

Neoliberal Subjectivity and Gendered Inequalities

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Abstract

This chapter traces the notion of neoliberal subjectivity from a conceptual and empirical perspective. It explores to what extent neoliberal discourses transform how young people understand themselves. The conceptual part juxtaposes the two often referred approaches to subjectivity by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim and by Foucault. Drawing on two empirical studies on the life plans of young adults in Switzerland, the chapter then fleshes out how neoliberal subjectivity manifests in young people's understandings of themselves. The final section relates the findings to studies from other contexts and discusses the consequences of this self-concept of young adults. Using gender as the primary analytical category, the chapter illustrates how neoliberal subjectivity individualizes responsibility and thereby privatizes persisting inequalities.

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1 Introduction: How Neoliberal Transformations Impact Young People's Lives

A growing body of research analyses how processes of neoliberalization impact the experiences of young people. “Neoliberalization” is thereby used as an umbrella term to label recent social, cultural, political, and economic transformations. In a nutshell, it denotes a shift towards a regime of governance that emphasizes individual choice, calls for a lean state, and privileges market-based solutions. It understands market competition as the prime means to ensure efficient service provision. Thus, neoliberal policies typically entail the rollback of public spending, privatization, deregulation, and the rollout of market-like institutions (Larner 2009).

Most studies argue that these transformations have made the transition to adulthood more complex and challenging. Continuing trends of neoliberalization such as declining public funds for education, social support services and welfare, the privatization of schools, as well as deteriorating labor standards and rising unemployment rates erode previous stable pathways through education systems and into labor markets. As a consequence, the prospects of young people have become more uncertain (for an overview cf. Jeffrey and McDowell 2004; Mills et al. 2005; Jeffrey 2010).

A number of scholars argue that these shifts contribute to extending the youth phase of the lifecourse. Today's transition from childhood to adulthood is marked by a continued dependence on the support of parents and family. Drawing on interviews with young adults in Italy, Santoro (2006) for example identifies transformations in the labor market and the rising number of young people employed in atypical and temporary jobs as one of the key reasons for their prolonged stay in the parental home. Furthermore, Biggart and Walther (2006) use the term “yo-yo-transitions” to draw attention to the fact that pathways to adulthood do not follow linear trajectories. Steps towards independence, they argue, have become reversible. To an increasing extent, phases of living independently and having a stable income are followed by phases of financial dependence and moving back in with the parents.

The studies delineating these trends draw on data from diverse countries in the Global North as well as in the Global South. However, analyses by geographers caution against universalizing generalizations. They show that the experiences of young people as well as notions of dependence and independence, of youth and adulthood, and of expected transitions depend on geographic context (Evans 2008). Furthermore, young people's lives differ depending on their class, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, ability, and other markers of social inequalities (Van Blerk 2006; Dyson 2008).

When analyzing how processes of neoliberalization affect youth, geographers often lay their emphasis on socially excluded and marginalized groups, such as homeless young people (e.g., Evans 2006) or youth with impairments (e.g., Worth 2009). They illustrate how – especially for these groups – transformations of school systems and employment regimes have contributed to widening the gap between aspirations and opportunities (Jeffrey and McDowell 2004). Notwithstanding these patterns, most of the studies do not portray young people just as passive victims of increasing uncertainty. They analyze the diverse and often cunning strategies that youths employ to react to and improve the situations they find themselves in (Dyson 2008).

While the existing body of research has allowed for better understanding of the lives of youth today, social and economic transformations appear to remain conspicuously external to young people. This raises the question about the extent to which powerful neoliberal discourses do not only affect people's experiences and life strategies but also transform how young people understand themselves. How does it change their identities? In what ways do young people themselves increasingly develop what could be called a neoliberal subjectivity?

