

“Those who’re in the gutter look at the stars? Explaining perceptions of labor market opportunities among European young adults”

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In the backlash of the global financial crisis, unemployment has risen worldwide. Also in Europe, the share of unemployed in the 27 EU member states rose from 8.0 percent in January 2009 to 9.5 percent in January 2010 (Eurostat, 2010). Young adults are among the first to feel the recession since this group enters the labor market potentially without the required work experience. While the increase of unemployed in the European Union increased with 1.5 percent between January 2009 and 2010, youth unemployment rose with 3 percent from 17.7 to 20.9 percent over the same time span. Moreover, there is a wide discrepancy in those rates across European countries: data for January 2009 show that youth unemployment is lowest in the Netherlands (5.6 percent) but highest in Spain (33.1 percent).

In cross-national perspective, research on youth employment has not go beyond the classic investigation of the school-to-work transition, with a particular emphasis on the length of unemployment and the first job quality. Firstly, individual information informs us that in general women and the least educated (Wolbers, 2007) have it worse in their transition from school to a first job; secondly, national level information shows that especially the a prosperous economy, an educational system with an emphasis of apprenticeship as well as an overall weak employment protection legislation exert a strong influence on first job opportunities (Ryan, 2001; Scherer, 2005, Müller, 2005); thirdly, recent outcomes have underscribe the interaction between individual and national level factors (Wolbers, 2007).

Despite the increasing findings on objective unemployment indicators, comparative research has not yet touched upon young adults’ perceptions of first labor market opportunities. Nevertheless, next to the study of school-to-work events, having an insight into the determinants of perceptions of opportunities is also crucial for the empowerment of the job-seeking youth. Even though this causal link has not been clarified, according to social psychological theories (Ajzen, 1991), negative perceptions of the opportunities towards the labor market are expected to impose restrictions on actual job search strategies, meaning that young adults become inactive, unmotivated and potentially in a vicious circle that eventually hampers the ability to become employed (Dooley et al., 2000; Ferguson et al., 2001).

The aim of this paper is therefore to analyze the determinants of European young adults’ perceptions of the first job opportunities in their country. More specifically, we will be interested in the respondents of maximum 30 year old in the 2008 wave of the European Social Survey (ESS) answering the question “What do you think overall about the opportunities for young people to find their first full-time job?” Since the ESS is a cross-national survey project carried out in more than 25 countries, it allows us to model both individual-level information in a multilevel regression model (Hox, 2002), including gender and educational level as well as whether one still is a student, unemployed or at work, and country-level factors, distinguishing between structural, like the economic situation, social security spending, educational system and employment protection legislation, and cultural information, like general attitudes towards youth and the unemployed. Moreover, the multilevel approach allows to model cross-level interactions to analyze, which is shown to be crucial in the understanding of youth unemployment.