

# Independent Research Group Lack of Training: Employment and Life Chances of the Less Educated



Max Planck Society for the Advancement of Science

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## Why do we need to know more about the less educated?

Despite their group's relatively small size—at about 15% of all present-day school-leavers in Germany, or between 80,000 and 100,000 youth, depending on the birth cohort—"less-educated" persons represent a significant object of both German policy and public debate. They face extremely high unemployment risk. They constitute half of all long-term unemployed persons in Germany. Their higher vulnerability is usually attributed to the following: (1) the number of jobs for less-educated workers has decreased and will continue to decrease, and (2) due to the current job shortage, less-educated persons are forced out of the labor market because they lose in job competition with better-qualified persons (displacement). The underlying cause of their higher unemployment risk seems to be their lack of qualifications, making the acquisition of vocational qualifications seem a fitting solution to the problem.

In fact, our research agenda emphasizes an explanation other than displacement. The "selection" hypothesis locates inequality of opportunities earlier in the life course—the result of selection processes in educational systems—and does not simply state that at labor market entry higher-educated persons outperform the less educated. Our perspective is historical, institutional, and comparative, as we examine changes in composition of the group of less-educated persons over time, in shifting institutional contexts, and in different regions and countries.

## Research program

Present-day policy mainly focuses on the question of what is to be done about less-educated youth once their lack of qualifications has become reality, reducing the problem solely to the qualification dimension. The research group will go beyond this perspective by addressing three main research questions:

- (1) We explore why there are still less-educated young persons at all and who constitutes this group today.
- (2) We re-introduce the sociological explanation that selection on the basis of formal qualifications is not a natural law, but the result of social action. Thus, we investigate the educational experiences and labor market opportunities of less-educated persons from an historical and institutional perspective and explore whether lack of training is a general

or an historically defined, dynamic educational deficit in labor markets.

(3) We investigate whether less-educated Germans are socially excluded, and if so, whether their disadvantaged labor market situation is in fact the cause of their social exclusion.

Two dissertation projects begun in January 2000 address the first two research questions. The dissertations investigate why particular sociostructural groups are over-represented among the ranks of less-educated youth. If innate ability differences alone were the cause of the variance in educational outcomes, we should find equal proportions of less-educated youth in all social strata, but we do not. Thus, the sociological question to be addressed first is:

### Which societal factors produce this group?

The dissertations investigate the segregating German education system as a "producer" of differently-certified groups, the different school types as a form of institutionalized inequality in learning and socialization environments, and the significance of family background and disability labeling for individual careers in the German school and vocational training system. Sandra Wagner's dissertation, *Family background and school careers of less-educated youth in (Western) Germany*, focuses on historical changes in the composition of the less-educated group in terms of social background and ethnicity, and the effects of changes in the German education system on their resources for socialization and ability development over the past 50 years. Justin Powell's dissertation, *Does school integration matter? Institutional arrangements and educational attainments of youth with physical disabilities in Germany and the United States*, shows how schooling structures define and categorize students with special needs and disabilities and asks how institutional arrangements themselves contribute to reduced levels of educational attainment. In both countries, youth with disabilities make up a large proportion of those who do not attain the minimum degree usually required for further training. By investigating this particularly disadvantaged group, we may more clearly discover selection processes and discrimination based on ascriptive characteristics, such as disability.

Heike Solga's research addresses the third question. She examines less-educated persons' labor market participation since 1950. Different cohorts' entry into the labor market, career paths, and opportunities to gain qualifications later in life will be analyzed.

The central complementary theses are:

**(1) Superfluosity hypothesis:**

In general, employment opportunities are determined by the qualification structure of the labor force (supply side) and the quality and quantity of the available jobs (demand side). Thus, lack of training does not in itself result in less-educated persons' marginalization in the labor market. The functional irrelevance or superfluosity of less-educated persons is produced by an oversupply of qualified labor and/or a decline in labor demand.

**(2) Selection hypothesis:**

It is reasonable to assume that the persons who escaped from the "camp of the less educated" over the last decades were not a random sample of the population. The remaining individuals are most probably a "negative" selection in terms of learning and cognitive competencies. Their increasing labor market vulnerability would still result from increased job competition, but the disadvantages caused thereby would be analyzed more as a consequence of this "creaming-out" process, leading to stigmatization by society in general and employers in particular. Moreover, since those who remain untrained are not randomly distributed within the social stratification system, this hypothesis must and does include an explanation of how this lack of ability and skill is socially produced and constructed. In contrast to the displacement argument, it locates inequality of opportunities earlier in the life course—as selection processes in the educational system—and does not simplistically state that more highly educated persons outperform the less educated at labor market entry.

