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THE IDENTITIES OF YOUNG PEOPLE IN EUROPE

A research on the process of identity construction among European young people: suggestions for policies, and the EC White Paper on Youth

Summary

Youth transitions to adulthood have been re-shaped and made more uncertain by the societal changes of the past few decades. The ways in which young people define their identities in the context of the uncertainty which is part of their everyday lives has been the subject of my research, which has focussed on Italy and England. The results of this research are presented, and their policy implications discussed in relation to the lines recently drawn by the European Commission in the White Paper on Youth.

Introduction

This briefing note presents the results of the research on young people that I have carried out for my PhD project at the Centre for Family Research of the University of Cambridge, and outlines the policy suggestions which can be developed from its findings, in the light also of the recent EC White Paper on Youth. The research project, which has been supported by an EC Marie Curie Fellowship, has explored the ways in which young people define their identities in contemporary Europe, with a comparative focus on England and Italy.

In the present age, when the contexts of people's lives are being altered at an increasingly fast pace by the effects of globalisation, it is suggested that the transition from childhood to adulthood has become extremely fluid and happens in less predictable ways than in the past (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997). Faced with a rapidly changing world, young people find it increasingly hard to rely on the experiences of previous generations to construct their lives and identities. In the pronounced uncertainty that characterises today's society the process of identity construction, which psychology has traditionally

seen as the specific life-stage task of youth (Erikson, 1980), thus acquires a particular relevance. It is, in fact, at times when they are put into question that identities become especially significant, when previous self-constructions turn out to be no longer viable and in need of revision. Given that so few things can be taken to be secure and long lasting in the contemporary world, my research has investigated the manner in which young people move in the context of such fluidity.

The first section of the briefing note makes a background review of the ways in which young people's lives have changed in contemporary Europe, making reference to Beck's theorisation of the risk society (Beck, 1992), and highlights the implications of societal changes on youth transitions. The second section introduces the EC White Paper on Youth, summarising its recommendations. My research project is presented in section three, which outlines the theoretical background, fieldwork details, and results of the study. The fourth and final section highlights the policy suggestions that my research findings allow to develop regarding youth policies, in relation also to the indications drawn in the EC White Paper on Youth.

1. The changing context of young people's lives in contemporary Europe

The context in which young people grow up in the advanced industrial societies of contemporary Europe has been changing quite significantly in the past few decades. With the restructuring of Western economies, characterised by a decline of manufacturing industries, many workplaces which would traditionally employ young people ceased to exist and youth unemployment became a reality which has continued to be a problem for

European societies (Bynner, 2001). In the face of the rapid social changes brought about by a situation of high unemployment and greater job insecurity, the contexts of young people's lives have taken on the traits of the 'risk society' as described by Beck (Beck, 1992), though the continuity shown by the existing patterns of social inequalities best defines this context as one of 'structured individualisation' (Evans and Furlong, 1997).

As an unintended development of the capitalistic system, a process of 'reflexive modernisation' (Beck, 1994) has been taking place since about the 1960s. In parallel with the advancement of the capitalist industrial order, a simultaneous dissolution of the established structures which were providing the foundations for that system has arguably occurred. That has led to a societal change towards 'individualisation' (Beck, 1992), which has had the effect of freeing people from the hold of tradition. However, once the framework of the old structures which were regulating people's actions was opened, a situation of profound insecurity has flooded in. That has marked the emergence of a 'risk society', where an unprecedented variety of risks, on both a personal and a global scale, are constitutive of the experience of everyday life.

In the uncertainty of the changed context, issues of identity have acquired a new urgency and relevance. On the subjective level, the 'disembedding' (Giddens, 1991) from the grip of traditional authorities has meant experiencing a higher individual freedom and the opening of new possibilities for self-definition, as identities are not structured in advance any longer. On the other hand, it has also implied disorientation by the loss of those norms and other forms of practical knowledge which would previously guide the construction of lives and identities. The development of a reflexive attitude is required in conditions of late modernity (Giddens, 1991): in order to anticipate and actively engage with the risks which crop up at every turn in one's existence, so to define a future course of action, people must be constantly open to alternative self-reconstructions. Risks are thus constructed as essentially individual tasks to accomplish, while their connections to wider social processes are obscured and difficult to read.

