

Choosing to Labour: Structure and Agency in School-Work Transitions¹

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Abstract: We still know relatively little about how young people rationalize their educational and occupational plans and what this might tell us about the relationship between structure and agency in school-work transitions. In this paper, based on a multi-method comparison of youth apprentices in Canada and Germany, the range of school-work transition alternatives realistically under consideration was circumscribed by socio-economic status, habitus, cultural capital, and institutional factors. While their vocational choices reproduced their class position, youth apprentices nevertheless saw their entry into the trades as an expression of a preference for, and identity with, working-class ideals of manual work. Further analysis suggests, however, that these narratives can also be interpreted as post-facto rationalization strategies in response to public discourses that equate life course success with ever higher levels of educational attainment.

Résumé: Nous connaissons peu concernant comment les jeunes établissent leurs plans d'éducation et de profession, et comment cela nous aiderait à comprendre la relation entre structure et agence dans la transition de l'éducation au travail. À base de la comparaison multi-méthodes de jeunes apprenties au Canada et en Allemagne, nous déterminons que les alternatives considérées dans cette transition sont circonscrites par le statut socio-économique, le habitus de résidence, le capital culturel et les facteurs institutionnels. Tandis que leurs choix de vocation reproduisent leur position de classe sociale, les jeunes apprenties voient tout-de-même leur entrée dans les carrières de travail manuel comme l'expression d'une préférence pour, et identification avec, les idéaux du travail manuel de la classe prolétaire. Par ailleurs, une analyse plus poussée suggère que ces histoires personnelles peuvent être interprétés comme des stratégies de rationalisation post-facto, en réponse au discours public qui équivaut le succès dans la vie avec l'atteinte de plus hauts niveaux d'éducation.

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Introduction

The last year of high school is an important period in school-work transitions as students begin to seriously consider life after school, narrow their educational and vocational options, and reinforce dispositions toward specific career destinations. Explaining school-work transitions processes, researchers concerned with issues of structural reproduction have emphasized the capacity of institutional structures to reinforce social inequality (Andres and Krahn, 1999; Kerckhoff, 1995; Shavit and Blossfeld, 1993), while agency in school-work transitions has been variously interpreted as acts of rational choice, resistance, or as reflexive and strategic (Evans, 2002; Goldthorpe, 1996; Willis, 1977). Yet, we still know relatively little about how young people rationalize their educational and occupational plans and what their rationalization strategies might tell us about the relationship between structure and agency in school-work transitions. In this paper, based on semi-structured interviews and focus groups, the aim is to provide insights into such rationalization strategies by focusing on a group of Canadian students who participate in a high school based apprenticeship program. As these young people, although still enrolled in high school, have already made their first tentative steps into employment, they are in a unique position to reflect on their career decisions as both high school students and workers. Their experiences are contrasted with those of first and second year apprentices in Germany's dual system. Germany's dual system of vocational education often informs policy and implementation processes of youth apprenticeship initiatives in Canada and the US (Hamilton, 1990; Lehmann, 2000). The dual system is seen as a successful model due to Germany's low rates of youth unemployment and highly skilled workforce. What is often overlooked, however, is that Germany's dual system is embedded in very different education and labour market structures. Furthermore, unlike the relatively new and marginal apprenticeship programs in Canada, the dual system has a long tradition of forming major pathways into socially and culturally respected careers in skilled employment. A comparison of Canadian and German apprentices in similar trades provides a rare critical look at how these differences affect individual experiences and rationalization strategies in school-work transitions.

RAP: Alberta's Registered Apprenticeship Program

Youth apprenticeships in Canada have gained in popularity in recent years.² In terms of enrollment, they have been most successful in Alberta, a western

2. For a more detailed description of youth apprenticeship initiatives in Canada, see Lehmann (2000).

Canadian, natural resource-intensive province, and Ontario, where they are linked to a relatively strong manufacturing sector. In Alberta, where the data for this paper was collected, the formal introduction of a youth apprenticeship program in the early 1990s was a response to high levels of youth unemployment, particularly for non-university bound youth. Yet, while school-work transitions for young people are seen as having become increasingly difficult, we continue to hear concerns about critical shortages of skilled workers in the trades (e.g., Alberta Apprenticeship and Industry Training Board 1996; Alberta Chamber of Resources and Construction Owners of Alberta 1990; Statistics Canada 2003). Policy-makers, employers, and the media regularly portray the long-term prospects for the Canadian economy as crippled by a demand for skilled labour that far outpaces supply. "Trades scrambling as labour shortage looms," states a recent front page headline in the *Edmonton Journal* (Finlayson 2003). Alberta's youth apprenticeship program (Registered Apprenticeship Program, or RAP) was introduced to address both issues: offering high school students an alternative to traditional post-secondary education or immediate workforce entry, while also attempting to create interest in the trades as a career option and answering industry pressures to bring at least some aspects of the secondary curriculum more in line with industry needs (Lehmann and Taylor, 2003).

RAP is designed to allow full-time high school students to begin, on a part-time basis, an apprenticeship as early as grade 11, fulfilling requirements toward high school graduation and a journey person certification at the same time. In order to participate in RAP, interested students — either on their own or with the assistance of teachers, workplace coordinators, and counsellors at their schools — need to find an employer willing to take them on as part-time apprentices. Recruitment into the program appears to take place in a variety of ways. Some students approach employers or schools on their own, mostly because they attended information sessions at their schools or because they have heard about the programs from older students already enrolled. Other students are encouraged to participate by teachers in vocational courses.

Each 125 hours spent on the job are considered equivalent to a high school course and students are allowed to take up to eight RAP courses, which replace most if not all elective courses necessary for high school graduation. Depending on workplace demands, RAP apprentices may work and go to school during the same term or they may attend school full-time for one term and be in the workplace full-time the other term. While still officially high school students, RAP participants are also fully registered and indentured apprentices. This means that their on-the-job learning falls under the jurisdiction of the Alberta Apprenticeship and Industry Training Board and the regulations governing general apprenticeship training in Alberta.

