

Article

The Role of Autonomy in the Transition to the World of Work

Jan F. C. Gellermann^{1,*} and Philipp Fuchs²¹ Institute for Employment Research (IAB), Germany² Institute for Social Research (ISG), Germany* Corresponding author (jan.gellermann@iab.de)

Submitted: 15 November 2021 | Accepted: 22 March 2022 | Published: 9 June 2022

Abstract

The article is based on a qualitative study covering 32 youths from the age of 18 to 25 who did not manage a stable transition from school to the German labor market. All of them, albeit to different degrees and for different reasons, are running the risk of long-term exclusion from the sphere of work and vocational training measures as well as public support structures. Based on multiple narrative interviews with the young persons participating in the study, qualitative case reconstructions were conducted concerning their social background, socialization, and how their biographies developed. This contribution specifically sheds light on the relevance of the genesis of autonomy for the individual transition into the world of work and further education. The findings are presented as risk factors hampering the genesis of autonomy in the process of socialization, namely, (a) dysfunctional parent–child relationship and (b) persistence of traditionalism. The findings point not only to the high relevance of autonomy for managing a stable transition but also imply that there are further factors leading to more disconnectedness in addition to a broad range of factors known from the existing literature. From our perspective, longer processes of socialization, i.e., subject formation processes, significantly contribute to a more nuanced understanding of this phenomenon.

Keywords

autonomy; German education system; German labor market; school-to-work transition; socialization; vocational training; youths

Issue

This article is a part of the issue “Challenges in School-To-Work Transition: Perspectives on Individual, Institutional, and Structural Inequalities” edited by Brigitte Schels (Institute for Employment Research / University of Erlangen-Nuremberg) and Veronika Wöhrer (University of Vienna).

© 2022 by the author(s); licensee Cogitatio (Lisbon, Portugal). This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY).

1. Introduction

This article focuses on youths whose transition from school to work failed and for whom institutional support services provided by the German welfare and education system as well as employment services have remained ineffective. Our empirical basis is the qualitative longitudinal study *Disconnected Youth: Processes of Disconnecting in School-to-Work Transition* (Fuchs et al., 2018).

The study was, among other things, motivated by a remarkable disparity in the German vocational training market, which increased during the years prior to the Covid-19 pandemic: On the one hand, the num-

ber of unfilled apprenticeships in 2019 reached an all-time high in Germany (80,000, according to the Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training [BIBB], 2021, pp. 15–17). On the other hand, at the same time, there were more than 73,000 young people still looking for an apprenticeship. Of course, not all youths who do not find a training place are “disconnected youths.” In principle, a mere oversupply of apprenticeships does not necessarily mean that all applicants will be supplied. Two major reasons are (a) regional imbalances in the vocational training market and (b) varying demand for different occupations (BIBB, 2021, pp. 23–24). Some of the youths who fail to start an apprenticeship find other options—such as picking up low-skilled work or taking

up studies—but some of them are at least temporarily not in employment, education, or training, a status also referred to as NEET. However, among this group, there is also a significant share who have dropped out of all institutional contexts, such as school or vocational training or other support structures (Caroleo et al., 2020). According to initial estimates, a group of about 21,000 youths in Germany is severely cut off from all institutional support (Mögling et al., 2015, p. 45). These young people can also be considered “disconnected youths.” Our findings on processes of disconnecting complement the previous findings for Germany and aim to identify causes for particularly severe cases of disconnectedness using a qualitative approach applying sequential analysis and case reconstructions. Focusing on the reconstruction of individual processes of socialization, we find two main factors driving processes of disconnecting: (a) dysfunctional parent–child relationship and (b) persistence of traditionalism. Both of these considerably hamper the development of habitual autonomy, which in turn affects the ability to cope with the vocational education system and the working world.

Following this introduction, this article first presents the theoretical framework containing both a review of relevant literature on disconnected youth as well as the theoretical core of our article, namely the concepts of “habitus” and “life practice,” and the relevance of “autonomy in the world of work.” Details on the empirical basis of this article and the applied methodology of qualitative analysis are the subject of Section 3. Section 4 presents the main empirical findings of two factors driving processes of disconnection. Section 5 contains our conclusions.

2. Theoretical Framework

One of the most prominent approaches in research on youth unemployment is the NEET concept. Empirical research based on the NEET concept can be traced back to the Social Exclusion Unit in the UK in 1999 (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999), which first introduced this concept. Since then, researchers have picked up on this idea and investigated potential factors contributing to the status of becoming NEET (Furlong, 2006; Yates & Payne, 2006). Interestingly, the terms “NEET” and “disconnected youth” are often used synonymously (Kevelson et al., 2020), thus blurring the distinction between a potentially temporary status of unemployment and a more wide-ranging process of disconnecting. The NEET definition has, in addition, been repeatedly criticized for being conceptually vague since it covers a variety of groups—ranging from young people with multiple disadvantages to those with good educational attainment failing to find a stable job (Cavalca, 2016; Scarpetta et al., 2010) or even not being interested in a stable transition.

