



# Bringing social biography to life course studies: Agency and reflexivity in education-to-work transitions in young adults' biographies

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## ABSTRACT

The paper is based on my longitudinal qualitative study, which takes a “social biography approach” to exploring and interpreting biographical sequences in a person’s life course from early childhood to young adulthood. Against the background of a recent debate that argues for bringing “life” back to life course research through the implementation of qualitative data, the paper explores how life course studies could gain from taking a social biography approach to youth transitions. I focus on analysing education-to-work transitions within the biographies of a young woman and a young man from working-class families. The analysis shows that their education-to-work transitions were not based on linear trajectories, but their decision-making agency was path-dependent on their previous agency in different biographical contexts, and also linked to the lives of significant others. I argue that there is a heuristic benefit to including reflexivity within a study of the life course through the actors’ interpretation of the impact of country-specific “opportunity structures” on their education and employment. Analysis of the two biographies has also revealed that the emotions and satisfaction displayed in the actors’ reflections also had an impact on their agency in relation to education and work. After discussing the compatibility of the social biography approach with life course studies, I conclude that life course studies benefit from including a biographisation to the contextualisation of transition process.

## KEYWORDS

social biography, education-to-work transition, agency, reflexivity, life course, Serbia

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 LINKING THE SOCIAL BIOGRAPHY APPROACH, AGENCY, AND REFLEXIVITY TO LIFE COURSE

The concept of life course was introduced by Elder's seminal study "Children of the Great Depression" (Elder 1974), while as an interdisciplinary approach it became particularly prominent in social studies from the late 1980s. Since then, "a set of interrelated presuppositions, concepts, and methods that are used to study these age-graded, socially embedded roles" (Mortimer and Shanahan 2003: 11) has been established as a paradigm based on five core principles: 1. Each life phase affects the entire life course: life-span development; 2. Individuals actively construct their biography: human agency; 3. Life course is embedded in historical events: time and place; 4. Social circumstances and events influence transitions: timing of decisions; 5. Social relationships and networks contribute to the shaping of biographies: linked lives (Elder, Johnson and Crosnoe 2003: 11; Heinz 2009a: 4). Although they are all inevitably entangled, the second principle is particularly relevant for my argument in this paper, while the third, fourth, and fifth are also applicable, as will be evident from the analysis.

As one of the central concepts of the life course paradigm, transitions are explored and understood within the above-listed principles as contextualised processes (Vogt 2018) or "time-dependent passages of individuals between life spheres", rather than in terms of "psychosocial or developmental assumptions or normative expectations regarding the correct timing and sequencing of becoming adult" (Heinz 2009a: 4). Apart from being sometimes wrongly

used as a descriptive concept related to youth, the transition to adulthood has been the most studied of various life course transitions (see e.g. Kovacheva and Hristozova 2022). I agree with the standpoint that the transition from education to employment is central to the transition to adulthood (Heinz 2009a; Roberts 2018). Since "It influences how and when other life stage transitions are made, and as with all other youth life stage transitions, the outcomes are likely to have lifelong consequences" (Roberts 2018: 72), it is also "pivotal" in societies such as Serbia, which normatively emphasise family transitions as central (Tomanović and Ignjatović 2006, 2010). Recent comparative research on differences in education-to-work transitions in Europe focused on the macro-institutional frameworks related to pace and modes of employment ("employability") (e.g. Eurofound 2014). They have detected several common trends within most developed European and OECD countries (see Raffe 2014: 183) and numerous sources of country-specific differences (Raffe 2014: 184). Some researchers also attempted to establish typologies of multiple youth transitions (e.g. Walther 2006) or models of family transitions (e.g. Iacovou 2002), mostly relying on the Esping-Andersen typology of welfare regimes, while others distinguish between "occupational" (regulated) and "unregulated" education-to-work transitions and a mixture of the two (Roberts 2018). Regional comparative studies point out that the education-to-work transition among young people from Southeast European and particularly Western Balkan countries is highly "unregulated": there is still a high rate of unemployment, as well as so-called "flexible" but actually precarious employment, which is pushing them

towards emigration and the normalisation of non-merit factors in finding employment (such as nepotism, clientelism, and corruption) (Lavrič, Tomanović and Jusić 2019). As is the case in some South European countries, in Western Balkan countries these trends have caused prolonged material dependence on parental families within a post-socialist version of a “sub-protective” (or “familistic”) youth transition regime (Walther, Strauber and Pohl 2009) and postponed family transitions (Lavrič, Tomanović and Jusić 2019).

This paper is based on my longitudinal qualitative study, in which I employ the “social biography approach” – reconstructing biographical periods in a person’s life course from early childhood to young adulthood. In addition to this method, I use social biography as a conceptual framework for the study in order to explore the complex interrelations between structure, agency, and identity within time perspectives (Tomanović 2012, 2019, 2021).<sup>1</sup> This approach assumes that social biographies are being formed through a process whereby the individual shapes his/her biography in relation to the social context: its structural features (enabling and/or restricting), the resources available, agency, and personal identity (Tomanović 2012, 2019, 2021). The social biography approach also incorporates dynamic and processual aspects of the life course paradigm by demonstrating ways in which social and historical features (“time and place”), and structural and institutional factors (“social circumstances”) reflect on the individual’s life, shaping and directing the person’s agency in different situations and life phases.

<sup>1</sup> The method of research and analysis will be explained in more detail in the next section of the paper.

