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Compressed, postponed, or disadvantaged? School-to-work-transition patterns and early occupational attainment in West Germany

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ABSTRACT

We study school-to-work-transition (STWT) patterns and early occupational attainment for five West German birth cohorts. Although these cohorts experienced very different macro conditions, their STWTs were facilitated by Germany's strong vocational education and training (VET) system. The main research question is whether linearity of STWTs differed across and within cohorts. Linearity concerns the normatively expected order of different activity statuses during this life phase. High linearity is ideal-typically defined as entering VET or tertiary education programs after leaving general education, followed by rather direct entry into employment. Non-linear patterns diverge from this ordering or may also include other status activities, like unemployment and inactivity. We use data of the Adult Starting Cohort of the German National Education Panel Study (NEPS) and employ sequence analysis and regression methods. Our analyses reveal that the proportion of young people experiencing the ideal-typical transition patterns increased over the cohorts. Yet, the degree of non-linearity (in terms of number of status activities and status shifts, and some non-employment experience) of these ideal-typical STWT patterns also increased over the cohorts. Moreover, we find strong differences between men and women in early occupational attainment. Higher-educated women in particular had higher risks of long-term disadvantage, whereas men were able to compensate for disadvantages by achieving higher educational attainment and establishing themselves more quickly in the labor market.

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1. Introduction

Linearity is an important characteristic of school-to-work transitions (hereafter: STWTs) in advanced economies (cf. Brzinsky-Fay, 2007; Buchmann & Kriesi, 2011). Linearity concerns the normatively expected order of different activity statuses during this life phase. High linearity is ideal-typically defined as entering vocational education and training (VET) or tertiary education programs after leaving general education, followed by rather direct entry into employment (preferably into skilled jobs) and stable labor market integration. Non-linear patterns diverge from this ordering (e.g., school–employment–VET–employment), or may also include other status activities, like unemployment and inactivity. Thus, the degree of linearity can be assessed by two measures: the number of status activities and the number of shifts between status

activities (hereafter: status shifts). Perfectly linear patterns are defined by the three status activities (school, VET/university, employment) and two status shifts (i.e., school–VET and VET–employment). Non-linear patterns are defined by higher number of status activities and status shifts, especially owing to unemployment or inactivity episodes. Additionally, the severity of non-linearity can be assessed by occupational attainment at the (defined) end of STWTs: the higher this attainment of individuals who experienced rather non-linear STWTs, the less severe is this non-linearity.

The discussion on country variation in youth unemployment and NEET rates (youth not in employment, education, and training) often refers to this characteristic of STWTs: unemployment and NEET rates vary considerably between advanced economies. Despite the current crisis, countries with strong VET systems—especially apprenticeship systems (e.g., Austria, Germany, and Switzerland)—show much lower rates than countries with general education systems (e.g., France, Italy, or Spain) (OECD, 2013: 5–6). One of the key arguments why rates are low(er) in these countries is that firm-based training programs facilitate more linear

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STWT transitions than general education systems (e.g., Brzinsky-Fay, 2007; Buchmann & Kriesi, 2011; De Lange, Gesthuizen, & Wolbers, 2014).

This explanation, however, falls short on at least three points. First, most studies do not investigate STWT patterns but rather treat labor market entry as a single event (e.g., Scherer, 2005; Wolbers, 2007). Thus, the linearity of STWT patterns in these countries is often unknown.

Second, most of these comparative studies overlook within-country differences in STWT patterns, often leading to rather ideal-typical considerations of STWT patterns and labor market entry (e.g., Gangl, 2002; Kerckhoff, 2001; Ryan, 2001). Yet STWT patterns may vary across time (cohorts) and within cohorts, for example, by educational attainment or gender.

Third, we can observe a strong association between national youth unemployment rates and the unemployment rates of prime-age workers (aged 25–54) (e.g., Breen, 2005: 131; Gangl, 2002). In 2014, for example, the correlation between these two rates was 0.9 (own calculations based on OECD indicators for 2014).¹ This strong correlation questions the simple explanation regarding the impact of VET systems, because low(er) rates could be generated by good economic conditions and not by the education system per se. Breen's (2005) comparative macro-level analysis for the years 1995–1999 suggests that strong VET systems do facilitate lower youth unemployment rates at least to some extent. The time period covered is small, however. The country-comparative study by De Lange et al. (2014) on labor market integration for the period 1992–2008 corroborates Breen's finding. Neither study, however, allows for within-country and within-cohort comparisons over time. To determine whether strong VET systems generate linear STWTs under different economic conditions, we need historical comparisons within countries with strong VET systems. This design enables us to discover whether, and if so for whom, participation in vocational education results in linear STWTs regardless of the economic situation.

