

# Gender and School-to-Work Transitions Research

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## Abstract

This essay critically reflects on existing conceptualizations of gender in school-to-work transitions research. Gender is always included as a “control” variable in analyses of post-school transitions, but the way in which gender is embedded in institutional structures across different national settings is rarely unpacked in a systematic way. The essay draws on recent research to outline the way in which gender differences in labor market outcomes, especially at the early stages of the career, are likely to reflect variation in the nature of education and training systems. In doing so, it argues for the need to build bridges between transitions research and other sociological accounts of education and gender and highlights methodological challenges in combining insights from detailed case-studies of specific workplaces and from multivariate analyses of large-scale national and cross-national data sets.

## INTRODUCTION

There is now a large body of research on school-to-work transitions across very different educational and labor market systems. This research traces the way in which the kinds of skills developed within the education system and the relevance of these skills for the needs of employers facilitates a smoother transition to employment for young people in some countries than others (Shavit & Müller, 1998). However, gender has rarely been a central focus of transitions research, at least until comparatively recently. Gender is usually included as a “control” variable in multivariate analyses of post-school transitions, but the way in which gender is embedded in institutional structures across different national settings is rarely unpacked in a systematic way. The relative neglect of gender in transitions research yields an incomplete picture of the early labor market experiences of young people and leaves us with unanswered questions: To what extent do gender differences at labor market entry reflect differences produced and reproduced in the education and

training system? Do young women and men with the same qualifications obtain employment of the same quality? To what extent do gender differences in employment outcomes reflect different institutional structures (such as employment protection legislation, EPL) or the preferences and practices of specific employers? This essay seeks to draw on recent comparative studies in the field to suggest a way of combining insights from transitions research with other sociological theories on education and gender as a basis for a more comprehensive framework for analyzing the gendering of school-to-work transitions.

#### GENDER IN EARLY RESEARCH ON SCHOOL-TO-WORK TRANSITIONS

From the 1980s onwards, studies of employment turned towards a new emphasis on the influence of institutional structures. Drawing on detailed case-studies of employers in France and Germany, the societal perspective sought to explore the interaction between education and labor market systems and the way in which these systems shape the pathways taken by workers (Maurice, Sellier, & Silvestre, 1986). This work focused on the relative emphasis on the provision of occupationally specific skills as opposed to general skills within the education/training system and the way in which this interacted with employment structures in relation to recruitment and on-the-job training. Thus, a “qualification space” in Germany and an “organizational space” in France paralleled the distinction between occupational and internal labor markets. However, initial formulations of this perspective were criticised for being “gender-blind” and commentators (such as O’Reilly, 2006) highlighted the way in which the characterization of systems such as France and Germany changed markedly when attention was paid to the features of female employment in those countries. Thereafter, school-to-work transitions research developed conceptually, delineating the way in which specific features of the educational system, such as its standardization, differentiation, and degree of linkage to employment, shaped young people’s labor market outcomes (Shavit & Müller, 1998). Studies came to pay greater attention to the role of EPL in influencing young people’s post-school trajectories, highlighting the “outsider” position of young labor market entrants in some systems with strict EPL (Breen & Buchmann, 2002; Müller & Gangl, 2003). Increasingly, these features of institutional structures became seen as “transition systems,” which formed specific configurations at the country level, rather than individual dimensions which could be separated analytically (Raffe, 2008). In spite of this greater conceptual understanding of the factors shaping transitions, structures continued to be viewed as largely gender-neutral, with analyses controlling for gender in statistical models but neglecting the

way in which gender could be embedded in, and fundamentally alter, these structures.

### GENDER AND WELFARE RÉGIME THEORY

In parallel to, but largely distinct from, developments in school-to-work transitions research, comparative research on (older) women's employment highlighted the way in which cross-national variation in welfare and family policies shaped labor market outcomes. Initial work (Esping-Andersen, 1990) distinguished between three ideal-type liberal, social democratic and conservative welfare state régimes, with a later extension to include Mediterranean (family-oriented) and post-socialist clusters. Like the societal perspective, initial formulations of the welfare régime theory were criticised for being gender-blind. Later extensions of this theory, by Jane Lewis and Diane Sainsbury among others (and subsequently by Esping-Andersen himself), more explicitly addressed the extent to which certain welfare states relied on a male breadwinner model and unpaid household labor carried out by women. These developments have produced useful insights into the way in which State policy can influence levels of female labor force participation but these studies do not tend to explore the type of employment secured, more especially the degree of occupational segregation by gender (Steinmetz, 2012).