Generally, RAP students will have completed the equivalent of a first year apprentice's work hours by the time they graduate from high school and

receive advanced standing if they choose to continue their apprenticeship training full-time. Despite significant growth in enrollment since the first five students started in RAP in 1991, the 980 enrolled RAP apprentices at the end of 2001 still comprise less than one percent of all high school students and about 2.5 percent of all apprentices registered in the province (Alberta Apprenticeship and Industry Training Board, 2002).

Germany's Dual System

Although most Canadian youth apprenticeships, including RAP, are modelled to various degrees after Germany's dual system, the latter is firmly entrenched in a very different institutional, political, economic, and cultural framework. Unlike the loosely structured regulations that guide apprenticeships in Canada, the German dual system is based on a complex system of responsibilities characterized by a high level of joint decision making at the federal, provincial, and local levels (Greinert, 1994; Münch, 1995). Furthermore, employment in occupations covered under the apprenticeship system in Germany requires formal credentials obtained in the dual system. In contrast, a valid journey-person certification is increasingly unimportant to employment in the trades in Alberta (or elsewhere in Canada), which also helps explain the relatively high rate of non-completions in apprenticeship training (Sharpe, 2003).

Unlike participants in RAP, German apprentices are no longer in the secondary school system when they begin their apprenticeship. They have formal training contracts, are counted as full-time employees, are covered by collective agreements, are paid for attending part-time vocational schools, and are protected against dismissal under the Vocational Training Act (Münch, 1995: 51). Depending on occupation, apprenticeships in the dual system last between two to four years and completion depends on passing midterm and final examinations covering practical and theoretical aspects of the occupation.

Although there are no official entry requirements into the dual system, who enters it and into which occupations is very much defined by Germany's heavily streamed three-tier school system. While apprenticeship training in Alberta (or anywhere else in Canada) is largely confined to traditional trades occupations — 49 in Alberta — the German dual system actually covers over 300 occupations, ranging from traditional trades to the types of modern service and administrative occupations that are usually part of the community college system in Canada (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung, 2000). Traditionally, graduates from the lowest secondary school stream (the secondary modern school or *Hauptschule*) have entered apprenticeships in crafts, skilled trades, and lower-level service occupations upon completion of grade 9 (generally around the age of 14 or 15). Graduates from the middle school stream (*Realschule*) were mostly found in upper tier service occupations (e.g.,

in banks, insurance companies, or the public service) and graduates from the highest school stream (*Gymnasium*) were university-bound. However, educational expansion within the last 25 years has led to what some have called displacement competition (Schober, 1984).³ As more young people graduate from the two higher school streams, employers have raised their entrance requirements for apprenticeships (Heidenreich, 1998). While this displacement competition disadvantages those with the lowest levels of educational attainment, it has also been argued that it highlights the system's value as a pathway to highly respectable middle-class careers, both in skilled labour and service occupations (Lempert, 1995).

Structure and Agency in School-Work Transitions

Proponents of initiatives like RAP argue that they make school experience more meaningful and offer a way out of the downward spiral of low levels of schooling and labour market failure (Buechtemann et al., 1994; Economic Council of Canada, 1992; Hamilton, 1990). Vocational credentials have indeed been shown to improve individuals' labour market outcomes compared to those whose highest level of educational attainment is high school or less, but university graduates still fare better in terms of employment stability and income (OECD, 2000; Statistics Canada, 2001; Taillon and Paju, 1999).

Critics, however, charge such programs with reinforcing existing social inequalities by streaming lower-class children into marginalized career options (Kantor, 1994). Recent stratification research in Canada has found that the influence of class-based structural variables has persisted over time (Andres et al., 1999; Anisef et al., 2000) and that socio-economic status (SES) is still the strongest determinant of educational and occupational attainment (Davies, 2004; Krahn, 2004). Research in Germany and Europe largely confirms the findings of the Canadian studies (Kerckhoff, 1995; Mansel, 1993; Shavit and Blossfeld, 1996). Friebel et al. (2000: 71-2), in a review of Germany's educational expansion in the 1970s and 1980s, conclude that success in the educational system is so highly correlated with social origin that one cannot simply conclude that educational expansion has equalized life course chances.

Despite the overwhelming evidence of structural reproduction in school-work transitions, research has been criticized for overemphasizing the capacity of institutional structures to reinforce social inequality and for lacking insight into the actual decision making of individuals. The young people under investigation are essentially treated as empty receptacles, their minds *tabula*

3. These issues are more broadly situated in debates of credentialism and credential inflation (Collins, 1979; Murphy, 1988).

rasa. Educational and occupational aspirations and socially reproductive processes are seen to happen to them. Yet, most of our own experiences tell us that we make decisions that are not determined by some invisible yet all powerful structural force. Although not generally couched in these terms, these conflicting perspectives reflect the duality between agency and structure. Proponents see programs like RAP as adding educational choice and thus increasing the potential for agency. In contrast, critics highlight the structurally-reproductive conditions of apprenticeship enrollment. It is therefore important to investigate whether youth apprentices' decision to enter a relatively new and marginal transition program is the result of active choice or the outcome of streaming, particularly in light of powerful public discourses regarding the benefits of increasingly high levels of educational attainment.

Evans (2002: 246) suggests that the relatively recent emergence of the concept of agency in youth transitions research reflects the realization that the influence of social structures on youth transitions is neither direct nor entirely deterministic, and that young people "can actively shape some important dimensions of their experiences." Similarly, Anisef et al. (2000: 22) preface their analysis of life course experiences of a 1973 Ontario high school cohort by insisting that "personal agency is always present in the transition from youth to adulthood; young people make distinctive choices about their education and career pathways at critical junctures."

