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## School-to-Work Transitions of Young Women. A Cross-Cultural Approach Based on Group Discussions

### **1. A Cross-Cultural Approach to the School-to-Work Transition of Young Women**

Since the 1980s in Germany as well as other European countries transitions between school and vocational training have become increasingly deregulated and prolonged (Jobert/Marry/Tanguy, 1995). In many cases vocational training does not follow directly from secondary school. Instead, young school leavers carry out numerous internships or take unskilled jobs or otherwise face unemployment. Hence, along with the orientations and trajectories of adolescents, their increasing risks of social exclusion have become a subject of scholarly debate (Battagliola/Brown/Jaspard, 1995; Heinz/Nagel, 1995; Walther/Stauber et al., 2002; Seibert, 2005). Furthermore, this general change in life courses and transition patterns is structured by effects of gender (Solga/Konietzka, 2000; Krüger, 2001) and of immigrant background (Kalter, 2006; Seibert/Solga, 2005). In fact, for female school leavers in Germany the transition between school and vocational training offers restricted and insecure careers (Seus, 1993; Schittenhelm, 2005a). Young women, particularly those with immigrant backgrounds have fewer chances of entering vocational training compared to men with similar backgrounds; and if they succeed in entering this field, women are still concentrated in disadvantaged areas (Granato/Meissner, 1994; Granato/Schittenhelm, 2004; Faist, 1995; Wilpert, 1993).

Scholarly debates have focused on some main gender issues such as the pathways that lead young women to less paid, less stable and less recognized employment (Apitzsch, 1990; Wilpert, 1993; Schittenhelm, 2005a) as well as their orientations between work and family life (Geissler/Oechsle, 1996). In addition, some studies highlight the interrelations between labor market opportunities and young women's career expectations. Do they prefer family activities because ongoing changes in the labor market place job opportunities beyond their reach? Are young women professionals concentrated in only a few areas of employment with high numbers of female members<sup>1</sup> as a result of independent choice based on former socialization, or simply be-

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1 According to the German government's annual report more than 50 % of young women are concentrated in only ten kinds of vocational training, and for young immigrant women the main spectrum contains even fewer options (BMBF 2007).

cause they do not have any other opportunities? Empirical studies that rely on young women's orientation proved that even though they were unemployed and had unstable educational biographies, they nevertheless had stable work motivation and did not withdraw voluntarily from a professional career in order to devote themselves to private family life (Nicole-Drancourt, 1994; Schittenhelm, 2005a). Hence, the exclusion of young women from labor market opportunities does not necessarily produce a reorientation towards traditional values. The question is whether gendered school-to-work transitions are the result of women's aspirations or are instead strategies of adaptation to the restricted conditions of vocational training and the labor market (Krüger, 2001). To understand young women's access to vocational training as well as the effects of immigrant backgrounds, we require information about how school leavers interpret their living conditions during this status passage and how they develop strategies to cope. Thus, the issue is the relationship between educational achievement and social chances for young women to evaluate their educational degrees during entry to the labor market. At the same time, the interrelation between social structures and the individual as a social actor is not only determined by institutionalized contexts but also transmitted by heterogeneous social and cultural conditions. In addition to investigations about the labor market and the resources transmitted by educational institutions, it is necessary to understand how young women develop strategies and options for their pathways. The way in which young women interpret their transitory stages is influenced by social micro-units such as family, school friends or peers in the neighborhood.

Hence, apart from educational degrees a kind of social knowledge is relevant that is not only transmitted in the schools. With regard to the entire set of knowledge, skills, and abilities that constitute a person's cultural capital in the sense of Bourdieu (1986), not only educational institutions prior to or along the status passage, but all kinds of networks a person belongs to become objects of investigation. Along with the school leaver's family the juvenile networks with their lifestyles and symbolic systems are of particular importance in this regard (Schittenhelm, 2005a, 2006). If we want to understand the shaping of the school-to-work transitions of young women we need concepts to analyze these influences with appropriate methods and methodologies.

