

School-to-Work Transition, Career Development and Family Planning —Methodological Challenges and Guidelines of a Qualitative Longitudinal Panel Study

Thomas Kühn & Andreas Witzel

Key words: school-to-work transition, longitudinal study, career development, family planning, grounded theory, qualitative data base, typologies

Abstract: We are presenting the basic features of our qualitative German panel study concerning the job entry of young adults, dealing also with methodological issues. The selection of the respondents in qualified jobs (commercial-technical, crafts/trade, services) took into account gender-specific aspects, different labor-market prospects and regions. From the quantitative panel, a theoretical sample of respondents was selected who were interviewed three times in three-years intervals (3 waves). These interviews, focusing on individual biographies (i.e. orientations and action strategies) form the basis for constructing a typology. Methodological innovations concern the modeling of the sequence of occupational actions and orientations as life-course sequences and the case-specific and case-comparing analysis of interview transcripts. This was done—based on a data bank containing the interview material—by means of a detailed scheme of categories. The integration of quantitative and qualitative longitudinal data presents a theoretical and methodological challenge. Our focus is on biography and life-course research which suggests an interdisciplinary approach.

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1. Introduction

In this paper, we are presenting the characteristics of our longitudinal study on the school-to-work transition of young people during their first years in employment, dealing also with the methodological challenges and guidelines involved. First, we give an outline of the project design by summarizing theoretical and methodological basics and points of reference. The realization of general, grounded-theory oriented guidelines within the scope of our longitudinal design requires methodological derivatives and specifications which will be discussed in the second section of this article. [1]

2. Theoretical and Methodological Basics of the Qualitative Longitudinal Study "School-to-Work Transitions"

Our comments refer to the qualitative part of the project "School-to-Work Transition" of the Sonderforschungsbereich 186 (Special Collaborative Research Center) at the University of Bremen.¹ In the scope of this project, career development as well as family-related status passages of a cohort of apprentices are being investigated by means of qualitative and quantitative methods. We interviewed engine fitters, car mechanics, hairdressers, bank-, office- and retail employees who had finished their vocational training in 1989/90 either in an area with bleak labor market prospects (Bremen) or good ones (Munich). Our investigation includes some of the traditionally most popular qualified jobs in the service and trade sector that represent, at the same time, occupations with good and bad prospects as well as typical women's, men's and mixed jobs. From the quantitative panel a theoretical sample of respondents was made with whom we conducted problem-centered interviews (WITZEL 1982, 2000b) three times in three-years intervals, focusing on the individual biography, i.e. orientations and action strategies of the respondents (n=91 for all three waves). [2]

The qualitative part of our study deals with the sequence of actions when entering employment and investigates the first five years in the labor market. Important biographical points are being set during this passage from education to employment, in a combination of social selection and self-selection processes. We reconstruct young adults' activities by means of the theoretical concept of self-socialization (HEINZ 1988, 2000; HEINZ & WITZEL 1995). While older theories of socialization frequently imply mainly adaptive processes in which individuals learn to comply to given social structures by internalizing institutional norms and adopting age- and gender-specific role expectations as well as social values, the concept of self-socialization puts more emphasis on the individuals' active shaping of their life-course development. This enables to consider the specific achievements of individuals in integrating the changing social demands in the conduct of their lives. The structure of social systems has both a limiting and an enabling character. Opportunities and restrictions are—corresponding to the concept of "Duality of Structure" (cf. GIDDENS 1995)—subject to interpretations and modifications by the actors. Thus, the question whether choices in the transitions are bound to social contexts or can overcome them remains open. Since the actors are trying to construct their biographies despite of chronological discrepancies between individual claims on the one side and occupational demands, uncertain careers as well as unintended action results on the other, our research has been also on ways of reducing demands or constructing compromise or other ways of coping with social realities (cf. HEINZ, KRÜGER, RETTKE, WACHTVEITL & WITZEL 1987; WITZEL 2000a). [3]

Our interdisciplinary focus in biography and life-course research allows connections with *social psychology* (socialization research on the relations

