

Preface

This volume emerged from the international research program '*flex*CAREER: Flexibility Forms on the Labor Market – a Cross-National Comparison of Social Inequality', funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG). The main focus of the project has been on the effects of the flexibilization process on individual employment careers and social inequality structures in modern societies. This edited book presents the findings of the second phase of the *flex*CAREER project which examined the late career and the transition to retirement in ten OECD-type countries (Germany, The Netherlands, United Kingdom, USA, Italy, Spain, Denmark, Sweden, Hungary, and Estonia). In 2008, the results of the first phase of the *flex*CAREER were published as an edited volume entitled 'Young Workers, Globalization and the Labor Market: Comparing Early Working Life in Eleven Countries' in the program of Edward Elgar Publishing.

For several decades, many European societies relied on pushing older workers out of employment by using early retirement in order to relieve national labor markets in times of increasing market uncertainty and economic restructuring in the globalization process. Yet, one of the major challenges facing European and Northern American societies today is their severe demographic aging. The increasing share of older people puts pension systems under substantial pressure because of the rising imbalance between those claiming pensions and those contributing to the pension system. Alongside, the labor force of modern societies is marked by a significant aging resulting in increasing labor shortages. These make it necessary for companies and governments in various welfare states to maintain elderly in employment instead of sending them into early retirement. Indeed, it can be observed that in the recent past governments have tried to increase the labor market attachment of older employees by retrenching early retirement benefits (see, for example, the EU Lisbon Agenda). However, it can be expected that the success of these reforms varies considerably among modern societies. Our book investigates which policies are currently applied by the different modern welfare states and what lessons modern states may learn from each other in this process. We further ask how far the privatization of public pension systems and the abolishment of early retirement programs

have increased the level of uncertainty in old age and social inequality in modern societies.

More specifically, the empirical analyses presented in this book tackle the following questions: Is there a general trend towards more unstable and prolonged careers for older people? Do older people increasingly have to pay the price for failing on the labor market, for example by a substantial decrease of pension incomes or even by old age poverty? Another set of research questions focuses on the issue of social inequalities. Who are the winners and losers among the elderly? Do uncertainty, inequality and instability increase for all older individuals, or are traditional inequality patterns – based on educational resources and occupational class – persistent or even reinforced? And finally, countries differ significantly with respect to the characteristics of their occupation systems, the strength of their labor market regulations, the nature of their employment sustaining policies and the level of decommodification offered by the national welfare system. How do these institutional packages affect older people's employment trajectories and retirement? Have the lives of (older) people in various countries become more alike? Is there a convergence in life-course patterns, or are the changes induced by the globalization process path-dependent?

The *flexCAREER* project started in 2005. It was first located at the University of Bamberg, directed by Hans-Peter Blossfeld and Karin Kurz. Since 2009, the project has been located at the Universities of Bamberg and Göttingen, when Karin Kurz was appointed as Professor of Sociology at the University of Göttingen. During the preparation of this book, the project consisted of the core project members Annika Rinklake, Julia Schilling, Paul Schmelzer and Alberto Veira-Ramos who all contributed greatly to the realization of this research project.

An important part of the *flexCAREER* project was to create and utilize an international research network in which substantive and methodological issues in the analysis of labor market entry and the early employment career could be developed. This network of experts contributed with their country studies to this book. We would like to thank all contributors of the country-specific chapters for their co-operation and the enormous effort they put into their analyses and manuscripts. We tried to use comparable data, and made a commitment to apply a common research design to the study of labor market entries and early careers. However, the contributors did not simply carry out a previously designed analysis. As demonstrated by the wealth of information in the country-specific chapters, much of the work in this book represents the creative contributions of our international collaborators.

In the stage of preparing the final typescript, we received valuable help from our student assistants Alexandra Trojan and Carolyn Stolberg. We benefited greatly from the work of Jonathan Harrow, who improved the

English of our manuscript with great care. Although these colleagues eliminated some of our errors, only we are responsible for those that remain.

Our appreciation also goes to Tim Williams at Edward Elgar Publishing and the anonymous Edward Elgar reviewers for supporting the publication of this volume. Finally, we would like to thank the German Research Foundation for their financial support that made this ambitious project possible.

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