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LIFE COURSE, EDUCATIONAL TRAJECTORIES AND SOCIAL INTEGRATION OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN SLOVENIA

Abstract. Young people in Slovenia are nowadays confronted with a competitive educational system, a demanding and restrictive labor market, as well as with a prolonged period of dependence on parents. The risky transition to adulthood compels them to search for flexible strategies that are able to lead them to their (uncertain) goals through the maze of the education system, work, entertainment, family, and peer relations. The article interprets Slovenian results from the international qualitative study *Governance of Educational Trajectories* in the context of life course and social integration of young people in Slovenia. We use the life course concept to analyze the adequacy of education for social integration, and how students in the last year of primary school (ninth-graders) in Slovenia plan their educational trajectories, what they expect from the future and what social support they rely on. Ongoing differentiation and de-standardization of life courses have extended the perspective of school learning towards lifelong learning. Accordingly, life courses are addressed as lifelong educational trajectories.

Keywords: *educational trajectories, life course, social integration, students, parents, primary school, job market*

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Changes in life courses in late modernity

Interest among researchers in studying transitions and changes in life courses showed particular growth in the 1980s. This increased attention can be attributed to major changes in biographical experiences and life plans in the preceding decades. These changes in turn are a consequence of changes in the fundamental institutions of the life course: changes in educational paths, work and employment, models of family and partner life and increased longevity. "Transitions are crucial but also vulnerable moments

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of 'liminality'. They are situated between two statuses. Therefore they are structured by institutionalized trajectories, regulated by 'gatekeepers' and symbolized by 'rites de passage'." (Walther et al., 2006: 22) Life courses over time and space connect individual lives with a broader social structure. By distinguishing life phases, social institutions connect the needs and abilities of the individual in different phases of life with different needs of society and social roles which are structured around age and gender.

In researching life courses we need to look at two separate fields of enquiry: research on individual life courses and biographies (the psychological approach) and research on the social context and the institutional order influencing the social inclusion of people (the sociological approach). Characteristic of contemporary research on life courses is that these two research approaches come increasingly closer to one another. An individual life course is a path through social structures in which the biography of an individual becomes both typified and differentiated. For this reason it is necessary to observe how the life course of an individual is acted on by cultural models, the social order, and institutions on the one hand, and personal expectations, plans, and characteristics and planning of biographies on the other. As the well known German researcher Walter Heinz (1997) has found, an analysis of life courses cannot be exclusively individual or exclusively social, but rather it must take into account all levels of social organization as its heuristic principle. Life courses are how the entire space in which our lives unfold is organized.

If models of life courses are routinized and show little deviation from the prescribed standards, routines and traditional norms, we call them "*standard*" or "*modal*" life courses (Heinz, 1997). Like any institutionalized social form, these also have a dual significance: on the one hand they constitute socially recognized and accepted biographies of individuals; they provide social support and approval, and protect them from the uncertainty and risk of still untried life courses. On the other, they limit innovation and creativity as well as the autonomy of a life course. It is also important for many different normative models to be able to co-exist. Tradition has, for example, strongly reinforced class and gender differences among these models. Gender and social specific norms shape and legitimize numerous institutional processes; they are not just commonly shared norms. Heinz refers to these as "*institutional assumptions of normality*" (Heinz, 1997: 82).

Just in the past decades there have been some crucial changes in life courses and transitions, particularly in the transition from youth to adulthood, in the direction of the *de-standardization and deregulation of transitions*. The de-standardization of youth transitions is associated with the shift from modern (Fordist) to post-modern (post-Fordist) societies. It represents the change from a social context characterized by mass production

and consumption, standard employment, and a demand driven welfare state towards a flexible system of production, trade and consumer lifestyles (Walther et al., 2006). Jeremy Rifkin (2000) has even concluded that in the process of economic liberalization many substantial social rights have been replaced by rights of “access”. This trend is the result of neoliberal interests as well as the decline of national welfare states. It seems as though increased complexity in the politics of managing life courses and heightened self-responsibility are an expression of embarrassment of national institutions which are no longer capable of ensuring their sovereignty in the form of protecting the social inclusion of their citizens.