There is a particularly rich literature based on quantitative studies identifying factors driving the NEET status at different levels. On a structural level, characteristics of the labor market and the welfare state, the voca-

tional and employment system, and economic factors like the national GDP growth and the size of a youth cohort potentially impact the transition of youths into employment and training (Flisi et al., 2015). But family background plays a significant role as well, including factors such as parental educational attainment, parental unemployment, parents’ income (Carcillo et al., 2015), or being a child of divorced parents (Eurofound, 2012). On an individual level, factors such as being disabled or of poor health as well as special educational needs are often found to increase the risk of becoming NEET. The same is true of ethnic minority groups or persons with immigrant backgrounds (Ross & Svajlenka, 2016) and care leavers (Akister et al., 2010). Finally, educational attainments and experiences of young people often prove to be relevant risk factors. Examples are lower education (Duckworth & Schoon, 2012), lower self-efficacy, and becoming a parent at an early age, especially among women (Millett & Kevelson, 2018).

Most of the existing research is based on a very broad understanding of failing transitions, thus covering a variety of constellations and motives among youths who fall under the category of NEET. In contrast to this, we explicitly focus on young persons who did not manage the transition from school to the world of work and received basic income support for long-term unemployed instead of starting vocational training. Furthermore, institutional support in these cases has so far proven ineffective. Although we acknowledge that typical risk factors identified in the above-cited literature also play a role in these cases, we are also convinced that an in-depth look from a biographical perspective with a focus on the process of socialization and subject formation can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of this sub-group of youths most-at-risk of becoming severely disconnected.

Our assumption is that especially more severe disconnectedness essentially stems from a discrepancy between the habitual autonomy and the autonomy requirements of a modern work and education society. In other words: Disconnectedness can arise if the degree of habitually formed autonomy falls short of societal expectations as well as the need for individual autonomy required to cope with the various tasks of the educational and occupational system. This is not meant to imply that disconnected youths are themselves to blame for their situation or their lack of autonomy. Autonomy is part of the individual habitus and arises from a complex socialization process. As we can see from the above-cited literature, the social and economic situation and milieu of their families of origin, educational practices of the parents, the support structure of the welfare state, the educational system, and the question of equal opportunity play considerable roles as well.

In modern societies, autonomy is increasingly becoming the norm in the working world. A good example is the free choice of occupation: Sons no longer automatically and unquestioningly follow their fathers’ occupations, as in earlier times, with no other career options

being available. Daughters, too, do not simply become housewives after marriage, just because their mothers did. Today, they have to make a well-founded decision and they need a substantiated reason (Oevermann, 2009, p. 40). The free choice of occupation puts the responsibility on individuals to choose how to secure their livelihoods. This is why the principle of equal opportunity is so important in modern societies. Free choice of occupation and the accompanying personal responsibility can only be legitimized if, in principle, all occupations are open to all aspirants. Free choice of occupation is related to a free labor market: The introduction of free enterprise and a competitive market in Western Europe in the 19th century meant that production processes or services were no longer regulated, as traditional crafts or trades continued to be for a long time (Fischer et al., 1980; Kindleberger, 1974; Knowles, 1932/2006). At the same time, equal opportunity is not completely realized, as we can see from findings on ongoing structural discrimination in the access to apprenticeships and work (Keita & Valette, 2020).

A similar increased demand for autonomy can be observed in the tertiarization of the economy, i.e., the relative increase in service occupations. Even supposedly simple service occupations today require employees to make independent decisions. This increases both the overall opportunities for autonomy and the need for autonomy. Vocational training also nowadays requires more technical, analytical, and social skills, as well as learning and problem-solving skills (Funcke et al., 2010, pp. 22–23).

Organizational hierarchies are also flattening (Acemoglu et al., 2007; Rajan & Wulf, 2006). Even lower-level jobs today involve more personal responsibility and menial work requires more autonomy (Berger & Offe, 1984). This flattening of hierarchies is made possible by technological progress, which automates largely standardized work processes through digitalization and automation (Gerten et al., 2019). As a consequence, working individuals are required to act more autonomously. They must also act more flexibly at lower hierarchy levels and make more independent decisions than in the past, as there are more uncertainties to manage and tasks are becoming more complex (Wischmann & Hartmann, 2018, p. 26). Another theoretical premise of our article is that the institutions of the vocational education system and labor market in modern societies offer less recourse to traditions and routines. Therefore, individuals must shape and decide areas of their lives independently (Beck, 1992). Individual autonomy is central to coping with this creative pressure, which means both a gain in freedom but also an enormous burden (Giddens, 1991).

2.1. *Habitus and Life Practice*

Our perspective on the phenomenon of disconnected youth is, on the one hand, based on the concept of habitus by Bourdieu (1984) and, on the other, on the con-

cept of *Lebenspraxis* (here translated as “life practice”) by Oevermann (2004, 2009). From Bourdieu’s concept of habitus, we adopted the premise that patterns of perception, thought, and action are formed and consolidated as individuals engage with society. An individual neither reacts completely pre-determined nor completely free to a given situation but faces a range of choices in all life situations. Based on Oevermann’s model of life practice, we assume that individuals always have more choices available to them than they are able to realize. They are thus forced to choose among the options available without knowing beforehand which is the right one and without knowing any clear reasons yet. The available options in turn are structured both by societal and—in the case of employment—economic restrictions and potential discrimination, but also by the perception of the individual forced to make a choice (Oevermann, 2004). Autonomy, which is based on habitus, is the prerequisite for constructively confronting new stages of life and thus for overcoming the crisis of moving out of the familiar into an unknown future with the confidence of proving oneself. It is the ability of individuals to act in unknown situations and also to anticipate and bear responsibility for the consequences of their actions. The individual must therefore first recognize what is new in a situation, i.e., feel a need to make a decision, identify the options available, and choose among them in the first place (Oevermann, 2004). New and unknown situations can occur at very different levels—in personal relationships, such as when choosing a partner, or in the world of work, when deciding what to study, choosing a career, or changing jobs, but also in existential life crises, such as illness.