One of the earliest and arguably most influential studies on agency in the transition from school was Paul Willis's 1977 study *Learning to Labour*. In this ethnographic study of a small group of working-class "lads" in a school in a poor area of Birmingham, Willis proposes that the lads' rebellious, anti-school behaviour is a reflection of working-class resentment toward the middle-class values embedded in the educational system. However, the unintended consequence of their resistance is ultimately a reproduction of their own class position, as their aim is to leave school as soon as possible and to enter the working-class world of manual labour. Willis rejects claims that structural forces exclude working-class youth from achieving higher educational attainment and thus social mobility. Instead, he suggests that the lower level of educational attainment of working-class youth is not so much a result of an inability to compete at school, but of an unwillingness to compete, rooted in a deep class-cultural antagonism. Working-class youth are seen as actively and purposely resisting middle-class notions of mobility through higher education.

An alternative agency-centred explanation of inequality in school-work transitions is found in rational choice theory. Rational choice theorists argue that people attempt to maximize the utility of their educational decisions based on costs, expected benefits, and the probability of success of various alternatives (Boudon, 1974). As success is defined in terms of subsequent return on the initial investment in education, and as this definition is dependent on one's

income and SES, individuals from different class locations arrive at different conclusions. For members of the working class, unsuccessful participation in higher education would be far more costly than for members of a family with a higher SES. Vocational programs or courses, from a cost-benefit perspective, provide a much safer protection against unemployment or unstable, unskilled labour (Goldthorpe, 1996).⁴ In a critique of both rational choice and resistance theory as foundations for understanding agency in school-work transitions, Brown (1987: 3) found that working-class students were neither as instrumentally focused as rational choice theorists argue, nor were the majority of them engaged in the type of deviant, counter-cultural behaviour Willis described. Instead, they were quite willing to make an effort in school to find meaning and dignity in their lives and to enhance their chances of making a working-class career.

In efforts to consolidate notions of structure and agency, school-work transition researchers have tried to conceptualize transition processes as involving reflexive and acting individuals, but whose agency is nevertheless constrained by very real structural conditions that exist *de facto*. Working within the theoretical notions of risk society (Beck, 1992) and late modernity (Giddens, 1990), researchers have developed concepts of agency and individualization that assume a continued influence of structural factors such as class, gender, and race, although at a much less prominent and deterministic level than in much of the social stratification literature (Evans, 2002; Rudd and Evans, 1998). Bourdieu's concept of habitus (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992) is also increasingly applied to the study of youth transitions. Put simply, habitus creates dispositions to act, interpret experiences, and think in a certain way. Bourdieu's concept of habitus has at times been interpreted as being overly deterministic and incapable of explaining agency or resistance (Jenkins, 1992). In this paper, a far less deterministic interpretation of habitus that reserves the potential for agency, albeit socially bound, is applied. Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992: 133) himself has argued that

Habitus is not the fate that some people read into it. Being the product of history, it is an *open system of dispositions* that is constantly subjected to experiences, and therefore constantly affected by them in a way that either reinforces or modifies its structures. ... Having said this, I must immediately add that there is a probability, inscribed in the social destiny associated with definite social conditions, that experiences will confirm habitus, because most people are statistically bound to encounter circumstances that tend to agree with those that originally fashioned their habitus. (emphasis in original).

4. Goldthorpe supports his argument by suggesting that, for the same reason, the male-female gap has narrowed, because investment in higher education by women is seen as paying off in the labour market to a degree that investment in higher education by working-class children is not guaranteed.

As individuals' upbringing and social environment are the strongest contributors to the formation of habitus, using habitus allows us to place school-work transitions processes in a framework that can account for the active formation of dispositions towards certain educational and occupational choices, and explain how these dispositions are rooted in social structure (Andres, 1993; Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997).

These conflicting theoretical and empirical positions are complicated by two other, parallel public discourses. Media and industry representatives increasingly profile and promote careers in the trades as leading to secure, stable employment with a very high income potential. This is often contrasted with burger flipping university graduates struggling to pay back massive student loans (e.g., Anthony, 2003). But there is a more pervasive discourse about the need for increasingly high levels of formal, post-secondary education for occupational and life course success in a post-industrial or knowledge economy (e.g., Bell, 1973; Drucker, 1993; Reich, 1992). Changing skill requirements in the workplace caused by new technologies and different organizational structures are said to emphasize individuality, problem-solving skills, and other skills more traditionally associated with academic careers and promote the idea that all workers need to be knowledge workers (Benson, 1997; Grubb, 1996).

In front of this backdrop of competing theories, ideologies, and discourses we need to analyze and understand how young people form dispositions and rationalize their decisions about post-high school plans.

The Study

This paper is based on a mixed method, comparative study of 65 high school students enrolled in RAP in Edmonton, Alberta (N=29) and first and second year dual system apprentices in Bremen, Germany (N=36). In addition, 40 similar aged academic-track students in Edmonton (N=23) and Bremen (N=17) were interviewed and surveyed to provide comparative data on socially and structurally reproductive processes. The focus of this paper, however, is the 65 young apprentices.

Data collection was carried out between November 2001 and October 2002, using either one-on-one semi-structured interviews, or focus groups. In addition, all participants filled out a survey at the end of their interviews or focus groups, which included items assessing parents' educational and occupational attainment, participants' own educational achievement, as well as other background data. The 29 Edmonton RAP students were either in their first or second year of participation in RAP (grade 11 or 12, which means they were between 16 and 18 years old).