The remainder of this chapter will trace this notion of neoliberal subjectivity from a conceptual and empirical perspective. The following section discusses recent approaches to individualization and the neoliberalization of subjectivity, drawing on the work of Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2001) and Foucault (2008). Sections “3” and “4” use empirical material from two studies on the life plans of young adults in Switzerland to flesh out how neoliberal subjectivity manifests in young people's understandings of themselves. The final section relates the findings to studies from other contexts and discusses the consequences of this self-concept of young adults. Using gender as the primary analytical category, it illustrates how neoliberal subjectivity individualizes responsibility and thereby privatizes persisting inequalities.

2 Conceptualizations: Becks' and Foucaultian Approaches to Subjectivity

The vast majority of studies focusing on changes in how young people construct their identities relate to Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim's theory of individualization (2001). Beck and Beck-Gernsheim define individualization as a current social development, which involves the disintegration of previously existing frames of reference and role models ordained by religion, family, class, etc. This means, for example, that having children is no longer perceived as a given, but as an option. It has become a question of individual decision (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2001, p. 126; cf. also Schwiter 2011a). Analogously, the division of labor in the family is no more predefined by fixed gender roles, but a matter of individual negotiation (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2001, p. 105; cf. Schwiter 2013). With the weakening of preordained life courses, individuals increasingly can and must decide for themselves. They are set free and compelled to develop their own guidelines and lead their own independent lives.

The dissolution of previous controls and restrictions, however, does not lead to an absolute freedom. Previous frames of reference are replaced by the new demand that individuals take their lives into their own hands and provide for themselves: “individuals are not so much compelled as peremptorily invited to constitute themselves as individuals: to plan, understand, design themselves and act as individuals – or, should they ‘fail’, to lie as individuals on the bed they have made for themselves.” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2001, 3 f.). According to Beck and Beck-Gernsheim these transformations have led to a precarious state of freedom, which requires individuals to make a myriad of decisions, while being unable to foresee the decisions' outcomes. The human being becomes a “homo optionis” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2001, p. 5). In consequence, individuals feel uncertain and overwhelmed by the choices that they need to make and the responsibilities that follow from them. They are at a loss at the tyranny of possibilities.

Like Beck, Michel Foucault describes a sociopolitical transformation that changed how people understand themselves. He delineates the establishment of a neoliberal governmentality, in which subjects are no longer controlled by coercive power, but asked to manage and control themselves (Foucault 1988, 2008). External policing has been replaced by self-regulation. Foucault's writings conceptualize the individual as the product of a discursive regime of power. Neoliberal governmentality constitutes a subject that feels responsible for forging its own destiny and governing itself. The individual becomes an “entrepreneur of himself” (Foucault 2008, p. 226; cf. also Kelly 2006).

While Beck and Beck-Gernsheim emphasize the uncertainties people experience when continually forced to take decisions without knowing the consequences and their struggles in dealing with the new world of uncertainties, Foucault conceptualizes neoliberal governmentality not as an outside process that forces people to adapt but as an intrinsic part of their understanding of themselves. Their self-concepts are discursively produced in relation to the accepted frames of reference in a specific context at a certain point in time. This approach allows for analyzing the particular subjectivities of young people as the products of the discourses that they coproduce in their narratives about their lives and their aspirations. That means, by talking to young people about their experiences and expectations we are able to analyze neoliberalization as it is ingrained in young people's understandings of themselves.

3 Tracing Neoliberal Subjectivities: The Example of Young Adults from Switzerland

The following sections trace this idea of neoliberal subjectivity by analyzing narratives of young adults from Switzerland. The empirical material stems from two consecutive research projects. The first involved 24 in-depth interviews that were collected for the project “Life Plans” (cf. Schwiter 2011b). Operating from a gender perspective, the study explored how young people in Switzerland anticipate having children and forming a family and how they envision their employment careers and other plans for their future. The interviewees, an equal number of women and men,

were all in their mid-twenties and childless. Apart from these common characteristics, the theoretical sampling (cf. Glaser and Strauss 1967, 45 ff.) aimed for the highest possible variability with regards to the participants' places of residence, educational trajectories, occupations, family backgrounds, sexualities, etc.

