

Social Work and the Organizing of Transition to Work

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1 Destandardised life courses and the role of career guidance

The transition to work is a major domain of social work and with the high youth unemployment rate (EUROSTAT 2019) it has gained even more attention in the European Policy (in this issue: Schröder et al.). Today, organisations providing career guidance have become a widely accepted approach to regulate modern transitions to work. The OECD, the World Bank Group and other international actors promote career guidance services “to assist people, of any age and at any point throughout their lives to make education, training and occupational choices and to manage their careers” (OECD, 2004, p. 19). Moreover, this definition refers to the fact that the education and training sector has been expanded to provide more opportunities to continue education in a later stage of life. This is particularly the case for individuals who have or want to find a new workplace or to go back to education in midlife or old age. Career Guidance is thus not only important for young people in the transition from school to work but for literally anyone who is facing a change in her/his working life.

Each transition in an institutionalised life course (Kohli, 2007) is accompanied by a change in role and status. For instance, the transition from undergraduate to graduate student is a change in status that brings along the role of teaching or research assistant. Transitions often also entail the change from one institution to another – e.g. from pre-school to primary school and to secondary school – socialising pupils in a new ‘social organisation’ (Dannefer, 1984) with new developmental tasks and challenges. Hence, institutional environments play a crucial role in the life course as they set up an age-graded and stage-like standard biography (Kohli, 2007; Sackmann, 2013).

Age-related stages most commonly categorise a normative standard life course such as childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and old age. With regard to that, it is considered to be a foregone conclusion that transitions are mastered successfully and timely, such as entering and leaving school, acquiring a full-time job or entering retirement. However, only in the rarest cases are life course trajectories smooth and predictable. They are rather characterized by discontinuities caused by critical life events such as death of the parents, divorce, being involved in a car accident or winning the lottery. Such life events may already be considered as a brick in the wall of a standard biography. Such life events may be considered already, a brick in the wall of a standard biography. Still, there are institutional environments that regulate these deviations from the standard biography. For instance, children who have lost their parents can be placed in a foster care system (Göbel et al. in this issue).

Another point that must be taken into account when talking about standard biographies is the historical context because it effects the individual experience of each life stage (Elder, 1977). Since the industrial revolution of the 19th century, paid work has received a particularly high value in society. This becomes clear when we look at institutional systems that provide

pathways for modern transitions to work. Not only has there been a trend towards the expansion of secondary and tertiary education and training but also an increase in job changes. In Western Germany, the rate of job shifts has more than doubled for men born in 1971 compared to those born between 1920 and 1971 (Brückner & Mayer, 2005). The authors of the study explain the dramatic increase in the 1970s by a steep rise in unemployment rates for this cohort. Yet another study “shows that, compared to the 1940 cohort, the risks of involuntary firm switches and downward wage mobility have strongly increased for the cohorts born around 1960” (Mertens & Mayer, 2004, cited in Brückner & Mayer, 2005, p. 41). In summary, governmental institutions set up the normative standard for the life course of a cohort, “a group of people who were born at the same historical time and who experience particular social changes within a given culture in the same sequence and at the same age” (Hutchison, 2015, p. 11).

However, there is common sense agreement among scientists that the standard life course can no longer be understood as linear with age-related stages anymore (Brückner & Mayer, 2005). Instead, so-called “patchwork biographies” are becoming more and more common today (Beck, 2009). In short, there is an increase in transitions between status passages. This viewpoint probably holds true all spheres of life but is particularly important for the transition from school to work. First of all, the transition from school to work is situated in a phase of life in which numerous other tasks have to be met, such as entering into a partnership, physical changes, developing a positive image of one’s own body and moving out of the parental home, to name a few. However, even more importantly, the transition from school to work is unique because it is a transition away from an institutionally obligatory path towards a career that has to be actively planned by the individual. To be no longer in the education system means having to make one’s own decisions regarding plans for the future. As Kerckhoff (2003, p. 251) stated: “the transition from school to work is a key process in the life course, as the individual’s experiences moving through education and into a career are commonly understood to have important and lasting influence on subsequent pathways through adulthood” (see also Person, Rosenbaum, & Deil-Amen, 2005).

