicate their experiences and orientations (Schütze 1983; Rosenthal and Fischer-Rosenthal 2004). Nascent entrepreneurs (re)tell stories about how they observe and enter the market and how they move through the target market, and they give accounts of their identity claims for a particular market. Meanwhile, they motivate their actions toward markets with respect to their experiences in prior and concomitant engagements in social spheres. The following section presents one of these case studies and contrasts it with other case studies. I chose this way of presenting the results of the study because it shows, on one hand, embedding work in its complex and interwoven character and, on the other hand, diversity across cases and conceptual dimensions.

The case of Ms. Hagen

At the time the interview took place, Ms. Hagen^[2], a woman in her 50s, was dependent on means-tested benefits and was receiving a subsidy for nascent entrepreneurs. Recently, she founded a consulting firm targeting two markets simultaneously: first, the market of business consultancies and, second, the market of personnel recruitment agencies. Owing to space limitations, I focus on her recruitment agency in the ensuing exposition. Ms. Hagen's employment career began after she quit her law studies without earning a degree after ten years of study. Until the foundation of her first enterprise, she had been working – sometimes in temporary work – for various employers in different industries, such as the music, hotel and tourism, and legal industries. Although her job changes were often involuntary, she managed to keep phases of unemployment rather short, never exceeding six months at a time. At the time of the interview, she was officially enrolled in distance learning for a higher education degree, but she did not seem to pursue it with determination. The analysis of her case shows that throughout her employment trajectory, her intrinsic motivation to work is second to her pragmatic goal of earning a living.

Embedding in a market

Ms. Hagen's ambition to understand market processes and dynamics is – in comparison with other cases in the study – extraordinarily pronounced. She expresses many thoughts on these issues and develops an explicit account to adapt to market requirements. She grounds her stories of what goes on in specific markets, such as the personnel market, in a larger narrative on the workings of the market economy in general. Market economies, the story goes, are subjected to permanent turmoil and technological progress, which brings with it a need for permanent (organizational and behavioral) adaptation and learning on behalf of market participants (570-579^[3]). This inevitable change fuels tough competition. To Ms. Hagen, markets are simultaneously drivers of change and arenas of its implementation. Irrespective of market size, market participants are conditioned by the overwhelming natural forces of competition and technological innovation. They are exposed to permanent 'radical change' (577 [German: Umwälzung]) and 'transformation' (ibid. [Umwandlung]), and thus, all market participants need to have their 'fingers on the pulse of time' (558). Accordingly, adaptability becomes her mantra. To signal this to other market participants, she includes 'change' (491) in her company name, indicating that her services are intended to support others in coping with changes.

Stories of equivalences: Stories of equivalences embed market identities in markets by characterizing

the market's structure and by expounding what is special about that market and how one's product is similar and links to these characteristics. The primary market Ms. Hagen targeted is the personnel recruitment market, which is peculiar in that it is nested in the labor market as an intermediary between employees and employers. Personnel recruiters take a catalyzing role and enter processes of peer observation between employees without themselves being peers in job competition. Ms. Hagen had become familiar with this market in her prior self-employment. In describing the market, she draws on experiences from that period. To keep up with technological change, she says, companies had to upgrade their staff or hire new staff, particularly in times of radical innovations. To illustrate this point, she refers to the spread of new IT (475-481): for a provisional period after an innovation, companies are desperately looking for new, young and qualified staff, often directly recruiting from universities, which in turn sometimes cannot 'deliver graduates at the speed demanded' (478-479). On the other side of the market, similar challenges regarding adaptation drive employees to pay close attention to how job profiles change and – if necessary – to accommodate to changes via continued training. Another development that she interprets as a sign of the new age is that secondary education currently requires a 'much wider spectrum, much more knowledge input, much more *know-how* [English in original]' (529-530). As a recruiter, she locates herself in the market of intermediaries. In her stories of equivalences, she interprets the intermediary position by actively engaging in customer acquisition on both market sides (e.g., students from universities and companies in the banking sector, respectively). In that respect, she works not unlike a sales manager – a position she occupied earlier in her career. Consequently, Ms. Hagen is comfortable with becoming a calculative agency, whose rationale accords with the rules of the market game (Callon 1998a, s. below).