In the more fragmented and individualised world of late modernity, along with the compulsion to reflect and self-define, which demands that people choose one code of reference among many, in much the same way as a consumer option (Bauman, 1995), one unifying principle can

be found: the imperatives of the market, to which everyone is asked to conform (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). Life must accommodate the market in every single way (Sennett, 1998), and people are requested to be flexible to the changing requirements, mobile, free and unattached. Each of them a 'flexible work unit' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995), they must be prepared to disregard their social commitments for the sake of their individual ambitions. Avoiding commitment is thus the best strategy in a world where things are changing fast and everybody is asked to be constantly on the move (Bauman, 1998).

But although the perception of uncertainty and risk is generalised, risks tend to accumulate in the lives of the less privileged, since the old patterns of inequality have stayed intact, the social differences having actually got more extreme and polarised. It is thus in a context of 'structured individualisation' (Evans and Furlong, 1997) that young people define their lives, a context where they all are faced with new risks which are difficult to tackle, and mainly only assessable on a short-term basis. However, it is also a context where they come differentially equipped to deal with these risks, on the basis of their position in the social structure in terms of class, gender, ethnicity and locality. So for some of them who may be constructing 'biographies of choice' (Beck, 1992), taking an active involvement with the options which risks may open in their lives, others will instead experience no choice, but be forced into one-way routes over which they have little or no control.

Against the uncertain background of late modernity, the transition from youth into adulthood has also taken a new character. The passage into adult life would typically be marked by a series of inter-related transitions, taking place in different and concatenated spheres of young people's lives (Jones, 1995): from school to work, from the family of origin to a family of one's own, and from the parental home to a home of one's own. Those transitions are now happening in a non-linear fashion: they have become desequenced and protracted in time, cannot entirely be predicted and involve backtracking and false starts (Furlong, 2000), resembling the fragile and reversible movement of a yo-yo (EGRIS, 2001). Taking aside the longer time they usually spend in education, very few young people nowadays share a same set of experiences: their choices are increasingly individualised, in the manner of consumer options (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997).

As a consequence of the reshaping of youth transitions, the age brackets which define the contours of youth are increasingly blurred. As a stage of life, youth is thus losing its transitional character towards adulthood and may either be seen as extending further in time and taking more emphasis as a separate stage in itself (Soares, 2000), or as increasingly overlapping with adulthood, the process of becoming an adult now starting earlier in life (Wyn and Dwyer, 2000). An ever growing number of internal subdivisions are variously being named, such as 'late adolescence' (Du Bois-Reymond, 1998) or 'young adulthood' (EGRIS, 2001). In this novel phase of youth, young people's experience is typically made up of status inconsistencies. With the characters of both an adult and a young person at the same time, they live divided lives (EGRIS, 2001) which are difficult to reconcile into a coherent and unified life-plan. These inconsistencies are a source of tension which may potentially be the cause of a whole range of new forms of suffering and mental health problems (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997) as well as other risk-related behaviours (Chisholm and Hurrelmann, 1995).

2. The EC White Paper on Youth

In response to the many rapid and substantial changes which are affecting the lives of young people in Europe, the European Commission has published a White Paper on Youth (21/11/01). The aim of this document is to define a new framework of cooperation for European Union policies concerning youth. Given that many of the current policies are still based on expectations which do not correspond to the reality lived by young people any longer (EGRIS, 2001, Jones and Bell, 2000), taking issue at the European level with the changing aspects of young people's lives is an important step. Two are the main aspects on which the future cooperation will rely: the application of 'the open method of coordination' in the specific field of youth, and mainstreaming, that is the taking more into account of youth into other policies.

The White Paper is the result of a wide-ranging consultation exercise which has involved all the Member States and has lasted from May 2000 to March 2001. Young people from diverse backgrounds, youth organisations, NGOs, the scientific community, policy-makers, and public administrations have all participated in its drawing. National Conferences were organised in all the Member States, as well as a European Youth Gathering in Paris in October 2000, Hearings with the Economic and Social

Committee in Brussels in February 2001, further meetings in all the European capitals, an event in Umeå in March 2001, and a Public Hearing on youth policy organised by the Committee on Culture of the European Parliament in April 2001. In relying on such an extensive participation, this White Paper is an outcome of the EC 'governance' approach. Opening up the European Union's decision making process to the citizens who will be affected by those decisions, so that they can be informed, as well as directly involved in it, is one of the strategic priorities set by the European Commission in order to promote new forms of governance.

