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Perception of One's Own Transition: Young Adults with Different Risk Patterns Describe their Vocational Orientation Process

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Abstract

A key requirement for being an integrated member of our achievement-oriented society is the successful transition from school to work. This article aims to present a multi-dimensional point of view on de-standardized vocational orientation processes. Vocational orientation therefore is understood as an active, constructive process of young adults, which are socially and institutionally bounded. Data is based on a mixed-method design with 406 young adults who completed a standardized questionnaire and 12 qualitative interviews. With this design, we aim at answering the following questions: (1) which patterns of risk can be identified and (2) how representatives of different risk patterns describe their individual vocational orientation process. Three groups of risk patterns were conducted by latent class analysis, which differ not just in terms of individual factors but also regarding social resources of family, school and workplace. If we take a closer look at the individual perception of vocational orientation by representatives of these groups, vocational orientation has been perceived differently depending on one's agency.

Keywords

vocational orientation, risk patterns, agency

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1 Introduction

Being accepted as an integrated member of our achievement-oriented societies is related to one's integration into the labour market. A key requirement concerning this integration is the successful transition from school to work (Blossfeld et al., 2011; Kogan et al., 2011). Related to this, two transitions are crucial: The first transition from compulsory school into vocational education and training, or another post-compulsory education, and the second transition into the labour market. The successful management of the described transitions is especially relevant in employment-centred transition systems like in Switzerland (Gonon & Stolz, 2013; Walther, 2006). In comparison to other transition systems, employment-centred transition systems are characterised by early selective allocations into different career paths and low acceptance of prolonged transitional phases (Walther, 2006).

Switzerland has a low unemployment rate and a well-established system of vocational education and training. A large percentage of youth gain direct access to vocational education and training or further education after compulsory school. Because of this well-known successful structure and the importance of transitional processes, young adults experience high pressure to be successful during the transitional processes. This is even more crucial, as the transition is highly decisive for further success in the labour market (Stolz & Gonon, 2013). Nevertheless, about 25% of youth face challenges and failures while trying to manage the first transition (Kriesi et al., 2016; Berweiger et al., 2013). Young adults who fail to enter vocational education and training or further education directly, are challenged regarding their vocational orientation. Due to the outlined importance of success concerning the transitions from school to work, there are several formal support offers (e.g., special vocational orientation provided by compulsory school, career guidance, a year of pre-vocational training) and support provided by persons (e.g. parents or friends) that intend to support young adults regarding the accomplishment of transitional processes. These support offers vary with regard to their accessibility for different groups of youth.

The current study aims at analysing individual vocational orientation processes of different groups of youth.

After a summary of the current state of research, research questions for this study will be derived in section 2. Afterwards, section 3 contains theoretical background, while the methodological approach concerning the investigation of the research questions will be illuminated in section 4. Section 5 pursues to report the results. A summary and final conclusion will be drawn in section 6.

2 State of research and research questions

While there are several studies in Switzerland with a limited focus regarding specific sections in the transitional processes, there are only a few which present a broader focus on the whole vocational orientation process (e.g., TREE-Study by Bertschy et al., 2007; FASE B by Neuenschwander et al., 2010). These studies focus on the social and structural patterns of vocational orientation.

With regard to transitional processes, several studies report correlations between difficulties concerning the (first) transition and several risk factors (Scharenberg et al., 2016; Häfeli & Schellenberg, 2009). These risk factors include, according to the authors, individual, family-based, school- and workplace-related risk factors (ibid.). Research on individual risk factors comprise factors related to the person such as gender, migrant background or academic achievement (i.e., Hupka-Brunner, et al., 2016). Research on family-based risk factors include in particular the influence of parental aspirations or the relationships to parents, sometimes in combination with migrant background of the family (i.e., Neuenschwander et al., 2016). School-related factors include career guidance of different actors while workplace-related risk factors

consider motivational aspects as identification and satisfaction with the chosen profession, occupational self-efficacy and professional fit.

To sum up, research on vocational orientation is mainly focussed on certain moments in transition, while a processual viewpoint with the individual as an agent of his vocational orientation is rarely examined. Furthermore, as young adults in transition cannot be seen as a homogeneous group, there should be more research that takes into account a multi-dimensional approach of different risk factors.