4.8 Stories of distinctions: Taking a market position by developing a market identity also presupposes distinctions from other market identities – distinctions that specify how the own market identity is different from others and how these differences relate to market demands, thereby enabling survival. According to her accounts, Ms. Hagen moves on a highly prestructured market with massive inequalities in terms of market share and power. She frames this situation as an opposition between David and Goliath: 'And with this approach [of actively acquiring customers like a sales manager], I'm often a bit like David vs. Goliath, you know? Getting a foot in the door' (449-451). Although Ms. Hagen does not want to defeat Goliath (and does not see herself fit to do so), she takes advantage of her small size. Metaphorically speaking, she wants to sneak in a (probably already closing) door, which is to say that she is looking for jobs that larger competitors are incapable of dealing with or are simply not interested in. Such jobs searches come as 'individual projects at a certain speed' (465-466), where she can use, for example, her contacts with universities to act 'quickly and flexibly' (484). Thereby, she deliberately undercuts prices of larger companies on the market (443-445). As White (1981) would argue, Ms. Hagen is building a niche for her market identity in her observation of competitors, looking for distinction on a market held together by basic similarities in the kind of services offered. More than for the cases of other interviewees, in Ms. Hagen's case, this market positioning actually is a *reflexive* endeavor: she installed a small recruitment agency as a small recruitment agency in a relational setting dominated by large and medium-sized competitors (452-453).

4.9 With her eagerness to observe and adapt to market demands and with her reflexive self-positioning, Ms. Hagen is an extreme of embedding work towards the market. At the other end of the continuum, we find the case of Mr. Mahmoud, an architect of Afghan origin, who had worked for several years in the Caucasus region. After the fall of the Iron Curtain, he lost his job and reoriented himself towards his long-standing passion of painting. Mr. Mahmoud considers art as a life-long learning project, and he constantly takes classes and tries to improve his painting. A couple of years later, he migrated to a mid-sized town in Germany, where he quickly integrated into a network of local artists. For years, he had worked as a street artist and sold his paintings at Christmas markets. Then, Mr. Mahmoud – who was in his early fifties at the time – decided to become self-employed with an art gallery. With the founding of the gallery, he aimed to establish himself beyond street art and Christmas Markets as a way to institutionalize his artistic activities and take them to a new level. His market identity on the local art gallery market, however, was elusive. He conducts market research on competing galleries, identifies market-specific logics and invests time and money in his gallery. Nevertheless, his project remains somewhat detached from his target market because he does not know how to attract potential buyers and his stories of distinctions evolve around the fact that his gallery is the only one in town to sell paintings from exclusively one artist: himself. The question is why this niche should convince customers. Furthermore, it raises the question of whether his gallery even met the basic criteria of art galleries and the respective local market because, unlike other galleries, his gallery does not systematically search for and select art to provide a sales venue where artists and buyers meet. Thus, his niche-seeking is not sufficiently grounded in embedding work in his target market. To overemphasize the point, his gallery more closely resembles the stall at Christmas markets where he used to sell his paintings than the galleries with which he competes on the local art gallery market.

4.10 The lack of adaptation and specification of his market identity is a result of the fact that self-employment was from the beginning a project routed in Mr. Mahmoud's personal style, particularly in the ambition to advance his artistic activities. This process is in stark contrast to what Ms. Hagen does on and towards her target market. While Ms. Hagen is anxious to sense market developments, builds her market appearance (and her private life)

on the market requirements and is willing to sacrifice her private life, Mr. Mahmoud has different priorities. With his self-employment, he pursues a personal agenda that ensues from his dedication to art and painting. He thus exemplifies an imbalance across contexts and in the practices of embedding at the cost of embedding in markets and drawing distinctions from his personal style. As a consequence, his market identity faces rigidities and remains elusive, with little chance of settling permanently on the target market.