Bremen is a city in northern Germany that is similar in size to Edmonton and is also, like Edmonton, a provincial (*Land*) capital.⁵ Although recently Bremen, as the rest of Germany, has had much higher levels of unemployment than Alberta, the city does have an industrial base that provides apprenticeship-training possibilities in similar or identical trades to the ones profiled in the Edmonton sample. The Bremen sample included 36 first, second, and third year apprentices (aged 16 to 20) within Germany's dual system in occupations identical or similar to those of the RAP students in Edmonton.

Of the 29 RAP students in Edmonton, only five were women, all of whom apprenticed as hairdressers. Although efforts were made to include young women apprenticing in traditionally male trades, none could be found in the schools selected for this study. The situation was similar in Germany. Out of 36 participants, 11 were female, none of whom were in traditionally male trades, although two were not in hairdressing but apprenticed as chefs. The preponderance of males in this study is representative of gender imbalance in apprenticeship training generally in Canada and Germany. In 1997 in Canada, only 2 percent of motor vehicle and heavy equipment apprentices, 1.5 percent of apprentices in industrial and mechanical trades, and 2.5 percent in building construction trades were female (Statistics Canada, 1999). The situation in Germany is similar: only 2 percent of motor vehicle, 1 percent of metal trades, and on average 1 percent of building construction apprentices are female (Bundesministerium für Bildung und Forschung, 2001).⁶

All interviews and focus groups were audio-taped and transcribed. Data analysis followed the coding process prescribed by Strauss and Corbin (1990). This involved moving from initial coding of interview and focus group data into relatively open categories to establishing more specific coding hierarchies and ultimately developing more selective empirical and theoretical categories

5. Particular thanks go to Walter Heinz, Helga Krüger, Andreas Witzel, and Werner Dressel at the Universität Bremen, as well as Eva Quante-Braun, Elisabeth Mahlberg-Wilson, Anne Grothrian, and Manfred Breden from the "Bleib Dran" team at the Akademie für Arbeit und Politik at the Universität Bremen.

6. Efforts to increase female participation in male-dominated trades in Germany, although they do exist, appear to have been relatively unsuccessful and many have even been abandoned in recent years (Personal conversation, Vocational School Teacher, Bremen May 30, 2002). Similarly, there are few efforts in Alberta to increase female participation in traditional male trades. There are no equal opportunity programs (at least at the high school level) that try to increase participation of women in male-dominated apprenticeships. Generally, it is seen as sufficient to ensure that young women are aware of the opportunities in the trades (Taylor and Lehmann, 2002). More research is needed to investigate why, for example, so few women choose careers in the trades and to what extent this gender imbalance is related to gender role socialization or hostile workplaces (see Gaskell, 1992).

(e.g., the different rationalization strategies discussed later in this paper). This process was aided by keeping extensive field notes and noting emerging themes throughout the data collection process as well as during transcribing. The data, including the field notes, was analyzed using QSR NVivo software.

Reproducing Social Inequality

Analysis of the questionnaire data showed that participation in either youth apprenticeships or academic-stream programs was clearly related to SES. For instance, an overwhelming majority of RAP students in Edmonton (71%) and of apprentices in Bremen (81%) grew up with fathers who had less than university education. Similar relationships were observed for mothers' educational attainment, fathers' occupational attainment, and family income (see Table 1).

The higher percentage of apprentices with less educated fathers and with average and below average family incomes for the Bremen sample highlights the more reproductive thrust of Germany's tripartite streamed secondary education system. It may, however, also hide the fact that many of these fathers have enjoyed solid middle-class careers as graduates from the dual systems themselves, as the results of fathers' occupational attainment indicates.

Table 1. Edmonton RAP students and Bremen dual system apprentices by various socio-economic characteristics

	<i>Edmonton</i>		<i>Bremen</i>	
	N	%	N	%
Fathers' Highest Level of Education				
University	6	29%	6	19%
Non-university	15	71%	25	81%
Total	21	100%	31	100%
Mothers' Highest Level of Education				
University	18	14%	8	23%
Non-university	3	86%	27	77%
Total	21	100%	35	100%
Fathers' Occupation				
Professional	1	4%	3	10%
Skilled	13	52%	19	66%
Semi- and un-skilled	11	44%	7	24%
Total	25	100%	29	100%
Family Income				
Above Average	9	38%	5	15%
Average & below average	15	62%	29	85%
Total	24	100%	34	100%

Nevertheless, these relationships in both Edmonton and Bremen confirmed findings of other recent stratification studies in Canada and Germany (Andres et al., 1999; Friebel et al., 2000; Krahn, 2004).

These socially reproductive processes have been linked to individuals' levels of cultural capital and their ability to negotiate school curriculum and expectations shaped by middle-class values (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). The questionnaire therefore included a set of items intended to measure cultural capital, but in a way that is tied to a concept of habitus (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). Participants were asked in the questionnaire to indicate whether, growing up, their family placed more emphasis on learning manual or intellectual skills. The majority of apprentices in this study agreed that they grew up in families in which developing and having manual skills was considered more important than having intellectual skills (see Table 2). In other words, class not only had a direct influence on the formation of school-work transition dispositions via parents' educational and occupational attainment or family income, but also an indirect impact via habitus and associated levels of cultural capital.

These quantitative findings were supported by the analysis of youth apprentices' narratives. Tim's comments about how his choice to become a millwright in RAP is related to his social background are representative of comments made by other youth apprentices in both Edmonton and Bremen.

Tim: I've always enjoyed working in a trade. It's just what my family does and I just seem to enjoy working with my hands rather than working with my mind all the time. [...] My family's been like that for all their lives and I just had to grow into it, I guess.