The individualization of life courses is one of the central concepts developed in the past two decades by social scientists in order to explain structural changes in the lives of people (Bauman, 2001; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) This concept is used in an attempt to capture new ways and institutions for the socialization of individuals. It is not a normative concept that would, for instance, lead people to more independent ways of life, but rather a theoretical description of factors which shape the social structural as well as subjective level of changes in modern society in recent decades. Individualization for the individual means first of all an awareness of various life positions and conflicting behavioral expectations in every phase of life. We do not choose or decide on the basis of traditions, norms, or social affiliation, nor even based on socialization experience or generational comparisons.

In such complex circumstances it is thus expected and demanded of individuals today that we have the capabilities and competences to plan and manage our own life courses. We must learn how to become our own “planning office” for our own life courses, based on our capabilities and opportunities, current social niches and status on the market, and based on anticipation of the future. The movement of individuals in time and space is increasingly influenced by the individual’s *active shaping of their biography* in connection with the lives of those close to them. Giddens’s concept of “*connected lives*”, which we frequently encounter in this connection, refers to the individual’s ability to link their life plans to the life courses of their partners, spouses, parents, children, and close friends (Giddens, 1991). Both concepts, that of the *active shaping of their biography* as well as that of *connected lives*, stress that a suitable understanding of the life course requires study at a number of levels, extending from structured life paths, social institutions, and the market to social networks and individual life courses. For a comparative analysis it is important to observe changes in significant thresholds of age-ordered life courses, such as work and family careers as well as central transitions which shape the biographies of individuals and collectives.

An important component of the contemporary life course is time. Everything changes very rapidly. This reduces predictability of development and the future. Life courses therefore constantly adapt to the changed environment. In order to maintain continuity and consistency in life histories, individuals have to constantly ask themselves where they come from, where they wish to go, and in what way a specific situation relates to their present life. This requires *biographicity*: the ability to reflect one's own biographical process and to assess the relationship between one's own experiences, wishes, abilities with external demands and opportunities (Walther, 2006). These expectations and demands frequently exceed the capabilities of the individual and the extent of the information which is available to them. The result of these pressures is, among others, a greater dependency of individuals on social circumstances than was the case in traditional circumstances. In this way new types of social dependency of individuals come into being, and new strategies of action.

Two new strategies for managing the life course in particular are problematic. The first strategy is the increasingly *superficial understanding of problems*. This means that problems are perceived only at the level of particular symptoms: we are unable to recognize their root cause, and so we solve only the current, visible symptoms and not the source of the difficulties. The other strategy is the *fragmentation of life* and spheres of interest, so that we experience life as a collage of disconnected fields in which we operate as fragmented individuals. This strategy is directly connected with the ever increasing pressure from the market, media, and consumption, which offer us ever new activities, guidelines, directions, styles, and ever fewer possibilities for managing long-term life strategies independent of the current market supply.

Educational trajectories and needs for lifelong learning

Childhood and youth today are governed by three institutional networks: *the educational system, the employment system and the leisure time and cultural system*. Through coordinated participation in these three areas of activity, young people should be able to achieve their future social identity and stability of their life course. Due to the diversification and fragmentation of the contexts of learning, living and working, increasingly transversal clusters of abilities and knowledge are called for, such as "contextual competence" or "biographicity" rather than clear-cut skills. Yet, the concept of competence also invites different interpretations. Rychen and Salganik (2003) distinguish between social, personal and technical competence as the key competences for a successful life in a well-functioning society. This stands for a modernized human capital approach that corresponds to "youth as a resource".