### THE LIMITATIONS OF WELFARE RÉGIME THEORY IN UNDERSTANDING SCHOOL-TO-WORK TRANSITIONS

There are some features of existing research on welfare régimes that further limit its potential to yield insights into the labor market position of young women and men. Firstly, it rarely considers the role of the education and training system in influencing the nature of gender differences in employment. Accounts focus on the role of State policy in income maintenance and employment regulation but rarely analyze the way in which State institutions shape the kind of education and training received by young women and men. Secondly, research from this perspective has largely focused on adult workers, with country typologies derived on the basis of their employment allocation patterns. However, the scale of gender differences is found to be very different for younger workers across the different country typologies (see a series of analyses presented in Blossfeld, Skopek, Triventi, & Buchholz, 2015). Thus, at labor market entry, young women are found to be relatively better off in the Southern European countries, where they are more likely than men to enter prestigious occupations, than in the social-democratic systems, where Danish women earn less than men and Swedish women obtain

less prestigious jobs than men. On this basis, Blossfeld *et al.* (2015) conclude that welfare régime typologies are more helpful for understanding gender careers after family formation. In addition, the framework focuses on the way in which family responsibilities and the unequal division of labor within the household constrain women's employment differentially depending on State support. With the increased age at first motherhood across many European countries, family responsibilities are unlikely to be a significant constraint for most labor market entrants. It is not clear, therefore, as to the mechanism through which family policy will influence gendered outcomes at labor market entry unless it is assumed there is a backwash effect whereby employers expect young women to have children in the future and therefore engage in statistical discrimination. A final issue is that welfare régime theory, like many other conceptual frameworks of institutional structures, has difficulty in accounting for large-scale change. This lacuna is particularly pertinent in the context of recent trends in female educational attainment across many Western countries and the potential impact of these trends on employment outcomes, especially at labor market entry. As a result of these limitations, the welfare régime perspective, while offering useful insights into the impact of State policy on the labor market, does not provide a comprehensive framework for understanding gender differences in early labor market outcomes.

#### THE LIMITATIONS OF WELFARE RÉGIME THEORY IN UNDERSTANDING THE REPRODUCTION OF GENDER DIFFERENCES

Limitations to the welfare régime framework have been highlighted even from the perspective of understanding the situation of older workers. A number of commentators have argued that welfare régime theory has neglected the potential role of culture and could benefit from insights from feminist theory regarding the construction of gender and power. Charles and Grusky (2004), in a careful exploration of cross-national variation in horizontal and vertical occupational segregation by gender, highlight two central concepts: gender essentialism, whereby assumptions about the "natural" abilities and orientations of women and men facilitate allocation to different types of jobs, with a labelling of "technical" and "manual" roles as male and "care" roles as female; and male primacy, whereby vertical segregation is shaped by the belief that men are more deserving of status than women. They argued that, as a result, levels of horizontal segregation (that is, women and men working in different types of jobs) and vertical segregation (that is, differences by gender in representation in higher status or supervisory positions) may be influenced by different societal factors and may change in different directions over time. For example, a growth in the services sector may provide new

management positions for women, thus reducing vertical segregation, but at the same time may reinforce women's location in female-typed "care" roles, raising levels of horizontal segregation. Their work shows the complex interplay between institutional, cultural and economic factors in shaping gender segregation and points to the potential for a more dynamic understanding of employment patterns.

## NEW RESEARCH ON GENDER AND SCHOOL-TO-WORK TRANSITIONS

There is now an emerging body of research which pays greater attention to the way in which gender differences are shaped and reshaped on labor market entry and, more specifically, to the role of the education and training system in producing these differences. This research fits broadly into two groups: "side-by-side" single-country analyses which allow for inferences to be drawn about commonalities and differences across systems (Blossfeld *et al.*, 2015); and multi-level analyses which seek to identify the macro-level features of national systems which influence the relative scale of gender differences across different settings (Steinmetz, 2012). The latter set of studies often focus on women of all ages; however, the emphasis on the role of the education and training system and the investigation of between-cohort differences mean that such research provides very useful insights into early labor market processes.