Embedding in personal style

- 4.11** Through embedding in personal styles, market identities become part of an overarching pattern of movement over time and across different social contexts. Seen from the perspective of personal styles, market identities decouple by developing the economic rationale of calculative agency. As mentioned earlier, establishing a calculative agency suited to a market identity is much less effort for Ms. Hagen than for the other self-employed persons interviewed. She is prepared to adopt all means necessary to survive on the market. For her, this results in being professional – something with which she (as she sees it) has an advantage in comparison with other nascent entrepreneurs (259, 1004). She demonstrates and enacts her 'entrepreneurialness' within the interview, for example, by drawing upon specific linguistic economic registers and concepts such as 'break even' (621), 'milestones' (281) or 'change management' (491) [all English in the original] or by demonstrating market knowledge and analytical rigor in her self-analysis (see above). Ms. Hagen is comfortable with this kind of embedding work. Her self-employment was, from the beginning, focused on saleability. In addition, she had been self-employed for several years prior to starting this venture. Thus, creating a calculative agency was unproblematic. The question remains, though, of how Ms. Hagen's market identity with a calculative agency at its core relates to her personal styles, which in turn can be decomposed into a private life and an employment history.
- 4.12** Showing equivalences and distinctions toward her employment history, Ms. Hagen reports strong continuity in her employment history: 'I have always had certain [responsible] tasks in companies, even without having the education required. That way, I got an overview over many companies. [I got to know to] a lot of variety during this period. As a consequence, today, I relatively quickly devise solutions for different projects and very different challenges' (312-319). In this story, she describes how working in various settings fostered her problem-solving abilities, which is something she considers to be elementary to the services she offers today. Interestingly, this interpretation of her employment trajectory as a resource contradicts other stories in the interview. She repeatedly compares herself to other employees and to the requirements of the labor market. She concludes these comparisons by stating, 'And in my case, something always protrudes or [laughing softly] doesn't fit in exactly' (210-211). Characteristically, she applies an outside perspective to herself as a job candidate – the outside perspective of a professional working in the personnel department – and, from that perspective, analyses her deficits. Seen in this way, she is someone who has no university degree and no continuous employment record, and – unlike others in her age cohort – she is not in an executive position (209-219). However, now that she is self-employed, these disadvantages become assets – assets related to problem solving and adaptability to various market configurations. She reembeds from supplying labor (where she senses she has a deficient position) to supplying services (where she claims a competitive edge), by changing her identity from an applicant to an entrepreneur. This is an example how the positioning of identities in new contexts can be an opportunity to rewrite stories of the self. The market identity links to the experiences made in various employments (equivalences) but cuts off from the unfavorable labor market positioning associated with it (distinction).
- 4.13** Equivalences and distinctions toward private life: Ms. Hagen's market identity embeds quite differently in private life than it embeds in her employment history, although in both instances, cutting links is crucial only in that what it retains from equivalences to private life is much less substantial. Ms. Hagen's networking activity vividly demonstrates this point. Asked about the role her family played in the process of becoming self-employed, she replies, 'Somehow, my family had little influence – well, actually none' (1318-1319). The same holds true for her friends, whose role she describes as 'small' (1279). She goes on to say, 'Rather the opposite. I deal with them less and less because they all have been in one company for 16 to 20 years now. So they are in a totally different situation than I am' (1279-1282). Additionally, Ms. Hagen carefully keeps nonprofessional topics out of conversations with her professional network. With respect to these contacts, she says, 'It's very good if you have someone to talk that would *not* start saying: 'Well, I have a problem, too: My grandparents are ill!' –Or something like that' (854-856). Therefore, distinctions appear in Ms. Hagen's network stories in two ways: shielding off contacts with nonprofessionals and excluding nonprofessional issues from relations to professional peers. In comparison, equivalence is less prominent, but still important. In the passage best representing her appreciation of leisure time, she describes this time as an opportunity to 'recharge batteries' for work (1295-1296). Obviously, her market identity and private life are in a hierarchical relation, with the former dominating the latter. Private life becomes something that accompanies and comforts life on markets, and apart from that, it is displaced.
- 4.14** Ms. Hagen's embedding work towards her personal style is exceptional in two ways: She has had few problems (and high motivations) in establishing calculable agency, and she is extraordinary willing to subordinate

