



Independent Research Group

Lack of Training:
Employment and Life Chances
of the Less Educated

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Duration: January 2000–May 2005

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Research Agenda

We investigate the *causes and consequences of less education* from a life-course perspective and analyze changes over time as well as regionally and cross-nationally. Our joint research questions are: How do less educated persons' disadvantages at multiple status passages cumulate over their life courses? What changes, especially in institutional rules, norms, and processes, have occurred over the postwar period and what consequences have these had?

The Causes of Less Education Among Youth

We investigate how initial inequalities are transformed into exclusion from training and education, focusing on the educational and training systems and their social mechanisms: sorting and selection functions, the learning environments that they provide for children with different characteristics—given initial inequalities—and the recruitment practices of firms for apprenticeships or on-the-job training opportunities.

Social Consequences of Less Education

The group's second research focus are the coping strategies of less educated youth with the stigma of low education, especially during their school-to-work transitions, and less educated youth's often tenuous participation in labor markets. We know that in many Western countries, less educated persons constitute an increasing share of the long-term unemployed. They are less able to enter into even unskilled jobs. The dominant (mainly economic) explanation is the so-called "displacement" argument, which theorizes that, given an oversupply of qualified persons, trained persons out-qualify less educated persons in job

competition. Yet, that explanation does not include the "production process" of less education in its analysis. Our project offers a sociological explanation for the increasing labor market vulnerability of less educated youth, emphasizing the consequences of historically declining proportions of less educated youth. This sociological explanation takes into account changes in group size, group composition, and employers' perceptions over the course of educational expansion—contributing to the phenomenon that less education itself has become a social stigma in education societies.

Data

Much of our research compares different West German birth cohorts, allowing us to investigate the two research questions in changing educational norms and institutional settings in educational and training systems as well as under varying economic circumstances. In our comparison of (Western) Germany with the United States, we examine whether and how the degree of locational "segregation" in educational systems—a highly differentiated and hierarchical school system in contrast to tracking or ability grouping within comprehensive schools—influences the production of differen-

tial educational attainment levels for ascriptive groups. Further, we use the *Life Course Studies* of the Institute's Center for Sociology and the Study of the Life Course and the German Socio-Economic Panel Study (GSOEP, an annual panel study conducted by the German Institute for Economic Research, DIW). We complement our analyses of representative population surveys and collections of aggregate statistics with our own life history database (of 106 school leavers from schools for

"learning disabled" children) derived from a pilot project on "job coaching" based at the University of Cologne in North Rhine-Westphalia. Besides a standardized life history survey, we conducted biographical interviews with a sample of these school leavers from special schools as well as with their job coaches. This data set is particularly valuable because most large-scale educational studies in Germany do not include (representative) samples of special school pupils or graduates.

Research Areas and Results

The Social Production of Less Educated Youth

Project 1 Sandra Wagner

Key Reference

Wagner, S. (in press-b). *Jugendliche ohne Berufsausbildung: Eine Längsschnittstudie zum Einfluss von Schule, Herkunft und Geschlecht auf ihre Bildungschancen*. Aachen: Shaker Verlag.

Research Project 1

Youth Without Vocational Training: A Longitudinal Study of the Influence of School, Social Background, and Gender on Educational Opportunities

This quantitative longitudinal study analyzes an educational group long ignored by educational sociology: youth without vocational training. Although in comparison with other countries, Germany succeeds well in having among the least proportions of youth without any secondary school certificate, the remaining group of youth without training represent a "problem group" increasingly at risk in (vocational) education systems and in labor markets. Changes in this group's size and composition vis-à-vis educational level, social background, ethnic heritage, and gender are key aspects addressed by this project (Figure 1). The goal of the empirical analyses is to show (1) which changes result mainly from quantitative change

due to educational expansion and qualitative reforms and structural transformations, and (2) how these compositional changes contributed to the exacerbation of the problem of less educated youth. The dissertation's contribution lies in the historical investigation of this educational group and the problems its members face in the German schooling and vocational training systems.