Indeed, in relying on and promoting young people's own contribution as active citizens, the White Paper addresses one major concern: the disaffection which young people increasingly seem to show towards politics, especially in its traditional forms, a disaffection extending also to European institutions, which are often perceived as distant. Thus, in drawing the lines of future European policies on youth, the White Paper attempts to give voice to the wishes and aspirations of young Europeans, with the aim of involving them in the process of building the Europe of tomorrow.

With regards to the specific field of youth, The European Commission proposes an 'open method of coordination' for the achievement of commonly defined targets. Such method establishes a collaborative approach between the Member States and, through a procedure which involves periodic monitoring, evaluation, and peer review, fosters a mutual learning process. Together with priority themes, common objectives, guidelines, follow-up mechanisms, and arrangements for consulting young people are also defined.

The priority themes which the European Commission has highlighted for the application of the 'open method of coordination' are the following:

- Participation

Enhancing young people's participation is an improvement also in terms of their education and citizenship. Primarily aimed at a local community level, participation should be promoted through innovative mechanisms, which may allow also the involvement of young people who are disadvantaged and hard to reach, as well as those who are not already active in organisations.

- Information

The provision of information is closely associated with the aim of fostering participation. Information should be targeted on young people, who should ideally be also directly involved in the design and production of communication.

- Voluntary service among young people

Efforts will be made towards recognising voluntary service as an experience of non formal learning and towards removing any obstacles to the movement of volunteers.

- Greater understanding of youth

The aim is taking stock of the research in progress on young people at the European level, as well as promoting new studies within the sixth European research framework programme.

On the basis of the consultation exercise undertaken, the priority areas in which the youth aspect has to be taken into account are the following:

- Education, lifelong learning and mobility

A clearer definition of the concepts, skills acquired, and quality standards of non formal learning will be pursued, together with its better recognition and complementarity with formal education. On mobility, reference is made to an Action Plan approved in Nice in December 2000 which aims to eliminate barriers to the mobility of students, teachers and researchers, on the purpose of promoting a European qualifications area.

- Employment

Reference is made to the European employment strategy based on the 'employment' chapter of the Treaty of Amsterdam. Specifically with regards to young people, the Employment Guidelines stress the need for policies preventing long-term unemployment on the basis of individual counselling; the improvement of education and training systems; reducing the number of young people leaving education and training prematurely; making instruction in the new technologies universally available.

- Social integration

The Lisbon European Council of March 2000 set in place an open method of coordination to foster social integration. This method combines national action plans with the common objectives for tackling social exclusion and poverty adopted at the Nice European Council of December 2000. The aspects most specifically concerning young people include: developing a labour market which favours the inclusion of young people;

guaranteeing adequate resources and incomes for young people in difficulties, particularly members of minorities; tackling inequalities in education; enhancing access to quality services; regenerating disadvantaged areas.

- Young people against racism and xenophobia

Article 13 of the Treaty of Amsterdam strengthened efforts to combat any form of discrimination and the European Union has acquired two new directives and an action programme in this field. At Community level it is proposed that priority will be given to tackling racism and xenophobia in all Community programmes and measures affecting young people.

- Autonomy for young people

It is proposed to set up a high level working group for advice on this complex issue, which requires multidisciplinary expertise, as well as involving many policies other than those more specifically concerning youth (i.e. employment, family, social protection, health, transport, justice and home affairs).

3. The research: the process of identity construction among English and Italian young people

3.1 Research framework

My approach to the study of identities has been holistic and relational, based on what I have called a 'self+other' model of identity. Developed on the assumption that we construct our identities in a dialogue with the other, by relating to what we are not, this model challenges the notion that a boundary differentiating and opposing the self to the other should instead be fundamental (Paasi, 2001). A dynamic model, it accounts for continuity and change over time as well as over movement across space, and also integrates the dimensions of uncertainty and of the imaginary (Hermans, 2001). By referring to the dialectics of self and other it looks at identities as multiple and shifting narrative constructions, made of diverse and often conflicting selves (Markus and Nurius, 1986), and constantly being negotiated.

Migration has been chosen as a case study because paradigmatic of a late modern human condition characterised by rapid social change, increased facility of movement and of contact with the other. It is an existential condition in which the fundamental parameters regulating human life, time and space, have profoundly changed (Bauman, 1998). As such, the experience of migrating can show at a higher

level of intensity those same processes of identity construction that are part of everyday life in a late modern context. The migration stories collected in this research exemplify a contemporary type of movement, specific to young people in Europe, for whom migrating has become far easier and corresponds to one of the possible options available in life. Following my own life-story as a framework, I have drawn the research parameters from my experience of migrating from Italy to England as a young woman, and have designed the investigation as an autobiographical project (Stanley, 1992).