This quote illustrates how habitus and cultural capital intersect to create a remarkably strong set of dispositions toward education and work. Tim's comments are evidence of an embodiment of structure; his dispositions toward

Table 2. Importance of skills used in the home by location

	<i>Not Important</i>		<i>Important</i>		<i>Total</i>	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Manual Skills						
Edmonton	7	26%	20	74%	27	100%
Bremen	10	28%	26	72%	36	100%
Intellectual Skills						
Edmonton	22	81%	5	19%	27	100%
Bremen	24	69%	11	31%	35	100%

Respondents were asked: "On a scale from one to five, with five indicating very important, how important do you think are the following skills in your family?" Values of one to three were recoded as "not important," while responses of four and five were recoded as "important."

a career in the trades are the result of “a past which survives in the present and tends to perpetuate itself into the future” (Bourdieu, 1977: 82). Like Tim, most youth apprentices had grown up in environments rich in manual work traditions and marked by a distrust of or indifference to higher education.

Rather similarly, Dean and Ted, both apprentices in RAP, talk about the social (or maybe occupational) environment in which they grew up and which obviously shaped their dispositions toward work.

Ted: Nobody in my family went [to university] ... trades, that's about it. If you do anything, it's always a trade. ... I knew probably in grade 9 I was never going to university. I was just going for a trade in something.

Dean: ... I've always been good with my hands, ... I've never been book smart at all, I'm [unintelligible] when it comes to doing like writing work. But if you put me in like a shop, I can build just about anything ... [unintelligible] ... I'm good with my hands, I'm not good with my head.

Although interview participants like Ted and Dean may not be conscious of the way in which their SES and their upbringing contribute to their specific sets of dispositions toward manual work, they are able to justify their preference for this type of career as opposed to considering university as an option. This intersection between habitus, cultural capital and dispositions toward work was remarkably similar for the German apprentices. Consider, for instance, the following conversation between Matthias, Thomas, and Steffen, all of whom are apprenticing as car mechanics.

WL: In your families, was there also any pressure to do well at school or to do bookish things, like reading, writing, and so on?

Matthias: For me it was more manual, trades work.

Thomas: They [my parents] said it doesn't matter if you're stupid, as long as you work.

Steffen: I think the way my dad did it was really quite good. He put out his hand and I was supposed to give him whatever tools he needed. If you don't think, then you'll get the wrench whacked over your head, if it's the wrong one.⁷

Rudy is apprenticing as a roofer in Bremen. His explanation of why he started his apprenticeship, despite being warned about the job by experienced workers in the occupation during an internship, is an even more telling example of the relationship between class, habitus, education, and employment.

WL: Did anybody warn you about the job?

Rudy: Yeah, I got that too, in my internship. Before I started my apprenticeship, they all said “train for something different, not this job. It's no good.”

7. Interviews in Bremen were carried out in German and translated into English by the author. The intention of the translation was to stay as true to the original narratives as possible, but also to translate them into what might be considered colloquial or “natural” English.

WL: Why did you do it anyway?

Rudy: Well, because ... I looked at my [*Hauptschule*] diploma and marks, and thought to myself ... in my family, almost everybody works in construction, and then I thought, why shouldn't I do it myself?

Narratives of Choice and Agency

Despite this overwhelming empirical evidence of socially reproductive processes, apprentices also insisted that their career decisions were based on choice and agency. A common way of affirming their education and career choice was found in rational choice-type justifications. Nathan, who apprentices as an electrician in Edmonton, summed up all the key incentives when he explained what he liked about RAP and what motivated him to enter the program.

Nathan: There's a lot of things that are for doing the RAP program. [...] You do get credits out of it ... and ... as well as getting paid. And on top of that ... you finish all your hours and you have your first year [of apprenticeship training] completed. You get out of school and you're a year ahead of all your other classmates. [...] I mean, university ... you go every year and you pay 5,000 to 10,000 dollars. Whereas, you go and take [an apprenticeship], and in your first year ... I can easily make 5,000, 6,000, 7,000 dollars. [...] And I figured out by the time you're done university and by the time you've done your trade [...] you're 80,000 dollars ahead of the other person.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Nathan's comments reflect how RAP is promoted throughout the province. Brochures distributed in high schools across Alberta highlight money, work experience, and high school credits as the key advantages of participation. The brochure's cover reads "Earn while you learn." RAP is described as a way to

become an apprentice and gain credits toward both an apprenticeship program and a high school diploma at the same time. It's like having it all! ... Paid career training before you leave school.

In addition to earning an income while receiving credits toward high school graduation, RAP participants spoke passionately about their preferences for manual work, or "real work," as most of them called it. The following excerpt with a group of Edmonton RAP students illustrates this sentiment.

Nick: I don't really want to do an office job, because I'd rather be out actually doing work.

Dean: Yeah, the physical in the work appealed to me too, instead of sitting at a desk for six hours.

Doug: Yeah, that would be so boring.

The youth apprentices in Bremen gave very similar reasons for having chosen a career in the trades, as this excerpt from a focus group of Bremen electricians attests.

WL: Did any of you think about continuing at school?

Sebastian: That wasn't an issue for me.

Sebastian: As a student at grammar school [*Gymnasium*], you have no money. You might get a bit of an allowance from your folks, maybe a small job on the side or so. You might get 200 Euro ... no, that's already too much ... maybe 100 Euro in a month or so. And we definitely get a bit more than that.

Karl: And we also learn to really work. Not like them, packaging vegetables or whatever it is they do [laughs].

Yet, there remained a sense that these rational choices are partly a response to underlying concerns that entering a manual career is an inferior choice. Historically, vocational education has been targeted at low academic achievers (Schuetze, 2003) and manual careers have never been as highly regarded or lucrative in Canada as they are (or, some would argue, have been) in Germany. The following comment by Nathan, an Edmonton apprentice in RAP, serves as an example.

WL: Why do you think not more people take advantage of a program like this?

Nathan: I think the reason more people aren't going after this is that they think it's more like a lower-class type job, because it's labour. It is a lot of physical work, and they're thinking that people who are doing that don't have the brains.