Based on the existing research on transitions (to work) in a life course perspective, I want to make three theoretical assumptions. First, individual transitions are always socially embedded. Decisions on career plans are jointly negotiated within the family, with friends, with teachers to name a few. In particular (but not exclusively), parents may place great demands on their children and thereby set the benchmark for individual success or failure in life. Whether spoken or unspoken, the goals, wishes, needs and expectations result into plans of the parents for their children, of teachers for their pupils and into plans that an individual has for him- or herself. If the plans of the different actors conflict, this can lead to intergenerational tensions, which brings us to the second theoretical assumption: transitions are anchored in the mind as they are imagined in advance and reflected upon later. People not only have a predefined expectation of a transition, they look back at their life and regret what has not been done. More than this, shared notions of a normal, expectable life build the basis of transitions. This refers not only to the socially acceptable timing of a transition (being too old to do certain things, e.g. learning how to read as an adult, which can be highly stigmatised) but also to the passionately planning of careers starting at an early age with educational games and foreign language classes. This, of course, assumes that the household has the necessary resources to spend on education. Therefore, the third theoretical assumption of transitions is that of an unequal distribution of resources to master a transition to work. Individual opportunities depend on the historical dimension (e.g. a financial crisis and a

recession or war), the opportunity structures provided by the governmental and non-governmental institutions as well as on economic, cultural, social and symbolical capital (Bourdieu, 1986).

In a nutshell, transitions are envisioned in the viewer's mind, are of a social nature as they are being constantly negotiated and are shaped by opportunities and resources in a given historical context. In order to be able to explain an individual transition, we have to look beyond the individual level to include the social, structural and historical level. Social work plays an important role in this as it can be understood as the organisation of planned support as well as the organisation of influencing ways of life and forms of subjectivation (Kessl & Otto, 2011). People processing organisations (Hasenfeld, 1972) manifest and translate rationalities of governance, so that organisations must be understood as a kind of relay station of power effects (Gertenbach, 2014). Organisation and modern society are in a relationship of recursive constitution to one another, such that the organizations themselves produce and reproduce those very social structures and institutions that again produce and reproduce the organisations (Ortmann, Sydow, & Türk, 2000, p. 19).

The result of a qualitative case analysis is that career guidance services cling obstinately to the idea that transition to work is still feasible even for this group of early school leavers who are considered superfluous in a competitive labour market demanding only highly trained and flexible employees. As will be shown, the pedagogical rationality of governance into which this societal demand is translated in career guidance services, leads eventually into an individualisation of the risk of failure.

2 Qualitative multilevel research design

The research project 'Transition Processing'¹, was designed to investigate how transitions are processed by career guidance services. Our objective has been to identify underlying rationalities of processing transitions through career guidance services (Chyle, Dittrich, Muche, Schröder, & Wlassow, 2019). Based on a multilevel analysis, the starting point has been an analysis of the field of transitions to work. The field analysis has focused on institutional regimes and opportunity structures in the welfare states of Germany and Luxembourg.

Methodologically, we started from the assumption that reality is produced through socially shared forms of knowledge and action that can be defined as rationalities (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). The concept of rationality points to the fact that, in knowledge formations, specific structural and action problems are dealt with in a certain way (normatively). Rationalities can then be defined as collective notions in a certain situation that delimit what is considered normal and abnormal, what is true and what is untrue, what can be said and what cannot be said (Townley, 2008). That means something can be rational in the sense that it seems institutionally logical, legitimate and meaningful to those involved (Karl, 2014). Organizations, and especially people processing organisations (Hasenfeld, 1972), play a crucial role in manifesting and translating such societal demands and requirements into (pedagogical) rationalities of governance and thereby reproduce a predominant rationality.

¹ The research was conducted in a collaborative research project between the Universities of Luxembourg, Flensburg, Hildesheim, Tübingen and Frankfurt. This work was supported by the Fonds National de la Recherche in Luxembourg [grant number INTER/DFG/14/8888406/TransPro/Karl/Schröder]. The German partners are funded by the German Research Association.

Our qualitative multi-level design (Helsper et al., 2010) consisted of a field analysis including a discourse analysis, a market analysis and secondary data analysis as well as of a case analysis including the analyses of five organizations that offer career guidance. The field and case analyses provide insights into transition processing on the societal, regional, organisational, interactive and individual level

The organisations that have been researched are in the areas of coaching, the transfer society, vocational guidance for under 25 year olds, vocational orientation in schools and counselling for so-called early school leavers (EUROSTAT, 2016). The cases were selected according to theoretically significant combinations of characteristics: the age of the addressees, the life situations of the addressees and the support structures of the career guidance services.