The life course paradigm is considered to be very flexible in including a combination of methods, and furthermore the possibility to fill the gaps left by each group of methods on its own (Heinz 2003: 73–92). Against the background of a recent line of debate that argues for bringing “life” back to life course study through the implementation of qualitative data (e.g. Nico 2016), I explore in the paper how life course research could benefit from the biographical approach to youth transitions. My argument is partly in line with life course studies based on interviews that point out the significance of relating the concept of agency to “biographical action orientations” (e.g. Evans and Heinz 1994) or “biographical choices” that demonstrate various action strategies by which “young people from different social origins actively pursue individual goals when choosing to follow or to change transition pathways” (Heinz 2009b: 391). Another study has informed my research and analysis by implementing the “biography backwards” method of reconstructing biographical sequences (Henderson et al. 2006). Through exploring and interpreting youth transitions in the UK with the qualitative longitudinal approach, the study has demonstrated that young people change their agency in different life situations and contexts. Some biographical contexts, particularly so-called “extended moments” – such as the transition from one educational level to the next after dropping out of school, or when confronting educated unemployment – challenge young people to “in a sense ‘discover’ or ‘perform’ their agency” (Jeffrey 2012: 246). Exploring and interpreting agency within a biography reveals that it takes different forms and has different meanings at different stages of an individual’s biography

(Tomanović 2019, 2021). It is my intention to explore agency related to education and work during those “extended moments” within the biographies of two young adults – a young woman and a young man from working-class families from my longitudinal qualitative study (Tomanović 2021).

I study agency as a capacity to act intentionally, which is the result of a process that takes into account both contextual structures and the person’s aspirations, and which is based on reflection, compromise, negotiation, and resourcefulness. Consequently, I interpret agency as socially bounded – “a socially situated process, shaped by the experiences of the past, the chances present in the current moment and the perceptions of possible futures” as defined by Karen Evans (2002: 262). I argue that socially bounded agency is also embedded in changing biographical contexts in the life course (Tomanović 2019, 2021).

Agency is not only influenced by external, but also by internal structures as “internalized frames of reference” (Evans 2007: 93). Together with embedded dispositions, reflexivity mediates between structure and agency (Caetano 2021: 230). In making decisions on whether, when, and how to act, individuals reflect on their (structured) circumstances and resources, their aspirations, plans, relationships, and modes of action. In contrast with some viewpoints, that argue that reflexivity is a kind of cultural capital of more privileged (Giddens 1991) and educated (Heinz 2009b) people, I support the view that reflexivity is essential for the agency of all young people, but there is a significant difference in “what they are reflexive about” (Farrugia 2013: 690). Reflexivity is associated with their “material circumstances, their cultural capital and, crucially, the local structural

conditions they face” (Farrugia 2013: 691), and it is also contextually shaped (Caetano 2015; Nico and Caetano 2017). On the other hand, whether or not reflexivity would produce actions based on choices is “still heavily reliant on the socioeconomic or class position of young people” (Threadgold and Nilan 2009: 54) and their gender (Adkins 2003). When reflexivity is realised through actions as a product of a “post-reflexive choice” (Adams 2006: 522), it elicits feelings of satisfaction and self-confidence (Threadgold 2011). When not realised into aspired actions, however, reflexivity produces feelings of frustration and “painful awareness” of the individual’s lack of choices (Adams 2006: 525).<sup>2</sup> Reflexivity is inherent to “biographisation” – “the process by which young people reflectively relate their agency to contextual features (structural opportunities and constraints, normative expectations and demands, etc.) to their needs, wishes, and interests” (Walther, Stauber and Pohl 2009: 105). I argue that there is a heuristic benefit of including biographisation within the study of a life course. By including reflexivity connected to making decisions within the different life stages that create biographical contexts, we can enhance our understanding of how emotions associated with certain events and relationships give them relevance, and therefore impact and direct people’s lives (Nico 2016: 2109).

Although the impact of young people’s agency is recognised and acknowledged as important in the education-to-work transition, the research connecting it to reflexivity (see e.g. Devadason 2007) and to life course and biography (see e.g. Nico 2021) is still rather scarce.

<sup>2</sup> For more discussion on different aspects of agency in the social biography approach, see Tomanović (2019).

It is my intention to contribute to filling that knowledge gap by exploring agency and reflexivity related to education and work through analysis of the selected young adults' biographies and within the innovative framework of the social biography approach.

## **1.2 THE SERBIAN CONTEXT AND "OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURES" FOR EDUCATION-TO-WORK TRANSITIONS**

Both life course and social biography approaches place (young people's) agency within structural, cultural, and institutional frameworks of particular social context. I will outline, in short, the features of those frameworks that are relevant for education-to-work transitions in Serbia. A number of studies discussed the impact of the 2008 global economic crises and consequent austerity measures on young people's lives and transitions (see e.g. Schoon and Bynner 2019), and more recently the impact of the global crisis caused by the current COVID-19 pandemic (see e.g. special issues of journal *Young* 2021a, 2021b). My argument in describing and interpreting the context of society in Serbia is that we are experiencing a "chronic social crisis" (Vigh 2008). The violent breakdown of former Yugoslavia and its socialist regime was followed by two phases of transition denoted as "blocked" (during the '90s) and "unblocked" post-socialist transformation. Recent macroeconomic growth based on the neoliberal model of market reforms, accompanied by the corrupt state and weak institutions, has resulted in a constant and significant increase in social inequalities and the highest income inequalities in Europe (Arandarenko, Krstić and Žarković Rakić 2017). Since the major social systems –

market economy, the rule of law, and the welfare system – have not been institutionally consolidated and regulated during these three decades, I argue that it is justified to characterise the social context in Serbia as a "chronic social crisis" (Tomanović 2021).<sup>3</sup>