## GENDER DIFFERENCES AT LABOR MARKET ENTRY

A set of country studies published in Blossfeld *et al.* (2015) points to the persistence of gender differences at labor market entry. Horizontal segregation remains marked in many countries and, in spite of changes such as increases in women's educational levels and labor force participation rates, cross-country trends have been inconsistent, with segregation declining in some settings (such as Denmark, Sweden, and the UK) and increasing in others (such as Estonia and Russia). Vertical segregation also remains pronounced even among labor market entrants, with young men more likely to be employed in managerial and professional jobs than young women (Blossfeld *et al.*, 2015).

## FEMALE ADVANTAGE IN EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT?

Transitions research has consistently found a strong relationship between educational outcomes and success in labor market integration. This pattern suggests the importance of looking at gender differences in educational

participation and course take-up and the potential implications for the early labor market career. Many Western countries have experienced a growing gender gap in educational attainment in favor of women (DiPrete & Buchmann, 2013). There has been a good deal of debate about the reasons behind this trend, with changes being attributed variously to broader social and labor market factors (such as more egalitarian attitudes and rising levels of female employment), the approach taken to student assessment (especially the relative emphasis on coursework as opposed to exams), the feminisation of teaching, the pattern of classroom interaction between teachers and students, the “laddish” culture among boys and/or the gender mix of the school. However, there has been some tendency to offer post-factum explanations of the phenomenon; for example, boys’ dominance of classroom interaction was used as an explanation for female educational disadvantage in the 1970s but is now used to explain male underachievement (Smyth, 2007). Nonetheless, the shift in female educational participation is of such a scale that it might be expected to translate into female advantage in the early years of labor market integration. However, there appears to be no consistent pattern across European countries in the extent to which increased female educational attainment has been reflected in occupational level and/or pay returns (Blossfeld *et al.*, 2015).

#### GENDER DIFFERENCES IN COURSE TAKE-UP

Alongside this shift in the patterns of educational participation by gender, there has been a notable persistence in the gendering of course or track take-up within the education and training system. Again, there has been a lack of consensus on the influences underlying these patterns. Gender differences in field of study have been variously attributed to biological factors, the backwash effect of gender segregation within the labor market, the nature of the educational system, whether young people attend a coeducational or single-sex school, and the construction of particular spheres of knowledge (such as science and technology) as “male” or “female” (Smyth, 2007). Although some commentators posit a near-universality in gender differences, it is clear that there is cross-national variation in the kinds of subjects taken by young women and men (Smyth & Steinmetz, 2008).

#### THE STRUCTURE OF THE EDUCATION/TRAINING SYSTEMS AND GENDER DIFFERENCES IN TRANSITIONS

To date, relatively few attempts have been made to explore the way in which different educational systems can affect patterns of course or track take-up by gender. One exception is research that shows how systems with earlier

decision points tend to have more gendered course take-up (Buchmann & Charles, 1995; Charles & Grusky, 2004). More recently, Moorhouse (2017) has used macro-level data to identify the influence of labor factors on segregation in field of study. Her research points to the fact that increasing female employment levels are associated with increasing segregation in field of study while stronger protection for women's economic rights tends to reduce such segregation. Much of the research has, however, focused on subject or field of study choice within upper secondary or tertiary education while there has been comparatively little research on the extent of gendering of vocational tracks, a phenomenon that is likely to significantly influence employment outcomes across several European countries (for a notable exception, see an edited volume by Imdorf, Hegna, & Reisel, 2015). Furthermore, despite the persistence of gender segregation of certain fields of study, there has been notable feminization in some domains, especially medicine and law. Again, conventional theories have not adequately explained either these changes or the persistence of a gender gap in take-up of STEM fields of study (Mann & diPrete, 2013).