This article will assess group discussions as a means of understanding the making of young women's transition from school to work. In particular, two main issues will be emphasized:

- First, how orientations and strategies are gradually developed and are still emerging in the course of the status passage
- Second, how these orientations and strategies are consequences of the way young women negotiate their living conditions in the context of their entire social networks.

The investigation<sup>2</sup> presented in this article is based on an ethnographic study of female school leavers in Berlin at the end of the 1990s. In terms of methods, in addition to the group discussions emphasized in this article, both participant observation and narrative interviews have been applied. The young women left school with intermediate levels of education (in Germany we call it *Realschule*)<sup>3</sup> while also having East or West German and immigrant backgrounds. The opportunities offered by the educational system were, firstly, vocational training, which in Germany is often provided by companies in combination with vocational schools, or secondly, continuation in school in order to achieve higher educational qualifications. Although there is a spectrum of potential pathways, young women who have this intermediate level of school education must face considerable social risks. Even those who obtain vocational education will join a sector of the labor market with a high rate of unemployment. However, besides the opportunities to acquire skills, numerous jobs and training programs were provided especially for the high number of unemployed young people in the city of Berlin. Thus, the issue is not simply the transition into apprenticeship and regular work. Instead, all kinds of work-related experiences have to be considered, including the periods of job-seeking and unemployment.

Within the cross-cultural approach of my study, the impact of family backgrounds and juvenile networks upon young women's trajectories were investigated with regard to potentially varying social and cultural contexts. Thus the study takes into account how, given that Germany is an immigrant society, adolescents' lifestyles and living conditions show a broad heterogeneity. Furthermore, the comparative approach aimed to study the trajectories of women with immigrant backgrounds in relation to principal aspects of youth transition and gender relations in the immigrant society.

## 2. The Comparative Perspective and its Units of Analysis

If we examine young women with either East or West German or immigrant backgrounds in terms of a comparative approach, the focus of interest is on

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- 2 The study, funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG), was conducted in the department for Qualitative Educational Research at the *Freie Universität Berlin* in 1998-2002. For a discussion of the main results see Schittenhelm (2005 a, b) and of the group discussions in particular Schittenhelm (2006). I am grateful to my research assistants Jutta Buyse and Miriam A. Geoffroy and to my colleague Aglaja Przyborski for her collaboration in implementing the group discussion that is the focus of this article.
  - 3 Graduates from the "*Realschule*" have better chances of finding an apprenticeship than school leavers from the lower track "*Hauptschule*"; nevertheless, they still face social risks during their school-to-work transition.

how we conceptualize our units of analysis. In contemporary societies, limitations of gender, regional or ethnically defined categories are not determined entirely for collectives as a whole. Indeed, even when they are shaped by such categories, it is the case that pathways, lifestyles and self-concepts show immense variety. Hence, within a comparative perspective we cannot consider native born or immigrant women as homogenous groups. In examining common terms of reference or collective experiences, we have to take account of their in-group variety as well (Schittenhelm, 2005a).

If Bourdieu's concepts are adopted (Bourdieu, 1986), then formal education is not the only important factor. Indeed, social knowledge and cultural heritage transmitted by the family and by the entire social networks also represent essential elements influencing the achievement of educational degrees. The intergenerational transmission within families can contain resources and orientations, as well as values and codes linked with social status (Elias/Scotson, 1965; Bertaux/Thompson, 1997). In the cross-cultural approach that is the focus of this discussion, this type of social knowledge can be shaped by the family's migration, by the experience of transformation of a former communist society as well as by ongoing changes in today's modern societies. For example, the family background can transmit the social experience of the West German working class or lower-middle class who have to face a new insecurity of their social and economic status.