3.2 Fieldwork details

The fieldwork took place in England and in Italy, in Cambridgeshire and in the Provincia di Firenze respectively. It lasted from February 1998 to October 1999 and involved the participation of 41 young people, aged 16 to 26, and equally divided by sex and between migrants and locals, the migration being between the two countries. Through the adoption of a qualitative approach, multi-method and autobiographical, which has involved the use of diaries and visual methods, as well as open-ended interviews, my intent has been to rely on the active collaboration of the young people taking part, allowing them to participate according to their own modalities of self-expression. The contribution that these young people have given to the research, which, requiring follow-up, represented a significant investment in terms of their time and energies, has indeed been enthusiastic. The resulting multi-level autobiographical narratives have been analysed along the parameters of qualitative narrative analysis (Lieblich et al., 1998), with the aid of the Atlas.ti computer software (Muhr, 1994).

3.3 Research results

What follows is an outline of the themes which this research has documented as being most significant in the process of identity construction among young people in contemporary England and Italy.

- **The 'eternal present'**

The predominant mode of existence emerging from the young people's narratives supports the post-modern thesis of a quintessential fragmentation of the human condition in late modernity: events are lived as disconnected one from the other and interpreted as the outcome of individual actions, with no relation to broader social processes (Bauman, 1998). In this atomised context, the temporal framework in which young people live their lives is that of the 'eternal present'. Their life-plans have only a

partial and short-term breadth, often retaining a non-committal character. Just as they are met with numerous and rapid changes in their lives, young people have an opposite psychological need for certainties (Sennett, 1996), a need to impose some sense of control over what is undefined and to isolate for themselves some standpoints they may make reference to in their self-definition. One way of finding some security is to live by focalising all attention on the present. That is the prevailing outlook in the young people's narratives, the majority of which have a 'progressive' tone and describe the young person's life-story in terms of the construction of some expertise, to be achieved in one's studies, training or work experience. The dimension of one's career thus becomes paradigmatic to the construction of identities, and allows some confidence in the task of mapping the future, often by privileging this sphere of life to the exclusion of all others.

At some points in life, however, securities may be unsettled and young people may be confronted with the necessity of self-reconstructing, devising a different narrative for their identities. 'Regressive' narratives are told by those young people who, faced by the collapse of the life scenarios which had previously provided the main reference to the construction of their identities, are looking back at their past to re-establish some sense of security out of their loss. Memory, thus, becomes particularly central for them, either as a refuge where to escape from their present difficulties, or as a safe level where to reflect and self-reconstruct in vision of a possible way out. At such 'fateful moments' (Giddens, 1991) of revision in life priorities, other young people construct 'moratorium' (Erikson, 1980) narratives, opening themselves to uncertainty and fully embracing change. On the surface, that change may either correspond to a 'business as usual' attitude, or to a series of short-lived and heterogeneous experiences, undergone without commitment, but commonly the open exploration of the immediate future towards one's self-reconstruction is the underlying trait of these stories.

- **Fateful moments**

These moments when young people typically undergo a reconstruction of their lives and question their previously held identities may acquire a crucial position within their life trajectories, being subjectively perceived as signposts in the transition to adulthood. The events most often cast in such paradigmatic role may be of a relational nature, such as the start or break-up of a relationship. They may otherwise

correspond to crucial career stages, such as taking exams or changing jobs. Or they may involve some form of travel, typically taking a year out, backpacking or spending a period of language study abroad. The meaning of these events-signposts is socially constructed: sometimes with a clear institutional nature, they are imposed as normative by the social context. Other times the young people themselves may be more actively involved in defining them, in collaboration or in contrast with their significant others.

- **Living with uncertainties**

The daily lives of these young people are dominated by a condition of widespread uncertainty, which strongly affects the nature of their transitions to adulthood. Some of the factors which appear determinant in describing their transitional routes can be traced back to the conditions of life typically experienced in highly industrialised late modern societies. Others are instead more specific to the local English and Italian contexts, and arise from the interaction of the same globalising trends with the peculiar institutions of these countries at the levels of education, labour market, and family and cultural backgrounds.