Due to the difficult data situation, especially regarding migration experiences and patterns, the study utilized diverse data sources, joining official statistics with analyses based on the GSOEP with the German Life History Survey and the Independent Research Group's own survey of school leavers from special schools (category "learning disability"), among others. Findings showed that this educational group's size has declined since the 1950s and 1960s and it is more than ever com-

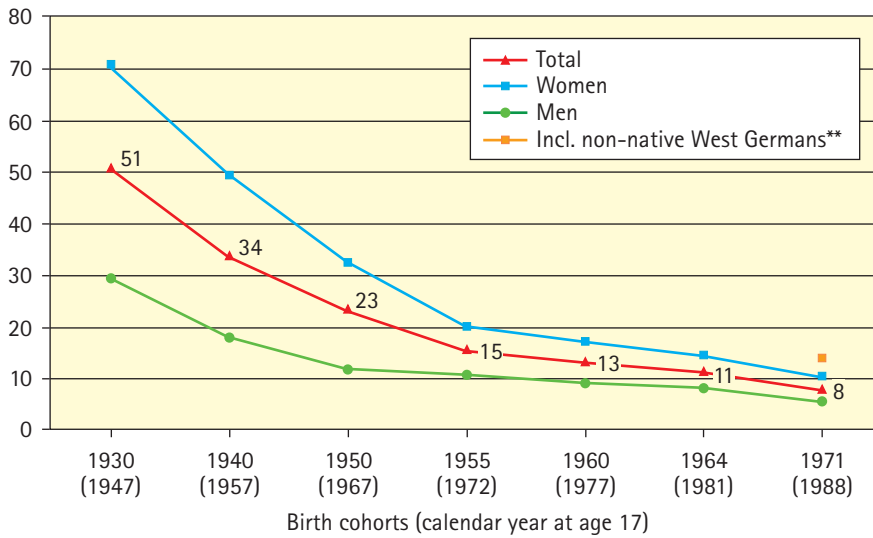


Figure 1. Proportion of persons without completed vocational education at age 25 (in %, only West German origin)*.

* Without persons with an A level; persons still in vocational education at age 25 are not counted as "without" completed vocational education.

** Persons aged 25 to 29 (birth cohorts, source: Survey of the Federal Institute for Vocational Education (BIBB)).

Source. German Life History Study, Max Planck Institute for Human Development, Berlin.

posed of young men and ethnic minorities, who nevertheless spend relatively more time in school and at-

tain more certificates than in the past.

Research Project 2

Institutional Barriers to Inclusion

Despite similar citizenship rights, discourses of equality and merit, and disability paradigms, the German and American special education systems diverged considerably over the 20th century. Resisting a multitude of international, national, and regional reform initiatives, German Länder maintain at least ten types of segregated special schools; less than 15% of disabled students attend general schools. By contrast, 95% of all disabled students in the United States attend general schools, but spend part of their school day separated from their peers in general education classrooms. Nationally, 5%

of all students in Germany, but 12% in the United States are classified as "having special educational needs." Why did these countries institutionalize school integration to such different extents? Justin Powell investigated three major phases in these systems' institutionalization: first, the copying of the general educational system's logic (isomorphism); second, the diffusion and differentiation of special education organizations (expansion); and third, the persistence of segregation and separation (inertia). Empirically, he analyzed (1) students' classification into special education, (2) their allocation to learning opportunity structures (along a continuum from segrega-

Project 2 Justin Powell

Key Reference

Powell, J. (forthcoming). *Barriers to inclusion: Special education in the United States and Germany*. Boulder: Paradigm.

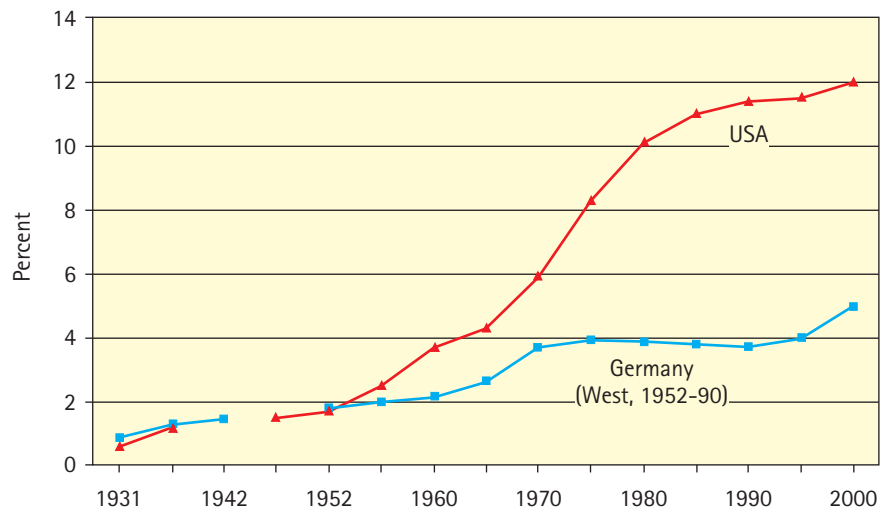
tion to full-time inclusion), and (3) their resulting educational attainments.