Despite changes in the structure and course of youth in past decades, youth is still primarily a period of schooling, and the central problems of and pressures on young people stem from this activity. For this reason it is not strange that the principal feature of changes in growing up in recent decades is the growing pressure on young people to acquire as much education at as high a level as possible, and a high cultural level and associated recognitions, awards, titles, and certificates which enable social promotion, career, and privileges. Changes in the labor market and threats of potentially excluded younger generations have also led to policies to reduce pressure on the labor market and ease the transition to employment by means of various educational options and the prolonging of the educational process. The norm of continuing education at colleges and universities is strong, at least in the European context. This norm means that it is expected of those growing up that they stay in school for a prolonged period of time and acquire a high level of education. The basis for this norm is the belief that young people can best prepare for employment through formal education. But the problem is that for the majority of the jobs which are available today, academic education is unnecessary and even unimportant. As Côté and Allahar (1994) note, this is a consequence of the monopolization of the educational system and the need of some professional groups to thereby increase their occupational status and welfare.

Besides school certificates and titles, the knowledge society offers a parallel system of formal and informal recognitions in the field of leisure time consumption and achievements, for example in sports, media, and the entertainment industry. The awareness that the advantages of a young person in the struggle for a better position in society are all the greater the more educational and cultural capital they can acquire in childhood and youth has in the European environment expanded to all classes and generations. For this reason aspirations for intensive education beginning already in the early childhood years are becoming stronger, and also the period of schooling is becoming longer, and along with it the period of youth and growing up, extending into the third decade of life. The time factor plays an increasingly important and decisive role in childhood and youth. In addition to formal educational institutions, the supply of informal educational organizations and extracurricular activities is also expanding, and along with this the pressure on parents to begin educating their children already in the pre-school years.

Education is a central element of the interplay between structure and agency or between individual *life course trajectories* and *biographies* (Du Bois-Reymond, 2004; Walther et al., 2006). Institutionalized *educational trajectories* are intended to prepare children for adulthood and thus have created the youth phase as an “educational moratorium”, while “new learning

life courses” extend over the whole life span (Chisholm, 2008). Inasmuch as individuals interpret and appropriate their life course in constructing their life history, educational trajectories are interrelated with subjective learning biographies (Du Bois-Reymond, 2004; Walther et al., 2006).

Due to the extension and expansion of educational processes to an entire generation of young people and due to the different demands of the market, the need for the age-differentiated segmentation of society into young people and adults is becoming less and less relevant of late. This process tends to eliminate young people and youth but paradoxically in such a way that some significant characteristics of youth are extended to all generations and the entire life span. The need for ongoing education throughout life is among the most important. Accordingly, life courses can be addressed in contemporary societies as being *lifelong educational trajectories*. The notion of *lifelong learning* reflects an increasing uncertainty about what skills and knowledge are necessary and individual responsibility for one’s own learning career (Jarvis, 2009). This does not necessitate the full adoption of the aims and objectives of the knowledge society/economy, however; rather, it is an objective reflection of widely observable societal changes and their governance.

Extending the period of schooling and making it a mass phenomenon on the other hand causes a considerable degree of frustration, school failure, and dropping out among young people. One of the biggest problems of disengaged and frustrated learners is that their life course so far is marked by an accumulation of failures, not only in one area or at one point in time, but successively and in many different life areas. By the time they leave education and have failed to find a satisfactory job or profession, their self-esteem has been bruised, and they have lost trust in institutional help (Du Bois-Reymond and Chisholm, 2006). When the disengaged learners were asked about their educational experiences, many answered by pointing to two features of school that they criticized. One was the indifference of the institution to the individuality of the student (“you are but a number”); the other was the irrelevance of the content of what curricula offered them (“what is this good for anyhow?”) (ibid.: 30). Both these criticisms raise precisely the dilemma of mass education in postmodern knowledge societies: it is unable to satisfy the present and immediate needs of the student, which would imply flexible curricula and combinations of non-formal and formal education.