- **Life is a race**

The job insecurity of the labour market and the high incidence of unemployment provide a common scenario for the lives of young people across Europe. Common to all these young people is thus also the perception of being at risk, which makes the threat of unemployment a very tangible one in their lives and also a major theme in the construction of their identities. This 'fear of unemployment' is accompanied by a worldview which constructs life as a race, and the self's main goal as to achieve individuation through competing against all others. Within such a competitive outlook on life, those dimensions that can best fit the changing requirements of the market become the axial points in the definition of identities. The process of individual growth is, therefore, traced along a skewed trajectory that rarely does leave any space for a more holistic construction of selves.

- **Longer time in education**

In both countries, the transition from school to work appears complicated by an extension of the time spent in education, which involves also double tracking, studying and working at the same time, and backtracking, returning to education after completion of one's studies and entrance in the world of work. This longer stay in education along routes that are more

individualised than in the past is a reality for most young people, regardless of their background. However, these narratives provide also evidence of the continuing importance of the social structure in reproducing the existing patterns of inequalities. The balance of choices and risks opening within individual lives, as well as their subjective perception, assumes very different characters according to the young people's social positioning in terms of class, gender, ethnicity, and locality. The process of individualisation is thus a structured one (Evans and Furlong, 1997).

If an increasing number of young people in England and Italy nowadays take the route into higher education, it is also true that such route often appears as an obliged one in order to avoid the risks of unemployment, rather than an actual choice. Despite the pervasive presence of unemployment in these young people's lives, the English still seem to maintain a relatively optimistic view of their job prospects, in contrast with Italians, whose view of the future appears to be much more negative. For many of these students, however, involvement in education is also accompanied by a parallel involvement in the world of work. Some of the characters in the young people's experiences in higher education are quite different in the two countries. These differences regard the ways in which they select their routes into higher education, as well as the inter-related transition from the parental home to a home of their own.

- **English transitions**

For the English young people, choosing one's route in education is essentially constructed as an individual responsibility. Once they have selected their route, the educational system seems to impose what generally appears as a clear structure on their lives, which also shapes their identities accordingly. Throughout their curricula, they are encouraged to feel part of the educational institution and develop a collective identity as students. That is also reinforced by the fact that, often, associated with going to university is leaving home to live in student accommodation. Even though this transition to a home of one's own may only be temporary and prelude to a future return into the parental home, still it is one step towards the definition of an independent household. Within this rather structured picture, dropping out of one's studies appears as a relatively rare phenomenon. Involvement in education is also often accompanied by a contemporaneous involvement in the world of work, which will usually have a more regular character than that of Italians, and will also have started earlier, while still in

secondary education. The optimistic expectations which the English young people seem to have regarding their work prospects are linked to the tradition of accelerated school to work transition which typifies the English context (Bynner, 2001).

• Italian transitions

Italian young people most commonly stay in the parental home throughout their time at university, living according to a 'family commuting' pattern (ISTAT, 2000). This means that Italian families have a continuing and strong influence on the lives of their young, as well as on their identities. Sharing their daily lives with parents often makes the combination of child and adult selves in the young people's identities a difficult one to reconcile (EGRIS, 2001). Young people's life choices, such as educational choices, may thus often be constructed as family tasks, and be characterised by an active involvement of parents. However, though engaged in helping their children select the most appropriate career in an insecure labour market, parents also lack the skills necessary to read the changing society and, thus, to transmit their cultural capital (Jones, 2000). The routes they suggest, rather than bringing advantages, may actually end up complicating their children's trajectories, often mapped by false starts and dropping out, in the common phenomenon of 'irregular careers', (ISTAT, 1999) which this research has documented as typically Italian. Their involvement at university is also not sustained by any collective narrative. There is no sense in which the institution may promote a sense of belonging analogous to the English case. By contrast, however, Italians may be more likely to develop a collective identity as a student through political involvement, though this is true only for a minority of students. Whereas the dominant ways of constructing citizenship appear to be based on the ability to be a self-constructing individual (Nagel and Wallace, 1997), or a discriminating consumer (Bauman, 1998), for these young people social participation is instead fundamental.

• A society of singles?

The ability to be open to a continuous self-reconstruction according to the changing requirements of the market is seen as an essential requirement in a context of late modernity, which promotes the identities of single, unattached, and mobile individuals (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995). Yet these narratives show that relationships still have a crucial value in young people's lives. The dialogical perspective of this research has allowed the appreciation of a multiplicity of ways in which

young people construct their identities through others. It is by relating to a social network of others, drawn from both everyday and imagined worlds, and who may be lived as possible selves and role-models, that identities are defined. Family, friends, partners as well as models imposed by the society at large, may all assume such a crucial identity-defining role.