Nevertheless, a permanent revision of cultural heritage takes place in the intergenerational discourse. Hence, new values and orientations can be developed in the young women's peer-group networks. Mannheim's concept of "generation" (Mannheim, 1952 [1928]) presupposes a common situation and shared experiences at a certain age, as a source for shaping the values and lifestyles of youth. On the one hand, their development of collective orientations creates its own cultural contexts. On the other hand, this generational approach enables us to consider young people's perception of ongoing social changes. In my study these are represented as the changing socioeconomic conditions in the labor market as well as German reunification with its different consequences for East German, West German and immigrant youth.

In comparison to research on networks of young men, especially those with a working class or migration background, we do not know so much about the juvenile milieus that enable young women to find their place in society. Today, we have to see these roles and perceptions of young women in terms of a new situation in the labor market for young generations in contemporary industrial societies. Young women with East German backgrounds had to face a transition into adulthood with high risks and destabilization, whereas their parents had none of these experiences because of the more regulated life courses in a centrally planned economy (Koklyagina, 1995). Furthermore, the second generation of the immigrant population in Germany and also some elements among West Germans do not have the

same social opportunities as their parents. The ongoing changes with their related impact of destabilization of these milieus exert a double meaning: on the one hand they entail high risks of exclusion or unstable jobs, and on the other hand they involve social chances to achieve a position in newly developing sectors or in highly qualified fields.

Gender connotations are transported within these social and cultural contexts given by family and peer groups. Thus, they are part of intergenerational transmissions or a result of newly emerged youth sub-cultures. Another consideration is how they result from actual living conditions that are still undergoing the transition process. The way in which young women develop interpretations of and strategies for their occupational choice and final transitions is also shaped by the spectrum of labor market opportunities within their grasp (Chisholm, 1995; Schittenhelm, 2005a, b).

The cross-cultural approach enables us to take into account the multiple influences that shape school-to-work transitions. Based on comparative case studies that are a central step in the data evaluation of the documentary method (Bohnsack, 2007), this approach includes case-groups for the units of analysis that are systematically compared (Schittenhelm, 2005b). To analyze young women's perception of socioeconomic changes in different social and cultural contexts, consideration is given to the cultural heritage of family backgrounds and to how this aspect is transmitted or revisited between generations. Furthermore, a crucial aspect is the interpretation of common experiences in the peer groups that simultaneously face the transition processes. Their reception of dominant values and gender images transmitted by the media or by relevant institutions is of crucial importance in this regard.

Young female school leavers may face similar restrictions based on the current lack of apprenticeships in Germany or on prevailing gender inequalities in the labor market. The extent to which they also perceive specific transition processes as genuinely based on their immigrant, East or West German backgrounds is the result of empirical investigation, rather than presumed differences in the comparative design of the analysis.<sup>4</sup> Within this theoretical framework, therefore, the focus is on young women's collective patterns of perception and on whether their living conditions provide similar resources to cope with the school-to-work transition. These aspects may vary according to multiple dimensions that may not only contrast between the compared groups.<sup>5</sup>

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4 See the numerous critiques on pre-supposed gender or ethnically defined differences underlying the concepts and designs of investigations (Stolcke, 1995; Gümen, 1996; Nohl, 2001; Schittenhelm, 2005a).

5 Having grown up in German society in the same period and having similar educational titles they also have a common basis.

### 3. Using Group Discussions to Investigate Status Passages in Educational Pathways

Scholarly debate on young women's transition into vocational training and labor is shaped by the frequently discussed ambiguities in modern biographies. On the one hand scholars examine how young women's transitions are the consequences of high institutional restrictions (Seus, 1993; Krüger, 2001). On the other hand studies focus on female school graduates as agents of their transitions with more or less limited opportunities for decision making (Geissler/Oechsle, 1996; Stauber, 2004).

Nevertheless, beyond existing controversies, in Germany an emphasis on the individual's transition patterns dominates current research on the status passage as well as the small number of studies on female immigrants' transition (Apitzsch, 1990; Wilpert, 1993; Granato/Meissner, 1994; Gültekin, 2003). In terms of method, single interviews are applied as a matter of course. Furthermore, in interviewing school graduates repeatedly during the course of their transition, panel inquiries observe how orientations and strategies are developed gradually, thus respecting dynamics of the transition as a process over time (Raab, 1996; Kuhnke/Müller/Skrobaneck, 2007).

