CHAPTER 4

Career Beginnings American-Style: Agency and Floundering in Subjective Perspective

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Youth transitioning from school to work are facing a new and challenging environment. The rapid movement of ideas, technologies, capital, and workers across national boundaries presents great opportunities at particular times and places, but these opportunities may suddenly evaporate, overturned by more efficient techniques, new product lines, and consumer preferences. Work, then, has become increasingly precarious; there is global competition for capital, markets, and labor, and continuous technological change quickly diffuses across national borders. Employers are loath to make enduring commitments to employees, so, rather than hiring permanent employees with health and retirement benefits and advancement opportunities, employers in both public and private sectors increasingly favor temporary workers, outsourcing, or short-term contracts. Because of all this, young people may no longer expect the life-long occupational careers that were typical in mid-twentieth century America. They are told to expect to change occupations several times in the course of their careers.

It may be a little bewildering for young people to contemplate their future prospects. On the one hand, an incredible array of possibilities beckons—given the myriad post-secondary educational institutions before them; the hundreds, if not thousands of occupations to choose from; and the option of employment in far-reaching corners of the world. On the other hand, the more choices and opportunities there are, the more difficult occupational exploration, choice, and commitment may become.

Exacerbating these difficulties, the United States offers relatively little help to youth, in comparison to other post-industrial societies, as they move from school to work (Kerckhoff 2002, 2003). In the “new” American economy, characterized by rapid technological innovation, the constant appearance and disappearance of occupations, organizational mergers, and downsizing, it may seem inordinately difficult—if not impossible—for teenagers to predict the kinds of occupations that will be available to them, let alone to prepare themselves for this unforeseeable labor market.
Furthermore, young people approach the transition from school to work with markedly different knowledge, skills, and resources. Globalization has resulted in greater concentrations of wealth in the United States and other modern countries, and within those countries, some individuals and families have benefited immensely while others have fallen behind. Inequality in the distribution of income and wealth generate inequalities in socialization, educational experiences, and resources that promote cognitive, emotional, and social development as well as socioeconomic attainments (Furstenberg 2006; Mortimer 2008). Clearly, young people in the United States, like their counterparts all over the post-industrial global world, are very unequal in their preparation for the labor force. This inequality is reflected in their early occupational experiences and subjective reactions to them.

Amid growing inequality, youth and their parents understand that good, high-paying jobs go to those with college degrees. But while most high school students aspire to graduate from college, less than one-third of youth in recent cohorts have succeeded in doing so. Many youth move back and forth between school and full-time work. Those who do graduate from college typically take longer than four years to complete “four-year degrees.” As a result, the period of transition from school to work can be lengthy and uncertain, and there is often little structure or support to help young people find employment. Most youth must rely substantially on their own resources to find jobs. For the privileged, the prolonged transition enables a lengthy period of freedom from adult responsibilities, enabling both educational and occupational exploration (Arnett, 2000). For those with fewer resources, the transition from school to work is a scary time of poverty and precarity, trying to make connections, and working hard to develop skills for industries that may already be on the decline.

Research has revealed much about the actual standing of young people, their incomes, occupations, and rates of unemployment, and has documented their shifting attitudinal states. However, most studies do not speak directly to youth’s subjective awareness and more nuanced understandings of their situations. How do young people in different structural locations themselves view their circumstances? What do they like and dislike about their jobs? What do they think helped them and hurt them in their journey from school to work?

Like the others in this volume, this chapter is based on in-depth interviews in four cities (New York, San Diego, Detroit, and Minneapolis-St. Paul), and one small, rural community (approximately 25 interviews from each). The impacts of globalization and widespread immigration are reflected in the diversity of the sample. The youth come from high and low socioeconomic origins,