This need to rationalize and reconstruct career dispositions was remarkably similar in both Edmonton and Bremen, despite the differences in labour market structures and the fact that the dual system has a long tradition of leading to stable, highly respected careers — a tradition that is increasingly coming under scrutiny (Heidenreich, 1998). A careful deconstruction of apprentices' narratives, following analytical strategies prescribed in grounded theory approaches (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990) suggested that they were engaged in what may best be described as a variety of rationalization strategies. These rationalization strategies, which should be interpreted, simultaneously, as a way of positively constructing constrained choices and acts of agency, will be discussed in the following sections.

Rationalization Strategies

Biography Construction

While the comments regarding rational choice were very strong and convincingly stated arguments, the youth apprentices in the study also engaged in a form of biography construction that reaffirmed habitual states and earlier decisions. Decisions were often recast as having been based on already existing interests and on the pleasure and enjoyment the work promised to entail. Work experience gained since starting their apprenticeships was largely described as fulfilling this promise, as having been “fun,” as the following excerpts from two separate focus groups indicate.

Dean: I've always been fascinated with, like, watching things get done. Like, you sit there and you watch them pour concrete foundations for your house, and watch them frame it, and

you watch them put the plywood on and drywall it. I just love watching getting things done.

Joelle: Oh yeah, this profession [hairdressing] is awesome for stuff like that. It's like not work. When you're having one of those days where you just laugh the whole day, because it's just ... It's not like, I'd say, your desk job; it's fun.

Just as manual work was described as more fulfilling, most apprentices also rejected the idea that higher post-secondary education is necessary for future career potential. Sven, a German youth in his second year of a hairdressing apprenticeship, talked about personal motivation and drive being more important than formal educational credentials. He gave his boss as an example.

Sven: My boss doesn't even have *Hauptschule* [lowest level school stream], he quit *Hauptschule*, and as a hairdresser, he's now the trendsetter in Germany. He's on TV and stuff like that. [...] He became a famous man. And that's why I think somehow that you don't need school anymore these days.

Rejecting schooling and denying value to higher post-secondary education was also a reflection of some RAP students' desire to "get on with their life."

WL: Did school become any more meaningful through RAP for you?

Brent: Uh, not really. I think life in general became more meaningful. I just got the overview of what life is gonna be, you know, I really wanna get out of here [school] and just start my life, start a career, get going.

However, cracks did appear in some of these narratives. Julia, a young Bremen hairdressing apprentice who quit *Gymnasium* (Germany's upper level school stream) after grade 11 is a perfect example of a biography reconstruction that began to collapse on itself during the course of the focus group.

Julia: I was just happy ... in the beginning, I would say that I'm happy that I now have a job that I know I want to do, that I enjoy. [...] I'd rather earn a little less money than making the big dough and sitting in an office all day, waiting for five o'clock. [...] I really didn't want to do that, although at one point I was pretty sure that I would end up in an office. I also wanted to become a teacher, totally conservative jobs, somehow. But then I just said to myself, no, I muck around on myself all the time, doing my nails, makeup, that totally interests me. [...] Then I said to myself, working in an office, that's too boring for me, I need to meet people and not stare at a computer screen all day long.

Anne: You know, now I wouldn't mind staring at a computer screen [laughs].

Julia: Sometimes I think that, too. [...] Yeah, somehow I do feel ... not stupid, but kind of stuck. [...] I can't imagine standing behind a chair for 15 years, washing hair, blow-drying hair, cutting hair, always the same. It's the same all the time. I mean even now it's like "oh no, not another perm." [...] And the money is terrible.

Adding to Julia's own sense of insecurity about her choice was the general disapproval from people around her. Her family and friends all thought that she could have done much better. Like Julia, other Bremen apprentices were also concerned about the long-term disadvantages they face vis-à-vis those with a university education. This feeling was generally not shared by Edmonton

apprentices and is clearly rooted in the fact that future access to higher education is much more difficult for the Bremen apprentices because of Germany's heavily streamed education system.

Embrace of Workplace Culture

Apprentices discussed their workplace experiences as antidotes to school, or the prospect of white-collar employment. Where school was often seen as meaningless and inconsequential, work was imbued with meaning. Unlike the "unreal world" of high school, RAP students, in their own words, had now entered the "real world."

Ted: It [RAP] is not like school. You can't slack off every ... [is interrupted]

Dean: ... yeah, it's not like you can come in and not write a single thing down [like] in school. Like if you go into work and don't touch a single tool, there's not ... you're not ... no questions asked, there's no leniency. Like that, like we have it here [at school]. We have it easy here. There it's the real world.

Interestingly, the discipline and regimen so readily accepted at work was resisted in school, as Frank, one of the Bremen apprentices, agreed.

Frank: School, you had more holidays than school; and getting up in the morning, you wouldn't take that too seriously either. And now at work, it's tough as nails, you couldn't just say, "OK, I'm five minutes late." Everything is getting more strict, and school was much too lenient for that.

Almost all of the apprentices considered working, drawing a regular salary, and taking on adult responsibilities as conferring a status in the "real world." This status transcended possible disadvantages of social origin.

WL: I want to pick up on a point Nick just made, that those people who go to university, most likely their parents will pick up the tab for them. Do you think that gives them an unfair advantage, that they come from maybe better-off families?

Nick: Not really, because they don't have the skills in the real world. That they haven't paid for everything themselves ... [Ted talks over Nick]

Ted: They don't know the responsibility ...

Nick: ... it's gonna be new as soon as they start [working].

A socio-economic disadvantage was thus turned into a "real world" advantage: becoming independent, learning responsibility, and having a plan for your future.