With universalized compulsory schooling, general education systems expanded massively, and special education grew apace (Figure 2). The subsidiary organizations of special education experienced exogenous and endogenous growth from two main sources, most rapidly since the mid-1950s: (1) the reduced exclusion of children with perceived impairments, and (2) general education teachers' increasing transfer of "abnormal" or "exceptional" students into special education. The resulting increasingly heterogeneous student bodies challenged the rationalized standardized organizational structures and processes of German and American school systems. Efforts over the past three decades to address and reduce the overrepresentation of male, ethnic minority, and poor children and youth in such pro-

grams have largely failed: They remain the core groups participating in special education.

Education reforms over the last century reflect shifts but also continuities, in ideologies, institutions and organizations, interest group power, as well as political decision-making structures. Both societies gradually eliminated the exclusion of disabled children and youth from public schooling. Yet the persistent ongoing challenge is to similarly reduce interschool segregation or intraschool separation by restructuring schools to educate all children together in the same classes—as education research has demonstrated that inclusive education benefits all students. While a quarter of American special education students drop out or age out of high school, half succeed in graduating from high school with a standard diploma. In contrast, only 2% of German special school leavers earn a diploma (*mittlere Reife* or

Figure 2. Proportion of students classified as having "special educational needs" in Germany and the United States, 1931–2000*.



* For Germany, figures for students "with special educational needs (SEN)" attending general schools (*Integrationschüler*), representing between 10% and 15% of all students with SEN, have only been published by the Kultusministerkonferenz since 2000.

Source: Powell, 2004a.

Abitur); 80% do not even attain the lowest qualified secondary school certificate (*Hauptschulabschluss*). These individuals face extremely limited opportunities for vocational training and employment, and the resulting reduced life chances (Wagner, in press-b; Pfahl, 2003; Solga, 2003a). Considerable disparities remain between, and within, these societies in disabled students' differentiation, their educational experiences, and their probabilities of education attainment (Powell, 2004a). Significant disparities found among the 16 German *Länder* and in the 50 States of the USA demonstrate that political conflicts (not consensus) and professional and parental

choices (not certainty) are responsible for the unequal distribution of learning opportunities to students served in special education organizations, for their stigmatization, and for their low educational attainment rates. The major barrier to inclusion—the institutionalization of *special* education itself—is an ongoing process, not a fixed state. Thus, while neither federal nation has yet achieved inclusive education to the degree called for by advocates or mandated in educational policies and antidiscrimination laws, some *Länder* and states are well on their way of replacing special with inclusive education organizations. In so doing, they provide models for others to follow.

Social Consequences of Less Education

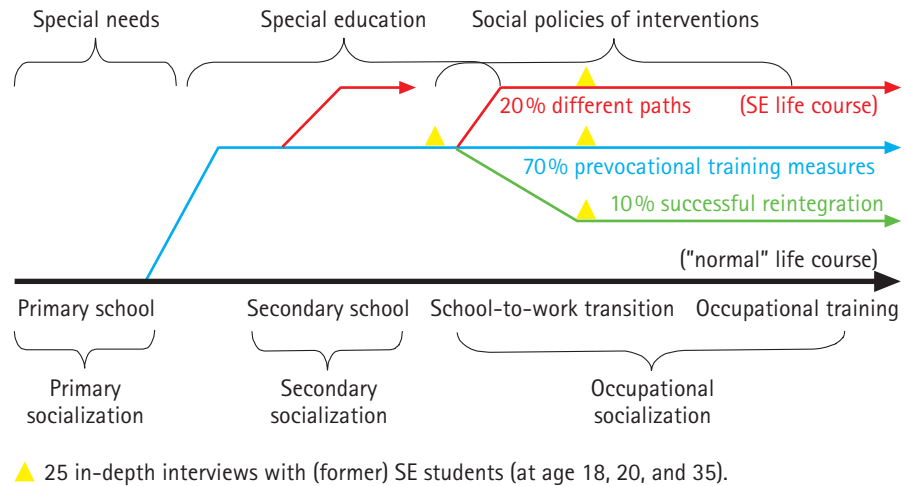
Research Project 3 Consequences of Special Schooling for the Identity Formation of Socially Disadvantaged Youth