Open access to higher education is a legacy of the socialist period, but the closure of social structures and also social reproduction within the social strata have been taking place since the 1970s. Recent studies point to a high level of reproduction of educational inequality, explored through indicators such as the odds ratio for educational mobility, inequality in the accumulation of cultural capital, inequality in access to state support measures, and inequality in educational aspirations and plans (Tomanović and Stanojević 2015; Lavrič, Tomanović and Jusić 2019). The quality of education is comparatively low, since almost one-third of pupils tested by PISA are found to be functionally illiterate, while the share is significantly higher among families from the lowest quintile of socioeconomic status (Arandarenko, Krstić and Žarković Rakić 2017: 6). The transition from education to work in Serbia is prolonged and uncertain, marked by a decreasing but still high unemployment rate, significant long-term unemployment, and a rising share of precarious work among young people (Stanojević 2016). At the same time, the institutional framework for supporting education-to-work and family transitions is weak – there are scarce and poorly targeted public policy measures for facilitating the transition to adulthood.

<sup>3</sup> It is noteworthy that the analyses in the paper encompass data, accounts, and findings from the early 1990s until 2014, therefore not including the latest global crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Within this context, young people in Serbia perceive and to certain extent accept and normalise nepotism and political clientelism as actual mechanisms that provide employment (Tomanović and Stanojević 2015; Lavrič, Tomanović and Jusić 2019).

The risks of an unregulated and insecure labour market create an extensive financial and housing dependence among young people on their parental families (Tomanović et al. 2012; Tomanović and Stanojević 2015; Lavrič, Tomanović and Jusić 2019). This is supported by a highly accepted familistic orientation that their children's education is foremost the parents' prerogative. Parents therefore do not support combining work and schooling, for which there are no institutional opportunities during secondary and university education. Together with precarious employment, this lack of material autonomy and security produces the feeling of existential uncertainty, which is one of the basic structural constraints that prevents family formation (Tomanović, Stanojević and Ljubičić 2016), and also one of the major push factors for emigration among the young (Lavrič, Tomanović and Jusić 2019). Since the structural risks and constraints related to a highly unregulated labour market and weak and unreliable institutions have been on-going for more than two decades, we can argue that they create a context of chronic social crisis (Tomanović 2019). Within such a social context, young people develop flexible and temporally fragmented strategies (Tomanović et al. 2012), as uncertainty is incorporated into various domains of their biographies, notably their aspirations and plans (Tomanović 2019, 2021). In accordance with conclusions from a comparative study on educa-

tion-to-work transitions (Raffe 2014) that the social context in each country is unique and that it is highly relevant to treat each as a separate case, I intend to study opportunity structures in the context of Serbian society. The concept that was introduced by Roberts refers to a set of determinants of education-to-work transitions that are "formed primarily by the inter-relationships between family backgrounds, education, labour market processes and employers' recruitment practices" that "create distinct career routes which govern young people's progress" (Roberts 2009: 355). After introducing the method of study, I will explore, through biographies of the two young adults, how opportunities and constraints influenced their agency related to education and employment within different life stages, and how they interpret the structures in their reflections.

## **2 METHOD: EXPLORING AND INTERPRETING THE SOCIAL BIOGRAPHIES OF YOUNG PEOPLE**

The paper is based on data and findings from the longitudinal qualitative research that I carried out from 1993 until 2014. The study started as cross-sectional research based on structured and semi-structured interviews in two contrasting urban social settings: a working-class suburban area and an area in central Belgrade.<sup>4</sup> The study was not designed as longitudinal from the beginning, but the changing social context of Serbian society provoked the development of a longitudinal study that was flexible and contingent

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed description of the selection of the respondents and the longitudinal qualitative research process, see Tomanović (2019).



(Tomanović 2003).<sup>5</sup> The longitudinal qualitative study was carried out in four waves, every seven years from 1993, when the children were four to seven years old, until 2014, when the respondents were young adults aged 24 to 28 years old. The empirical evidence was obtained through semi-structured interviews with the parents (in pairs when possible) and the children/young people, carried out separately (24 interviews in the first, 42 in the second, 40 in the third wave), and through observation during the first three waves and with 18 young adults in the final wave. The interviews were recorded with the respondents' consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim.

The interviews in every research wave were organised around repetitive topics, such as education, material situation, work, housing, emotional relations, leisure time, social contacts and networks, and family relations. The analytical and interpretative aim was to reconstruct the biographical sequences of seven-year periods in the child's/young person's life. In the last two interviews, I applied the so-called lifelines account (Thomson and Holland 2002) by asking the young people/adults to imagine themselves in four areas: housing, education, work, and personal relationships at the ages of 25, 30 and 35. The retrospective and prospective accounts were analysed by the method of constant comparison (Boeije 2002; Charmaz 2006), when I employed a twofold comparison approach. I used a synchronic (cross-sectional comparison of the topic among the different respondents to detect and explore emerging patterns. Diachronic

<sup>5</sup> For a detailed and elaborated discussion of the applied longitudinal qualitative method, its advantages and its limitations, see Tomanović (2020).

comparison involved analysing the topic within a particular biography in time perspective as a means of interpreting its changing meaning and significance in different life stages that comprise complex biographical sequences.