At the same time it is clear that the late modern economy does not need as many university-educated workers as the educational system is producing. This mismatch deprivileges many young people and causes them to lose faith in the belief that a good education is a condition for success. Self-fulfilling prophecies appear: “*Since education does not lead to a job, I lose motivation for learning and working hard in school, since I have no other opportunity*”;

in this way we are now faced with a mass of passive and uninterested students. Investments in education also thus become equivocal, since the future profit from educational effort has become less and less predictable.

Empirical findings: Postponement of educational and vocational decisions in Slovenia

Ever since the early 1990s, youth research in Slovenia has been revealing truly radical changes in the life trajectories of individuals and in transitions between individual life stages: youth has been extended, and the patterns of transition to adulthood have become more plural and no longer predictable (Ule and Miheljak, 1995; Ule et al., 2000; Ule and Kuhar, 2008). The life pathways of the mid-1980s generation of young people in Slovenia were more linear, less diverse, less complex and less dynamic (Ule, 1988). Increasing numbers of young people in Slovenia, especially youths with higher education and those living in cities, pursue the kinds of life patterns that can be described as choice biographies. On the other hand the individualization of the growing-up process multiplies the number and extent of risk decisions and life paths for all young people.

The intricate web of “objective ambiguities” of the life situation causes difficulties for an increasing number of young people who try to plan and manage their lives: it forces them to continually search for a temporary balance between opposing tendencies, requirements and expectations. All these social contrasts and difficulties confronted by young people increase their *social and psychological vulnerability* (Ule et al., 2000).

While previous research in Slovenia in this field focused primarily on transitions into the labor market, *in this section of the article we go one step back and focus on the transition from primary to secondary schools, and present the results of a qualitative study carried out among 9th grade students in Slovenia within the international research program Governance of Educational Trajectories in Europe (Goete)*¹. Statements of students expressed in semi-structured interviews and focus groups concerning their educational trajectories and transition into secondary schools were compared and contrasted with those of parents, teachers and experts.

Transition from primary to secondary school: Why worry?

After finishing the nine-grade compulsory primary school that Slovene children enter at the age of six, a vast percentage of students in Slovenia decide to enroll in upper secondary general education programs, which in

¹ See Ule, editorial introduction in this thematic bloc.

Slovenia are called “gymnasium” programs. In the academic year 2011/12, out of 18,196 candidates the majority (7,518) enrolled in these programs, while only 7401 enrolled in upper secondary technical programs, 3058 in secondary vocational programs, and 219 candidates in lower secondary vocational programs. Gymnasiums do not educate students towards a specific vocation but instead provide general education and merely prepare the student for further education. “Gimnazijski Maturant”, the title awarded to students who finish the *matura* examinations after four years of gymnasium, basically means that the person is not skilled or trained in any profession and that they plan to pursue further education – faculty, academy, etc.

This growing trend towards majority enrollment in non-vocational general education programs in Slovenia can be attributed to several factors. The survey revealed that children in the 9th grade of primary schools (15 year-olds) are generally undecided about their vocation, gave very vague, sometimes carefree and unspecific answers, and have thus shown unclear and unspecific vocational goals: they “don’t know” what profession they would like to have, they frequently change their opinions on the subject, or often even simply state that they are not burdened with the future and do not worry about it:

“I don’t know – to finish school and to get a job.” (LJ-students-interview-Jennifer)

This undecided attitude of students is in sharp contradiction with both the children’s and their parents’ perceived importance and magnitude of this transition to secondary school and crucial life decisions that are being made in this period. All actors involved in the educational process—parents, teachers, experts and likewise students themselves—widely expressed the view that this enrollment in general programs is merely a manner of postponing vocational decisions as well as those related to more general life goals². While their educational and vocational plans are vague, we found that the 9th-graders’ more specific conceptions, plans, preoccupations and wishes about their future life revolve predominantly around their private lives – having family and children or some general idea about ‘a job and family’:

“... well, I would like to have a younger daughter and older son, so that a daughter would have a brother whom she could trust. For the husband, I wish he would be my best friend, so that I could trust him ...” (LJ-students-interview-Metka)

² See articles on *Coping, Relevance and Access* in this issue for an elaborated view on the matter.