The project "Gender Inequalities in Educational and Vocational Pathways" (cf. Maihofer et al. 2013) added 32 in-depth interviews with young adults. They were selected from the so-called TREE study, a representative longitudinal survey of Swiss youths' educational trajectories and their transitions into the labor market (cf. TREE 2013). At the time of the interviews, these participants were also in their mid-twenties. The sample consisted of an equal number of women and men in gender typical and atypical occupations, which were chosen randomly from the representative sample. An interviewee's occupation was defined as gender typical, if more than 70 % of current Swiss workforce in this occupation had the same sex, and as gender atypical if this proportion amounted to less than 30 %. Following this definition, female electricians and male nurses, for instance, were categorized as gender atypical, female hairdressers and male mechanics as gender typical. The interviewees were invited to tell the story of their educational and occupational pathways and reflect on what they identified as relevant turning points in their biographies. Furthermore, they were asked to share their expectations of the future with regards to employment careers as well as family formation and other areas of personal interest.

All interviews in both projects were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The quotes used in this chapter have been translated from Swiss German or French. The studies adopted a Foucauldian discourse analysis as suggested by Waitt (2010). This method of analysis places special emphasis on identifying what is considered "normal" or "self-evident" when young adults talk about their lives. Furthermore, it asks the researcher to reflect not only on what is typically being said but also on the silences – the topics, terms, and arguments that are not present in the narratives. The following discussion focuses on the shared patterns that appeared repeatedly across the interviews. However, this does not imply that the patterns were visible in all the interviews to the same extent. Although the brevity of this argument will not allow for them to be discussed in detail, fractures and contradictions did exist, as "there are no relations of power without resistance" (Foucault 1980, p. 142).

3.1 Young People's Self-Concepts: The Discourse of Being Different

When young adults talk about their lives, their narrations show a prevalent discourse of "being different." The interviewees do not envision themselves as part of a group with similar life experiences and aspirations – be it due to their common gender, their generation, their ethnicity, or any other commonality. First and foremost, they see themselves as one of a kind with a unique set of interests, talents, and aspirations. They say for example:

Every human being is different. You can never generalize about others from yourself.

Each and everyone has to find out for himself, what is the right thing in his situation.

More and more, I feel inside myself, what fits for me.

Every human being has a talent, I say to myself, a talent. He can deal with some things better than other people.

As the above quotes illustrate, the interviewees foreground being unique. They feel singular in what they are good at, in what makes them happy, and what they aspire to in life. Their understanding of themselves thus builds on differentiation rather than commonalities. As a consequence of this individualized self-concept, they do not perceive traditional biographic trajectories as relevant for their own lives. If people are individual in their needs and aspirations, they argue, it is impossible to have one standard life course fit everybody. Instead, everyone has to forge one's own path. The personal biography thus becomes a project that young people can and must design for themselves. The young people see it as their responsibility to shape their biographies according to their own interests and aspirations. This discourse of being different reflects neoliberal thought in that it conceptualizes people as responsible, autonomous individuals who govern themselves.

3.2 Young People's Self-Concepts: The Language of Choice

From the perspective of these young adults, the future appears as a multitude of biographical options from which the individual has to choose. In consequence, biographical pathways must be constantly reflected upon and cleverly managed. With regard to educational trajectories, for example, this discourse of individuality means choosing out of many the training courses, apprenticeships, or subjects of study that fit their individual interests and talents best.

The interviewees' narrations about how they entered their occupational fields are diverse. While some explain that they had known their preferred occupation for as long as they could remember, others recall a long process of considering different occupational trajectories, changing their anticipated pathways repeatedly, and being undecided until the very last moment. With hardly any exceptions, however, the stories culminate in a moment of choice: The narratives feature a key turning point, when the youths "decided" and "chose" their occupations:

I said, this is the occupation I want. No matter what.

In that very moment I decided, I will become a watchmaker.