In order to explore and interpret the significance and meaning of education and work in the respondents' biographies, I have employed in this paper the same method as described above to analyse the interviews with the two young people. The intention of the paper is to provide the actors' perspective on those two important domains of their life course. The research goals include exploring their perceptions and satisfaction with their schooling and work and obtaining their reflections on making decisions related to education and employment in different life stages. Through analysis and interpretation, I intend to respond to the theoretical aim of evaluating benefits by including the social biography approach in life course studies.

### 3 ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

#### 3.1 SLAVICA – REFOCUSING WHILE “THE FUTURE IS ON HOLD”

Slavica was seven years old when I first interviewed her in 1993, and 28 at the time of the last interview in 2014.<sup>6</sup> She comes from a family of workers in a suburban neighbourhood of Belgrade. Both her parents graduated from vocational schools and were employed in the industrial sector, but they both lost their jobs

<sup>6</sup> Her biography has also been presented and analyzed in Tomanović (2019, 2021). Therefore, some of the quotes from her interviews presented here are used in the previous studies, and they are taken verbatim from the data sets from the interviews in relevant years noted in the brackets.

during the post-socialist transformation. This meant they had to engage in precarious work: her mother as a sales assistant and her father by doing various odd jobs in the informal sector, such as repairing cars and working as a painter/decorator. Slavica is the youngest of three children in the family; she has a significantly older brother and sister who had both graduated from vocational schools, started working, moved out, and formed their own families at the time of the last interview. In Slavica's family, traditional features, such as honesty and obedience, were always particularly valued, while her parents also supported the attitude that independence could be achieved through taking on one's own responsibilities and those of the family.

Slavica had several reflections on her education at different stages of life, and those related to the "extended moments" of her biography: periods connected to educational phases (Jeffrey 2012). The second interview took place when she was finishing elementary school at the age of 14, thus she reflected briefly on how she perceived different subjects at school, but also on her plans for further education. At that point, she had expressed her wishes and plans to go to vocational school for beauticians and to open a beauty salon with her elder sister, who was a hairdresser. In her retrospection on that period during the third interview, Slavica reflected on her decision-making process concerning secondary school. After spending a long time preparing for the final exams that are considered entrance exams for most secondary schools, vocational and comprehensive alike, she had suddenly decided to pursue her interest in drawing, and instead took the exam to enrol in art school for design. In that way she expressed agency

that conflicted with the wishes of her parents, who would have preferred that she go to a school for administrative jobs. Her account reveals that she was aware that her chances of passing the special entrance exam for a highly competitive design art school after just 10 days of preparation were very slim, but she took the chance nonetheless. Since she did not get into the desired school, she then decided to enrol in the one she considered the most similar: a vocational school for graphic design. Although her parents disapproved because the school did not have a good reputation at that time and they were worried about her being surrounded by bad students, Slavica expressed high satisfaction with her choice of school: *I don't regret finishing that school, it was awesome – my company and teachers and everything.* (2007)

She was particularly satisfied with her work experience (organised by the school) at a printing firm that she extended as paid work during summer vacations:

*At that time, I was going to folklore dance, then that work practice at school and outside school, and I managed to see all the people and socialise, and my grades were never better. I was so organised. And I made an impression [at the printing firm], so they called me to work there in the summer. That was awesome for me. I earned an allowance so I could buy myself a pair of jeans.* (2007)

Slavica's positive experience and satisfaction in secondary school informed her decision to take on university studies that would combine graphic design and engineering, and she had to move to another town to pursue those studies. She did not qualify for the desired university course, but enrolled in another:



ecological engineering. During the third interview when she was 21, Slavica expressed satisfaction with the studies, even though they were not her first choice. Her “post-reflective choice” (Adams 2006) and agency to pursue her educational aspirations gave her feelings of confidence and satisfaction at that period of her biography. She was dedicated to finishing her master’s degree and was anticipating good prospects for employment afterwards: *Considering that we want to enter the European Union, the EU requires that each firm has an engineer employed in environmental protection. I think that there is a chance [of getting a job]. She expressed that her aspirations for the future would be to complete her education, to get a job in her profession, to start a family, and to get a promotion by the age of 35: I think that I have more ambitions that might not be visible, but in five years’ time [from the age of 30 to 35], if you put effort into it, you are bound to advance.* (2007)

Slavica exercised an independent agency, sometimes confronting her parents’ wishes concerning school, but she also acknowledged that her parents provided great support for her endeavours. With no institutional support mechanisms, she would not have been able to pursue university education without her parents’ provision and financial help. Her educational aspirations and plans were maintained by her parents, who in their interviews valued university education and expressed a wish that at least their youngest child should pursue it with their support. They restructured their resources so that they could finance her studies in another town, under great strain and with the help of the two elder children, which is evident in the following account from the interview with Slavica’s mother, who also described

changing “opportunity structures” in comparison to the socialist period:

*She is on the state budget, allegedly free education. But you see how much a textbook costs and how much this and that is. It all really costs a lot. We are going to support her wishes, but the government should do something. But in a country like this, it is absurd to expect anything, but everyone copes as they can. I can say, luckily, we have given her something, our children help a bit, so we will cope somehow, but it is hard. It is hard to support a student today; the good times are over. Those times will never return...* (2007)