I will need a paycheck, a big one because I'll have a family, two kids and a wife, and... I don't know, perhaps I'll also need a good job ... (KP-students-interview-Marko)

Children's plans, ambitions and concerns regarding their future thus reflect the general social and cultural focus on the private sphere, which is a result of individuals' inability to deal with increasing complexities of modern life. When students have vocational goals, more often than not these are unrealistic:

Especially in the case of primary school children, these wishes are very fictitious and more fantasy-related. They are not really quite realistic. And so now forensics are popular, and everyone wants to be a forensic scientist (MS-experts-interview-Employment Office-psychologist-Katja)

I do always think about what I want to become... I was always attracted to... you know, what you see on television... To become an actress, what you see in America... To become an actress and be on the red carpet, this is my dream. (MS-students-focus group-girls, Patricija)

When the vocational goals were clearly formulated, these were very often related to family tradition, parental and extended family influences, which can either function as an example or social pressure:

Well, everyone in the family is either a cook or a baker, so I decided to become one as well. (LJ-student-interview-Domen)

Fears regarding the transition: how to make new friends and how to collect enough points

When the postponement of the vocational decision is taken for granted, the focus of both the parents', teachers' and children's main concern regarding the transition were shown to shift onto two focal points: the social context of the transition, and the formal requirements and academic achievements required for the transition to secondary school. The first deals with the social challenges lying ahead: change and broadening of the social environment, and their related traps and pitfalls, such as drugs and 'bad company'. Children's more concrete fears regarding the transition on the other hand revolve around their changed social life - losing existing classmates and friends, fears related to the integration into the new environment, etc.:

"I'm not really ready to go to secondary school ... because we will separate ... and I don't know if I'm going to find new friends." (LJ-students-interview-Jennifer)

You know, I am quite worried. One can get in with the wrong crowd, this I am really worried about. You are afraid because secondary school is a very different thing. /.../ She hasn't let me down so far, but I don't know what will happen in the future... (LJ-parents-interview-mother of a special needs child).

One of the chief concerns by both parents and students revealed in the survey are limitations regarding enrollment: notably, not so much about whether the child will be able to cope with the selected educational program but whether they will be able to enroll in it or not. Figuring out how to enroll into the chosen program, the strategy required to collect enough points etc., thus seemed to be one of the main preoccupations of all actors involved in the educational process: students, parents and teachers. With some irony we could say it is developing into a veritable science:

Enrolling in physiotherapy this year..., this was quite an interesting experience. How difficult it is to calculate these percentages and figure out what counts where and how. I had no clue about this and neither did she. /.../ And probably this isn't the only case where we are clueless ... myself and I think most parents ... and children. (KP-parents-interview-mother-Ana)

Factors contributing to the postponement of educational and vocational decisions

Parental expectations and pressures

Children rely primarily on their parents and family for support in educational decisions and trajectories. Families play a protective role, at the same time placing a great amount of pressure on children and burdening them with their high demands on the one hand, and assuming decision-making about their children's future and relieving them of making these decisions themselves on the other. Children in fact revealed a great amount of anxiety related to the transition and their choice of school / further education, and very clearly detect also the covert parental request to be successful (reinforced by the competitive and performance-based educational model which excludes peer support)³. The perceived magnitude of their choice is com-

³ See also articles on *Coping and Relevance* in this issue for an elaborated view on the matter.

bined with their feelings of impotence with regard to making it, revealing fears and feelings of being under great pressure. Explicitly parents generally express support for children's decisions; in fact, "we decide about the child as parents" is never used, instead the rhetoric of "whatever s/he chooses" is used:

I fully support all her decisions. It's her decision, her life. /.../ She always says herself that she has to make an effort if she wants to become something, if she wants to make something out of herself..., she simply has to make more of an effort then.. (LJ-parents-interview-mother of a special needs child).

However, if the pressures are implicit, this does not mean they are not there: great parental expectations are at play, and could be paraphrased by: "we supported her/him – on the condition that s/he is successful".