Many of the accounts feature relevant others who suggested pathways or served as role models. Some refer to a parent or relative who worked in the same occupation, while others mention a teacher or a friend who oriented them towards a

particular field of study. Despite the appearance of role models in their narratives, however, the young adults insist that it had been their choice alone and strongly reject any interference. One interviewee for example recounts how he resisted his uncle's inappropriate attempts to push him towards an apprenticeship as a cook. And another interviewee illustrates this by saying:

At home, for instance, no one told me, learn this or learn that. My brother and I always had absolute free choice. That was good.

Surprisingly, this language of free choice is not only prevalent in the stories of young people with above average educational credentials. It is present also in narratives of young people with difficult educational pathways who might be more constrained in the types of employment they can find. A young woman, for example, wanted to become a clerk. She recounts how she wrote countless applications, all of which were rejected. When she got more and more desperate after months of rejections, her mother insisted that she apply for other jobs as well and pointed her to a position as a janitor. She recalls how she initially got furious and refused to apply, because she had vowed to herself that she would find an office job and that she would never go into cleaning. Nevertheless, she applied and got invited for a 1-week trial period, which she found surprisingly enjoyable. At the end of that week, she narrates:

And then I said, I want this profession. And I truly wanted it. (...) I chose this profession, because I absolutely wanted it.

The janitor's story illustrates how the discourse of choice can be prevalent in a narrative even though the person might not have had any other options available. The imaginary of free choice forms a key element in neoliberal thought. Neoliberalism propagates "governing through freedom" (Larner 2012, p. 363). It envisions "free markets" as ideal way of organizing economic activities. Thereby, the individual is imagined as customer who chooses among different commodities and suppliers. This imaginary of choice is mirrored in the young people's narratives of choosing one's occupation and life path. It disregards the fact that some people have much more limited options available to them than others.

3.3 Young People's Self-Concepts: Keeping Up with an Unpredictable Labor Market

According to the youths, a professional education should not only fit one's own interests and talents, but it should also be in demand. The interviewees see it as their individual responsibility to make sure that their occupations are sought after on the labor market and that their educational credentials stay up-to-date. As the interviews suggest, no one expects to work in the same job, for the same company, or even in the same field throughout one's employment career. As a matter of course, the youths

assume that labor market demands shift quickly and unexpectedly and that they will have to look for new employment opportunities multiple times during their careers:

I won't be here (doing this job) four, five, six years on. You never know what the future brings.

There is no guarantee that it will still be like this in two years time. No one gives me a guarantee that I will still run this shop in two years time.

One is very easily replaceable. (...) Demands for educational credentials rise. Workplace security does no longer exist in the way it existed previously. That's why you have to stay flexible.

As these quotes suggest, having to look for new employment opportunities appears natural and inevitable. In reaction to employment insecurity, the interviewees disclose a discourse of flexibility as the prime strategy of keeping up with labor market demands. Many interviewees mention that they deliberately "choose" educational credentials that are flexible in the sense that they are applicable in various employment fields. A mathematician for instance points out that mathematical knowledge is needed not only in statistics and finance but also in engineering. An assistant in a home for blind people explains that she could also look after people with other kinds of care needs. Furthermore, some interviewees deliberately attempt to get formal training in a second employment field. A sales assistant for instance trains as a cosmetician, and an electronics technician as a sales manager. The interviewees emphasize that it is vital to stay open-minded, to keep as many doors open as possible, to constantly watch out for newly emerging opportunities. One interviewee summarizes the notion of flexibility by saying:

I want to have the option of switching to another job. That's important for me.

Moreover, it is striking that the sample comprises not a single interviewee who is not enrolled in or plans to enroll in some kind of further education. Only one respondent challenges the perceived necessity to attain additional qualifications. He calls it stupid how everyone signs up for further training courses simply because everybody else does, too. Despite this criticism, he shows no less commitment to further invest in his educational credentials than the other interviewees, who state for example:

One's education is never complete. Less and less so.

I don't want to get stuck with regard to my education.

