
Capturing agency. A qualitative approach to youth perceptions on agentic latitudes in mobility structures

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Abstract

The interlinkage of agency and structure has become a popular but also contested arena of theoretical debate in youth research, especially in the context of school-to-work transitions. So far, however, the contributions in the field leave a rather diffuse picture of young people's biographical manoeuvring in general, and, specifically, with respect to young people's mobility connected with labour market integration. We argue against this backdrop, that the individual interpretation of, adaptation to and transformation of structural characteristics that frame mobility opportunities are of vital relevance for understanding this interlinkage, leading to the overall question: How do young people move within the structural mobility frames?

However, capturing these aspects empirically is a major challenge and places high demands on analytic processes. We are starting with a strongly explorative approach, looking at individual perceptions of young people collected in qualitative interviews. In particular, this inductive research step comprises the search for, and systematic analysis of, sequences that address how young people experience structures that frame mobility opportunities, how they embed these framings in their individual life plans and how they deal with structural constraints. In moving from case-internal to cross-case and, finally, to cross-country comparisons, we go beyond the individual and national perspective. The geographical sphere, inherent to mobility processes, finds specific attention in our analyses by looking at "places" (especially the destination country) as subject of individual motivation and planning, of structural framing (e.g. through mobility programmes that predefine the mobility target) and of individual appropriation of places in the course of mobility experiences. Thereby, the focus is laid on mobility episodes that are embedded in transitions to employment.

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grant agreement No 649263. The qualitative study comprises analyses of six different types of mobility (student mobility, cross-border volunteering, employment mobility, mobility in vocational training, pupil's exchange and entrepreneurship mobility), based on qualitative interviews with young mobile people in six European countries. For this work, a subsample of cases in those mobility types that are immediately connected to employment-related transitions (employment, studies and vocational training) was selected for three countries (Germany, Luxembourg and Norway); altogether comprising 46 interviews.

The results suggest that the individual assessments of mobility-framing structures are closely tied to the biographical embeddedness of mobility experiences and the (individually or structurally induced) scope of the respective mobility.

Keywords: mobility, youth, agency, qualitative analysis, places