Referring to the outlined lack of research, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. Which patterns of risk can be identified and characterized within the vocational orientation process?
2. How do representatives of different risk patterns describe their individual vocational orientation process?

The first research question aims at giving a more concrete picture on different patterns of youth at risk, taking into account already existing theoretical multi-dimensional approaches (Häfeli & Schellenberg, 2009). The second research question illuminates the agency of individuals (see Evans, 2002) within their vocational orientation. Both aspects will be reflected in the following section.

3 Theoretical background

3.1 The complexity of vocational orientation

There is a lot of theoretical and empirical evidence which points out the ongoing de-traditionalisation and individualisation of modern societies (e.g., Beck, 1992). Transitions from school to work have become fragmented and reversible, or as Walther (2006, p. 121) calls it “*Yo-yo-transitions*”. Vocational orientation can therefore no longer be seen as a one-time decision for one’s working life but as an ongoing process starting at an early age and enduring in adulthood. Still, the transition from school to post-compulsory education and training and later into work is of long-term importance for one’s vocational orientation. This is especially true for employment-centred transition systems as in Switzerland. In these countries young adults are navigated towards an early integration into standard trajectories or/and into the labour market (Blossfeld et al., 2011; Kogan et al., 2011).

Therefore, vocational orientation is understood as a long-term, active and constructive process that emerges from perceptions and experiences of young adults with a different range of opportunities (Müller, 2009). This definition of Müller (2009) enhances not only the processual character of vocational orientation but also understands the young adult as an actor in this process in interaction with his environment. This environment can be perceived as enabling or limiting one’s vocational orientation.

3.2 Agency and risk factors

As we perceive vocational orientation as at least partly individual-driven, this theoretical perspective is in line with what Evans (2002, p. 262) reflects in the concept of *bounded agency*. *Agency* stresses the individual, proactive decision-making process of young adults in their vocational orientation (ibid.). The annex *bounded* refers to the limitation through structural foundations and ascribed characteristics of one’s action (ibid.). These ascribed characteristics were discussed as so-called “risk patterns”. Risk patterns comprise of individual and environmental characteristics that are associated with difficulties regarding the transition from school to further education or/and training and later into the labour market (Gebhardt et al., 2017). As Häfeli

& Schellenberg (2009) show, these risk patterns include a variety of individual, familial, school- and workplace-related risk factors. In addition to the need of a multi-dimensional perspective on “youth at risk” the interpretation of such “risk patterns” from an individual perspective is of interest. It is important to take into account the complexity of biographical and structural aspects interrelating in one’s vocational orientation.

4 Data and method

To acquire a better understanding concerning the complex and long-term transitional process from compulsory school to vocational education and training, and further into the labour market, we combine a quantitative survey and a qualitative study that were both carried out in the German-speaking part of Switzerland. This mixed-methods approach is designed as an explanatory sequential design, as the qualitative sampling procedure was based on results compiled within the quantitative study (Creswell, 2014).

Quantitative data (n=406) was gathered using a standardized questionnaire, including participants involved in a longitudinal sample (questionnaires distributed in 8th and 9th grade, and three years after), and young people who attended a specific transitional program (one year of pre-vocational training) during 2010, 2011 or 2012. The questionnaire contains questions and items concerning risk factors, transitional paths and the perception of the used support offers. The validity and reliability of the used scales were statistically proven.

The identification of different risk patterns (RQ 1) was tackled applying latent class analysis (Muthén & Muthén, 2012; Collins & Lanza, 2010). Various individual (gender, migrant background, academic achievements), family-based (educational aspirations of parents, relationship to parents), school-related (support provided by school, special career lessons and teachers) and workplace-related (perception of one’s own autonomy and competence in the course of an apprenticeship) risk factors were included within the latent class analysis (based on Häfeli & Schellenberg, 2009).

The sampling process concerning the collection of qualitative data was based on the identified distinct risk patterns, due to the researchers’ aim to interview participants with different combinations of risk factors. Twelve problem-centred interviews were conducted and analysed by using qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2015). To gain a deeper understanding regarding the agency of vocational orientation of youth with different patterns of risk (RQ 2), perceptions of interviewed participants about their individual experiences and thoughts on their vocational orientation process were analysed.