The aim of our paper is to overcome these three shortcomings. We therefore study STWT patterns and occupational attainment until age 30 for five West German birth cohorts (born between 1948 and 1977). These cohorts left school between the mid-1960s and the early 1990s and reached age 30 between 1978 and 2007. Thus, they experienced different combinations of macro conditions, but all cohorts' transitions were facilitated by Germany's strong VET system.

We define the "end" of the STWT period by age rather than duration (i.e., 15 years after leaving school). The reason for doing so is that young people not only stay longer in education (as acknowledged in the duration approach) but also become older. Age receives strong attention in demographic research (e.g., Baizán, Michielin, & Billari, 2002; Billari & Wilson, 2001) or research on socio-psychological factors (e.g., Elder & Shanahan, 2006; Mortimer, 1994; Shanahan & Mortimer, 1996). Yet it might also be of interest for studying STWTs and early occupational attainment, because being older when making educational decisions and/or entering the labor market could help "speed up" this life passage because of age norms or higher (developmental) maturity (e.g., Mortimer, Oesterle, & Krüger, 2005). Different birth cohorts might therefore achieve similar occupational positions at age 30—even though they had less time between leaving school and reaching 30. Furthermore, delays resulting from educational expansion could be compensated for by higher educational attainment, enabling younger cohorts to achieve higher occupational placements faster. To assess whether this delay not only postpones

the entire STWT period but also changes early occupational attainment, and whether this attainment is influenced by maturity and/or age norms, we compare occupational attainment achieved at age 30 and 15 years after leaving general schooling (i.e., when individuals have the same amount of time available for their labor market entry).

In sum, our paper addresses three research questions: First, does the German VET system support linear STWT patterns for men and women—regardless of economic conditions—and does this apply to school leavers with low school attainment as well? Second, does early occupational attainment—as our indicator of the severity of non-linearity of STWT patterns—differ across and within cohorts? Third, does occupational attainment vary when looking at age 30 or 15 years after leaving school?

2. Macro conditions in West Germany 1960–2000

We start with institutional and historical information on educational expansion, apprenticeship market conditions, and labor market conditions in West Germany between the mid-1960s and the mid-2000s (corresponding to the cohorts of our study, see Table 1).

2.1. Educational expansion

The German secondary school system is highly segregated.² Starting in grade 5, it differentiates between school types and school degrees (cf. Bol & van de Werfhorst, 2013; Leuze & Solga, 2013): the lower school type (*Hauptschule*), the intermediate school type (*Realschule*), or the university-preparatory school type (*Gymnasium*). Very few German states have comprehensive secondary schools. Moreover, all states have schools for children with special needs (cf. Powell, 2011). Young people can leave school without a degree, with a low degree (*Hauptschulabschluss*), an intermediate degree (*Realschulabschluss*), or the university entrance qualification (*Abitur*). These degrees do not fully correspond to the school type attended: For instance, students from intermediate schools, too, can leave school without a degree or with only the low degree.

Educational expansion, meaning increasing cohort shares of individuals participating at least until the intermediate school level, started in West Germany in the mid-1960s and slowed down in the late 1980s before rising again in the early 2000s (i.e., after the birth cohorts studied here). Table 1 displays this development. The percentages of school leavers with at least an intermediate school degree increased strongly between the 1950 and 1970 cohorts; the 1970 and 1975 cohorts achieved rather similar shares.

2.2. VET conditions

In addition to compulsory schooling (typically 9–10 years, depending on state policy), Germany also requires young people to participate in vocational education (at least part time) until age 18 (or longer). Students can fulfill this requirement by attending *Gymnasium*, fully qualifying VET programs, or (full-time or part-time) prevocational education programs. The German VET system therefore includes not only the dual (or apprenticeship) system and the fully qualifying school-based system (e.g., providing training as nurses and kindergarten teachers) but also the sector of prevocational training measures (for more details, see Protsch & Solga, 2015).

The first two sectors, the dual and fully qualifying school-based system, lead to recognized occupational training certificates and

¹ Data extracted on May 18, 2015, from OECD.Stat.

² The following school system information refers to the historical time of the cohorts studied—neglecting recent changes in some German states.

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