Begun in October 2003, this dissertation project inquires into the life courses of young adults with little educational capital. Its main goal is to find out whether, and how, school leavers from special schools (for "learning disabled" students) can yield to the expectations of work organizations and labor markets, and how they attain social recognition via the paths of social integration they choose. The project focuses on the formation of the biographical selves of young leavers of special schools that can be traced back partly to their subjectivation in school. Comparatively, Lisa Pfahl examines if, and how, graduates of

special schools gain social recognition through different socializational contexts. In doing so, the project explores the school leavers' reactions to their situation as well as the consequences of their adaptive behavior. Here, it is important to take the reciprocal interaction between biographies and the opportunity structures, cultural and material resources, recognition, and (lacking) competencies into consideration. The sampling strategy partly follows the explorative style of grounded theory. Yet, with our self-conducted survey of 106 special school leavers (see above), we have the opportunity to select the cases for the biographical studies using the collected information. Several contrasting groups were selected for further investigation that allow us to contrast "suc-

Project 3 Lisa Pfahl

Figure 3. The life courses of youth with "learning disabilities" participating in special education (SE).



successful" with "unsuccessful" careers as well as to explore short-term and long-term coping strategies due to the stigmatizing classification of "learning disability" early in their lives: (1) youth who successfully began an occupational training placement (interviewed in 2002 at the end of their schooling and again in Summer/Fall 2004); (2) youth who follow an "alternative" path of social integration, such as teenage motherhood or delinquent activities; and (3) occupationally established adults who attended a special school. The biographies of school leavers from special schools offer insights into marginalization caused by the contemporary German educational system. Separated early in their school careers, only one fifth of the young people who attended schools for pupils with so-called learning disabilities (most of whom are socially disadvantaged) receives a certificate (*Hauptschulabschluss* or higher). Even less—one tenth—manages to enter vocational training. Instead of entering the training market, these

youth follow different paths, such as pretraining (remedial) programs, unemployment, teenage motherhood, or delinquent activities. These young adults' biographical constructions will be contrasted to those of "more successful" youth. The early educational "careers" of these youth demonstrate some competencies of marginalized young people—namely in managing their stigmatization and keeping an "intact" personal identity (Pfahl, 2003). Examining persons who developed successful occupational orientations, we still find a stance of "withdrawal" from societal expectations and opportunities. First results show gender variations including a prevalent lack of perspective and confidence among females, but an overestimation of status and competence levels among males. Ethnicity also proved to be relevant for processes of stigma management because of their different cultural resources. These aspects will be studied in depth in the next phase of research.

Research Project 4

The Rise of Educational Disadvantage in Germany: Explaining Less Educated Persons' Decreasing Employment Opportunities—Economic and Sociological Insights

Turning to employment chances of less educated persons, Heike Solga has developed four mechanisms that need to be taken into account if historical shifts in opportunities are to be fully understood: (1) displacement, (2) discredit, (3) impoverished resources (especially networks), and (4) stigmatization. Among the factors are changing group size and composition, educational experiences in changing school settings, and employers' recruitment processes. While the less educated group has always been considered a "problem" group, the impoverished network and stigma mechanisms have grown in importance as certification has developed into a "master status." Through increased diffusion, official educational attainment legitimately determines allocation in

labor markets. As the norms of educational attainment have risen, the less educated group's decreasing size and institutionalized segregation ensure its visibility and stigma, with enhanced relevance for foreclosing employment opportunities. Not only individual aspirations and expectations but also skills, cultural and network capital, and certificates are reduced in those who become less educated.

These four mechanisms are derived from a *multidimensional concept of education and educational groups* in which (low) education is considered to be much more than just skills and qualifications. Instead, low education is analyzed here as a social phenomenon that reflects a host of social meanings and social relations. This concept allows us to investigate changes in the individualized processes of skill certification and attribution as well as changes in educational groups' social relationships, available resources, and social identity formation.

Project 4 Heike Solga

Key Reference

Solga, H. (in press-b). *Ohne Abschluss in die Bildungsgesellschaft: Die Erwerbschancen gering qualifizierter Personen aus soziologischer und ökonomischer Perspektive*. Opladen: Barbara Budrich.