A number of studies have highlighted the relationship between educational and occupational segregation by gender. At the macro level, findings show that countries with high levels of educational segregation by gender tend to have high levels of occupational segregation by gender for both young and older workers (Smyth, 2005; Steinmetz, 2012). At the micro level, these studies indicate the way in which choice of, or allocation to, field of study channels young people into gender-typical jobs (Blossfeld *et al.*, 2015; Smyth & Steinmetz, 2008; Steinmetz, 2012). Thus, much of the gender difference in type of job at labor market entry is found to be related to prior allocation to "male" and "female" fields within the education and training system. Nonetheless, there is evidence of a direct gender effect on occupational entry, even taking account of field of study. Thus, young women are significantly less likely to enter predominantly male jobs and more likely to enter predominantly female jobs, even controlling for gender and educational field. Not all gender segregation is attributable to educational segregation, with gender continuing to have a direct effect on the "sorting" of young men and women into gendered jobs. In overall terms, occupational segregation in the youth labor market tends to reflect both "pre-sorting" into different educational fields and "post-sorting" into different jobs among those in the same field of education (Smyth, 2005; Steinmetz, 2012). The degree to which this takes place is likely to reflect the complexity of institutional, social, and economic factors operating at the country level, a framework that has been analyzed in a second set of studies on gendered employment patterns.

## CROSS-NATIONAL DIFFERENCES IN EMPLOYMENT SEGREGATION BY GENDER

Multi-level modeling techniques have increasingly been used to unpack the size and drivers of between-country differences in gender segregation. There is no evidence from this research of a decline in occupational segregation among younger cohorts, with one study pointing to a greater likelihood of younger workers entering typically male and female jobs relative to their older counterparts (Steinmetz, 2012). The differential expansion of the service sector, especially public sector employment, has been found to operate as a crucial influence on the gendering of employment outcomes at labor market entry and beyond (Charles & Grusky, 2004; Steinmetz, 2012). A high proportion of women in public sector employment and high levels of female labor force participation overall are found to be associated with a greater representation of women in female-typical jobs (Steinmetz, 2012). In some contexts, female educational participation has been found to operate as a “qualifications lever” to help secure women entry into previously male occupational domains (Crompton & Sanderson, 1990; Witz, 1992). However, there is emerging evidence that higher female tertiary enrollment is instead associated with more gender-typed work for women and more gender atypical work for men. It appears that rather than acting as an equalizing influence, a growth in female representation in higher education appears to be accompanied by a rebalancing of the workforce towards typically female jobs, with more women and men entering these jobs in countries which have experienced such a shift (Smyth & Steinmetz, 2008). A similar pattern is evident in relation to levels of female labor force participation; again countries which have experienced a growth in female employment have also experienced a rebalancing of employment opportunities in the graduate labor market towards typically female jobs (Smyth & Steinmetz, 2008).

## FAMILY POLICY AND GENDER SEGREGATION

Like welfare régime theorists, a number of commentators have pointed to the role of family policy in cross-national variation in women’s employment outcomes. A greater level of provision for care and education for pre-school children appears to be associated with less occupational segregation by gender. It may be that national systems facilitating a work-life balance through child-care provision have been more successful in challenging gender-stereotyped behavior and attitudes within the workforce as a whole (Smyth & Steinmetz, 2008; Steinmetz, 2012). More generous parental leave provision is also associated with a greater representation of women in typically male occupations (Steinmetz, 2012). While most research has focused on horizontal segregation



by gender, one study highlights the way in which greater State provision of preschool care and education is associated with lower levels of vertical segregation, that is, a higher proportion of women in management positions (Steinmetz, 2012). In addition, the presence of family-friendly policies is significantly related to having a lower average gender wage gap at country level (Triventi, 2013). In many ways, these analyses provide a potential bridge between transitions research and welfare régime theory by incorporating an account of both education/training and labor market structures alongside an analysis of family and welfare policy.