To discuss an alternative approach based on group discussions in order to investigate status passages between school and vocational training does not mean to reject the biographical one. Both approaches can be combined. Yet what is the aim and what are the theoretical concepts underlying the use of group discussions to examine school-to-work transitions?

In early applications of group discussions, the method was used at the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research to analyze the political climate in post-war Germany (Pollock, 1955). Thus, political discourses and attitudes have been the focus. A subsequent step was Mangold's concept (1960) that aimed to understand informal group attitudes (*informelle Gruppenmeinungen*). In the context of the *documentary method* (Bohnsack, 2007) the method serves to examine collective orientations including the terms and structures of social worlds. In this contemporary use of the method, the analysis includes the interactive process of how individuals express their social knowledge in mutual exchange (Loos/Schäffer, 2001; Przyborski, 2004). For these purposes the group discussions are conducted in a non-directive manner, thus enabling the group to develop its own reference terms (Loos/Schäffer, 2001).

Using group discussion to investigate status passages implies a specific approach to the subject of transition between education and the labor market. Instead of emphasizing the biography of a single person as the main unit of analysis (Schütze, 1983), the object of the examination is the process of negotiation between young women or young men who are facing and interpreting this status passage. However, there are coincidences with the biographical approach. The group discussion approach refers to deregulations of the

status passages as well. The more loosely regulated transitions are, the more it becomes necessary for school leavers to prescribe transitional stages and to develop common ideas concerning how to cope with the challenges of the life span in their mutual exchanges.

In this regard the group discussion approach takes into account that transitions into vocational training are cohort transitions and thus socially embedded. The changes of status between school, vocational training, and the labor market are not only individual but – in the sense of Glaser and Strauss (1971) – collective status passages.<sup>6</sup> In this case, transition experiences are part of a collective destiny. Members of the same cohort of school leavers perceive the status passage simultaneously, since they are more or less of the same age.<sup>7</sup> The use of group discussions is intended to shed light on how coping strategies, interpretations of transitional stages, and ideas about dealing with the status passage are generated in interactive processes among school leavers who are similarly involved in the transition processes.

If the members of the group under investigation share common risks of social exclusion – caused for example by gender or by immigrant backgrounds – they face parallel contingencies during the transition. The more they share a similar set of social knowledge, the more likely they develop common definitions about these contingencies and similar ideas about how to cope with them. However, to take into account diverse sub-collectives among cohorts or populations under investigation, the whole sample consists of a variation of groups. In my study the young women with German-born or immigrant backgrounds have been recruited by referring to current living conditions and transitional stages, thus achieving equivalent sub-samples for the cross-cultural comparison.

The subjects for data analysis are sequences in which the participants explicitly or implicitly describe topics that are of major interest for the investigation, for example when the young women talk about their experiences in seeking an apprenticeship or about their fears of being unemployed. Furthermore, all sequences in which the interaction is busy and the group's conversation lively and animated should be taken into account. According to the methodological assumptions of the documentary method (Bohnsack, 2007; Bohnsack/Weller, 2006) the latter sequences are – regardless of their thematic relevance at first glance – highly relevant in terms of the groups' orientations and social strategies. Thus, in addition to the young women's accounts on thematic topics, their manner of conversation is a subject of the investigation as well.

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6 Glaser & Strauss (1971) for example distinguish between “individual” and “collective” status passages, taking into account that some transitions can be a group phenomenon.

7 Not every change of status during educational and professional trajectories is necessarily of collective character. Transition between unemployment and occupation in the later life course for example are rather individual transitions that are not in the same way collective experiences in a peer environment.