1 The project is directed by Walter R. HEINZ; further team members besides the authors are Hildegard SCHAEPER and Joachim MOWITZ-LAMBERT. Detailed information concerning the project can be obtained under <http://www.sfb186.uni-bremen.de/projekte/a1.htm>.

between individual and society), with *development psychology*, considering the lifelong process of socialization (plus a contribution on the development in early adulthood), with *psychology of work* by investigating career development, and *personality psychology* that is trying to follow up the actors' subjective relevance systems. Our research contributions are focusing on *occupational sociology* and *social inequality*—we are investigating the importance of the structural categories career and gender—and on *family sociology*—with emphasis on the transition to parenthood and an analysis of the connection with job opportunities and orientations. [4]

While producing and evaluating qualitative data, we are following general guidelines and principles of *grounded theory* (cf. STRAUSS & CORBIN 1996). In the framework of this theoretical approach, we are criticizing a hypothetic-deductive procedure which allows collection and verification of data only by ex ante-determined operations. We are also disapproving of a mere inductive position according to which the scientist's attitude is marked by a general openness toward empiricism (naturalism), resp. defined as "tabula rasa", ignoring previous theoretical knowledge (cf. KELLE 1994, 1996). The yield of knowledge is instead understood as an inductive-deductive interrelation, both in the process of collection and analysis of data (cf. WITZEL 1996, 2000b). Also with respect to the importance of case analyses and case comparison for the development of qualitative results (cf. KELLE & KLUGE 1999; WITZEL 1996), we are following the research paradigm of *grounded theory*. [5]

3. Methodological Challenges, Further Development and Guidelines Resulting from the Analysis of Qualitative Data

As we will show in the following, special challenges and the need of further development are arising for our analysis, first, from the longitudinal character of the study, second from the relationship of the qualitative to the quantitative panel, and third, from the extensive interview and text data. These issues result from the complex subject "life-course development" and from a systematic consideration of social-structural categories like gender, profession, region by taking qualitative sampling. For analyzing this material (in total, we have 300 problem-centered interviews in 770.000 text lines), computer-aided strategies.² [6]

3.1 Computer-aided strategies and methods of qualitative data analysis

In order to increase the possibilities of an access to our data, we developed a data bank that covers all interviews by a detailed category system. This system helps to find similarities, differences and connections between the different text segments. This is not a means for deducting concepts and theory, but a starting point for various stages of focused analysis. The categories or codes chosen by us as a data-bank classification system have limited theoretical validity, not to be

2 Since the computer-aided analysis represents both a main area in the coming (third) FQS-issue [Text-Archive-Re-Analysis](#) and the connection of quantitative and qualitative research of the subsequent fourth issue [Qualitative and Quantitative Research: How the two research traditions see each other](#), we confine ourselves to an abstract of the subject matters and address the longitudinal nature of our study in more detail.

understood as "core categories" in the sense of *grounded theory*, but as thematic "containers" (RICHARDS & RICHARDS 1995) that offer material for further analysis and for formulating theoretical concepts. They support the analysis in reference to the themes having been touched in our problem-centred interviews. [7]

The category system allows a dynamic, time-related interview analysis across the different waves of our survey. It guides the thematic grouping of data with regard to career and family-planning as well as to order it chronologically. This means to arrange the career development of our respondents according to the timing and duration of passages (cf. action strategy under 3.3). In order to ensure a case selection according to social-structural aspects, the interviews were also grouped by certain characteristics like level of job qualification. This complex coding system enables a detailed and elaborated collection of the subjects of the biographical interviews (for an in-depth presentation, cf. KÜHN & WITZEL 2000). [8]

3.2 Integration of qualitative and quantitative longitudinal data and analytical-interpretative methods

The integration of qualitative and quantitative longitudinal data represents a special theoretical and methodological challenge. At the same time, our project is focusing on the *sampling procedure* for the qualitative sample and the *result-oriented combination* of qualitative and quantitative methods. [9]