After identifying a situation as new and unfamiliar, individuals must then realize that the previous routines and habits are no longer viable and new actions are required. This ultimately means taking previously untested actions in unknown situations and thereby also enduring the uncertainty that these actions will only prove to be right or wrong in retrospect. Opening up new choices, mastering the unknown, appropriating and “habitualizing” new practices—all this requires autonomy. It also requires the ability to endure the uncertainty of whether these actions in unknown situations are socially appropriate or promising, and also to cope with them productively. “Productively” here means neither fleeing from the unknown, i.e., avoiding a new situation, nor denying the uncertainty or clinging to habitual behaviors, even if previous patterns prove dysfunctional. This ability to cope with crises autonomously is formed gradually during socialization (Oevermann, 2004).

Three aspects are important for the determination of autonomy as an integral part of life practice. The first aspect is *freedom and independence*, which means the possibility and ability to cope with challenges independently according to one’s own ideas, not according to the expectations and constraints of others (Oevermann, 2009). This presupposes the ability to form personal preferences and needs. The second aspect is *responsibility*

in the shape of foresight and self-control (Elias, 1978). This is the ability to shape one's life in a way that does not affect or restrict the freedom of others. In other words, the ability to act responsibly means imposing constraints or limitations on oneself as a prerequisite for autonomy. Thirdly, since humans are necessarily always members of a community on which they depend (both the family and a political community), they are expected to commit to maintaining and securing the future of the communities that sustain them. Autonomy consists of individuals deciding how to commit to the community, neither leaving the decisions about their lives to others nor avoiding active decisions altogether (Oevermann, 2009). This means the individuals carry both the *burden* of societal expectations while also having the *freedom of self-determination*.

3. Empirical Basis and Methodology

The empirical basis of our article is a qualitative study applying line-by-line analysis to biographical narrative interviews with 32 cases, of which 16 contrastive cases were included in a qualitative panel (Fuchs et al., 2018). By forming a longitudinal panel out of the initial sample, we followed the "logic of discovery" in qualitative social research, which means that researchers cannot make a valid decision on which cases to include in a study without having previously analyzed a reasonable amount of the data collected (Rosenthal, 2018, p. 76). Apart from sociodemographic characteristics, the criteria for the selection of cases for the panel were based on theoretical considerations: Following the principle of a "maximum contrastive comparison," we created a panel of study participants who on the surface display a maximum contrast with regard to the phenomenon of disconnectedness (Rosenthal, 2018, p. 86). The panel was formed, choosing the 16 most relevant and contrasting cases out of the initial 32 cases, when no further variants could be identified. All of the chosen cases were not in education employment or training (NEET) and had also previously failed to manage the transition to the world of work, i.e., usually at least for the last two years but also up to five years. In addition, the study participants were declared as "almost hopeless cases" by professionals of educational institutions and local employment agencies. To identify these cases and gain access to them, we conducted 43 focused interviews with professionals from the above-mentioned institutions, who also provided contact to potential study participants in some cases. We are aware that the description "almost hopeless cases" is a difficult classification, but we decided to follow this approach during our fieldwork to strengthen our focus on the sub-group most at risk of becoming permanently excluded. To counter this potential bias, two measures were taken. On the one hand, the interviews were conducted based on a broad and open biographical narrative stimulus. This allowed our interview partners to tell their individual story without framing it as a story

of a failed transition from the very beginning. On the other hand, the analyses of the interview material, initially, did not take into account the failed transition, since it represents a form of previous knowledge regarding the interview's context. This is in line with the methodological attitude of "artificial naivety," which is applied in the beginning of an analysis to block out any specific previous knowledge of the case at hand and to ensure an analysis that avoids the simple rephrasing of already existing perspectives (Oevermann, 1993a, p. 142). The resulting panel was very heterogeneous. It contained women and men, youths with and without a migration background, and different levels of education and social milieus (see Table 1). The study was conducted at two sites in Germany, both (former) working-class cities in the west of the country with a labor market displaying particular challenges, such as a comparatively high share of (a) long-term unemployment, (b) low-skilled workers in employment, and (c) youths participating in publicly subsidized training schemes because they could not find a training position. The locations were determined by the German Federal Employment Agency, which funded the study.

The methodology applied for the line-by-line analysis of the interviews was based on case reconstructions (Oevermann, 1993b), a method from the interpretative paradigm of qualitative social research, sequence analysis in particular (Maiwald, 2005; Rosenthal, 2018). For this approach, each interview is transcribed verbatim and divided in small units (sequences). Each unit is then extensively and subsequently interpreted and hypotheses are formed regarding the underlying structure of the case. The rationale of this approach aims at not only reflecting the perspective of the interviewee but also analyzing what the presented happening or action means according to objective standards and common meanings (Rosenthal, 2018, p. 63). This implies that the actors' interpretation of a situation may differ from the researchers' interpretation. To derive reasons for processes of disconnecting, our study aimed to identify how the study participants deal with new situations, uncertainties, and status passages (Glaser & Strauss, 1971). Therefore, we reconstructed the patterns of individual choices in the life course and the individual substantiations for these choices (Fuchs et al., 2018). In this article, the main focus of our analyses was on the genesis of habitual autonomy and its subsequent role in mastering the transition from school to work. The two follow-up interviews with the cases of the longitudinal panel addressed the individual biographical progress and were conducted between 2015 and 2017, each after one year. This longitudinal approach allowed us, on the one hand, to trace the life course of the participants over a certain span of time. On the other hand, it opened up the possibility to test hypotheses based on the analysis of the previous interview. Thus, a thorough methodology of empirically deriving and testing hypotheses was applied over the course of the study.