At the time of the last interview, Slavica, then aged 28, had graduated and got a master’s degree in ecological engineering. After finishing a four-year course, she returned to Belgrade to her parental home so she would not be a financial burden to her parents. She described the period of finishing the final year of undergraduate studies and then doing her master’s studies as prolonged, since she had to work and study at the same time. She was, nevertheless, determined to finish her studies, taking exam after exam, and eventually got her master’s degree at the age of 27. She expressed disappointment with the quality of knowledge she got from her university studies, since she did not feel confident that she was qualified enough for her profession:

*Our education in general is too extensive. They don’t teach and train you specifically for a particular job. Instead you can do this and that, but actually the question is whether you can really do it or you can’t.* (2014)

On the other hand, when re-evaluating her efforts in education, which did

not lead her to the career she originally aspired to, she expressed satisfaction: *I am satisfied that I have finished. None of my friends from high school went anywhere further, they all stayed at the same level. [...] I am satisfied from that side, I have accomplished something for myself.* (2014)

While still finishing her studies, Slavica first took a precarious job as a waitress. During the last interview period, she was working full-time as a sales assistant in a cake shop, a job she had attained through a relative two years earlier. Her only satisfaction from the job was that it was regular, with regulated insurance and a steady income. On the other hand, she was aware that it was below her qualifications and that it did not provide any kind of opportunity for advancement or promotion: *There is no progress – you are a salesperson and that is it. I am not satisfied with that, I can't develop in that working position.* She had considered the job to be temporary and transitional at the beginning: *And it was like – never mind, it's just until something in my profession shows up. But nothing in my profession has shown up to this day.* (2014)

Slavica articulated elaborated reflections on her prospects for employment in the last interview. Although she anticipated that the EU standards would make her profession required in every company, her experience was that there was a "little demand" for her profile since job announcements appear online just "once in two or three months". She felt that she was without any social capital because her potential professional contacts were left in the city where she studied, while she is "left alone" with "no one from the branch here in Belgrade". She reflected on what she could do to improve her chances to find a job in her

profession, such as joining the association of engineers and taking professional seminars and English language lessons: *It means I am developing, I am expressing an interest.* (2014)

Slavica was also contemplating working as a volunteer (as an unpaid intern) in her profession if it would provide her with knowledge, skills, and work experience. She was at the same time comparing the indefinite prospects of potential employment with the benefits of having a regular job and a steady income at that moment:

*I was ready to volunteer. But on the other hand, I have my wage, I have a long-distance relationship, so I have to organise to go to him, that he comes here, for us to go to cinema, theatre, wherever... If I didn't work and only volunteered, I would lose most of it. Somehow, I am not ready for that. If I knew what I was fighting for, then I could spend 10 months volunteering so I would learn, I don't need compensation, and we will see later what to do. But there is no space for something like that.* (2014)

The last account indicates that Slavica was refocusing her agency to the relational domain, where she felt more competent and satisfied. On one hand, that was a more gendered identity position (Tomanović 2021), which was attuned with life course expectations and norms about the proper time for young women to form a family. The main source of her dissatisfaction was her partner's unemployment and her underemployment, which she perceived as a constraint on their emotional relationship: *Primarily with my job [not satisfied], since it is hindering me emotionally. We cannot live together; our relationship cannot develop.* (2014) She reflected on how to reconcile

her professional aspirations with her wish to start living with her partner. If her partner, who in her opinion had professional prospects, were to get a job, she would give up pursuing her professional goals, move to his town, and take any job available:

*I thought of finding a more normal job, or that he finds something – so we could combine what we have. But I gave up on the idea of changing jobs because it is hard to find one in the first place. We now hope that he will find something, so we will see what we will do. (2014)*

Besides these pragmatic plans regarding employment, Slavica at the same time displayed that she would not give up on her professional aspirations, but instead put her 'future on hold': *Well, in seven years' time, I think I will have to have done something myself with regard to my profession, a better job, specialisation in any sense. (2014)* In addition to articulated dissatisfaction with her work and career path, Slavica also displayed her identity insecurity within the process of adjusting her aspirations and plans: *I don't know who I am. I'm lost in time and space. (2014)*

### **3.2 MIRKO – RELYING ON HIS OWN RESOURCEFULNESS**

Mirko was also seven years old for the first interview in 1993, and 28 for the last interview in 2014.<sup>7</sup> He is the eldest child in a working-class family and he has two younger sisters. Mirko's parents were

<sup>7</sup> His biography has been also presented and analysed in Tomanović (2021). Therefore, some of the quotes from his interviews presented here are used in the previous study, and they are taken verbatim from the data sets from the interviews in relevant years noted in the brackets.

working double shifts combining formal employment and informal work during entire study period: his father as an industrial worker and a security guard for night shifts, and his mother as a cleaner at a kindergarten during the week and cleaning houses over the weekend as an extra job, until she retired. Family unity and solidarity were particularly valued, as were traditional gender and family roles. Unlike in Slavica's case, education, particularly university education, did not have particular significance in Mirko's family. Education was perceived to have an instrumental goal, and the parents had hoped that Mirko would attend an "easy school" that would provide him with material standards and security.