I sure want to upgrade my qualifications within the next few years.

The interviews disclose a multitude of statements in the vein of the above quotes. Again, the discourse of life-long learning was prevalent across the interviews. While

young adults with higher education and from wealthier family backgrounds considered going to graduate school or adding an MBA to their already impressive educational portfolios, respondents without formal degrees and less financial means mentioned for instance a language or a computer course at a community center. Notwithstanding these differences, the young people perceived themselves as active managers of their educational and employment careers. In contrast to Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's theory of individualization, the young adults did not seem to perceive this responsibility to continually update their educational credentials for an unpredictable labor market as overwhelming. For the most part, this perceived necessity appeared self-evidently normal. Taking a Foucaultian perspective, the unquestioned acceptance of individual responsibility for keeping up with shifting labor market demands indicates the extent to which young adults internalized the demands of neoliberal governmentality and have become "entrepreneurs of themselves" (Foucault 2008, p. 226).

3.4 Young People's Self-Concepts: Encountering Gendered Expectations

The discourses of being different, free choice, and individual responsibility are prevalent in interviews with women and men alike. In accordance with the notion of individuality, the respondents do not justify their educational pathways through their gender (cf. also O'Connor 2006). This means, for example, when women favor professions which allow them to help others, they do not relate this to their being women. Similarly, when men explain that it is important for them to make a high salary and be their own boss, they do not justify this with norms of masculinity. Traits are presented not as specific to one or the other gender but as individual characteristics unique to a particular person. As long as educational trajectories comply with gendered expectations, gender norms are not explicitly referred to. Gender remains irrelevant to the interviewees.

However, the interviewees in gender atypical occupations narrate repeated encounters with gendered expectations. Thus, gender norms become an issue in the narratives as soon as they are violated. A female electrician for example recalls:

It's a fight as a woman. At the time when I started my training, people didn't know female electricians. That's why I encountered difficulties again and again. Each time I had to step up and say: 'I can do this, too!'

Similarly, a male nurse jokingly recounts how his brothers commented on his choice of profession with the remark that they had always wanted a sister. Furthermore, he reflects:

You feel it on a men's night out: You might have an IT specialist and a banker at the table and other such classic hierarchical male things. And there you come and say: 'I work as a nurse'.

In these moments, none of the guys will say: 'Honestly? That's cool! Tell me more about it'. That will definitely not happen. In these situations you'll have to duck.

As these quotes exemplify, young people in gender atypical professions are marked as different. In the course of the interviews, they recall many instances in which they had to justify their professions. Mostly, they use the discourse of being different and refer to their individual interests and talents to legitimize their atypical occupational choices. A young woman for instance states:

I've always been boyish rather than a girly.

Surprisingly, however, the interviewees do not recount these instances as discriminatory or unfair. On the contrary, they present them as matter-of-fact accounts of what is to be expected when entering a gender atypical occupational field. A male nurse for example explains:

(Being a nurse) It's unmanly. That's what I hear all the time. (...) But it's like that wherever you go. If you choose a male dominated field as a woman, it's the same thing. It's a widespread phenomenon. (...) That's just how it is. If you go into an exotic field, you're the minority. And as a minority you will always have to stand your ground.

The prejudices, the challenges to their occupational aptitude, and the comments and jokes are treated as given aspects that simply come with their job. The youths accept them as self-evident consequences of their minority status. In this sense, they do not frame such instances as inappropriate behavior of others, but as their own responsibility to deal with what naturally comes with their atypical professions. The unquestioned acceptance of being subjected to gendered stereotyping and discrimination shows how young adults link the perceived freedom of choice to an individualized responsibility for all consequences of their decisions, even if they are discriminatory. This reflects neoliberal thought, which conceptualizes individuals as solely responsible for their own destiny.