Using group discussions, the examination is directed to the ongoing processes of transition and their current environment. However, considering current debates on transitions we may ask whether we can also use this instrument to understand dynamics in the course of the status passages and how transitional statuses refer to one another. In biographical analysis (Brose, 1983) work-related experiences and the way these are accumulated and represented in the individual's construction of social reality have been examined with regard to theoretical concepts of Alfred Schuetz (1973). Thus, it is possible to observe how orientations and coping strategies result from the incorporation of work-related experiences along with the biography.

Within the approach based on group discussions to analyze status passages, these aspects of temporality and process structures will not be neglected. Using this instrument, we can show how the group structures its discourse (Bohnsack/Przyborski, 2006) and thus how work-related experiences are represented and negotiated in the group's interaction. The theoretical assumptions of the analysis based on the documentary method are drawn from Karl Mannheim's sociology of knowledge (Mannheim, 1982) according to which a collective social knowledge with shared structures of thinking about social reality is based on similar living conditions. According to this concept there are spaces of experience that provide a conjunctive knowledge shaped by common social arrangements, nonverbal agreements as well as shared dispositions and structures of thinking. Thus, collective status passages are characterized by shared – present or past – living conditions and by collective frames of thinking about how to interpret this challenge in a life course and how to develop ideas about possible solutions (Schittenhelm, 2006).

In addition to the collective character of the transition, in my discussion of case studies which follows I will emphasize the structuring of the account in the group discussion and consequently show aspects of temporality and the dynamics of the transition processes. Thus, there are two main topics for the empirical analysis: firstly, how transitions between school, vocational traineeships, and labor are passed simultaneously, and are commonly negotiated in juvenile networks and, secondly, how they can be observed with regard to their social dynamics and process structures over time.

#### **4. A Change of Status is Tried out and Negotiated**

According to the methodological assumptions discussed so far, the following comparative case study examines not only the topics of the participants' account: the interactive process is also a subject of investigation. In the documentary method the analysis of the discourse organization (Bohn-

sack/Przyborski, 2003: 138-139) is part of the reflective interpretation.<sup>8</sup> The aim is to explore the sense of the participants' narration by the text's formal structure.

The first case to be examined is a discussion group comprising two young women with immigrant backgrounds (in my sample referred to as the group *Money*<sup>9</sup>). The participants share a common distinction regarding their engagement with education and work. They withdraw from work-related activities after the first transitional stages and then carry out temporary jobs which are mentioned in a distant and derogatory manner during their conversation. The participants were then 19 and 20 years old. Nilüfer<sup>10</sup> had to leave school without a certificate, while Fatma started training as a shop assistant after leaving school with an intermediate school certificate (*Realschulabschluss*) but eventually dropped out without a vocational training degree. Neither of them planned any further education. Not only the content but also the formal structure of their discourse was significant for the way they coped with the status passage.

The following sections examine how the experiences of labor are represented in the group's narrative. Fatma began her apprenticeship as a shop assistant shortly after finishing school. She describes the start of her vocational training in the following way:

Fatma: I didn't really want to do that (.) um (.) but I couldn't get anything else (.) so I started an apprenticeship as a shop assistant (.) at 'department store X' (.) which lasted two years (.) and (.) and I completed it (.) and then I was in my third year (.) and that's when I called the apprenticeship off (.) because I no longer enjoyed it  
*(introductory passage)*

Her entry into vocational training was perceived as something over which she had no chance of control. In her view it was a *fait accompli* that she had no other opportunity. However, it is unclear whether Fatma's perspective is a result of unsuccessful applications or whether she anticipated no other alternative from the very beginning and thus did not try anything else. She describes her drop out from vocational training in the way that she broke up the third year after having "completed" the second one. As a reason for her drop out, she mentions her negative work-related experiences.

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8 In the documentary method, data analysis consists of several steps: the formulating interpretation, the reflecting interpretation, the comparative case analysis, and – as a potential last step – a typology (Bohnsack, 2007).