The methods used to research each organisation include participatory observation, expert interviews with the career guides and biographical interviews with the young people facing a transition to work. Furthermore, the career guides were asked to record their consultations for a conversational analysis. At each organisation, at least five observation protocols, interviews and records of counselling sessions were collected and analysed separately for each organisation. To compare between field analysis and the different case analyses, the shared questions concerning the legitimation of knowledge, forms of subjectification, (self-)positioning and normalizing expectations have been used in the analysis (Schröder & Karl, 2017; Truschkat & Muche, 2018). As a result, the analysis provides insights into the functioning and homogeneity or heterogeneity of the field of career guidance services and fundamental theoretical insights into the social regulation of employment processes in modern societies (Schröder et al., 2019).

3 Guiding them back to the labour market – the case of Early School Leavers in Luxembourg

In the following, the empirical case study of one of the five organisations providing out-reaching career guidance for Early School Leavers in our research project will be described. Methods included in this study were participant observation, conversation analysis, biographical interviews, and expert interviews. This career guidance is designed to confront and successfully meet a practically impossible societal demand: the societal demand to integrate low-skilled young people into a labour market in which the degree of education or training is decisive for who finds a job and who does not.

Discursively, the group of Early School Leavers is constructed as one of the most disadvantaged groups in the labour market. In the line with the argumentation by the EU Commission, Early School Leavers have failed to complete vocational education and training, and this has

“negative effects on social development and economic growth. Innovation and growth – states the EU Commission – rely on a skilled labour force: Reducing the average European rate of early school leaving by just 1 percentage point would provide the European economy each year with nearly half a million additional qualified potential young employees” (EU Commission, 2011).

Although school dropout is not a recent topic, it has never been as frequently discussed as in today’s knowledge based society. Who exactly belongs to the group of Early School Leavers? In the Luxembourgish context it is (MENJE, 2015) important to point out that those students attending the lowest level of schools cannot simply continue or enrol themselves into a

higher-level school; rather they need to find an employer to continue their training and education. Hence, students who complete the 9th grade in April of each year and are not registered to attend another school by the month of October of the same year are considered as Early School Leavers. A comparison of the resulting lists of those who leave school after the 9th grade and of those who are registered in another school in October clearly reveals the group of Early School Leavers in Luxembourg.

Young people in this group are officially contacted by the ministry of education by post and are additionally contacted by the career guidance service by telephone to ask about their future plans. The ministry of education strives to “control” and to reach out to young people through the career guidance service in order to process the transition as efficiently as possible for the largest possible number of young people and, of course, to also be available to young people to manage a failed transition. However, there are no sanctions in cases where young people choose not to accept this “supportive structure”. Important prerequisites, mentioned by the professional career guides, for this process of successful and targeted counselling is a voluntary nature of participation and self-motivation of the young people. As a consequence, participation on a voluntary basis must then develop within the course of counselling. One expert states:

“So for me that is already // So for me it is already a success, if you have a teenager, who is open and wants to ah and comes back. (..) Because he wants to change something about his situation. That's a success for me ah for me is already a success if ah if someone informs me that he cannot come. These are very small things. It is not ah yes, he has now got an apprenticeship. Yes, that is the upper goal but (...) successes are already that the people are (incomprehensible), ah are here to come, to open up, to see okay: I'm standing there, ah I have problems to get ahead and there is someone who can possibly help me and who helps me to implement everything. These are successes.”
(expert interview 4)

Hence, typical counselling sessions are dependent on the voluntary nature and opening up of young people in the counselling interaction. Just the fact that young people are “coming back” or at least inform the career guide that they will not come back, is considered a success. The creation of a working alliance does not follow in the sense of “compulsory counselling”, which is enforced by threatening negative consequences if counselling is not used (Rohner, 2013). Rather, outreach, relationship work and the establishment of a sanction-free context help to uphold the counselling process and keep it ongoing.

Thus, this organization reaches out to a group that is not easy to contact in order to build up a trustful relationship. Moreover, members of this group appear to have difficulties in complying with the usual ways of establishing relations with others like making an appointment and at least cancelling the appointment in case of not showing up.

The next sequence is taken from my field notes during the participant observation in that career guidance organisation. The specific situation is a role play of a job interview with an employer in which the career guide is the employer and the young man or woman is the candidate for the job. These are designed to teach the appropriate behaviour in such a situation and young people should learn to prepare themselves for potential questions that might come up during the job interview. After the role play exercise, the career guide evaluates the performance of the young person and asks him to take some notes.