3.5 Young People's Self-Concepts: Finding Individual Solutions

As shown in the above examples, the discourse of free choice with regards to biographical decisions dominates the self-concepts of the young adults. As a consequence of understanding themselves as active, independent managers of their life plans, the youths automatically feel responsible for all the consequences of their decisions. This section illustrates how this individualized responsibility is linked to the expectation that solutions for any difficulties must also be found by the individual alone.

A young woman from a single parent migrant family for example narrates how she was happy to have secured an apprenticeship as a doctor's assistant. However, the medical clinic was forced to close due to fraud before she finished her training

period. In the following months, she tried to find a new medical clinic where she could finish her apprenticeship, but with no success. As the interviewee recalls, her mother did not have any money to spare for her education. Therefore, she decided to find a job to earn some money. During the following years, she worked in a number of occupations in factories, tourism, sales, and cleaning, several of which she lost because the businesses closed or downsized their staff. While she initially had no problems getting new jobs, she increasingly found herself in precarious, informal, and temporary positions and grew used to juggling several occupations at once to make ends meet. At the time of the interview she has just signed a new contract for a job as an assistant in a nursing home. She hopes moving into this new occupational field will allow her to finally get some formal training, which she can later use when applying for other jobs in this field.

When she reflects on her educational and occupational trajectory, the interviewee does not blame any of her employers, who often only offer temporary and precarious positions and do not provide any opportunities for on-the-job training or further education. She also does not blame social services, which did not support her and her single mother in a way that would have allowed her to continue her education. She does not blame the government, which allows precarious employment to grow. And she does not blame discriminatory treatment due to her gender, social class, or migratory background, which might have prevented her from finding a replacement medical clinic. She frames it as her own free choice to have left her apprenticeship before completion and entered the labor market without formal training. As a consequence, she sees it as her own responsibility to catch up on her missed training in order to access better jobs in the future.

In a similar fashion, men and women in gender atypical professions anticipate difficulties with regards to their family plans. Several male nurses voice their concerns about earning enough to support a family. Again, they do not blame their employers or the government for not valuing care work appropriately. The comparatively low salaries are not discussed as discriminatory or unequal but as a simple fact that comes with the choice of entering an occupational field that is dominated by women. In order to secure higher pay, they plan to sign up for advanced training as paramedics, physiotherapists, or vocational instructors for nursing. One interviewee for instance states:

If you want to have a family as a nurse, you're obliged to get advanced training and make sure you get some more money.

In contrast, several women in gender atypical occupations are worried about being unable to keep their jobs when becoming mothers. A female electrician explains:

Once you're pregnant, you can't continue to work on building sites. That's clear. That's a huge decision, because it can't go on as before with children. It can't. It's not possible. Maybe, I'll be able to get a part-time job in a warehouse or an office.

This interviewee describes how the decision to have a child implies losing one's job. The statement of this electrician mirrors the narratives of other women in gender atypical professions. A gardener anticipates having to switch to a sales job in a garden center, while an economist expects that motherhood will entail less interesting appointments from small nonprofit organizations.

Just like the men, the women in gender atypical professions do not blame their employers for not offering family-friendly employment conditions. And they do not blame the government for not offering affordable child care, which would allow mothers to continue their employment careers. They frame losing their jobs with the transition to motherhood as a self-evident consequence of their free choice of occupation and of their freely made decision to have a child. For example, with regard to reconciling employment and family work two young women state:

Work-family conflicts are conflicts you have with yourself. (...) If you can't reconcile the two, the problem is you.

I don't expect any work-family conflicts because I say to myself: you made your bed, now sleep in it. If there is a conflict, it's your job to solve it.

Both quotes assign the responsibility for reconciling the demands of work and family to the individual.

In sum – according to the young adults – life is about making “good choices or bad choices.” No matter what happens, the interviewees perceive the difficulties they encounter as matter-of-fact consequences of their biographical decisions. Accordingly, they expect others to bear the burden of their own respective biographical decisions, too. They would argue that the young woman mentioned above freely chose to discontinue her education. She must have known that having no formal degree would make it difficult to access secure employment. Furthermore, no one forced the young adults quoted above to go into gender atypical occupations. They must have known that feminized jobs do not pay well and masculinized jobs do not support motherhood. In the discursive logic of the young adults, it has been their decision – which means it is also their job to find a solution or live with the consequences.

