Shortly after the Wende and German unification, many researchers from the ‘old’ Federal Republic began to conduct research on young people and the family in the German Democratic Republic and the new Länder. Although the Central Institute of Youth Research in Leipzig (ZIJ = Zentralinstitut für Jugendforschung) had conducted research programmes for several decades, little was known about the attitudes and behaviour of young East Germans because the GDR government had withheld most of the ZIJ’s findings from publication (Friedrich, 1991). West German researchers were especially interested in finding out to what extent the different political and social systems had affected the development of young people. The peculiarity of this cross-cultural research question lies in the common cultural tradition of both systems. This may offer a chance to single out the effects of different state ideologies, educational systems and leisure-time activites on the process of growing up. The earliest and most carefully designed of a clutch of comparative studies by West Germans of young people in both Germanies were the so-called Shell Study Youth ‘92 (Jugendwerk der Deutschen Shell, 1992) and the huge youth and family surveys of the German Youth Institute in Munich (Bertram, 1992; Nauck and Bertram, 1995). Many other studies followed while the Shell Study was replicated in 1996 (Silbereisen et al. 1996).

After unification, some findings from the GDR era were published (e.g. Hennig and Friedrich, 1991; Boltz and Griese, 1995) while other data sets were saved and stored in the Central Archive (ZA) in Cologne enabling scholars to conduct secondary analyses of data collected in the 1970s and 80s in the GDR. A handful of longitudinal studies from the GDR continued beyond unification such as the Rostock study which had commenced with the birth cohort of 1972 (Meyer-Probst et al., 1991) or the study by Förster and Friedrich (1996) with eleven waves of data collection since 1987. In addition, an ingenious life-course study of three age cohorts presents lively insights into marriage and the family in the GDR (Huinink et al., 1995).

This chapter discusses some methodological issues arising from the comparative study of East and West Germany and presents key findings.
PROBLEMS OF EAST-WEST COMPARISONS

Hidden assumptions about East-West differences

When conducting East-West comparisons, most Western researchers as well as visitors to the East tend to take Western standards as their yardstick – sometimes implicitly, but very often explicitly. In such comparisons the East shows up as deficient and is very often characterized by a lack of modernity. This interpretation may be applicable if we look at the infrastructure or production where modernity or the lack of it can be measured in terms of money and technology. However, the Western standards are largely inadequate when we compare attitudes, patterns of behaviour, sentiments or culture-specific psychological traits. Leaving aside some basic aspects such as human and civil rights or democratic procedures, we simply do not possess transferable criteria for the comparison of everyday thinking and acting for people in different cultures. We do not have the measures to tell us that a behavioural trait prevalent in the East may be worse than the corresponding trait in the West. History, ethnography and sociology have taught us to overcome ethnocentrism. But, wherever East and West Germans meet, we are confronted with evaluations representing a naive ethnocentrism on both sides, even at the universities of the new German Länder. Surely, it would be more constructive to identify differences between East and West without grading them in terms of better and worse?

Adolescents and families in East Germany may have many things in common with their West German equivalents, yet they are charged wholesale with a lack of modernity. This is the case when adolescents meet (for example) in discotheques in West Berlin or at sport competitions and the Western participants demonstrate an arrogant superiority. Some observers speak of Western ‘prosperity chauvinism’ or ‘winner’s mentality’ (Bütow, 1995, p. 104). Some researchers regard the behaviour of adolescents in the West as more modern in style. However, the mere fact that a particular behaviour occurs more often or less often in the West does not make it more modern or better. It could be argued that the processes of modernization have unfolded in different ways in the GDR and the FRG (e. g. Gensicke, 1995; Kirchhöfer, 1995b). And it could be argued that the Western view is blind to the advantages of the Eastern kind of modern living.

Young People and the Family

on young people and their relationship with parents and peers in the western and eastern parts of German society.