9 The term "group" in the sense of the group discussion approach does not imply that the participants consider themselves as a group. Furthermore, the group discussion can comprise the interaction of two members only.

10 This name, as well as all other names of persons or institutions, has been changed to preserve anonymity.

Even during their school days both participants gained work-related experiences with internships, in Germany often imposed by school schedules. After the interviewer had repeatedly asked about practical training, Fatma described her internship in a department store:

Fatma: Geez, did I hate my (.) where did I do my internship (.) um::: (1) that was (2) in district X with department store Y, that (.) exactly (.) that's where I was an intern (.) a downright catastrophe (.) my God (.) I didn't like that one bit (.) where did I (.) in which department (2) (and) ladies' underwear I think (.) yes

II: Uh-huh

Fatma: And I just stood there all the time (.) and my God (.) and all that sorting (.) and that sorting (.) and then some bras arrived (.) and those (.) oh no (2) I didn't like that at all (.) *(work passage)*

Fatma even did her initial training in the field of her later apprenticeship. However, this early experience appears in her retrospective account as something she could not engage with. Instead, for her it was monotonous and difficult to tolerate. Like other sequences about work-related experiences this one also did not lead to discussions between the participants. Nilüfer in her turn, after being asked about practical training, expresses similar attitudes towards early experiences with internships during her school days:

Nilüfer: Well (.) I did two internships myself (.) one as a shop assistant in some boutique (.) and one (.) as a hair stylist (.) I didn't (.) I didn't like either one of those at all *(work passage)*

After having negotiated the prices of the boutique's goods with Fatma she continues:

Nilüfer: This big (.) there is this big X (*name of a high street shop*) right there (.) right next to it (.) a real small boutique (.) and hair stylist, I thought ah::: no (.) at first it was real dire (.) cleaning (.) sweeping (.) tidying (.) brushing away hair and (.) making tea in the kitchen (.) making coffee (.) and (.) oh my God (.) it's like (.) as though I'm their servant (.) really this and that and that (.) I wasn't allowed to do anything myself (.) only in the very last week (.) okay that's when they let me wash some hair. *(work passage)*

Nilüfer expresses her disapproval for the traineeship with reference to social relationships at the workplace and to the kind of work she had to do. In this case she describes her training during her school-days as a list of degrading activities that did not correspond very well with the sort of professional work she might have been introduced to. Everything was imposed upon her and she complains of not being able to do anything by herself. Thus, like Fatma, Nilüfer had already gained experiences in work-life during her school-days. Furthermore, besides an internship she worked as a temporary helper in her parents' snack-bar:

- Nilüfer: (*exhales*) (.) Hmm (.) one year (.) one:: (.) two years (.) always went there after school (.) or (.) right, weekends (.) and all (.) and then (.) I have been out of work for a month
- Fatma: Uh-huh
- Nilüfer: I just didn't go back (1) I can't be bothered (.) I mean (.) okay it also means I haven't been paid for a month either
- II: Uh-huh
- Nilüfer: But I mean (.) I can't be bothered to go there (1) ah it's only when I think (.) okay you're really out of money (.) you desperately need some dough (.) that's when I go there
- II: Uh-huh
- Nilüfer: After all it's only two hours a day (.) only from Monday to Friday (.) two hours (.) but that's enough already (.) I mean (.) that's too much for me (.)
- Fatma: (*laughs*)
- Nilüfer: I would really (.) like I said to my mum so many times (.) I would (.) (*exhales*) rather work as a cleaner eight hours (.) a day (.) than (.) work in this snack bar (.) because I just don't like it much (.) maybe because I'm working with my father  
(*work passage*)

In this representation of her work-related experiences, monotony and her negative attitude towards her work again are main topics. Her increasing disapproval finally has practical consequences: she stopped working regularly in her parents' snack bar and continued only in a very sporadic manner. It is worth noting that she introduces an alternative to the job in her parents' business: she would prefer to work eight hours a day as a cleaner. With this idea she continues to remain in the sector of unskilled and insecure jobs.