5 Results

5.1 Descriptions of distinct risk patterns

To analyse in a person-oriented approach similar patterns of individual characteristics – in our case patterns of risk – we chose latent class analysis (Collin & Lanza, 2010, p. 8). Due to empirical quality criteria for latent class analysis, a three or four class model is the most appropriate, with the recommendation to choose the few classes possible (ibid, p. 109). An overview of the criteria for the decision-making process is depicted in table 1.

Table 1 Results of latent class analyses to identify groups of risk

Latent classes	AIC	BIC	aBIC	BLRT	Entropy
2	6200.417	6312.525	6223,678	-3138.593***	0.809
3	6132.121	6288.272	6164.520	-3072.208***	0.702
4	6085.754	6285.948	6127.292	-3027.060***	0.771
5	6052.372	6296.609	6103.048	-2992.877***	0.730

Note. *** $p < .001$

For all of the class solutions BLRT is significant, as the other criteria do not give a clear hint for decision-making. With one exception, AIC, BIC and aBIC are smaller, the more classes are included in the model. Values concerning entropy vary. Considering additional content-driven reflections on these solutions, a three-class model seems preferable.

The following table 2 facilitates an overview of the characteristics of all three conducted risk patterns, which will be discussed in the following section.

Table 2 Description of distinct risk patterns

Risk group	Academic achievements ¹	Sex % male	Migrant background % native	ESCS ²	Aspiration (pressure by parents) ³	Relationship to parents ³	School-related factors ³ (sum) ⁴	Workplace-related factors ³ (sum) ⁵	% sample
Good initial position, many social resources	513	32%	86%	0.32	2.49	3.52	2.58	3.16	66% (n=267)
Moderate initial position, few social resources	465	23%	44%	-0.21	3.29	2.24	2.30	2.82	13% (n=51)
Bad initial position, many social resources	403	41%	0%	-0.85	2.92	3.58	2.69	3.14	21% (n=87)

Note. 1 Based on the achievement-points of a standardized test called “Stellwerk” with a range of 200-800 points, which aims at locating one’s personal achievement in the 8th and 9th grade of compulsory school. 2 z-standardized, based on the mean of the indicator. 3 Based on the means on a scale from 1=strongly disagree to 4= strongly agree.. 4 School-related risk factors include 11 items on career guidance through 1) teachers, 2) career educations lessons and 3) schools. 5 Workplace-related risk factors include 14 items on the experience of 1) autonomy, 2) competence and 3) social integration

The first pattern (66% of sample) is characterised by the designation “good initial position, many social resources”, because participants exemplify relatively high academic achievements, a prosperous socio-economic background, seldom migrant background, well-perceived vocational preparation provided by school and workplace, and supportive parents. Pressure exerted by parents is comparatively low. To sum up, this risk group barely faces risks. The risk level of

the second group (13% of sample) can be designated as “moderate initial position, few social resources”. In comparison with the two other groups, academic achievements as well as the socio-economic background are middle-sized, while the perceived parental pressure is relatively high and relationships between youth and parents are rated quite low. Furthermore, support provided by school and workplace is assessed comparatively low. The third group (21% of sample) can be described with the phrase “bad initial position, many social resources”, because academic achievements and socio-economic background are considerably lower compared to the two other groups, whereas support provided by parents, school and persons at workplace is assessed relatively high.

These risk factors were the basis for the subsequent qualitative survey that was conducted with members of the different risk patterns. The following section will focus on a deeper understanding of individual vocational orientation processes, by giving participants of the three patterns a voice.

5.2 Perceptions of the vocational orientation process by different groups of young adults

Based on the deductive-inductive process of a structured content analysis, two main categories characterise the vocational orientation process. The main category *vocational choice* was inductively sub-structured into: *already existent, independent, adjusted, and rational decision*. In addition, another main category summed up different challenges. All interviewees report the lack of *career choice readiness* and the feeling of *vocational orientation as a coincidence* as most challenging regarding their vocational orientation process.

In the following sections, we mention differences in these two categories by the three identified risk patterns.