The demands are greater today, aren't they? More is expected of them /.../ by parents, by the environment, and by society. There are these expectations for them to finish their studies in time, to select the right course of study, and finally the entire situation is such... (LJ-teachers-focus group-English language teachers)

The pressure to be successful is extremely high. The trend towards enrollment in general education programs at the same time devalues vocational schools, to such an extent that certain students hide from their classmates their plans to enroll in a vocational school and are ashamed of it:

As I see them, everyone wants to be successful. School is such an important factor in life, at least they still see it that way. /.../ So they wait to the very end, even the successful student ... and everyone wants to continue their studies. It's difficult for them to let others know that they will enroll merely in a vocational school. Everyone says they'll go to grammar schools and become directors, even children who have severe problems in school, with whom we have daily contacts (KP-experts-interview-social pedagogue)

Increased enrollment in demanding programs does not mean that children's capabilities are becoming increasingly higher but that either the standards of these programs are being lowered or that even children who are challenged in certain areas are faced with increasingly higher demands. Most probably, the situation is a result of a combination of both factors. Parental requests are thus in disharmony with the actual competencies and

abilities of children, who are therefore faced with high pressures. In combination with the predominant self-responsibility of children, this is a recipe for disaster.

When a student gets anything less than the highest score, I can see it in their face..., and since I know these parents, I also know under what pressure these children are and what failure means to them. They will have to go home and tell these parents that they got the second best score. And the way mothers and fathers feel about this is: I work hard so this child has everything, and their only duty is to study ... (IJ-teachers-interview-mathematics)

Ironically, parents are ill-equipped for dealing with the future themselves and lack strategies since the uncertainty of the future makes it hard to advise children about educational choices⁴.

Deficiencies of the educational system

The survey confirmed the criticism of mass education in postmodern knowledge societies that we expressed in the theoretical part: despite its declarative child-oriented focus, it is unable to satisfy the present and immediate needs of the student. Students thus speak of great pressures experienced in school and an overload of study material:

Maja: They could be more understanding about us having a life too, but instead we are totally preoccupied with this.

Patricija: It's only school, school, school!

Maja: ... because this isn't healthy.

(MS-students-focus group-girls-Patricija and Maja)

The students feel schools are excessively focused on the quantity and amount of knowledge instead of its depth or compatibility of study materials with the individual child and their interest in it. Despite contemporary educational and pedagogical discourses about a child-oriented and child-focused educational system in Slovenia, children themselves feel that the existing educational system does not allow them to develop their

⁴ See also the article on Relevance in this issue for an elaborated view on the matter.

natural abilities, interests and inclinations. Students emphasized this as one of the key reasons for their hesitations about the transition to secondary schools.

... now that we're approaching entering secondary school we should focus more on what we want and like to do and spend more time on that instead of having the greatest number of school subjects precisely now (MS-students-focus group-girls-Patricija)

While parents complain that schools provide insufficient support in this transition, other actors – teachers, outside experts – feel that they are in a subordinate position compared to the paramount role of the family:

/.../ we find that although we have a certain role in familiarizing them with various situations, families play a more substantial one in the story. Children themselves tell us who helps them in making a decision or who is the one actually making it. Families really play a crucial role here. (KP-experts-interview-principal)

A false impression of limitless choice

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Both parents and children and also partly teachers are under a strong impression of virtually unlimited choices that are supposedly available to children nowadays:

"If they are directed right, if they choose the right school, then they have absolutely good chances." (LJ-teachers-interview-teaching foreign students Slovenian language)

I think they have all their options open, all options /.../ And if they are aware of that they can achieve even less familiar professions that they didn't know existed before in their 14 years of life... (LJ-teachers-focus group-history teachers)

In this seeming array of choice, both parents and children prefer to leave the door open for as long as possible. The flip side of this optimistic view that sees only windows and doors in the globally connected information society of late modernity is the fact that it is increasingly more difficult and burdening to make these choices, which forces individuals to postpone them further into the future. The burden of choice was pointed out by students, parents, teachers and experts alike:

I think it's very difficult for them today. It is more difficult for us teachers as well, or anywhere else for that matter, because there are so many options available. This range of options has opened up, and making decisions is a really difficult and strenuous task for them. But they have to make choices constantly, and because these are so very important, making them is not easy, is it? (LJ-teachers-focus group-English language teachers)

Several contradictions were thus revealed through the survey. While all actors involved in the educational progress ascribe a tremendously high degree of importance to education, they are also disillusioned by the prospects this education will provide in the future and display awareness that formal education will not ensure competitiveness in the job market in the future:

"It'll be worse than it is now, a lot worse; only through acquaintances; and also there's a crisis, retirement only after 65 etc." (KP-focus group-students-Brane)

"Well, they (parents) have more chances to get a job, but nowadays it's really hard to find a job." (IJ-students-interview-Metka)

Concluding discussion: Transitions to adulthood and social integration of young people in Slovenia

What are the implications of these findings? Our point of view is that the main weaknesses of the Slovenian system of transition arise from the unsuitability of the educational system, which does not change sufficiently fast, and from the dominant preconceptions of adults and young people alike about professional opportunities and social reputation (absence of reputation) of certain types of education and professions. Young people do not have sufficient choice, nor can they freely combine different kinds of learning content. Also, the educational systems respond too slowly to new educational needs and new forms of knowledge acquisition. Accordingly, it has been "producing" an increasing number of educated young people with poor job prospects. Other factors that contribute to the inadequacy of transition to the labor market are a haphazard system of traineeship for young, first-time employees, and a rigid hierarchy of job roles. Consequently, mainly entry-level jobs are offered to young people, and since they are not interested in these they prefer to wait for a "better opportunity." As a rule, access to higher positions or better-paid jobs is dependent on the network of informal connections, meaning that education or the quality of applicants is of little relevance.

The issue of transition to adulthood is not particularly emphasized in the public sphere or by policy makers in Slovenia, except in connection with family policy, low fertility, and prolonged dependence of young people on their parents. Similarly, employment of young people is not an issue that attracts much attention, or in other words, it is subsumed into the general effort to reduce unemployment. The Slovenian labor market is in comparison to other European markets relatively inflexible. For many years lifelong full-time employment was the only existing form of employment; however, recent changes introduced into the legal framework and active employment policy are directed towards increasing the flexibility of the labor market. The most frequent mode of transition following all stages of education is a direct transition to the labor market either through fixed-term full-time employment, contractual work, temporary employment or grey economy. According to our estimates, 70% of young people with vocational, general secondary or university education belong in this category (Leskošek, 2009).

Young people in Slovenia obtain the status of adulthood based only on extensive negotiations with fundamental social institutions, not on the basis of predetermined norms and indicators of adulthood. This has caused a delaying of transitions from youth to adulthood. As a result these transitions are increasingly blurred, moving away from traditional normative expectations, and are increasingly pluralistic. Transitions are no longer as predictable as they were in the past, but rather must be agreed on in institutions through which young people pass (Ule, 2010) Due to problems in fundamental institutions of transitions, for example employment and economic independence, they are also riskier and more uncertain. These changes in Slovenia are similar to those in other European countries.

The order and planning of transitions between childhood and adulthood is fragmenting. Young people take up some activities which are characteristic for adults very early on, already at the end of childhood, such as consumption. "In sum, young people's transitions are characterized by pendulum-like movements between youth and adulthood and between different statuses of education, employment, etc., like 'yoyos', which suggests that we should perhaps refer to them as *young adults* rather than youth in the traditional sense" (Walther et al., 2006: 23). Studies of youth in Slovenia in the past decade have also shown that young people make decisions about their appearance and become credible buyers already at the end of childhood. Other transitions, for example starting a family of their own and having children, are being shifted well into adulthood (Ule and Kuhar, 2003). Olk (1995) even asserts that the transitions to adulthood are developing into a set of unrelated partial transitions which are taking on the form of a bricolage. Transitions imply more and more periods of "becoming", a passage into the next state of "being": to be a worker, to be a consumer, to be a father.