Since preschool, Mirko's central preoccupation was playing basketball and his aspirations towards a profession in sports marked his decision-making process during different stages of his biography. Despite his father's aspirations that he would go to some "easy school" (presumably vocational), Mirko enrolled at a sports gymnasium so he would be with his friends who participated in various sports: *The company of my friends suited me, they were all sportsmen, so I ended up there. (2007)*

His regular school was interrupted by a family crisis as the family separated temporarily when the father left them when Mirko was 16. Mirko was never willing to talk about that situation, but his mother confirmed that it was a difficult period for all family members. The family crisis marked a turning point in Mirko's biography when he exhibited agency by leaving regular schooling, shifting to part-time education, and finding employment. Since he was not willing to talk about the family crisis, he did not elaborate on the decisions he made or his reflexivity and feelings attached to them.

Mirko got his first job at his uncle's firm – doing physical work at first, then furniture installation and driving: Great, I have a great crew in the firm. My uncle is the owner, so he is full of understanding for my obligations outside work. And the boss is a good friend of mine. So, we know each other and we function well. (2007)

Mirko's agency from the age of 16 is connected to balancing employment with basketball training in order to pursue his anticipated career in sports. Analysis of the accounts from different stages of his biography reveals that, in his reflections, he considered playing basketball to be his profession, while paid work was just a necessity for securing material existence. Therefore, his evaluation of employment was considering the flexibility of the job to provide time and possibility for intensive training. He took into consideration the understanding his first employer had shown for those needs when he was deciding whether to change job later on. He stayed until his employer had found a replacement for him, although he had another job offer:

*I had their understanding, so I gave them my understanding to stay longer, although I felt dissatisfaction, not so much with the firm itself, but with the job description that wasn't fulfilling me in a good way, but in a negative one. So, with that kind of compromise, I stayed as long as I did. (2014)*

The other employer could not wait for him, so Mirko remained jobless:

*For a year, year and a half I was just doing sports, since that is what I have been doing whole my life, besides work [...] I took that break to rest properly, to think a bit and to return to physical activities until I decided to*

*start working with my brother-in-law [his sister's husband]. He is in fruit wholesale, so I am now with them. And it feels nice. It is a lot of work again, but it is well paid. (2014)*

Mirko got both his jobs through his personal contacts, so he was not using institutional channels for employment, nor was he considering political clientelism, although he was aware of the public discourse: *Everybody says that if you want some kind of employment, it all goes through the party membership card.* On the other hand, he stated that he would not want to be "labelled" as a member of any party.

Education did not have any particular significance for Mirko's work, which did not require any formal education, but rather skills such as driving and installing furniture. He was determined to finish high school, which he had left for work, by taking exams part-time. He accomplished this and graduated at the age of 21, as it meant a lot to his parents, particularly to his mother. At that time, Mirko had no particular educational aspirations, but he was focused on pursuing his sports career and working: *To be honest, I don't know. Maybe I start some studies, but just maybe. The fact is that I had hard time finishing school, not because I'm stupid, but because I couldn't make it work with my other obligations. (2007)*

Nevertheless, he started university studies in economics a couple of years later, with the motivation to provide himself with an easier and more secure job and a more comfortable existence: *The faculty degree would certainly bring a lot, easier job, probably some office job, separated from physical work, probably better wage, fixed working hours, opportunities for improvement*

and advancement in knowledge and in positions. (2014) In evaluating the quality of university studies, he stated that he was not expecting anything, since he was not able to meet the requirements for full-time students:

*In principle, passing exams was the only important thing for me. I wasn't expecting anything else, nor imagining what I could get from them, because I couldn't meet the things I could get from them. I wouldn't dare to ask for anything since I couldn't give back. (2014)*

Multiple obligations made him prolong his studies: *I stopped and I am still there, but not because of other plans, but because of family duties, about family, my sisters, my personal obligations, so I stagnated a bit and focused on my sports training and my job. (2014)* At the same time, he elaborated on his prospects in education by reflecting on his aspirations versus his constraints:

*I don't give up. Well, whether it will be in two-three or in five-six years... Although I wish to create a goal for myself, which is present somewhere in my subconscious, it is not realistic at this moment that I expect anything from it. Because of everything that is happening around me, around my family, so to say living existence – mine and my family's, my sisters... So, I don't know why, but I have accepted that I would be damaged a bit, in the sense that I haven't finished my studies yet, and I should have, at the price that I could end up without a degree, so that my family would have so much better life. (2014)*

This account clearly displays and reveals how Mirko has shifted his agency from pursuing personal goals in his sports career and education towards providing

for his family. Although playing basketball was his lifelong aspiration, he was aware from his late adolescence that he was lacking resources, material and social, but particularly time to dedicate to developing a professional career in sports. At the age of 21, he reflected: *If I want to do basketball, then I will have to stop working and really to commit to that. (2007)* Although he did not stop working and did not enter the professional league at the age of 28, Mirko was still expressing similar reflections and hopes that he could start his career by playing for a small club abroad, which he was hoping would happen with the help of acquaintances: *I could go abroad, there will be a trial, so if I present myself well... (2014)*

Mirko's prospective accounts relating to his imagined future display similar vagueness and openness when assessing the pros and cons of emigrating. His perception is that his qualities – diligence, creativity and resourcefulness – would be better appreciated abroad, although he perceives himself as a “patriot” attached to Serbia, Belgrade, and his social milieu. Emigrating would mean prioritising personal interests over providing for family:

*I have been thinking that if I could, so to say, afford more for myself, I could dedicate three or four years to going abroad, because of education, language, and job. I think I could dedicate let's say three or four years of my life, if that is a luxury, then to afford myself with the luxury. (2014)*