Table 1. Sample of longitudinal panel.

Name	Gender	Age	School-leaving qualification	Vocational qualification	Migrant-background
Andrea	Female	22	Lower secondary	No, multiple discontinued	No
Jenni	Female	23	Lower secondary	Discontinued	No
Jessica	Female	19	Lower secondary, not completed	No	No
Johnny	Male	19	Lower secondary, not completed	No	No
Lukas	Male	17	Lower secondary	No	Yes
Friedrich	Male	24	Upper secondary	No	No
Ralf	Male	23	Lower secondary, not completed	No	No
Markus	Male	20	Lower secondary	Discontinued	No
Veronika	Female	21	Lower secondary, not completed	No	Yes
Anton	Male	21	Lower secondary (subsequently completed)	Subsidized, discontinued	Yes
Marina	Female	17	Lower secondary (subsequently completed)	No	Yes
Umut	Male	16	Lower secondary, not completed	No	Yes
Cem	Male	20	Lower secondary	No	Yes
Sascha	Male	24	Lower secondary	No	No
Naima	Female	18	Lower secondary (subsequently completed)	No	Yes
Anna	Female	18	Lower secondary	Discontinued	Yes

Notes: “Discontinued” refers to the fact that the youth was able to find a training position but this training was terminated prematurely—either by the youth himself or herself or by the employer; “subsidized” refers to training positions provided by the Federal Employment Agency, a form of external training, offered to disadvantaged youths with little or no immediate involvement of employers.

4. Results: Autonomy Deficit and Disconnectedness—Two Factors

Regarding the three interviews with each of the 16 cases chosen for the longitudinal panel, we performed extensive case reconstructions of the study participants. On this basis we want to present two factors that inhibit the development of autonomy and consequently lead to disconnectedness: (a) dysfunctional parent–child relationship and (b) persistence of traditionalism. In order to illustrate the cases and findings, we also present selected interview sequences.

4.1. Factor One: Dysfunctional Parent–Child Relationship

In cases associated with dysfunctional parent–child relationships, individuals do not develop sufficient autonomy at the habitual level because the necessary processes of detachment from the parents were lacking or insufficient. We found two possible variants. Firstly, some individuals are forced early on to assume a degree of personal responsibility that adolescents are not yet able to cope with, because of their habitus. During their family socialization, these youths lack a stable bond with their parents, in which no basic trust could be developed (Erikson, 1963); the family situation is characterized by neglect and sometimes violence, as can be seen in the following quote:

It all started with my mother, she was never at home. She was at parties at night, I was alone in the street....There were times I only survived because I stole. (Sascha, first interview)

This situation results in a forced independence, to a certain extent, as a survival strategy in very problematic family circumstances. As a consequence, youths who are expected to be too independent at a very early age usually distrust other authority figures at school and in vocational training, or at least avoid trusting relationships because they experienced little stable protection and care from their parents as central reference and authority figures. In our first follow-up interview, Sascha proceeds:

I’m taking no crap from nobody!...At [name of the vocational training company] you have a probationary period for the first six months and I know I won’t pass it.

As a rule, this makes it difficult for them to establish relationships with professionals such as social workers or vocational counselors. Cases displaying this factor include youths with street careers who were thrown out by their parents, but also those who formally had a home but experienced such massive violence or neglect there that they outright fled from their parents and were thus

forced to fend for themselves. In our cases, this went hand in hand with occasional informal work, but sometimes also with crime.

A particular variation of this factor can be found among those youths with failed careers in child and youth welfare services. In this case, public child and youth welfare services were involved early on, but often changing foster families and interrupted foster care meant that the youths experienced no stable bond with regular caregivers and personal authorities.

As a result, these youths distrusted and were downright hostile to any authority, often leading to provocations, conflict, and social deviance, such as delinquency. The following quote illustrates that an interviewee who had been with various foster families and spent time in foster care was no longer able to accept basic instructions from his foster parents. He lacked confidence that anyone was well-intended toward him at all:

And at some point, I just went crazy. Because at some point I had had enough. I won't let them do this to me. I'm not a dork, so to speak. Yes, because I won't be pushed around, I'm not a puppet. I won't take orders from anyone. What kind of life would that be? I had to go home at five o'clock. At 13 years. Yes, okay, that's alright, but somehow I didn't see it. (Johnny, first Interview)

Although some of the cases associated with this factor habitually showed great motivation, they could not enter into trusting relationships with teachers and instructors, a prerequisite for training relationships. Equally problematic was their willingness to adjust to a group and think ahead, that is, to pursue an issue permanently out of long-term self-interest (Elias, 1978). Especially in conflicts, these adolescents were quickly inclined to withdraw from the situation or reacted with aggression. It seems plausible that this tendency, too, is rooted in a fundamental mistrust and deep insecurity in social relationships. Every conflict was immediately interpreted as a personal attack and a questioning of the entire relationship. They lacked the certainty of being accepted unconditionally. This does not mean that these young people are not self-reliant. Some interviewees developed amazing survival strategies. However, they can only apply this self-reliance individually, not in a team, school, or workplace community. Anomic or desolate family circumstances significantly hamper the development of autonomy in these cases.