“The student writes very slowly. This creates long breaks. When he is done, we say goodbye and the student leaves the room. [name of career guide] says it's very difficult. He has taken so long to write down something in his native language. Employers would simply not hire such teenagers anymore. For simple jobs it would be cheaper to use guest workers. They would not speak any language and would, therefore, often work below the minimum wage. For them, the money they would earn is still a fortune, and they could build a house in their home country after a few years. Therefore, the young people would have a hard time. 'An employer does not need a teenager today who needs a stencil to write his own name'” (observational protocol, BP_008_36).

The career guide identifies a major problem: low-skilled young people cannot find a training position or job. According to his description of this situation, the problem lies in the structures. He alludes to a failure of the school in providing sufficient education and skills. However, it is also striking that no (not even an implicit) solution is provided, except that the young person needs a better education in order to become competitive in the labour market. In this form, the problem is also individualised, because it is ultimately the responsibility of the young person to balance structural conditions and to become competitive through better performance.

If it is common knowledge that especially the group of Early School Leavers has very low chances to find a training position or job; it is a fiction of feasibility of transitions. Of course, the group of Early School Leaver is a group faced with multiple difficulties, and the transition to work or higher education is one issue among many others. This becomes evident in the empirical data from the conversation analysis. In the following conversation, a 20-year-old young woman who recently dropped out of Grade 9 due to mental health issues, even with suicidal ideation, wants to now continue her education:

G okay. That is, you see your psychiatrist in one week, and in two weeks we two would see each other. until then you may have more (.) starting points where we can work concretely.

C mh hm.

G today :: (---) today was actually more about putting me back in the picture so that I know again =where do we go, and where can we have confidence in going? how far are you. (---) But in any case hm, I think you hm, you look at me better than last year, right? (---) more open.

C yes?

G last year you were a little bit closed, (-) I think =

C really?

G this year more open.

C : ah.

G So I see, uh, a progress, right? (---) that you may not feel that way, that's normal.

C [(that's something you cannot feel yourself?)]

G but you actually look better to me: even clearer.

C (---) yes.

G that's good. (.) [that means] that you know what you want.

C [That's when you learn to grow up

G exactly.

(transcript of a consultation 4)

This sequence differs from the other counselling sessions in that the client is undergoing psychotherapeutic treatment because of suicidal ideation. Thus, in the course of the conversation, the career guide determines the further therapeutic care of the client as a prerequisite for vocational guidance. At least one psychological plan must be in place to develop career plans. Moreover, we learn by the statement "Today was actually more about putting me back in the picture" that the conversation is not a first conversation in the true sense, but a fresh start of a consultation, which may have taken place a long time ago. The career guide then changes from the ego to the we-form. She communicates a collective that carries on together. The consultant positions herself as a partner in dealing with upcoming challenges "where do we go, and where can we have confidence in going".

Trust plays a decisive role in the consulting context. In the following, the consultant changes to a psychologising assessment of the client. "I think you hm, you look at me better than last year, right? (---) more open". The positive assessment of the development of the personality structure of this young woman seems to diverge with the self-image of the client. However, the client seems to be open to the recognition of and further positive assessment of the career guide. The career guide becomes an important reference person for the client. In doing so, the career guide also sets a framework with her assessment. A more open personality is communicated and categorised as being better than a closed one. It becomes clear what is considered a positive development and what is not. The use of the comparative "clearer" communicates the career guide's idea of the direction in which the client should develop.

The positioning of the career guide is reinforced by her statement "that you may not feel that way, that's normal". The career guide claims that a stranger's assessment is needed to detect such a development. To underpin the young woman's positive progress, the career guide evaluates it with her statement "that's good" and infers that the client is aware of her possibilities in the statement "you know what you want".

The client takes her turn, picking up on the advancement in the personality structure just described by the counsellor. Knowing what one wants is now equated with being or becoming an adult. "That's when one learns to grow up". By using "one", learning to grow up becomes generalised and normalised. It is remarkable that adulthood is not described as a biological process, but as a learning process in the sense of learning to stand on one's own feet.

Following your own career plans and being an adult are set equal. This is also highly visible in biographical interviews:

“I did not know why I go to school. I was still young and so. And now / now I know what I want and now I have my plan, a goal (..) and I'll achieve that and / and yes I had to go through all that and now (.) Everything is fine, I hope” (biographical interview 4).