It seems, nevertheless, that his main aspirations are directed towards material standards and security:

*There are always goals, but they are staying aside, in the background, until you attain some capital by which you could realise them. Generally, ideas and*



*some kind of vision exist [...] As I said, I would like to earn that capital here. But, if the stars align, I might be abroad [in seven years from the interview], or maybe I'll be here the whole of my life. (2014)*

Mirko's agency was based on self-reliance and informal networks throughout his biography. It is congruent with his self-perception as a resourceful person who can cope in different life situations and who is a good and loyal person whom friends can rely upon: *I would do everything for friends, literally anything. Because friends are there when others are not, when others can't and when others won't. (2007)* He singled out relationships with family members and friends as the major source of his satisfaction: *I am satisfied, I can't say very satisfied, but I am satisfied. I have a healthy family that is always by my side, father, mother, sisters, friends. (2014)* It seems, therefore, that he has substituted his personal interests and goals, particularly those related to his sports career, with the gendered position, role and identity of family provider.

#### **4 DISCUSSION**

In the following section, I will discuss how the main principles of the life course paradigm are compatible with the social biography approach, since they both go beyond simply sequencing events by emphasising processes within trajectories and interlinked events and relationships in the same way. I will also point at benefits of including the reflexivity of social biographies in exploring and interpreting education-to-work transitions within life courses.

While the two studied young adults come from similar family backgrounds, their biographies are substantially dif-

ferent: Slavica is more education-oriented, while Mirko is more work-oriented. Regarding the second principle of the life course paradigm – that individuals actively construct their biography – analysis shows that their education-to-work trajectories and agency are path-dependent and embedded in biographical contexts. As the longitudinal insights from her interviews disclose, Slavica's educational trajectory was dependent on the line of her decisions across various life stages and biographical contexts. Her reflections display that her decision-making was based on compromising between aspirations and opportunities – her personal ability to enrol in her desired school or university course. She has displayed a different form of agency in decision-making across different life stages – in transitional educational phases, and later in confronting educated unemployment. This involved pursuing educational aspirations, adapting to changes by implementing a strategy of “cooling out”, then abandoning the career path in her plans, but not in her aspirations, and refocusing on her personal life (Tomanović 2019). For Mirko, education and work were intertwined from the age of 16 when he left regular school. His transitional trajectory is not a linear path from education to work, but work part parallel to schooling during secondary school and later with tertiary education. At the same time, education and employment are not connected in his biography on a reflexive level, as they are in Slavica's reflections. Although perceived instrumental – Mirko's high school education did not provide him with skills for his jobs, but it was expected to be more attuned to his anticipated career in professional sport. Similarly, his aspirations for obtaining university education are



not career-oriented, but to acquire a better social position and a more secure material existence.

Analysis of two biographical accounts has revealed particular “opportunity structures” in education-to-work transitions that are connected to the principles that socially contextualise people’s life courses: through being embedded in historical time and place, as well as social circumstances and events that influence transitions. Slavica and Mirko relate their agency to these opportunity structures by not taking into account scarce institutional support for education and employment, while developing and using atomised strategies of relying on non-institutional resources: material and social capital from their families and their own capacities (knowledge, skills, resourcefulness, contacts, etc.). Their agency and reflections disclose that they have “normalised uncertainty” (Roberts 2009) of their social context, which I have described as a “chronic social crisis”.

Analysis of the social biographies of the two young people also points to the relevance of the life course principle of “linked lives” (Nico 2021) by revealing how their education and work-related agency, decisions, and actions are connected to other people’s lives across different life stages. Slavica’s decisions concerning her education were supported by her parents, whose resources were crucial for her to pursue her educational goals. At a later stage of life, while facing unemployment and underemployment after finishing her education, her reflections and agency towards future work prospects are linked to her emotional relationship. The shifting of her agency towards the relational domain is also influenced by social circumstances that comply with

gendered norms regarding the appropriate time for family transitions. Mirko’s decision regarding secondary school was informed by his individual aspiration of having a professional sporting career. Nevertheless, from the moment of his family crisis, family ties and obligations towards family members took priority over his personal needs and interests. As a consequence, his biography became work-oriented, but not education- and career-oriented, as he was shifting his agency towards the relational domain of securing material comfort and standards for his family and taking on the role of family provider.

Including reflexivity into this form of analysis shows how the actors relate their agency to the structures around them, and how they interpret their opportunities and accomplishments in a given biographical context. Reflexivity is closely connected with emotions and feelings of self-perception and life satisfaction. Slavica has experienced constraints on her advancement and the realisation of her anticipated professional career since finishing her desired education. Her narrative reveals reflexivity with a lack of choices, which resembles what Devadason refers as *setback stories* related to the biographies of the young adults who have continued with their “employment in undesired, unskilled work [...] for extended periods and, thus, have been less able to climb career ladders or pursue personal goals. In these stories, young adults tend to refer to a lack of encouragement, confidence or the ‘right networks’ to fulfil their aspirations. This type of causality is often associated with specific events such as episodes of unemployment, not getting a job one has applied for, or not gaining entry to a desired occupation.” (Devadason 2007: 212).

Unrealised agency in the professional domain led Slavica to feelings of dissatisfaction with her work and career path and frustration, which is reflected in her self-perception. While Mirko was switching from his sports career with no promotion to a job orientation, he expressed no reflexivity on giving up his career and the reasons for not succeeding. He found satisfaction in his work as a base for his new role of family provider and in his self-perception as resourceful man who can solve problems. Those feelings informed his aspirations and plans for future employment.