A systematic variation of this factor is characterized by a too close and one-sided attachment to one parent as the primary caregiver. In our cases, this is always the mother but, in principle, it could just as well be the father. The adolescents are insufficiently detached from the mother or not at all; an equivalent relationship to the father or another person with parental functions did not exist in our cases. The consequence of an excessive fixation on one parent in early childhood was found

to be that dealing with and confronting other authorities is unfamiliar and problematic for these adolescents, if only because they feel threatened by the world outside their dyadic relationship, albeit to varying degrees. In these cases, the primary caregiver did not tolerate his or her offspring's steps toward adolescent independence and a psychosocial moratorium, which in turn led to a lack of stable identity with the offspring (Erikson, 1963). Interviewees who were mainly characterized by this factor found it very difficult to cooperate or productively engage with others. Yet, our sample again shows a variety of reasons for this strong fixation on the mother that extends into adolescence. In some cases, these children, after the divorce of their parents, were made substitute partners by their mother, which impaired their detachment and independence, such as communing with peers (Boszormenyi-Nagy & Spark, 1973; Foelsch et al., 2014). A poignant example is the case of a young woman whose parents divorced during her childhood. The mother forbade the daughter any contact with the father in the following years. At the same time, the bond between mother and daughter was strong, as they were united in caring for one of the mother's younger children, who had a disability. Shortly before she graduated from school, the young woman finally wanted to contact her father. The mother felt betrayed by her daughter, frequently punished her, and finally forced her to move out. In the end, the mother broke off all contact, which caused the young woman to suffer massively:

I just didn't think it was all right what my mother did, making my life hell like that. Just because she doesn't get along with my father. And that she had to drag me into this, although I actually don't have any grievances against my father...For example, I didn't think it was okay when I came back from staying with my father [and] my mother said: "You are grounded for four weeks." (Jenni, first interview)

The permanent double-bind behavior of the mother—out of great personal bond and sudden rejection—ultimately led to severe insecurity in external relationships, as the young woman no longer trusted in fundamental relationships. Her personal insecurity reached a point that after leaving school she felt unable to enter the working world, which was unfamiliar to her. Instead, this led to a period of disconnectedness lasting several years, during which she lived with friends, received basic welfare benefits, and had no fixed residence. In this case, the limited autonomy resulting from the problematic bond between mother and daughter is expressed on several levels: both in the mother's overall behavior and in the young woman's great vulnerability.

In other cases, although the parents' marriage was formally intact and the youths had already entered vocational training before the phase of disconnectedness, they nevertheless had great problems moving independently through society and outside of the family. In one

example, the sudden death of both parents resulted in a prospective university student withdrawing into the parental home for several years and not seeking help from relatives or public institutions. What stands out is that it was not grief for the deceased parents that produced this behavior, but the fact that his mother had personally and emotionally absorbed him for years, virtually denying the adolescent any engagement with the world outside the mother-child dyad. Also, during the interview, the young man was explicitly stressing his strong bond with his mother while at the same time displaying a clear tendency to devalue his father—concerning both his career achievements as well as his position in the family.

When his mother died, the young man was deprived of his primary caregiver without having developed gradual autonomy. In this case, again, excessive fixation on one parent made it impossible for the 21-year-old young man to cope with his life autonomously:

I was too old to get help and too young to know where to go. (Friedrich, first follow-up interview)

All cases of this second variant of the factor “dysfunctional parent–child relationship,” which could be traced back to incomplete detachment from the mother as primary caregiver, showed lacking confidence in their own abilities, insufficient self-efficacy expectations (Bandura, 1977) in new or unknown situations, as well as insecurity in dealing with authority figures outside of their families. This lack of autonomy proved to have a strong negative impact on their transition from school to work.

4.2. Persistence of Traditionalism

Among the interviewees which can mainly be characterized by the factor “persistence of traditionalism,” it is hysteresis (Bourdieu, 1984) that results in traditional orientations of the parent generation not transforming into orientations at the habitus level characterized by a higher degree of autonomy in the youths we studied. The factor “traditionalism” refers to a habitus formed especially in immobile milieus or immobile societies (Weber, 1978). Immobile or more traditional habitus here means that individuals try to preserve what they are used to, i.e., to reproduce the status of previous generations, but in no way pursue social advancement or try to form a new or own way of life.

Youths with a traditional habitus have robust particular orientations (Parsons & Shils, 1951) and try to identify role models that can be imitated to guide their actions. Although they engage with new, unknown situations, they make no genuinely individual decisions and fail to develop sufficient coping strategies of their own; instead, they merely look for role models or routines to follow. This habitus does not strive for autonomy, or independently shaping or co-shaping one’s own life, but tries to adapt to given circumstances. This also becomes evi-

dent in these youths’ relationship to the future, which they perceive as a fate they cannot alter. Hence, they do not plan far ahead and live mostly in the present. These individuals do not strive to develop their own values and interests, but mostly want to follow authorities.