• Children of divorced parents

The uncertainty that is arguably so characteristic of late modernity extends also to the arena of relationships and the family. The high incidence of divorce means that many young people have to redefine their relationships to parents, often with quite significant implications on their own identities. Divorce is often lived as an experience of loss and the psychological reactions it triggers may be likened to a process of mourning. For some young people, divorce may be equal to losing a parent and may actually have more problematic consequences than losing them through bereavement (Rodgers and Pryor, 1998). When a parent is not anymore part of everyday life, he or she may take on a crucial role in the young person's memory, becoming an essential reference point and role-model for identity. Instead, with a divorced parent who is still a part of everyday life, young people may often take on a protective and caring role, though in that case parents may sometimes lose their authority as role-models as well.

• Gender identities

Young people do in many ways define their lives through the competitive and individualised patterns which conform to the imperatives of the market, yet they also show evidence of cherishing relationships to others and of aspiring to form significant and lasting bonds. The 'self+other' perspective of this research has highlighted the relational discourse as one major dimension of identity definition for both young women and young men. Indeed, not many were the gender differences in the narratives with which these participants constructed their identities. Due to the process of individualisation, a wider range of options may be open for the definition of gender identities. In these young people's narratives, both innovative and traditional patterns of gender construction are simultaneously present. Differences may also be noted as to the extent with which the local cultures in the two countries have absorbed the social changes in the position of the sexes and do in fact allow a creative use to be made of this new flexibility, or rather endorse the reproduction of more traditional gendered constructions.

- **The romantic narrative**

Forming a life-long partnership is one of the main aspirations in these young people's lives, and, despite the increasing popularity of cohabitation, the attractiveness of marriage still rates very high, even for the children of divorced parents. The romantic narrative, through which young couples can define a joint identity, appears to be one major route of self-definition. It is, however, in the young women's stories that references to such shared authored narrative are prevalent. Young men more often aim to appear the main authors of their life-stories.

- **Career women and family men**

Young women in both England and Italy imagine their future selves as having a career in the world of work as well as a family, often referring to their mothers as role-models for both domains. The Italian women's narratives, though, never express career aspirations quite as explicitly. Among the young men, a few of the English construct their identities by taking their future selves as fathers as the dominant key, sometimes following both their parents as role-models, sometimes none. By contrast, no Italians define themselves as 'family men'. This suggests that, although the wished-for selves of young people in both countries may in fact be remarkably similar, the cultural scripts available in the English and Italian contexts may allow a different expression of those same aspirations. The Italian culture appears more resistant to change in gender roles, and the constructions of 'career woman' and 'family man', though reflecting a changing reality, must therefore be conveyed in less explicit terms. However, the Italian context also seems to leave much wider space for emotional and expressive communication in the relationships young people have with their friends, which are so central to the definition of their masculinities and femininities.

- **A widespread psychological malaise**

The identities of young people appear to be made of what often are conflicting discourses, which seem very difficult to reconcile into an integrated whole. The contradictions in their lives end up tracing identities that are split between different clashing selves (EGRIS, 2001) and also appear to be linked to much psychological suffering. Anxieties and fears often surface in their words as being part and parcel of their daily lives. This suffering is closely related to the individualised dimension which defines the conditions of these young people's existence. Although their lives continue to be differentially structured by social inequalities, young people perceive to be the sole makers of their own destiny. Any failure will thus be lived as being

entirely the product of one's responsibility and as a personal defeat. These new forms of existential suffering are lived along multiple levels, in connection to the numerous uncertainties that make young people's daily worlds.

Achieving an up-to-date, competitive and mobile identity is at odds with the communal goal to form a family. Especially for young women, a family identity may be lived as a force pulling backwards, rather than a legitimate aspiration. The pressure to succeed also creates a fragile equilibrium in the lives of these young people, who, forced to privilege the path of their expertise over alternative, more holistic self-constructions, must define their identities respecting a clock of external deadlines and production rhythms. Family relationships may also be the cause of tensions when the young people's demands clash with those of their parents, and when the role-models as well as the maps for reading the world provided for by parents do not prove adequate social and cultural capital in a rapidly changing context. Finally, these data show unemployment to have a major impact on the lives of young people, whose identities are intrinsically shaped by the perception of being at risk, and who acutely experience as a threat the social marginalisation deriving from the inability to play their part in society as consumers.

