

## Review: Determined to Work?

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Wolfgang Lehmann. *Choosing to Labour? School-Work Transitions and Social Class*. Montreal et al.: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2007. ISBN 978-0-7735-3306-6.

How do high school students in Canada and Germany decide what kind of work they want to do after graduation? Wolfgang Lehmann, a professor of sociology at the University of Western Ontario, asked over 100 students in Edmonton and Bremen and found some surprising results. This is not an oral history, but rather a qualitative study addressed primarily to Canadian educational policy makers and school administrators. Nevertheless, oral historians can learn from the ways in which social scientists analyze and interpret qualitative data such as interviews.

In the first part of his book, Lehmann describes his research results. Although statistics reveal that social status determines to a large degree whether students choose to apprentice in a trade or go on to university, the young men and women describe their choices as their own. Despite very different school systems in Germany and Canada, there are no significant differences in this gap between reality and perception. Lehmann is particularly interested in the students who decided to learn a trade. While Germany's apprenticeship system has a long history and is deeply integrated in the school system and labour market, Canada has no overarching system. Thus, he takes Alberta's Registered Apprenticeship Program as a case study. The crucial question about apprenticeship systems is whether apprenticeships help students achieve the best education or whether they channel working-class children into working-class jobs, thus perpetuating class structures and reproducing social inequality. Research, including Lehmann's own, shows that the latter is the case, and that there is little room for students' actual agency.

This is particularly problematic for female students, because they make their decisions within deeply gendered familial and social circumstances. Although girls and women have become more successful in education, their virtual absence from trades – and the lack of trades (outside of hairdressing) for them – leave female students not going on to higher education with a bleak future. Yet, even young women planning to go on to college or university plan their careers with considerations about future family plans in mind that put them into the traditional role of stay-at-home mom. Young men's silence about family in discussing their careers similarly points to gendered expectations of their future wives to stay at home with their future children.

Throughout the book, Lehmann's research results are richly illustrated with quotes from the interviews, where silences and the repetitive expression of ignorance are as informative as the young people's reflections on their futures.

In the second half of the book, Lehmann moves on to an analysis and interpretation of the interviews. In chapter 5, he examines Alberta's Registered Apprenticeship Program, in which high school students begin an apprenticeship while working towards their high school diploma. With the help of his informants, Lehmann exposes the program's deficiencies: Teachers are not informed about the program, which leads to declining grades for the students. The program and the school's involvement are based purely on employers' interests.

Apprenticeships do not follow plans but are simply ad-hoc learning-by-doing experiences. Apprentices' rights are discussed neither at the workplace nor in school; as a result, students buy into the idea that exploitation and abuse are part of the learning experience, and schools fail in their pedagogical responsibilities.

Chapters 4 and 6 will be most useful for oral historians wishing to find out how social scientists make sense of interviews. Lehmann draws on sociologists Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens, and Pierre Bourdieu to explain what the high school students told him in the interviews, focus groups, and survey. Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital and habitus are central to Lehmann's navigation of the theoretical framework of agency and structure. Parents play an important, albeit often unconscious, role in perpetuating class-specific life courses. Lehmann's evidence on the role of schools, however, is damning. In both countries, schools are systemically based on furthering the interests of middle- and upper-class children expected to go on to higher education. Neither curricula nor teachers (who are almost always from middle- and upper-class families themselves) are interested in working-class children's interests. As a result, these children are alienated from school.

But Lehmann is weary of deterministic structuralism. He concludes that the students were neither simply making independent, rational choices about their future employment nor did the structural conditions in which they grew up simply predestine them to seek either vocational training or an academic education. He is at pains to carve out a little room for his interviewees' agency in the face of overwhelming quantitative evidence the students' socio-economic status leaves them little choice. Throughout the book, he is in conversation with Paul Willis, who argued in his 1977 study *Learning to Labour* that working-class 'lads' were rejecting school's middle-class values and thus reproduced their working-class status and social inequality. Lehmann finds Willis's view too deterministic. But after reviewing his own evidence, he finds little agency outside of the students' belief that they had a choice, and even here he admits that they are simply rehashing the slogans of a liberal ideology. There seems to be frustration in his voice when he asks the very important question: "Are we to discount narratives of

agency if the result of this agency is socially reproductive [i.e. if it perpetuates social inequality]?”

Lehmann attempts to answer this question in chapter 6. He argues that researchers fall into the trap of their own middle-class values if they call the decision of a son of a car mechanic to become a car mechanic social reproduction while they call the decision of daughter of a lawyer to become a lawyer agency. He identifies the young people’s agency in their “active form of biography construction” (146). In the narrative construction of their lives, the youth reaffirm and justify their decisions to learn a trade. Although some continue to have doubts, they are adamant that higher education has no benefits. As Joelle, a student from Edmonton, explains: “I don’t really think [a lack of university education is a disadvantage], because I think it’s like up to you, what you put into things. If you put all your effort into something, it doesn’t matter” (152). Apprentices also agree that work is the “real world,” where, unlike in school, one becomes responsible and independent. The apprentices argued that work helped them “grow up faster” and become more mature than those who stay in school. As Brent, also from Edmonton, says: “Like most of my friends [puts on a whiny voice,] ‘Oh, my parents pay for university.’ I find that pointless. I mean, what does that teach you in life? You should be out working in your high school and save up for university, because then you learn how to save and you learn responsibility” (158). Lehmann interprets such biography constructions as processes of individualization that are part of late modernity. As such, they are evidence of agency, because they show that the youth “actively engage with the structures and patterns that frame their dispositions and actions” (169).

This argument for agency is interesting but not convincing. Too much of his own data, apart from the quantitative data, suggests that young people have surprisingly little agency in their decisions to learn a trade. Indeed, the interviews seem to show less upward mobility than the quantitative data. This may be in part because there is at times insufficient contextual quantitative data. For instance, two of the female apprentices are learning to become chefs, the rest are learning hairdressing. How does that compare to the national figures?

Despite these minor quibbles, the book raises important questions and finds a very good balance between the interviewees’ and the researcher’s voices. Oral historians will find a useful model for conceptualizing projects based on topical interviews, analyzing them within a life-course framework that is theoretically saturated without being overwhelming, and publishing the results in a concise form that nevertheless puts the interviewees’ voices in the foreground.