Even in modern societies, where autonomy, independence, and self-reliance have become more and more important, immobile/traditional milieus and traditional habitus formations can persist and be economically successful. Problems arise, however, when technological and organizational progress render this habitus no longer suitable for the working world. The examples for “traditionalism” we found showed a clear tendency of trying to live up to the expectations of other reference groups—be it the immediate expectations of their parents or milieu-specific expectations. These youths tended to form no individual interests and life plans, thereby also avoiding the related individual responsibility. In terms of Parsons and Shils’ (1951) “pattern variables,” we found the structures of particularism, diffuseness, and ascription reflected in their tendency to resort to fate. One striking example is a case from the Turkish migrant milieu. The milieu-specific expectation of the young man was that he, like his father, would quickly take a low-skilled but well-paid industrial job after school, earn an income, and marry a girl from his ethnic community, who had already been chosen by his parents:

Well, he [the father] said: “When I was your age, I [had] already started working by the age of 14.” That’s what he means, you know. And this is why he is so upset because I’m 18 and still not working....I also have German friends [that], when they were 17 or 18, they [were] already planning to move out. But with us, this is different. With us, when my father grows old, I’m the eldest and I have to work and take care of my family. This is how it works with us. (Umut, follow-up interview)

The adolescent tried with all his might to follow this model, even though this life plan had already failed for his father by then, who had been unemployed for several years. The youth nevertheless stuck to the model, even though the structural conditions for it to succeed no longer existed. He saw no sense in postponing his goals by completing an apprenticeship first, but also did not want to take up a low-paid job. Hence, he failed in several ways: His transition from school to work and his milieu-specific life plan failed because the parents of the chosen bride were not prepared to marry their daughter to a man with a low income.

Of course, traditional habitus persists not only in migrant milieus. There were also youths without a migration background—in our sample, it was always girls—from economically well-off, skilled laborer milieus who displayed a traditional habitus, which resulted in phases of disconnectedness. This was particularly the case when the interviewed girls grew up in families with a traditional

distribution of roles, their mothers were no role models for successful participation in the labor market, and their fathers also referred them to the gender-stereotypical role of housewife and mother. The corresponding interviewees grew up expecting that after school they would find a man to provide for them and enable them to lead a life as a housewife and mother. Although these cases often stayed in the educational system for a long time, they formed no individual interests or goals:

I was at the employment agency and they said that I should do a year of introductory work, so I did that....And then my mother found out about a school where you can catch up on a middle-school certificate, so I did that....Then I did a year of voluntary social service because my father said: "You have to do something." (Andrea, first interview)

Here the educational system functioned as a "holding pattern" until they achieved their ideal goal of entering into a provider marriage. The young women from our panel who displayed this factor tended to have slightly older partners who already had their own apartment and a job to provide for them. This, they believed, would relieve them of the need to choose their own career and, in some cases, to earn an income beyond a part-time, low-skilled job. Contrary to the young women's expectations, however, these relationships did not prove to be stable in our sample. One study participant stated that her partner ended the relationship after a while because he no longer wanted to support her. As a result, she left the shared apartment and immediately went back to her parents. The parents willingly took in their daughter, and the father furnished her old children's room. From a sociological point of view, there was a seamless change from the status of a housewife back to the status of a dependent daughter, combined with a rapid exchange of personal providers. What stands out is that this type of study participant did not perceive this situation as problematic or as reducing their autonomy. As these examples illustrate, youths who are mainly associated with this factor are essentially concerned with fulfilling goals set by others or the lifestyle standards of their milieu. They see work and professional life not as opportunities to shape their own world and circumstances but as a necessity that serves primarily to secure a livelihood.

5. Conclusion

Our main finding is that an insufficient development of autonomy on the habitual level strongly encourages processes of disconnecting, especially in the cases examined here which are characterized by a wide-ranging and persistent disconnectedness. Although well-known factors such as socioeconomic status, migration background, or early parenthood are also relevant influences and can be found among the youths we interviewed, we at the same time believe that there are further, under-

lying factors on the habitual level that strongly affect their efforts in the transition from school to work. More severe cases of disconnectedness might also display deviant behavior such as crime, homelessness, or addiction as well as specific family constellations (e.g., conflicts surrounding separation/divorce, violence, problematic parent-child relationships). This is why we also find that a specific way of life and family situation tends to coincide with disconnectedness. To add to these observations, we would argue that the processes of disconnecting we studied are also deeply related to longer processes of socialization, i.e., subject formation processes, and can also be explained from the perspective of classic socialization theory. In the case of "persistence of traditionalism," for example, these are milieu-specific phenomena, above all, persisting outmoded orientations at the habitus level, in the sense of hysteresis (Bourdieu, 1984), which block the necessary transformation of individual life practice and the development of autonomy. "Dysfunctional parent-child relationships," at the same time, are defined by an impaired development of identity and autonomy (Erikson, 1963). This can lead to very drastic forms of neglect, but also to more subtle forms, such as the excessive and one-sided attachment of one parent to the adolescent.

Just as our results do not imply that autonomy fully and exclusively explains difficulties in the transition from school to work, it also does not imply that every case of limited autonomy leads to disconnectedness. However, we show that transitioning from school to work does require a certain level of autonomy, which the youths we studied did not achieve due to their socialization. Especially severe cases of disconnectedness can occur when youths avoid the demands that arise after leaving school or fail to cope with them in the long term. The requirement to make autonomous decisions exists at several stages: (a) in the individualized choice of an occupation, in the sense of an internal evaluation of occupations and an autonomous choice of potential occupations, and (b) in proving oneself in vocational training, including mastering the status passage associated with entry into vocational training. Of course, proving oneself in a training relationship requires a successful application. Whether a young person receives a training place depends, to a large extent, both on the general economic situation of the region where a person searches and the hiring companies. The latter applies selection mechanisms in which pupils with poor or no qualifications, or other factors typically associated with disconnectedness—such as a migration background—are disadvantaged, a criterion that applies to many of our cases. However, the recruitment behavior of companies was not the subject of this study.