Being or becoming an adult by learning to stand on one's own feet and focusing on career plans is a rationale that is found in other biographical interviews as well. The clients present themselves as individuals responsible for their own destiny, who define access to the world of work through their insight into the meaningfulness of pedagogical organisations. The phrase "my plan" expresses the importance of taking responsibility for one's own life into one's own hands and of knowing and pursuing the concrete realisation of goals and recognising the meaningfulness of the schooling system and other institutions. It is stressed by an underlying willpower: "And I will achieve that". Self-doubt is explicitly excluded. This young person's achievements at this point are underlined by what he had to experience in the past. While not going on to explain what „I had to go through all that” means, this statement indicates that, unlike others, it was harder for him but now he is on the “right” track.

4 Discussion

The triangulation of the four analytical approaches shows how the rationality of feasible transitions is an alternative-free premise in consulting situations. In the interviews with the experts and the young people, action-related knowledge becomes manifest, that is, the clients realise that they will have to attempt the transition into work despite unfavourable conditions, because the alternative of unemployment does not correspond to an acceptable state. Even more, the young people seeking advice interpret their own biographies in such a way that, so far, they have done too little for a successful transition into work. In this context, being a rational adult means admitting one's own shortcomings and promising improvement (Fejes, 2008). These findings correspond with findings of a discourse analysis on political papers authored by the EU Commission and the EU Council, in which the responsibility is placed on the individual and the career guidance services are ascribed the role of accompanying individuals in becoming useful for the labour market again (Schröder & Karl, 2017).

The way in which young people and career guides view transitions into work is determined by rationalities that manifest and translate the various societal demands and requirements into (pedagogical) rationalities of governance. Organisations provide an essential framework for professional action in the fields of education and social work. They not only guarantee professional action (Schicke, 2011), they also characterise the work done in organisations by their underlying rationalities that produce and are produced in societal discourses. In other words: Organisations shape and are shaped by the discursive construction of society (Ortmann et al., 2000).

In the end, organisations are spaces in which power is received and re-transmitted. It is the co-productions and their effects: “the multiple forms of subjectivizing and ‘mediating’, the linking of the day-to-day administering of lives to broader programmatic concerns and political rationalities, including ideas of neoliberalism” (Raffnsøe, Mennicken & Miller, 2017, p. 22). The career guidance service retains the notion that transitions to work or higher school education are feasible even if they know better. The organisation manifests the rationale of attempting the almost impossible, guiding someone to find a job in a labour market in which literally no one is looking for unskilled human resources. And this is regarded as a display of

“adult” behaviour whereas other behaviour is categorised as “childish”. The principle rationale of being responsible for one's own actions is not questioned at all. The consequence of making “nonsense” in early life stages leads naturally to the fact that a person has to work much harder now to catch up with those that learnt to be grown up earlier. And what does it mean to be grown up in this rationality? It means to understand and to follow the rationalities of power manifested by organisations such as career guidance services framing an institutionalised life course despite all the biographical breaks and deviations. To be grown up means to play the game by the rules. And one rule is to accept that some people are better off than others, and you are the one who has to catch up by improving learning skills and education to be competitive and employable.

Beyond the rationality of having to earn money, possible alternative lifestyles find no place in these settings. In Germany, for example, the unemployed have joined forces and drawn up a manifesto of the happy unemployed (Paoli, 2007), referring to Lafargue (1907) who, at the beginning of the twentieth century, already propagated the right to laziness.

In a social work perspective, the problem with the rationality of regulating modern transitions to work is the fact that it suppresses a debate about social inequalities and social transformation. It leaves no space for collective awareness of shared interests that would bring those together who are marginalised, stigmatised, superfluous, unwanted, discriminated and oppressed within the society.

Everyone is addressed as an individual with equal rights and responsibilities, who is obliged to find her/his own way to paid employment (thus making her/him a recognised member in society). Even the role as a politically active outsider loses its charm in this discourse as these individuals are discredited as passive recipients of governmental aid. Those who are looking for political alternatives are considered as excluded individuals who have to include themselves again with the assistance of organisations providing career guidance. The distinction between exclusion/inclusion and between insider/outsider masks the fact that there are inequalities that only become visible by drawing the distinction between top/down or rather between rich/poor (Butterwegge, 2009).

Social work in career guidance services is a part of a neoliberal discourse that individualises responsibilities through the promotion of an unbound competition and, by doing so, it contributes to a formation of a racist, sexist and nationalist movement. In other words, activating for the wrong reason: Not improving careers and investments in human capital but activating to protest or rather to question and change cultural and social structures.

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