her private life to her economic activity. Other interviewees struggle much more with disentangling a market appearance from personal identities and are much less willing to disregard their private lives and interests. Ms. Tizian is a case in point. She specializes in creating art for children's rooms. After having worked outside her trained profession for several years, Ms. Tizian's self-employment constitutes an occupational return to her original education in design, triggered by a sudden and severe illness and her ensuing rehabilitation. Unlike Ms. Hagen, Ms. Tizian maintains a high affinity for and identification with her products. Especially in the beginning, she had problems behaving like rational market participants would. For example, Ms. Tizian describes how she burst into tears after selling her first pictures because she felt that she sold out her creativity. In the words of the Performativity School, in this instance, Ms. Tizian did not succeed in singularizing her paintings from their entanglements with nonmarket contexts. However, she overcame this initial reaction and managed to turn the attachment to her pictures into a feature of her market niche. She began selling her products as rare, sometimes unique, pieces of art, which are simultaneously personal and tailor-made to customer's needs. Although Ms. Tizian's embedding work towards her personal style becomes less problematic over time, it remains different from that of Ms. Hagen. While maintaining calculable agency is a permanent achievement of Ms. Tizian, it is self-evident for Ms. Hagen. While the latter subordinates her private life to professional life, Ms. Tizian makes one a part of the other, bringing them to the market and selling it in her stories of distinction. Moreover, as an extensive case study shows, the direction of flow is also reversed because Ms. Tizian uses positive feedback from the market to stabilize her overall self-concept and to overcome the social stigmata of unemployment and illness. Table 4 presents an overview of Ms. Hagen's case and the comparison cases.

Table 4. Ms. Hagen and comparison cases

		Ms. Hagen	Comparison cases
Market	Equivalence	Eager to observe and adapt to market dynamics: both market sides must subordinate to permanent change, Ms. Hagen as an intermediating "sales manager"	[Mr. Mahmoud] Observes competing galleries and several market logics and invests in gallery, but achieves overall insufficient embedding via equivalences
	Distinction	Reflexive positioning vis-à-vis the market as a small recruitment agency	[Mr. Mahmoud] Gallery is a means to pursue a personal agenda in new ways; insufficient embedding of niche in target market
Personal style	Equivalence	Continuity to employment history, where she developed problem-solving abilities and professional self-concept; private life reduced to "recharging batteries"	[Ms. Tizian] Self-employment marks the return to the profession for which she trained; personal attachment becomes a feature of her market niche
	Distinction	Based on the unproblematic cultivation of calculable agency; self-employment is a way out of a dead end in employment history; cutoff of private ties, professional ties cleansed of private matters	[Ms. Tizian] Conflicting and hesitant adaption to market demands; self-employment as a way to overcome the social stigmata of illness and unemployment