Fatma and Nilüfer currently agree in their attitude of distancing themselves from involvement in education and work. This distance is expressed not only by the content of their accounts, but also by the manner of their discourse. During the group's entire conversation the topics 'education' and 'work' were rarely mentioned. They spoke about their work-related experiences only when they were asked. Furthermore, these contributions did not lead to any processes of mutual exchange. Yet, in this manner the women talked about similar experiences in working life. There was no mention of realizing their own interests or of having the chance to make decisions during the transition.

However, meanwhile they have a common frame of reference for the interpretation of their work-related experiences. Already in the manner of their discourse it is obvious that the attitudes toward their current lifestyles are relevant and have been developed together. The frames of orientation that give sense to their separation from work are now produced in an interactive manner. It is documented in the way the young women negotiate the work of a hair stylist:

- Fatma: Or (.) I've been thinking about starting another apprenticeship (.) but (.) I wouldn't know what (1) no idea
- II: Uh-huh (1)
- Fatma: I don't know (1) I was thinking hair stylist
- II: Uh-huh
- Fatma: But the pay is lousy (laughs)
- Nilüfer: (laughs)
- Fatma: That's why (.) well (.) I'm thinking (.) they get four hundred (.) four hundred something or so, that makes
- Nilüfer: Two marks and fifty an hour
- Fatma: That's right
- Nilüfer: I mean that's next to nothing (.) well (.) I might as well go begging on the street (.) I'd be getting more
- Fatma: (laughs)
- Nilüfer: No (.) honestly
- Fatma: No (.) but they (.) they get paid (.) about four hundred and sixty marks a month (1) after tax (.) I'd be getting that much in benefits *(introductory passage)*

The participants negotiate the expected salary for their work while they are still in an apprenticeship; it is worth noting here that in Germany traineeships are paid if provided by an enterprise. They both agree in a distinction by referring to functional arguments. However, the horizons of their common frame of reference are beyond any skilled work but result from their sporadic jobs and from their experiences with the social welfare system. Nevertheless, these horizons provide shared normative criteria for the negotiation. Thus, they already judge their job opportunities in a frame of reference that is a consequence of their current situation and of the course of their transition so far. Based on the transitional stage they have reached now they cannot anticipate any alternative option in the sector of skilled work that is both attractive and within their reach.

A similar discouragement during the course of work-related experiences examined in the first case results in a downward mobility during this status passage. Yet, as far as this course is a shared destiny, the attitude developed can be a collective one. It is worth noting that this attitude is not specific to young women with immigrant backgrounds. It was observed, too, in German-born school leavers when they perceived a parallel process of being discouraged during their status passage (Schittenhelm, 2005 a, b). The strategy of gradually giving up aspirations as an adaptation to failures was discussed principally in the term of "cooling out" by Goffman (1962). A comparative analysis with a cross-cultural perspective is a means to avoid stereotypes about the compared groups. In their manner of coping with the transition the young women with immigrant backgrounds were, like those who were German-born, heterogeneous.

The members of the group *Brücke*, discussed here as the second case, also have an immigrant background. They too experienced obstacles during their transition into vocational training. But in contrast to the above-mentioned case these are met in a completely different way. However, work and training-related orientations have also developed during the course of the status passage. These are evident both in their content-related contributions as well as in the development of the discourse. In other words, in contrast to the above-mentioned case, experiences made in the working world became the subject of discussion. Conversations about “apprenticeship” and “profession” take on their own dynamic and are characterized by a high level of interaction, involving frequent turn-taking, interruptions of the speaker, and rapid, detailed, and lively utterances. Thus, in the case of the *Brücke* group coping mechanisms can be found which, on the one hand, orient themselves along the encountered opportunities in work life, and, on the other hand, result in expanding these opportunities by increased engagement with work and training. In this group, the transition periods during which the young women become familiar with the demands and restrictions of employment do not go along with the dissociation from work and training-related efforts, as was the case with the above-mentioned *Money* group. Aside from the actual status passage, the negotiation of the transition experiences within the groups’ frames of orientation also differ.