In order to make sure that all theoretically relevant groups were represented in the qualitative sample, the selection of interview partners took place on the basis of our questionnaire study (cf. MÖNNICH & WITZEL 1994). Criteria were the structural framework of job chances (regions with good or bad prospects in male, female and "mixed" occupations), the respondents' career (pathways and transitions from education to apprenticeship), the prospects of staying in the company. Furthermore, the selection of "extreme cases", for example, a woman with post-secondary education working as a car mechanic³, provided clues to special biographical choices. [10]

The *result-oriented combination* of methods consists of linking different sociological and social-psychological levels of theorizing social processes. In order to analyze the transitions between the educational and training system and the labor market as well as further career and family formation, we connect "macro-", "meso-" and "micro-level". By returning to the phenomena recorded on the micro- and meso-level by means of qualitative data, we attempt to explain the structuration of social inequality at the transition from education to employment and to family formation—as documented on the "macro-level" by quantitative data (cf. KÜHN & ZINN 1998; WITZEL & ZINN 1998; SCHAEPER & KÜHN 2000; SCHAEPER, KÜHN & WITZEL 2000, SCHAEPER, KÜHN & WITZEL 2001). [11]

3 As to the procedure of qualitative sampling on the basis of a quantitative inquiry by questionnaire, see also PREIN, KELLE and KLUGE (1993, pp.49ff.).

3.3 Interpretation in the framework of a longitudinal study

The longitudinal design of our study poses a methodological challenge insofar as not only connections between different orientations are being investigated, but also *processes of development* resp. temporal dynamics of these orientations as well as their realization. For analyzing these sequences, we developed a heuristic model of action that forms the basis for further thematic analysis and concept formation. These analyses, focusing on the crystallizing of various types (cf. KLUGE 1999; KELLE & KLUGE 1999), result in different possibilities of modeling with respect to the observation window and to developmental processes. [12]

When analyzing the transitions from education to employment and modes of agency during the first years on the job, our aim exceeds the understanding of actions with their focus on individual situations and focuses on sequences of action in the life course. We regard those sequences as results of self-socialization, i.e. the personal coping and arranging with career requirements and the reflection of experiences of inequality in employment and their impact on the life course. Thus, the question is, how the relations of employment experiences and biographical action orientations can be modeled as life-course sequences. By following the social-phenomenological action theory (cf. SCHÜTZ 1974), we formulate a *heuristic model of action* (cf. WITZEL 2000a). In doing so, we are sceptical concerning the construction of a general and, at the same, empirically grounded action theory, as proposed by ESSER (1996) in the "rational-choice" resp. decision-theoretical approach (cf. the critique by KELLE & LÜDEMANN 1995, 1996). Therefore, we choose a reconstructive approach to career-related actions and individual meaning or sense-making by conceptually "clustering" the orientations and actions identified in the interviews. The three elements of our basic conceptual model which proved empirically successful as a means for an interpretative analysis of longitudinal data, consist of aspirations (A), realizations (R), and balancing (B), in the sense of stock-taking, that are applied to individual situations in life course. [13]

Aspirations are describing the reasons of action identified in the interview texts. With them, we are able to reconstruct job-related and situation-specific interests, motives and concepts of action or even plans (cf. GEISSLER & OECHSLE 1996). The actors, confronted with opportunity structures, are inspecting alternatives that correspond with their aspirations. [14]

Realizations concern statements about concrete steps to put aspirations into actions. In order to cope with status passages and career demands, actors are focusing on chances that they are trying to realize and restrictions that they want to avoid. [15]

Balancing refers to the individual assessment of the consequences of decisions and actions as well as context experiences. Individual "résumés" are describing the significance of past actions, reflect ways of handling passage experiences and efforts to maintain biographical identity. The meaning of action is emerging in retrospect. This has been neglected in rational-choice theory (cf. ESSER 1996). It

is important for the simple reason that it forms an essential basis for perceiving and understanding social reality and for self-socialization processes across the life course. [16]

If the ARB-model is to serve the biographical analysis of action, its elements aspirations, realizations and balancing have to be related to personal definitions of the situations concerning transitions into employment and to further life-course transitions. These situations can be labeled as turning points of the *life-course* that locate the actor in various contexts of participation in institutions and organizations; here: apprenticeship, job, unemployment, change of job, military/community service, retraining, advanced technical college etc. [17]