What emerged from these youth apprentices' interpretation of their role as full-time labour force participants was a sense that they had reached a level of adulthood and maturity that separated them from their peers who were still at school. This sense of maturity and superiority was yet another interpretive strategy youth apprentices employed to validate their career choices in the face of a powerful public discourse advocating high levels of educational attainment.

Accelerated Maturity

It has been argued that young people's coming of age is being delayed in advanced industrial societies (Coté and Allahar, 1994). Coté (2000) writes about arrested adulthood, suggesting that today's young adults are becoming more like adolescents in their tastes, attire, and general outlook on life and responsibility. However, youth apprentices considered themselves to be much more mature than their academic schoolmates. Rather than shying away from adult responsibility, as Coté's arrested adulthood concept suggests, the youth apprentices in this study expressed eagerness to take on the increased responsibility of this new stage in their life course. Youth apprentices recognized and appreciated that they were no longer economically dependent, as Ted, an Edmonton welding apprentice, suggested.

Ted: The way I look at it, most people are gonna rely on mom and dad for the first four or five years in their life [after high school]. ... But I don't want to be like that. I don't want to have to rely on anybody. I want to go and make it on my own.

Riley, an Edmonton millwright apprentice, puts it rather succinctly when he comments on people who may question his choice to enter the trades.

Riley: I laugh at people [who study]. It's like, yeah, you work ...

Nathan: ... yeah, you think you're so smart ...

Riley: ... you work in a clothing store and you think you make lots of money. It's like, my paycheque is more than your mom's, don't talk to me.

Thus, having a regular job and earning a regular income is seen as asserting your status as a mature individual, able to chart a more discerning path on your life course, understanding your potential and what you are worth, but also increasingly defining who you are.

Almost all saw this accelerated transition into adulthood as one of the key advantages of participation in RAP in Edmonton or the dual system in Bremen. Still, this needs to be interpreted as an *ex post facto* strategy of rationalization, as it appears that youth apprentices have to spend at least some time in the workplace in order to realize and articulate this advantage, as is evident in this conversation between a group of apprentice car mechanics in Bremen.

WL: If you think back at what it was like at school, do you prefer working with older people now?

Detlef: Much better. There is a calmness there.

Steffen: You're just being treated better. Especially if you show that you can work, then you'll be looked at as an adult and you'll be treated much better; compared to being at school with people my age, who still think about playing.

WL: Did you notice that you had to grow up a lot faster once you started regular work?

Thomas: Absolutely. You can't goof around at work and fuck up. You have to get your work done.

Keith apprentices as an electrician through RAP and was one of the youngest participants in the study. Still, his early involvement with RAP had him thinking about his future with decidedly adult concerns about pensions and financial security.

Keith: If you're an early journeyman, you got all your life ahead of you, you'll have a steady paycheque, if you can keep this job, because I've kept it for a long time now, they haven't fired me. And they said that's the kind of job you can keep for a long time, and I'm working with guys that have worked with the company for over 40 years. So, I can start up an RRSP, I have dental, I have ... I'll be protected.

For the male youth apprentices, an underlying machismo was often part of this new-found responsibility and maturity. Consider the following comments by Curtis, who apprentices as an automotive technician in Edmonton.

Curtis: ...some kids when they go to school, they don't know what their parents experience when they go to work. For me, second semester, I'm already working as a *man*, doing a *man's* job. I already know what it's like. Not like some kids who don't have a clue of what they have to do. (my emphasis)

These findings show that accelerated maturity was a real phenomenon for the youth apprentices in this study. They viewed this accelerated transition into adulthood as providing a key advantage over those who enter the labour market with higher post-secondary credentials. The developmental value of youth employment at such a substantial level, however, has been questioned (Greenberger & Steinberg, 1986). Although advocates of youth employment (Mortimer, 2003) argue that gaining maturity involves the ability to perform typical adult roles, critics suggest that "a superficial ability to play adult roles can be achieved without commensurate development of self understanding or clarification of social experience," a state which may be better described as *pseudomaturity* (Greenberger & Steinberg, 1986, 5). This raises a fundamental and complex challenge to youth apprentices' perception of maturity and responsibility, namely that this very maturity has been gained as the result of an earlier decision made at a time when they were not mature enough to make fully-informed choices. Of course, this brings us back to the original questions regarding the relationship between structural and institutional contexts and individual agency.

Discussion

The quantitative findings presented in this paper indicate that the institutional features of Germany's streamed education system exacerbate effects of structural reproduction. The qualitative data, however, also suggest that in these early transition stages, socially and culturally reproductive processes may override institutional differences. Without a doubt, participation in youth

apprenticeships in both countries was related to parents' relatively low levels of educational attainment and to having grown up in homes which emphasized values associated with manual labour. Furthermore, although the education systems and labour markets lead to very different opportunities in Canada and Germany, youth apprentices in both countries engaged in remarkably similar rationalization strategies regarding their school-work transitions. For example, youth apprentices' accounts of the financial advantages of becoming apprentices recalled the cost-benefit calculations underlying rational choice theory. The post-facto nature of these narratives suggests that they need to be interpreted as strategies of rationalization rather than actual expressions of rational choice. Non-monetary rewards also emerged as equally if not more important factors youth apprentices mentioned when describing their decisions to become apprentices.

Brown's (1987) study of working-class secondary students' aspirations shows how interesting work, good workmates, and good working conditions are more important to decision making than an understanding of the cost-benefit relation of possible alternatives. And the perceptions of these rewards, as these data confirm, are strongly influenced by the social and cultural conditions that characterize a young person's life. Youth apprentices talked passionately about their preference for doing "real" (i.e., manual) work and how doing this work conferred upon them a more mature status in adult society. Rather than being an expression of rational choice, these comments bring to mind the working-class lads in Willis's landmark study *Learning to Labour* (Willis, 1977). But unlike Willis's lads, these young people did not see their participation in manual labour as a form of counter-cultural expression. Of course, in the 25 years since Willis's book was published, the economy, labour markets, and education systems have undergone dramatic changes in all Western, industrialized societies. Willis's lads, one must assume, could still rely to some degree on a labour market with a reasonable number of unskilled and low-skilled employment opportunities. But such opportunities now are said to have either largely vanished in a post-industrial, knowledge-based economy, or have become increasingly unstable. McDowell (2003) argues that these labour market changes disproportionately affect young, under-educated males.