### THE INFLUENCE OF CULTURE

More broadly, a number of studies have sought to examine the way in which the gender régime or culture shapes the nature of institutions and hence women's employment patterns. However, it has been challenging to accurately capture the scale and nature of cross-national variation in culture. Uunk, Kalmijn, and Muffels (2005) find a substantial positive and independent effect of a country's egalitarian gender-role attitudes on the likelihood of individual women being in paid employment. Charles and Grusky (2004) use one item from the 1990 World Values Survey ("men have greater rights to jobs during periods of high unemployment") as a measure of gender egalitarianism. Using this measure, vertical segregation levels are found to be lower in countries with more egalitarian attitudes among the general population but there is no consistent relationship between egalitarianism and horizontal segregation. Similarly, Mühlau's (2011) findings suggest no systematic relationship between egalitarian attitudes and gender differences in job quality at the country level. Employing several items on gender role attitudes, Steinmetz (2012) finds that egalitarian attitudes on some dimensions, but not others, are associated with a greater representation of women and men in gender-mixed jobs. The findings point to a broader issue of how best to capture a complex, and potentially changing, gender culture. Using attitudes to female employment recorded in cross-sectional surveys of the general population as a measure of the gender culture may be problematic, as the relationship between attitudes and behavior is complex, especially when viewed longitudinally (Steiber & Haas, 2012). Attitudes can be responsive to, rather than driving, broader societal change, with more egalitarian perceptions in the Irish context postdating a rapid rise in female labor force participation driven by economic boom and, in many post-socialist countries, attitudes becoming less egalitarian following the political and economic transition period. It seems we need to further interrogate the extent to which attitudes, measured cross-sectionally, are always revealing of deeper power structures within society and whether it

might be possible to develop other measures that could shed better light on the configuration of gender régimes.

#### FUTURE DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH ON GENDER AND TRANSITIONS

It has been argued in this essay that school-to-work transitions research has often developed in isolation from other strands of social scientific research, particularly the sociology of education and gender theory. Understanding how young women and men come to have exposure to very different subjects or fields of study could be enhanced by drawing on insights from school effects research and from studies that examine in detail the way in which gender identity is constructed and reconstructed within the classroom and school. The extent to which male and female students select different subjects and courses has been found to vary from school to school within national systems. Schools with otherwise similar characteristics can vary significantly in their provision of particular subjects (Oakes, 1990). Schools can also influence course take-up indirectly through subject packaging for optional subjects (e.g., by asking students to select between “male” and “female” subjects) and more subtle encouragement of the take-up of particular types of subjects. School climate and process can also contribute to the emergence of gender differences in educational outcomes, with schools serving as sites for the construction of masculinities and femininities (Connell, 2002). Furthermore, particular subject areas, such as mathematics and physics, may become constructed as “masculine,” leading to tensions for female students in selecting these subjects (Mendick, 2005). Transitions research could profit from taking on board these insights and seeking to unpack the ways in which early labor market outcomes may reflect the production and reproduction of gender differences within the education and training system.

Recent transitions research has increasingly moved towards quantitative analysis of large-scale national and cross-national datasets, a trend which has improved our ability to make inferences about the way in which institutional structures shape differences in employment outcomes but has perhaps at times restricted our capacity to unpack the underlying mechanisms at play. These studies make inferences about employer preferences and decisions on the basis of observed employment outcomes among a sample of adults. However, there has been little direct observation of employer behavior, a lacuna highlighted since the very early days of transitions research and which, it has been argued, serves to conflate demand- and supply-side processes (Bills, Di Stasio, & Gerxhani, 2017). An account which explores the way in which segregation patterns are shaped by the interaction between a differentiated labor supply (in terms of gender, educational level, field of study, and other factors,

such as social background and ethnicity) and a differentiated demand for labor on the part of employers would appear to offer a fruitful direction for future research.

The roots of transitions research lie in very rich and detailed case-studies of workplaces across different institutional settings (Maurice *et al.*, 1986). Similarly, the work of the Cambridge Labor Market Studies group used case-studies of firms to yield insights into the way in which employers demonstrated a preference for different sorts of labor (in terms of gender, age, etc.) in different market contexts (Craig, Garnsey, & Rubery, 1985). During the same time period, feminist theorists used detailed case-studies of specific occupations to trace the way in which occupational closure could be exercised by (some) groups of men, on the one hand, and women could use qualifications as a lever to secure entry to elite professions such as medicine, on the other hand (Crompton & Sanderson, 1990; Witz, 1992). Historical accounts show the way in which the gendered nature of the work process is built into the labor process from the outset (Bradley, 1989), reflecting the influence of broader social, economic and political factors. Thereafter, barring disruptions of the labor support or a restructuring of the labor process, the gender-typing of jobs tends to be reproduced in a “taken for granted” manner. There appears to be great potential to use case-studies of firms and occupations to explore employer recruitment and promotion decisions in detail and to unpack the way in which gender is (or is not) built into the configuration of jobs. The challenge will then be how to incorporate these insights into large-scale cross-national analyses but without such case-studies, we are unlikely to be able to properly understand the processes at play or develop the measures needed to capture them.

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