4 Conclusion: Individualized Responsibility and the Privatization of Gendered Inequalities

As the analysis of the interviews with these Swiss youths has shown, recent social and economic transformations do not only affect young adults from outside – forcing them to react and develop strategies to deal with increasingly uncertain transitions to adulthood. The neoliberal discourse of being different, of free choice, and of individual responsibility for the consequences of these choices also defines how the young adults understand themselves. It produces young adults as autonomous managers of their own biographies.

The above analysis focused primarily on educational and employment trajectories. However, the neoliberal logic also applies to other biographical decisions such as the transition to parenthood (cf. Schwiter 2011a) or the division of labor in the family (cf. Schwiter 2013). While the above analysis is limited to young adults from Switzerland, there exist a number of studies from other geographical locations that report similar findings. Harriet Bradley and Ranji Devadason (2008) for example analyzed labor market transitions of young adults in four neighborhoods in Bristol (UK) and explored the attitudes of the respondents to their situations. They conclude that these youths show an “‘internalised flexibility’ across boundaries of class, gender and ethnicity” (Bradley and Devadason 2008, p. 133). Their paper illustrates how this particular generation has accepted living with employment insecurities. Youth regard it as a matter of course that they have to deal with shifting labor market demands and the necessity for life-long learning. Many even embrace the idea of continually moving on, adapting, and changing so that they will not be “stuck in a job for life.”

While Bristol represents a rather prosperous city in Southern England, Kathrin Hörschelmann (2008) interviewed youth in Leipzig, a city in what was formerly Eastern Germany, which suffers from a severe shortage of employment opportunities. Many of her respondents had experienced unemployment in their own families and were afraid of not finding a job themselves. Nevertheless, Hörschelmann observes that: “few of the young people that were interviewed questioned the structural causes of unemployment and economic decline. Instead, they focused on their own failings through lack of effort or ‘messing up’ at school” (2008, p. 153). Even in the face of a bleak labor market, she concludes, the discourse of the youths discloses an “individualistic rhetoric of self-governance” (2008, p. 156) and emphasizes the need for the individual to be flexible and to try harder.

Analyzing the aspirations of young people in secondary schools in Lesotho and Zimbabwe, Nicola Ansell (2004) finds that youth increasingly feel responsible for achieving the transition to a new version of adulthood, which is defined by the receipt of formal employment. Due to the limited number of jobs offered in the formal sector, only a small fraction of these young people will ever be able to secure formal paid employment. In spite of these poor chances, the youths individualize responsibility and perceive it as their personal failure if they cannot achieve this goal. In a similar vein, Nancy Abelmann et al. (2009) identify a strong discourse of self-development prevalent in the narratives of college students in South Korea. The discourse allows them to see their educational success as the outcome of individual choices, unfettered by structural inequalities.

Even though the studies mentioned above suggest that aspects of a neoliberal subjectivity are indeed prevalent in diverse geographic contexts, it is necessary to be cautious against overhasty generalizations. Firstly, the existing literature (in English) shows a strong bias towards the more affluent countries of the Global North. While several studies trace neoliberal subjectivities of European, North American, and Australian youth (cf. e.g., also Farrugia 2010 on Australia; Leccardi 2006 on Italy; and Orange 2003 on the U.S.; O’Connor 2006 on Ireland; Hurrelmann et al. 2006 on Germany), there is less evidence from contexts in Africa, Asia, and Latin

America. Secondly, many studies draw special attention to the fact that young people’s self-concepts are strongly intertwined with geographic location (e.g., Geldens and Bourke 2008), class (e.g., McDowell 2002), gender (e.g., Ansell 2004), and other markers of inequality.