Starting with the group “good initial position, many social resources”, interviewees (n=4) describe having long-term occupational aims but also having to adjust them due to the fact that their aims turned out to be accomplishable or unrealistic. Vocational aims were therefore conceived as reversible in alignment with personal capabilities. These adjustments were not perceived as a biographical failure, as shown in the following excerpt:

Adrian: I think I just thought... in this case, this is not how it's going turn out. If one door closes, another open. I'm actually grateful that it turned out this way.¹

So even in times of high uncertainty, Adrian sees his vocational orientation as little challenging. He further perceives information during vocational orientation as sufficient and experiences a lot of emotional and concrete support of his parents.

In contrast, participants of the risk pattern “moderate initial position, few social resources” (n=5) do not report an existing strategy in their vocational orientation. One main challenge which is perceived is a lack of information. They consider their occupation-related decisions as coincidental and with long-standing consequences.

Kavitha: In my opinion one could show children a more diverse picture of professional options. (...) I have the feeling, we all have been thrown in at the deep end: “now go for it” and then you either interrupt your apprenticeship or you go on with it. You have to look after yourself. And I know A LOT of people which actually stopped their apprenticeship because it wasn't what they expected. I for example, I didn't dare quit, I had the feeling I wouldn't find anything else.

¹ The interviews were conducted in Swiss German with an idiomatic translation to English.

As shown in the quotation by Kavitha, vocational orientation is perceived as barely self-directed. The reason given for this lack of orientation is not having had enough information concerning occupational options or further education and concerning conditions of apprenticeships. In contrast to an active decision-making process within this disorientation, Kavitha chooses to stay in her apprenticeship due to anxiety of not finding another solution.

In the group “bad initial position, many social resources” (n=3), vocational orientation was described as being self-regulated. Challenges and failures occurred while trying to find an appropriate apprenticeship due to individual deficits during one’s vocational orientation process.

Jane: So, I already began searching for an apprenticeship in the third year of secondary school. I was ready and knew I wanted to do business administration (.) but I didn’t find anything. I wrote about 50 applications and I always received rejections. I thought: I don’t want to do anything else. So, I started a year of pre-vocational education and training. There I wrote 8 applications and received 4 confirmations.

In contrast to the flexibility of Adrian and the disappointment of Kavitha, Jane describes her vocational education as a self-regulated process. Despite her failure to find a direct entrance into post-compulsory training, she sticks to her original plans. Individual deficits as low performance in lower secondary school or problems during the application process can be managed as the individuals of this group report coping strategies in their vocational education. While parents were not reported as playing an important role, interviewees refer to other social resources, which they knew to activate when needed.

6 Conclusion

To sum up, we identified three groups of risk patterns, which differ not only regarding individual factors but also due to social resources provided by family, school and players at workplace. In particular, it is interesting that very different risk factors have been identified in two of the three groups: In the one group, risk is mainly due to low academic achievements and low socio-economic background, whereas in the other group, risk is characterised by low social resources. Compared to the former groups, the third group hardly faces any risks. Representatives of both groups with many social resources (no matter their good or bad initial position) describe themselves in the interviews as active agents of their vocational orientation while the group with few social resources perceive their vocational orientation barely self-directed.

If we embed the results of this mixed-methods research into the present discussion about vocational education processes, we see frictions between trends towards de-standardised transitions and the perceived lasting or even increasing importance of early career choices in Switzerland. So even though transitions from compulsory school to further education and training were increasingly reversible and fragmented according to Walther (2006), interviewees describe as a main challenge the lack of career choice readiness and the feeling that career choices at this age not as a controlled decision but a coincidence in one’s biography. To be an agent (see Evans, 2002) of one’s vocational orientation, the existence of social resources can be seen as a core aspect. Switzerland has an employment-centred transition system, which takes place at an early stage in peoples’ biographies. The main challenge for young people is not whether they participate in post-compulsory education or training – as it could be the case in sub-protective or liberal transitional systems – but whether this transition has been self or external directed (Walther, 2006). Agency is of high importance, as in Switzerland the chosen path of post-compulsory education has a long-during impact on later career paths (Gonon & Stolz, 2013).

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