In discussions with the young men and women in Edmonton and Bremen, nobody had seriously considered entering the labour market without further vocational credentials. Most Edmonton apprentices knew they were being trained to enter a labour market in which their newly acquired skills will be in high demand and which is expected to be characterized by future critical skill shortages, as Keith, the youngest RAP student in this study, so succinctly states:

Keith: [In] any newspaper, look under the trades, electrician, millwright, they're always there. Always. And it's a big list. They're looking for ya.

Nevertheless, the Edmonton participants appear to be confronted by a persistent negative stereotype of manual work, despite this current boom and labour shortages in the oil and construction industries. In Bremen, participants are engaged in training leading to traditionally highly respected careers, but in a labour market with fewer jobs. In both countries, apprentices appear to be affected by a discourse of changing skills and educational requirements. For instance, it is somewhat ironic that youth apprenticeships have attracted considerable interest in North America in the past decade, just as the future of the dual system is increasingly being questioned in Germany (Heinz, 2003). Changing skill requirements in the workplace caused by new technologies and different organizational structures are said to emphasize individuality, problem-solving skills, and other skills more traditionally associated with academic careers. In contrast, apprenticeship training, at least in traditional craft occupations, has been described as outdated and archaic, narrowly skill-based, and more concerned with antiquated virtues of discipline, punctuality, and cleanliness than with the more broadly defined demands of new workplaces (Geißler, 1994).

Yet, both in Edmonton and Bremen, choosing apprenticeship training in the trades was actually seen as a decision that delivers a real life advantage compared to a university education. Whether participants insisted on the rational choice type advantages or preferences for manual work, these narratives have to be interpreted as strategies of rationalization vis-à-vis an overwhelmingly powerful discourse that equates life course success with higher educational attainment. At least within Western industrialized nations, this discourse transcends borders, which would help explain the similarities in rationalization strategies between Edmonton and Bremen apprentices. Institutional differences appear to become less important as the cultural differences — in this case middle-class attitudes toward educational and career success — narrow.

Wyn and Dwyer (1999: 14) suggest that these overly optimistic outlooks need to be linked to a discussion of individualization, which in turn implies an understanding of school-work transitions as an active process. Young people need to rely on individual agency to establish or envision patterns “which give *positive meaning* to their lives” (ibid.,: 14, emphasis in original). The flipside of this argument is that reproductive processes also need to be accounted for individually (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997). If youth deny that inequalities in labour market outcomes are the result of persistent class inequalities, as was largely the case in this study, the reason for these inequalities are then to be found in the young people themselves. It therefore becomes much more important to recast participation in programs like RAP as the result of informed, active choice which promises a multitude of outcomes that are preferable to those achievable through, for instance, a university education.

This raises a crucial question: do these strategies of construction and reconstruction imply agency? Or do they constitute a form of pseudo-agency, in which individuals simply try to make sense of structurally determined transitions?

At first sight, there appears to be enough evidence that the latter is the case. Although participants expressed a sense of intentional agency in their narratives, the range of school-work transition alternatives realistically under consideration was limited by their past experiences. Yet, although their formation of dispositions was clearly circumscribed by habitus, their rationalizations also suggest that decisions were not entirely mechanical or determined. Emirbayr and Mische (1998: 980) argue that even though individuals operate with a habitually limited range of options, their decisions remain intentional because

it allows one to get things done through habitual interactions and negotiations (allowing Bourdieu to speak of the paradox of "intentionless intentions"). As Bourdieu notes, there may be much ingenuity and resourcefulness to the selection of responses from practical repertoires, even when this contributes to the reproduction of a given structure of social relationships.

The various rationalization strategies discussed above are evidence of such essentially reproductive ingenuity and resourcefulness, as individuals explained, evaluated (in hindsight), and justified their decisions as a reflection of vocational preferences. However, these strategies are not simply post-hoc rationalizations. Instead, they provide evidence that individuals actively engage with the structures and patterns that frame their dispositions and actions. Although the socially reproductive thrust of their dispositions and choices was not generally realized, the participants in the study did clearly understand and incorporate into their narratives where and how these dispositions were formed. Thus, it is possible to understand young people's narratives regarding their decision to become youth apprentices as reflecting independent choices infused with agency, even though these choices are situated in a context of habitus, cultural capital, and class.

Obviously, the data presented in this paper are limited by the fact that they do not reflect longer-term processes and experiences. From a life course perspective, Heinz (1999: 217) promotes the idea of seeing individuals' social location not as structurally fixed, but as open to change through work-related experiences in status passages that "link opportunity structures with individual decisions and thus shape biographies." A longer-term perspective may indeed shed light on the potential of the rationalization strategies discussed in this paper to be truly agentic and to shape life courses by either reproducing or transforming habitual states. Longitudinal data would also be useful in evaluating the policy goals of programs like RAP: do they provide meaningful educational experiences, improve school-work transitions, reduce youth

unemployment, and address skill shortages? In the meantime, however, it is important to recognize that youth apprentices see their entry into the trades as congruent with the formation of positive vocational identities and the possibility of a successful life course that is not in opposition to dominant middle-class ideals of education, mobility, and achievement. In other words, the narratives and perceptions of the young apprentices in this study suggest overwhelmingly that instead of learning to labour, as Willis argues, they are choosing to labour.

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