4.15 The case studies show the relevance of embedding work at the intersection of markets and personal trajectories in empirical processes in and around markets. Two aspects stand out. First, nonmarket contexts such as professional biographies, private experiences or long-held interests substantially influence the choice of target markets. Ms. Hagen focuses on the recruitment market against the backdrop of her professional experience and networks in that area. Among other things, self-employment in this market gives her the opportunity to work and earn money without a formal degree. Ms. Tizian returned to her trained profession and to her passion for art and design. In her biographical situation, engaging in an artistic market gives her the opportunity to remain true to herself, regain confidence and overcome the stigmata of unemployment and illness. For Mr. Mahmoud, entering the gallery market brought his artistic activities to a new level. It is a way to live in and with art, irrespective of economic success. Thus, in all cases, self-employed market participation is also a personal project. This is an aspect to which market sociology has paid scant attention. Market sociologists show little interest in where market participants come from and how market choices relate to market participants' passage through different social spheres. The reason for this disinterest could be that, for analytical purposes, market sociologists abstract from empirical (individual or organizational) agents and create analytical agents (such as market identities, calculable agencies, and economic habitus). While this move is necessary for investigating dynamics and logics in the market as relative self-subsistent aggregates, it misses out on the embedding of markets in personal projects unless one reintegrates analytical with empirical agents, which move around and return to social spheres beyond markets. The role of such trajectories has so far been inadequately theorized and empirically under-investigated, although the destiny of market appearances crucially depends on managing position-taking at the intersection of such trajectories with markets.

4.16 This brings us to the second issue. What self-employed market participants do on their target markets must be understood as embedding work towards this market *and* towards their personal trajectories. Ms. Hagen acts like a sales manager on the recruitment market, as she transfers a repertoire of action acquired earlier in her professional career to her present market appearance. Ms. Tizian adopts a cautious step-by-step mode of

integrating into the market when developing appropriate market behaviors and attitudes towards selling her products, in line with her general biographical uncertainty ensuing from her illness and with her routine of rebuilding confidence in private life via positive feedback in her professional life. Mr. Mahmoud, in turn, had problems finding a market identity in the local art gallery market, as Mr. Mahmoud's market appearance was too occupied with satisfying nonmarket considerations (most importantly, the ambition to take his artistic activities to a new level). Unlike Ms. Tizian and Ms. Hagen, he did not counter this embedding in private life sufficiently by embedding in his target market. These examples show that not only markets but also embedding in nonmarket spheres count for market positioning. Thus far, market sociology has dealt with these issues by either fullheartedly neglecting such influences, or by insufficiently addressing them (see table 1). As a consequence, it has overlooked the kind of market embedding that is mediated by its participants as a result of the way they take in, fend off and translate what they bring from (prior) engagements in other contexts. In fact, when switching perspectives from markets as a whole to self-employed market participants as their constitutional parts, it becomes clear that market engagements also address such maneuvers. The concept of embedding work enlarges the scope of market sociology and offers an additional perspective on markets that evolves around its participants.

Conclusion

5.1 The article has dealt with multiple embeddings of market participants from a market sociological perspective. Analytically speaking, self-employed market participants stand at the crossroads of markets and other social spheres they encountered in their journey through the social realm. These participants develop and cultivate a market identity that, on one hand, has to settle on their target market and, on the other hand, needs to embed in their (personal) style. Therefore, market participants engage in embedding work, that is, they draw distinctions and indicate equivalences towards both perennial contexts of their market endeavors. The case studies show the complex ways in which self-employed market participants interweave and separate markets from other experiences. The concept of embedding work carves out what it takes to maintain a market identity. It offers a novel sociological perspective on markets by including the trajectories of market participants in the picture. As part of this intention, it examines the origins of market projects and choices.

5.2 Furthermore, it addresses the question of how the maneuvering on markets links to experiences from embedding in social contexts beyond markets. The present article focused on the intersection of market positions and personal styles (individual experiences). In future research, this argument could be transferred to organizational styles (such as firms). However, adjusting the concept of embedding work to the peculiarities of firms brings with it new conceptual challenges, particularly because in firms, levels of action and groups of actors multiply. This draws attention to new complexities, for example, with respect to the interaction of inter-individual and inter-organizational levels (Brailly et al. 2016) or to power struggles between, e.g., owners, managers and workers (Fligstein 2001). These issues indicate directions for future research on embedding work.

Notes

1 A colleague (Kerstin Hartmann) contributed two case studies.

2 Pseudonym. Some details of the cases were omitted, and others were amended or coarsened to ensure absolute anonymity.

3 The numbers in brackets refer to line numbers in the interview transcript.

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