Multidimensional Concept of Education and Educational Categories

Individual characteristics:	<i>Skill certification</i>
Individualized group characteristic:	<i>Skill attribution</i> (connected to social meanings of, or beliefs about, "low education")
Actual group membership:	Defining <i>social relationships and networks</i> Defining <i>social identity concepts</i> (social meanings and in-/outgroup-relationships)

Heike Solga's analyses based on OECD data and policy reports on less educated youth show that these mechanisms do not only apply to Germany with its standardized schooling and vocational training systems. They reveal that in many Western societies, less educated youth are considered a "problem

group"—and that all four processes are dealt with in public discourses, social research as well as social and labor market policies. Nonetheless, these analyses indicate that their relative weight varies between countries. For example, whereas all four mechanisms are crucial to understand the labor market situation of

Table 1. Relative weight of displacement, discredit, impoverished networks, and stigmatization (selected OECD countries).

Country	Displacement	Discredit	Impoverished networks	Stigmatization
<i>Countries in which the share of less educated young adults (25- to 34-year-olds) is less than 20%</i>				
Finland	◆			
Canada	◆			
Norway		◆		
Sweden			◆	
Denmark	◆	◆		
USA	◆		◆	
Czech Republic	◆	◆	◆	◆
Germany	◆	◆	◆	◆
Austria	◆	◆	◆	◆
<i>Countries in which the share of less educated young adults (25- to 34-year-olds) is less than 20%</i>				
France	◆			◆
Australia	◆		◆	
United Kingdom	◆		◆	
Belgium	◆		◆	◆
Ireland	◆		◆	◆
The Netherlands		◆	◆	◆
Greece (<i>Less educated young adults do not face relative labor market disadvantages, compared to young adults with completed upper secondary education</i>)				

Source. Solga, 2003d, Chapter 11.

less educated youth in Germany, in the USA two mechanisms—namely “displacement” and “increasingly de-

prived networks”—seem to be of primary importance.

Concluding Conference

The Independent Research Group’s concluding conference “The Causes and Consequences of Low Education in Contemporary Europe” was held in Granada, Spain, from September 18–23, 2004. As a collaboration with the European Consortium for Sociological Research (ECSR), the conference was financed jointly by the Max Planck Institute for Human Development and the European Science Foundation (European Commission, Research General Directorate, High-Level Scientific Conferences). Researchers from all parts of Europe came together to discuss the key

themes addressed by members of the Independent Research Group over the past five years. The conference attracted more than 60 participants, from doctoral candidates to senior scholars, in sociology as well as economics, psychology, and education. Alongside the conference organizers Heike Solga, Paul M. de Graaf, and Marlis Buchmann, discussions were initiated or chaired by Hans-Peter Blossfeld, Richard Breen, Robert Erikson, John Goldthorpe, Anthony Heath, Johannes Huinink, Roxane Silberman, Wout Ultee, Michael Wagner, and Christopher Whelan.

Themes covered in ten paper sessions and lively poster presentations included the social production or causes of low education, ethnic minorities and their educational and occupational attainments, school-to-work transitions of less educated youth, low education and its consequences for social exclusion, and the employment careers of less educated persons. Methodologically, longitudinal and cross-sectional quantitative analyses were rounded out by historical-comparative and biographical studies that emphasized the historical contingency of "low education" as a relatively recent phenomenon since postwar education expansion in European societies. Alongside Europe and OECD-wide comparative work on education systems and labor market research, countries specifically examined in conference contributions included Austria, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Great Britain, Ireland, Italy, Hungary, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovenia, Sweden, and Switzerland.

The presented results, divided along the lines of the original research program of our research group—(1) the social production of low education and (2) its consequences for life course outcomes—show the complexity of the individual and contextual dimensions of low education. Individual disadvantages, such as poor language skills, social origins, stigmas such as caste status, immigration experience, and impairment or disability interact with such social and cultural aspects as school structures, tracking/streaming systems, and language and learning difficulties to impact educational trajec-

ries. Family background, religious beliefs, neighborhood characteristics, and truancy were also discussed as factors in educational experiences and attainment. At the level of regions and nations, education and social policies and the school and vocational training systems they influence are clearly implicated in producing, exacerbating, or ameliorating individual dis/advantages. Approaches leading the way forward attend to cross-national measurement problems in their analysis of the effects of educational expansion and continuing inequalities in learning opportunities.