## 5 CONCLUDING REMARKS

Qualitative analysis of education-to-work transitions within the biographies of the two young adults contributes to life course studies by including the missing actors' perspective on transitions through exploring their agency and reflections. Including a social biography perspective proves that transitions are contextualised life course processes (Vogt 2018). Moments of making decisions and choices are embedded in different biographical contexts, which are complex and related not only to structural opportunities and constraints,

but also linked to other people's lives. Transitional processes are also biographised; the actors reflectively relate their decisions and choices regarding education and employment to their self-perception, identities, aspirations, and expectations concerning their other transitions, notably family transitions.

The same methodological advantage of the longitudinal qualitative method – that it provides actors' interpretations of processes, providing insight and hindsight within a time perspective – is also its main limitation. The approach is anchored in the actor's repetitive reconstructions and evaluations of past life events, present uncertainties, and dilemmas about the future. We cannot, therefore, make predictions or identify the key factors that will determine the career paths of these young adults. The study does not make generalisations about education-to-work transitions in the general population. It does not reveal linear patterns and predictions of individual biographies either. However, these limitations point to the central role of reflexivity in interpreting agency across a person's life course, since each moment of life path reconstruction is also a construction of one's own social biography.

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# **Povezivanje socijalne biografije i životnog toka: Dejstvenost i refleksivnost u obrazovno-radnoj tranziciji u biografijama mladih**

## **SAŽETAK**

Rad je zasnovan na mom longitudinalnom kvalitativnom istraživanju u kome se primenjuje pristup socijalne biografije u proučavanju i tumačenju biografskih perioda u životnom toku osobe od ranog detinjstva do kasne mladosti. U okviru najnovije debate o „vraćanju života“ u pristup životnog toka kroz primenu kvalitativnih nalaza, rad se bavi načinima na koji istraživanja tranzicija u mladosti iz perspektive socijalne biografije mogu doprineti studijama životnog toka. U uvodnom teorijskom delu predstavljaju se ključni koncepti koji su relevantni za povezivanje dva pristupa: tranzicija u odraslost i obrazovno-radna tranzicija u okviru nje, dejstvenost i refleksivnost. Dejstvenost je u relevantnoj literaturi prepoznata kao značajan aspekt u obrazovno-radnoj tranziciji, dok su istraživanja koja se bave promišljanjem izbora, odluka i dejstvenosti u tranzicijama iz biografske perspektiva retka. Jedan od doprinosa ovog rada predstavlja pokušaj prevazilaženja te saznanje praznine. Potom se u uvodnom delu predstavlja specifičan kontekst tzv. „struktura mogućnosti“ za obrazovno-radnu tranziciju u društvu Srbije, koji se određuje kao „hronična društvena kriza“. U sledećem delu predstavljen je metod longitudinalnog kvalitativnog istraživanja koje je sprovedeno od 1993. do 2014. godine, sa dvadesetoro dece/mladih osoba i njihovim porodicama. Opisani su načini inicijalnog izbora ispitanika, prikupljanja podataka – intervju fokusiran na rekonstrukciju sedmogodišnjih biografskih perioda sa temama koje se ponavljaju u svakom istraživačkom talasu, kao i analize podataka i interpretacije nalaza.

Deo rada posvećen analizi fokusira se na obrazovno-radne tranzicije u okviru biografija mlade žene i mladog muškarca koji su poreklom iz radničkih porodica. Analiza je pokazala da njihove obrazovno-radne tranzicije ne prate linearne putanje, već da su donošenje odluka i izbori u ovom domenu povezani sa prethodnom dejstvenošću i sa životima drugih značajnih osoba u različitim kontekstima njihovih biografija i fazama životnog toka.

U završnim delovima se diskutuje kompatibilnost pristupa socijalne biografije i principa studija životnog toka: naglasak na dejstvenosti, na kontekstualizaciji u istorijskom vremenu i prostoru, i na povezanost životnog toka sa životima značajnih drugih, što se sve pokazalo u prethodnoj analizi. Moje gledište je da uključivanje refleksivnosti u proučavanje životnog toka može doneti saznanji pomak kroz akterovu interpretaciju uticaja specifičnih „struktura mogućnosti“ na njihovo obrazovanje i zaposlenje. Analiza dve biografije je takođe pokazala da su osećanja i (ne)zadovoljstvo koji su iskazani u promišljanjima istraživanih mladih odraslih imali uticaj na njihovu dejstvenost povezanu sa obrazovanjem i radom.

Uključivanje perspektive socijalne biografije pokazuje da su tranzicije procesi koji su kontekstualizovani u životnom toku. Donošenje odluka i pravljenje izbora su uklopljeni u složene biografske kontekste, koji nisu samo povezani sa strukturalnim mogućnostima i ograničenjima, već i sa životima drugih osoba. Proces i tranzicije su takođe biografizovani – akteri promišljanjem povezuju svoje odluke i izbore koji se tiču obrazovanja i zaposlenja sa doživljajem sebe, identitetom, aspiracijama i očekivanjima u vezi sa drugim tranzicijama, posebno porodičnom.

## **KLJUČNE REČI**

socijalna biografija, obrazovno-radna tranzicija, dejstvenost, refleksivnost, životni tok, Srbija