In conclusion, our results show the need for a more complex understanding of both the causes and manifestations of these phenomena. This does not preclude further differentiation of our identified factors in future studies. While it might prove difficult to transform our

qualitative approach and findings into a quantitative study, we still see two potentially promising areas for further research based on our results. Firstly, it might be interesting to more closely study factors positively contributing to a process of re-connecting, thus reversing the tendencies outlined in this article. Secondly, especially the more milieu-specific factor of traditionalism could at least partially be particular to the national German context. Thus, research applying a similar qualitative approach to different countries is likely to provide valuable insights into the varying role of milieus and traditionalism in different national contexts.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the three anonymous reviewers as well as the academic editors for providing valuable feedback on an initial draft of the article. Acknowledgments are also due to Prof. Stefan Kutzner, who lead the study on disconnected youth on which this article is based, and Dr. Rüdiger Wapler for final proofreading.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

- Acemoglu, D., Aghion, P., Lelarge, C., Van Reenen, J., & Zilibotti, F. (2007). Technology, information, and the decentralization of the firm. *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, *122*, 1759–1799.
- Akister, J., Owens, M., & Goodyer, I. M. (2010). Leaving care and mental health: Outcomes for children in out-of-home care during the transition to adulthood. *Health Research Policy and Systems*, *8*. <https://doi.org/10.1186%2F1478-4505-8-10>
- Bandura, A. (1977). Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioral change. *Psychological Review*, *84*, 191–215.
- Beck, U. (1992). *Risk society—Towards a new modernity*. SAGE.
- Berger, U., & Offe, C. (1984). Das Rationalisierungsdilemma der Angestelltenarbeit [The dilemma of rationalisation in white collar work]. In C. Offe (Ed.), *Arbeitsgesellschaft. Strukturelle Probleme und Zukunftsperspektiven* [Work society. Structural problems and future perspectives] (pp. 271–290). Campus.
- Boszormenyi-Nagy, I., & Spark, G. M. (1973). *Invisible loyalties: Reciprocity in intergenerational family therapy*. Harper & Row.
- Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*. Routledge.
- Carcillo, S., Fernández, R., Königs, S., & Minea, A. (2015). *NEET youth in the aftermath of the crisis: Challenges and policies* (Working Paper No. 164). OECD Publishing.
- Caroleo, F. E., Rocca, A., Mazzocchi, P., & Quintano, C. (2020). Being NEET in Europe before and after the economic crisis: An analysis of the micro and macro determinants. *Social Indicators Research*, *149*, 991–1024. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-020-02270-6>
- Cavalca, G. (2016). Young people in transitions: Conditions, indicators and policy implications. To NEET or not to NEET? In G. Coppola & N. O’Higgins (Eds.), *Youth and the crisis. Unemployment, education and health in Europe* (pp. 272–287). Routledge.
- Duckworth, K., & Schoon, I. (2012). Beating the odds: Exploring the impact of social risk on young people’s school-to-work transitions during recession in the UK. *National Institute Economic Review*, *222*. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F002795011222200104>
- Elias, N. (1978). *The civilizing process*. Urizen Books.
- Erikson, E. H. (1963). *Childhood and society*. Norton.
- Eurofound. (2012). *NEETs—Young people not in employment, education or training: Characteristics, costs and policy responses in Europe*. Publications Office of the European Union.
- Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training. (2021). *Datenreport zum Berufsbildungsbericht 2020* [Data report for the vocational education report 2020].
- Fischer, W., van Houtte, J. A., Kellenberger, H., Mieck, I., & Vittinghoff, F. (1980). *Handbuch der europäischen Wirtschafts- und Sozialgeschichte* [Handbook of the European economic and social history]. Klett-Cotta.
- Flisi, S., Goglio, V., Meroni, E., & Vera-Toscano, E. (2015). *School-to-work transition of young individuals: What can the ELET and NEET indicators tell us?* (JRC Technical Report). Publications Office of the European Union. <https://doi.org/10.2788/161168>
- Foelsch, P. A., Schlüter-Müller, S., Odom, A. E., Arena, H. T., Borzutzky, A., & Schmeck, K. (2014). *Adolescent identity treatment. An integrative approach for personality pathology*. Springer.
- Fuchs, P., Gellermann, J. F. C., & Kutzner, S. (2018). *Die Ausbildungsverlierer? Fallstudien zu Entkopplungsprozessen von Jugendlichen beim Übergang in das Erwerbsleben* [The losers of vocational training? Case studies of processes of decoupling of youths in the transition from school to work]. Beltz Juventa.
- Funcke, A., Oberschachtsiek, D., & Giesecke, J. (2010). *Keine Perspektive ohne Ausbildung. Eine Analyse junger Erwachsener ohne Berufsabschluss in Westdeutschland* [No hope for vocational training. An analysis of young adults without vocational qualification in West Germany]. Bertelsmann Stiftung.
- Furlong, A. (2006). Not a very NEET solution: Representing problematic labor market transitions among early school-leavers. *Work, Employment and Society*, *20*(3), 553–569.
- Gerten, E., Beckmann, M., & Bellmann, L. (2019). Controlling working crowds: The impact of digitalization on worker autonomy and monitoring across hierarchical