In their discussions the education-oriented group *Brücke* rates ‘education’ and ‘employment’ very highly. The group *Money*, however, talks about subjects such as ‘vocational training’ and ‘profession’ only when asked by the interviewer and communicate a strong dissociation from these subjects in the manner in which they talk about them. Another difference is the range of options these young women discuss. While the *Money* group, as presented above, refers to only very few, for the most part traditionally female apprenticeship trades (e.g. hair stylist, shop assistant) and occupations located in the precarious employment sector, the *Brücke* group discusses a much broader range of options of professional as well as academic fields of activity. The implicit alternative horizons mutually assumed by the speakers of the groups differ significantly, and they are to be assessed as a result of these women’s contrasting experiences of transition and employment. Thus, the actual paths these young ladies pursue also depend on the opportunities they experience during their status passage.

On the one hand the findings of my study highlight cases in which the exchange among peers required their simultaneous *participation* in vocational training or employment. On the other hand there are groups in which peers get together during the course of their status passage on the basis of a shared experience of *disintegration*. Based on comparative case studies finally four typical ways in which to cope with the transition have been elaborated upon (Schittenhelm, 2005a, b):

- Strategies of dissociation from work-related involvement (as discussed in the group *Money*)
- Strategies of anticipatory seeking higher qualification (as discussed in the group *Brücke*)
- Strategies of status-diminished integration in work-life
- Strategies of re-orientation and course correction

The typologies were characterized by a grade of transitional stages and distinct coping strategies with appropriate attitudes towards education and work. The group's differences did not only concern topics and contents of their accounts, but also their manner of negotiating their educational trajectories and work-related experiences. It could be shown that their attitudes were the result of a transition process and of a collective shared social knowledge with which the young women interpreted their experiences and developed their strategies to cope with their living conditions.

## 5. Conclusion

The scrutiny of group discussions (Bohnsack, 2007; Loos/Schäffer, 2001) showed with regard to the analysis of the status passage between school, vocational training, and employment the gradual development of a collective frame of orientation, within which these young women interpreted the demands of their status passage and negotiated their aims. In this way, it not only facilitates the reconstruction of the collective character of the status passage, but also the analysis of the course of a process. The subject of this analysis is not so much the chronological sequence of events, but the process structure upon which this sequence is based.

The collective mode of experiencing and coping which shapes the career choices of these young women rests upon a shared social knowledge. For one thing it is the result of the options encountered in the employment world so far. But it is at the same time a prerequisite for the ongoing progression of their status passage, by structuring the perception of future prospects and by its action-guiding consequences. Thus, social circumstances in the world of employment can be constituted through everyday perceptions and the collective practice of individuals – without the consequences of these actions actually being intended.

The group discussion approach is thus also suitable to conduct a habitus analysis in the sense of Bourdieu (1982). However, what is of interest is not

the group as an ensemble of individuals and their personal habitus.<sup>11</sup> Rather, the study endeavors to reconstruct the collective frame of orientation or rather various overlapping frames of orientation within which these young women lend meaning and significance to their experiences in training and employment. Collective orientations, as documented in the group discussions, involve *similarly structured* perceptions and mechanisms of coping with the expectations associated with the entry into the working world and the changing of a social status. In this regard distinct types of coping with the status passages have been observed. These strategies are based on shared transitory patterns and common ways of perceiving the implied transitory conditions. However, even though the school leavers perceive similar transnational mobility or societal transformations and changes due to immigrant or native – East and West German – backgrounds their way of coping with this crucial threshold in educational pathways also varies in-between the compared groups.

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11 On this topic see also Laks (1983) who analyses the symbolic negotiations that take place within groups by studying a group of young males; he distinguishes various positions each member takes on within the group, for instance, by looking at the interactions, the manner of speech, and the linguistic style.



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