Balancing or stock-taking comprises not only retrospective but also prospective reflection which will be followed by new assessments of goals, expectations and plans. Balancing, therefore, links—due to its double time perspective—the ARB-sequences with the individual life-course and represents the dynamic hinge of the "balancing-aspirations-realizations-balancing-model" (BARB-model). [18]

Analyses based on the BARB-model show the dynamics of biographical action in specific life-course situations and social contexts. They elucidate, for instance—in the individual interview itself and across all three waves of inquiry—the coming about of breaks resp. continuities in biographical development and transition processes or the fitting resp. discrepancy of individual aspirations on the one side and perceived institutional expectations and demands on the other; and they explain the consequences of action gained by balancing, for further shaping of a career. [19]

By analyzing longitudinal data, varied *observation windows* can be opened, corresponding to different questions and theoretical perspectives. Decisions have to be made concerning the extent to which statements from interviews can be compressed across situations and how *processes of development* are to be synthesized. In our project, the meaning of three biographical perspectives becomes evident: [20]

First, one can produce *situation-specific* analyses. For instance, different modes of arranging with episodes of discontinuity in employment (cf. SCHAEPER, KÜHN & WITZEL 2000) are discovered by looking at periods in which a respondent was unemployed: which aspirations and perspectives are implied? [21]

Second, there are *analyses across situations* which differ with respect to the incorporation of developmental processes and, thus, to the temporal axis connected to the longitudinal design. [22]

The *direct connection to developmental processes* is a characteristic of our typology "family planning" (KÜHN 1999) that shows in an elaborate way how young adults, having finished their education and training, anticipate and plan the transition to parenthood with respect to the timing and coordination with career prospects. In this typology, different *courses of orientation* are being

distinguished. The types vary, first, in the way they are related to family and career planning and, second, whether plans can be realized or not, whether they are being maintained, postponed or set aside. [23]

The typology of "modes of biographical agency (BGM)" concerning work and career (WITZEL & KÜHN 1999, 2000) refers to the individual handling of different life-course transitions and states (i.e., education, phases of employment and unemployment etc.). Thus, it relates to the individual meaning and importance of biographical categories like career, income, qualification. Like the typology "family planning", the BGM-typology spans across situations since it abstracts from the coping with specific risks of individual biographical episodes, focussing instead on the typical modes of biographical career agency among young adults. The theoretical concept of BGM is characterized by a fundamental openness towards stability or change of modes of biographical agency. It is an empirical issue whether the "central thread" in career development continues during the period of observation or is in a process of transformation. In the latter case, the classification according to the typology must be modified. Therefore, an empirical examination, only possible with longitudinal data can show why and how long a BGM remains stable beyond the first experiences made in labor-market and career. [24]

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Authors

Thomas KÜHN (Psychologist), born 1971, graduate of Bremen University, researcher at the Special Research Center 186 "Status Passages and Risks in the Life Course" at the University of Bremen since 1994 (further information at: <http://www.sfb186.uni-bremen.de>). His research focuses on biography and life course, career socialization, family sociology and psychology, methods of qualitative longitudinal analysis.

Andreas WITZEL (Psychologist, PhD), born 1945, studies in Regensburg and Darmstadt, researcher at the University of Bremen. Since 1990 project member at the Sfb 186 "Status Passages and Risks in the Life Course". His research focuses on career and pre-career socialization, occupation and labor market, and on methods of interpretative social research (especially qualitative interview and evaluation methods and the linking of qualitative and quantitative methods).

Contact:

Thomas Kühn
Sonderforschungsbereich 186
Wiener Straße, Postfach 330440
D – 28334 Bremen
Phone: +49/ (0)421 / 218 4141
E-mail: tkuehn@sfb186.uni-bremen.de
URL: <http://www.kuehn-thomas.de>

Contact:

Andreas Witzel
Sonderforschungsbereich 186
Wiener Straße, Postfach 330440
D – 28334 Bremen
Phone: +49 / (0)421 / 218 4141
FAX: +49 / (0)421 / 218 4153
E-mail: awitzel@sfb186.uni-bremen.de

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