- levels. *Jahrbücher für Nationalökonomie und Statistik*, 239(3), 441–481.
- Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and self-identity. Self and society in the late modern age*. Polity Press.
- Glaser, B., & Strauss, A. (1971). *Status passage*. Aldine.
- Keita, S., & Valette, J. (2020). *Arbeitsmarktdiskriminierung: Zugewanderte, denen man weniger vertraut, bleiben länger arbeitslos* [Labor market discrimination: Migrants who are trusted less, stay unemployed for a longer time] (Brief No. 10/2020). IAB.
- Kevelson, M., Marconi, G., Millett, C., & Zhelyazkova, N. (2020). College educated yet disconnected: Exploring disconnection from education and employment in OECD countries, with a comparative focus on the US. *ETS Research Report Series*, 1. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ets2.12305>
- Kindleberger, C. (1974). The rise of free trade in Western Europe, 1820–1875. *The Journal of Economic History*, 35(1), 20–55.
- Knowles, L. (2006). *Economic development in the nineteenth century: France, Germany, Russia and the United States*. Routledge. (Original work published 1932)
- Maiwald, K.-O. (2005). Competence and practice: Sequential analysis in German sociology. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 6(3). <https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-6.3.21>
- Millett, C. M., & Kevelson, M. J. C. (2018). Doesn't get better with age: Predicting millennials' disconnection (Research Report No. RR-18-42). Educational Testing Service. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ets2.12219>
- Mögling, T., Tillmann, F., & Reißig, B. (2015). *Entkoppelt vom System. Jugendliche am Übergang ins junge Erwachsenenalter und Herausforderungen für Jugendhilfestrukturen* [Disconnected from the system. Youth transitioning into early adolescence and challenges for the structures of youth welfare]. Deutsches Jugendinstitut.
- Oevermann, U. (1993a). Struktureigenschaften supervisorischer Praxis [Structural traits of supervisory practices]. In B. Bardé & D. Mattke (Eds.), *Therapeutische Teams. Theorie—Empirie—Klinik* [Therapeutic teams. Theory—Empiricism—Clinic] (pp. 141–269). Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Oevermann, U. (1993b). Die objektive Hermeneutik als unverzichtbare methodologische Grundlage für die Analyse von Subjektivität: Zugleich eine Kritik der Tiefenhermeneutik [Objective hermeneutics as an indispensable foundation for the analysis of subjectivity: At the same time a criticism of in-depth hermeneutics]. In T. Jung & S. Müller-Dohm (Eds.), *“Wirklichkeit” im Deutungsprozess: Verstehen und Methoden in den Kultur- und Sozialwissenschaften* [“Reality” in the process of interpretation: Understanding and methods in cultural and social sciences] (pp. 106–189). Suhrkamp.
- Oevermann, U. (2004). Sozialisation als Prozess der Krisenbewältigung [Socialisation as process of crisis management]. In D. Geulen & H. Veith (Eds.), *Sozialisationstheorie interdisziplinär: Aktuelle Perspektiven* [Interdisciplinary theories of socialisation: Current perspectives] (pp. 155–182). Lucius u. Lucius.
- Oevermann, U. (2009). Biographie, Krisenbewältigung und Bewährung [Biography, crisis management and proving oneself]. In S. Bartmann, A. Fehlhaber, S. Kirsch, & Wiebke Lohfeld (Eds.), *“Natürlich stört das Leben ständig”: Perspektiven auf Entwicklung und Erziehung* [“Of course life is disturbing all the time”: Perspectives on development and education] (pp. 35–55). Verlag für Sozialwissenschaften.
- Parsons, T., & Shils, E. A. (1951). (Eds.). *Toward a general theory of action*. Harvard University Press.
- Rajan, R. G., & Wulf, J. (2006). The flattening firm: Evidence from panel data on the changing nature of corporate hierarchies. *Review of Economics and Statistics*, 88, 759–773.
- Rosenthal, G. (2018). *Interpretive social research. An introduction*. Göttingen University Press.
- Ross, M., & Svajlenka, N. P. (2016). *Employment and disconnection among teens and young adults: The role of place, race, and education*. Brookings Institution.
- Scarpetta, S., Sonnet, A., & Manfredi, T. (2010). *Rising youth unemployment during the crisis: How to prevent negative long-term consequences on a generation?* (Working Paper No. 106). OECD Publishing.
- Social Exclusion Unit. (1999). *Bridging the gap*. HMSO.
- Weber, M. (1978). *Economy and society*. University of California Press.
- Wischmann, S., & Hartmann, E. (2018). Prognostizierte Veränderungen der gestaltbaren Arbeitssystemdimensionen [Forecast of changes of malleable dimensions of work systems]. In S. Wischmann & E. Hartmann (Eds.), *Zukunft der Arbeit—Eine praxisnahe Betrachtung* [The future of work—A practical perspective] (pp. 9–31). Springer.
- Yates, S., & Payne, M. (2006). Not so NEET? A critique of the use of “NEET” in setting targets for interventions with young people. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 9(3). <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676260600805671>

About the Authors



Jan F. C. Gellermann (Dr.) studied social work, majoring in planning and evaluation of social services and counselling at the University of Siegen. He worked as a lecturer and researcher in projects on training for unemployment migrants, marriage and family migration, and psychosocial and vocational development of “disconnected youths.” In 2017, he received a doctoral degree in sociology from the University of Siegen. Since 2017, he is a senior researcher at the Institute for Employment Research (IAB), the research institute of the German Federal Employment Agency.



Philipp Fuchs (Dr.) studied sociology, German and English philology at the University of Cologne and Trinity College Dublin. From 2005 to 2012 he worked for the Institute for Employment Research (IAB). From 2012 to 2019 he worked as a research associate at ISG, a private-owned social research company. In 2013 he received a doctoral degree from the University of Duisburg-Essen. Since 2019, he is the managing director of ISG, where he heads the labor market policy division.