With respect to living conditions of less-educated persons, the project explores the extent to which discernible differences in lifestyle can be attributed either to their "less-educated status" or to their labor market exclusion. The former would be correct if we find differences to higher-educated groups for all cohorts; the latter if differences are only found for less-educated persons in cohorts with poor employment opportunities. The two competing hypotheses are:

(1) Less-educated persons generally display different patterns in these domains of life compared to persons who have completed a vocational training program, even when they are in stable employment. If this is correct, any differences identified could generally be attributed to these individuals' less-educated status. This certainly does not imply that the less educated can or should be personally blamed for their fate. Instead, it would indicate the fact of their general

disadvantage and their restricted access to the life options enjoyed by those with qualifications.

(2) Such differences only exist when less-educated persons are especially disadvantaged in the labor market, that is, in times of low demand for labor. The real reason for their disadvantaged living conditions, then, would not be their less-educated status in itself, but the instability of their employment status and their growing marginalization in the labor market due to long-term unemployment and/or changes in their group composition (see selection hypothesis).

The answers to our three research questions may lessen the uncertainties mentioned above. This research focused on the less educated contributes to the specification of education's significance in society and in labor markets, and the interrelations between employment opportunities and other domains of life.

## Selected research results

- Educational expansion has led to a social homogenization of the lowest secondary school track in Germany (*Hauptschule*), which negatively impacts the school environment of children attending this school type (Solga/Wagner, 2001).
- Similar anti-discrimination protections and calls for educational and social integration in Germany and the U.S. have not led to similar levels and types of school integration for children with disabilities. Research presented by Justin Powell, "Disability discrimination and equality in Germany and the United States: Changing legal conceptions and social realities," at the 30th Biennial Meeting of the German Sociological Association, Cologne, September 2000, showed that while Germany and the U.S. legally protect the civil rights of citizens with disabilities, their educational systems have only partially succeeded in increasing levels of integration and inclusion and access to certification of children with disabilities.
- "Creaming-out" effect and educational disadvantages of persons with less-advantaged family backgrounds help explain the increasing vulnerability of less-educated persons in labor markets. Solga (Independent Research Group working paper 2/2000) reintroduced the selection argument: analyses show that—especially for men—the social selectivity of less-educated persons has increased over the cohorts. Due to this selectivity, certificates have increasingly replaced personal, ascriptive characteristics in job competition, leading to changes in employers' perceptions of this group.

## a) Books & journal/book contributions

Solga, Heike (forthcoming). Jugendliche ohne Schulabschluss und ihre Erwerbsbiografien. In: K. U. Schnabel/J. Baumert/A. Leschinsky/K. U. Mayer (eds.), *Das Bildungswesen in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland. Strukturen und Entwicklungen im Überblick*. Reinbek: Rowohlt.

Solga, Heike (forthcoming). Ausbildungslose und die Radikalisierung ihrer sozialen Ausgrenzung. In: H. Bude/A. Willis (eds.), *Ausgegrenzte, Entbehrliche, Überflüssige*. Hamburg: Hamburger Edition HIS Verlag.

Solga, Heike (2001). Jugendliche ohne Berufsausbildung – die neue Qualität eines alten Problems. *Gewerkschaftliche Monatshefte* 52 (1): 41-48.

Solga, Heike/Sandra Wagner (2001). Paradoxie der Bildungsexpansion: Die doppelte Benachteiligung von Hauptschülern. *Zeitschrift für Erziehungswissenschaft* 4 (1): 107-127.

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Solga, Heike/Heike Trappe (2000). Die Duale Ausbildung: Ambivalenzen veränderter Übergangsbioographien. *Zeitschrift für Berufs- und Wirtschaftspädagogik* 96 (2): 244-260.

Solga, Heike/Dirk Konietzka (2000). Das Berufsprinzip des deutschen Arbeitsmarktes: Ein geschlechtsneutraler Allokationsmechanismus? *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Soziologie* 26 (1): 111-147.

Solga, Heike/Dirk Konietzka (1999). Occupational Matching and Social Stratification. Theoretical insights and empirical observations taken from a German-German comparison. *European Sociological Review* 15 (1): 25-47.

## b) Working papers

Solga, Heike/Sandra Wagner (2000). "Beiwerk" der Bildungsexpansion: Die soziale Entmischung der Hauptschule. [ASide Effect of Educational Expansion: The Increased Social Homogeneity of the Hauptschule.] Independent Research Group working paper 1/2000. Berlin: Max Planck Institute for Human Development.

Solga, Heike (2000). *Displacement or selection? Two explanations for the increasing vulnerability of less-educated persons*. Independent Research Group working paper 2/2000. Berlin: Max Planck Institute for Human Development.

Powell, Justin (2000). *Staatliche Forschungsförderung der Sozialwissenschaften: die Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft (DFG) und die amerikanische National Science Foundation (NSF) im Vergleich*. Independent Research Group working paper 3/2000. Berlin: Max Planck Institute for Human Development.