Besides the paper presented by Heike Solga (see above) and Stephen Nickell's paper on labor market participation, other consequences of low education presented included lower wages, continuing disadvantage and even deprivation, ill health and smoking as well as disability. Findings focused on low education's role in difficult school-to-work transitions, its negative effects on fertility, and its consequences for family formation and divorce patterns. Social commitments, neighborhood integration, voting patterns and voluntary participation, and social exclusion more broadly were also analyzed.

In the paper/poster presentations and discussions, the conference participants agreed that in Europe, education is an increasingly valued individual and public good; however, beyond a minimal level, it has not yet been secured as a right for all citizens. Access for specific disadvantaged groups, especially from lower social class backgrounds, immigrants and ethnic minorities, and

disabled children remains tenuous or has been ensured only at the bottom of stratified educational systems. The resulting low educational attain-

ment negatively affects their employment opportunities and life chances in contemporary education societies.

**Collaborative
Project
Heike Solga
Alessandra
Rusconi**

Research Project (in Collaboration With the Young Academy of Science, Germany: Dual Career Couples)

Not only at the lower end of the educational hierarchy but also at the higher end, we find disadvantages in employment opportunities, albeit with different sources and qualities. Due to increasing female participation rates in higher education, the share of "*academic couples*"—in which both partners hold a university degree—has risen over the past decades in many European societies. Nonetheless, in Germany as well as other modern societies, dual careers are still not the norm among these couples, mostly because they cannot be realized due to obstacles for, and restrictions on, women seeking (full-time) professional careers.

In terms of dual careers, the interest of the Independent Research Group has been twofold: (a) What are the institutional obstacles that hinder female academic careers, and (b) what are sources within couples that negatively affect the realization of dual careers in academic couples? In collaboration with the Young Academy, we investigated institutional obstacles by conducting interviews with 181 university representatives (out of 322) (cf. Solga & Rusconi, 2004). One of the major findings is the gender-neutral output orientation of German search committees: In recruiting new associate or full-time professors, chil-

dren are mostly not taken into account when evaluating the publication lists of applicants. With regard to topic (b), we organized a special session on dual career couples in Germany at the 32nd Congress of the German Sociological Association (2004) with Christine Wimbauer (Yale University) to examine the sources of disadvantage within couples (Solga & Wimbauer, in press). Our own contribution to that session and the resulting edited volume examines the influence of the age relationship of couples on their chances of realizing a dual career (Solga, Rusconi, & Krüger, in press). One of the dominant explanations for this "failure" of dual careers is that because of "rational" decision making within couples to prioritize the partner who first achieves a desirable career opportunity, a "primary" and a "secondary" career are defined. Given the age difference between the partners and the differences in career time caused by it, the older partner typically has the "primary" career during a significant proportion of the life course. Moreover, given the typical age relationship in couples, that is, women are mostly younger than their male partners, men will have the "primary" career and women then have the "secondary" one. But this explanation raises the question of

whether women in partnerships with an atypical age relationship, that is, couples where the woman is older than the man, have better career chances than women in age-typical partnerships and whether, therefore, dual careers in these age-atypical partnerships are more common. Following another dominant explanation for the "failure" of dual careers, this may not be the case. Due to (age-neutral) gender ideologies and gendered labor market practices, it could be that women always have poorer career chances than men—independent of the age relationship within such partnerships. Utilizing empirical analyses based on the German Microcensus (1997), we examined these two explanations—the gender-neutral age relationship explanation and the age-neutral gender role explanation—of the chances

of realizing dual careers among academic couples in Germany. Our main finding is that both explanations fall short. Women in age-atypical couples do not have the same career chances as men in couples where they are the older partner (this finding contradicts the gender-neutral age explanation). On the other hand, these women in atypical couples do have higher career chances than women in typical couples (this finding contradicts the age-neutral gender role explanation). We therefore introduced the explanation of gendered age concepts in couples and suggested their further investigation in order to explore the questions: Whether, and why, age-atypical couples have more egalitarian gender identities and divisions of family duties than do age-typical couples?



Left to right: Lisa Pfahl, Justin Powell, Heike Solga (not pictured: Alessandra Rusconi, Sandra Wagner).

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Ohne Abschluss in die Bildungsgesellschaft
Die Erwerbschancen gering qualifizierter Personen aus soziologischer und ökonomischer Perspektive

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