Although these transitions from youth to adulthood are individualized and unique with respect to the individual's frame of reference, they are nevertheless still dependent on the structural location, for example the educational system in the country and trends in the labor market. Despite the growing fragmentation of transitions, structural limitations play an important role in them. Roberts (in Pollock, 1997) has called this approach *structural individualization*, i.e. individualization which to a great extent is dependent on and a consequence of change in fundamental structures and not purely personal will and desire. Jones and Wallace (1992) have suggested that due to all these changes instead of the concept of *rites of passage*, which have marked the acquisition of adult status in classic industrial societies, we use the expression *markers of status*.

Although some people experience these blurred differences between youth and adulthood as an extended period of youth moratorium, for others it means marginalization and exclusion from the economic and political world. For this reason discourses on transitions to adulthood in Slovenia and throughout Europe are placed among new debates on forms of social inclusion and new risks of social exclusion. If we look at young people through the contexts of social inequality, differentiation based purely on "included" and "excluded" is no longer appropriate. If we want to embrace the entire spectrum of problems associated with transitions and "markers of status," this requires further differentiation. The accumulation of cultural capital can lead to guaranteed employment, but there is still a risk that the individual will make the wrong decision during their schooling or professional training.

Researchers of life courses are even finding and assuming that many young people from today's cohorts will never grow up according to conventional standards but will for a long time, even permanently, remain in a sort of *semi-adult period*, for example in an unclear economic status of flexible under-employment or in an unclear relationship with a partner without commitments or responsibilities, or in the care of their family of origin (Heinz, 1997; Cote, 2005). They may be highly successful in some field, for example in their professional career, and completely immature in another, for example in intimate relationships. In researching transitions to adulthood it is thus necessary to take into account that inclusion in modern generations is far more complex than it appears and is acknowledged by various social policies. Mutual correlation of increased risk and uncertainty in the transitions of young people to adulthood means that this period is becoming crucial for policies that deal with social inclusion: educational policy, employment policy, housing policy, family policy. At the same time, it is precisely these policies and institutions for youth that overlook and neglect key changes in transitions and are thus exposed to the risk of missing the needs and concerns of young people in their transition to adulthood.

Young people are increasingly dependent on “gatekeepers”, professionals in institutions who look after the placement of young people in the system (Heinz, 1992). Systems of institutional support, social institutions, are overburdened by the unpredictable demands of the labor market and the increasing number of temporarily and permanently unemployed. National and public support systems do not operate in accordance with the needs and concerns of most young people. Education, vocational training and employment policies are in danger of normalizing differences in transitions among numerous individual cases and even among individual paths of transitions. This means that they produce unintentional and paradoxical effects of social exclusion instead of social inclusion. Strategies of systemic inclusion are losing legitimacy. The loss of security which used to be inseparably connected with institutional transition paths means that the risk of mistaken strategies can appear even when a young person follows standard institutional paths such as finishing their schooling, but finds that their education and training do not suit the real needs of the labor market. It is just a short step from the question of how to achieve social inclusion to the question of what social inclusion even is. Theoretical as well as everyday reflection on social inclusion often equates it with inclusion in the labor market. In contrast, young adults often see themselves as included in a number of different ways.

Young people must thus be understood as experts in dealing and living with uncertainty. The general principle of social inclusion must acknowledge their subjective experiences and learning processes, the coping strategies they have developed, and their demands for participation in society with regard to secure employment and lifestyles, even and especially when these depart from the norm. This means that inclusion in the labor market can no longer be the only objective of inclusion strategies. Young people have different careers in different areas of life and they develop different social resources in different social spaces. The main task of social inclusion is thus the strengthening of these possibilities even when they are no longer directly associated with familiar patterns of occupational careers.

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