Nevertheless, the existing literature discloses common aspects in the self-concepts of young people that transcend the specific case of the young Swiss adults presented above. To an increasing extent, young people perceive themselves as autonomous managers of their biographies. As part of this individualized self-concept, they adopt a new “form of responsabilisation” (Kelly 2006, p. 24) and feel accountable for all of the consequences of their biographical choices. Thus, they also first and foremost blame themselves for the circumstances in which they find themselves. In this sense, they have internalized the discourse “Your choice – your success or failure”.

Discussing this self-concept as neoliberal subjectivity shows that recent societal transformations have not freed young adults from norms and restrictions, but replaced previous forms of coercive control (e.g., the legal exclusion of women from certain occupations) by a new form of self-governance. This demand to manage one’s own life lies at the heart of what is termed neoliberal governmentality in reference to Foucault’s writings (cf. Foucault 1991, 2008; Lemke 2011; Kelly 2009). Foucault, however, does not content himself with simply describing discourses but always also asks about their effects. He analyses not only what they foreground but also what they silence (Waitt 2010).

With regard to the self-concepts of young adults, neoliberal subjectivity disregards that youth make their biographical decisions in very different contexts. It obscures the fact that the choices available to young people are highly dependent on their gender, class, race, sexuality, ability, and other markers of inequality. In this sense, neoliberal discourse negates the existence of discrimination and structural inequalities. From the perspective of the young adults, these unequal power relations have become all but invisible. And if they do appear, they are not primarily seen as societal problems but as the responsibility of the individual to deal with.

Secondly, the neoliberal foregrounding of choice hides the possibility that social realities can be changed. Continually evaluating the biographical options that present themselves in order to capitalize on important opportunities requires constant energy and attention. This leaves little scope for developing and reflecting on alternative visions of society. In this logic, the consequences of particular choices are perceived largely as given.

Thirdly, a neoliberal self-concept hinders young adults from forming alliances and challenging existing social realities as a collective. The perception of needs and aspirations as individually different obscures any common ground. Even though many young adults may encounter similar difficulties in their transitions to adulthood, the notion of individual difference supports the belief that their particular struggle is different from the struggles of others and that they have to find their own solutions. In consequence, collective problems are individualized.

With regard to the above example of gendered occupations, neoliberal subjectivization suggests that any discriminations and prejudices that young people in gender

atypical occupations face must be accepted as expected consequences of their unconventional choices. It is the employee's individual responsibility to deal with low pay in a feminized work place and lack of family friendliness in a masculinized profession. In the case of gender typical choices, gender is not explicitly referred to. In contrast to the reactions to gender atypical choices, this silence implicitly suggests that a chosen occupational field is deemed suitable for the respective gender. In this sense, the discourse of free choice contributes to constituting gendered understandings of professions and (re)produces a gendered normalcy. As long as segregation in masculinized and feminized occupations is assumed as "natural," there is little scope for visions of a society that does not make this distinction. In sum, gendered norms and inequalities are privatized: they are not seen as a problem that society as a whole has to address, but as a challenge the individual has to adjust to.

This chapter presented neoliberalism as a powerful discourse that does not only affect the lives of young people from an external source but also transforms how youth understand themselves. However, discourses are never without discrepancies and fractures. Craig Jeffrey (2012), for example, draws attention to the recent evolution of new collective alliances of young people. He discusses the important role of young people in the Tunisian uprisings that led to the Arab Spring and in the demonstrations and protest camps of the "Occupy" movement, which appeared in many cities around the world. Furthermore, recent studies indicate the potential of new information and communication technologies and social media to connect and mobilize young people across distance (e.g., Juris and Pleyers 2009). They explore how ICT and social media enable new kinds of alliances and new modes of political protests. Such findings may point to widening fractures in the discourse. It remains to be seen to what extent such movements and new technologies will challenge neoliberal subjectivity and offer young people alternative ways of understanding themselves. The future will show whether they allow for (re)building common identities, for example, as a generation of young people and can serve as starting points of a collective movement for change.

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