- **Establishing a dialogue with the other**

Constructing oneself by means of a dialogue with the other does not actually appear to be a straightforward process. 'Foreclosing' (Erikson, 1980) identities in terms of boundaries and borders may be far easier than opening the self to include the other and facing those uncertainties that the other may stand for. The moment of encounter with the other thus involves confronting the unknown and may also be the cause of a great deal of suffering and pain. This suffering clearly surfaces in the experiences of migrants, who narrate the difficulties they go through in the process of adjusting to a different environment. Three main factors appear to be crucial in this sense: previous expectations, together with the ability to form a social network, and to achieve a mastery of the language, with which access into the culture of the other may be eased.

- **Migration stories**

The migration stories collected in this research show a clear sense of what the young people are moving away from, but not of the direction they are going towards. Spatially moving thus corresponds to embarking on a search for knowledge. Introducing a break from everyday

life, travelling means coming into contact with the unfamiliar, an experience that enhances self-reflection and creates the conditions for a journey of introspection that may lead to 'becoming someone'. In that journey, a different perception of the self and of the world may be achieved, and different identities constructed. These young migrants tell of their experiences by referring to a condition of being 'in between' home and the host country, in a duality that may, however, be lived from different perspectives. Whereas for some, 'home' always stays as the ultimate goal they eventually aim to go back to, for others, migration becomes instead the key opening a different level of experience and knowledge of the world. Being a 'foreigner' can accordingly be associated with two very different existential conditions. Outcasts in the first case, who either feel at the margins or do not wish to immerse any deeper into the world they have moved into, they are instead cosmopolitan outsiders in the second, who enjoy their detached and privileged outlook on the society around them.

• Hybrid identities

When it is from the latter perspective that they narrate their stories, young people are able to fully participate in the other culture as well as in their own and to achieve, by creatively reflecting on their experience, a further dimension. Their spatial move has in this case also been a journey of self-discovery that has led them to a new level of knowledge about the self and the world. It is on that newly achieved dimension of hybridity (Bhabha, 1990) that these migrants may be able to elaborate a fluid and open reconstruction of identities, transgressing many of the limitations that instead bound the locals.

These young people construct their stories of migration in terms of individual experience and responsibility. Often happening at times of transition and in coincidence with fateful moments in their lives, their migration is not motivated by economic reasons, but often results from a personal strive to make sense of their lives, from an attempt to solve or, indeed, identify some existential problem. Even in those few cases in which their moving does arise from a background historically marked by economic out-migration, their narratives still echo those traditional patterns in a peculiarly modern fashion. These young migrants move on their own, according to a plan which responds only to their individually defined goals and which is not part of a more collective design. This migration also has a provisional character that always leaves a possibility of return open. Returning home is not the dream of a lifetime of work, but

simply one of the options available: as a life-project, migration is thus not definitive and its time boundaries may always be altered tomorrow.

• A new form of migration

This research has identified a new form of migration, distinguished by individualised patterns of moving. For the young people of contemporary Europe, migration is constructed as one of the possible life options available, and the experience of travel may become a means to define an identity. By moving, these young people are making an active use of the new possibilities for internal movement that the changing European context nowadays opens to its citizens. Yet, they have no awareness of the extent to which what to them appear as taken for granted life choices are, in fact, the product of recent economic and political changes which have profoundly altered the shape of their lives.

Their experiences are therefore specific to their generation in that they would have been unimaginable only a few years ago, and are paradigmatic of a late modern human condition that exalts the individuation of 'choice biographies' (Beck, 1992). Selves can move across different worlds, question society's standards, and achieve a multiplicity of possible constructions. Their lives describe a variegated range of routes along which the process of identity construction may proceed in the current age. In their variety and flexibility they are, however, the lives of a vanguard: the possibilities young people have to self-reconstruct are differently regulated by their position in the social structure and for the majority of them only one-way routes may actually be open.

4. Policy suggestions

On the basis of the results emerging from this research it is possible to draw a number of suggestions in connection with the policies on youth. The policy indications pointed out below aim to give a contribution to the debate which will follow the publication of the EC White Paper on Youth and concern five main areas: education, mobility, anti-racism, equal opportunities and mental health.

• Education

Educational programmes should better prepare young people for the uncertainty that awaits them in the world of work. Instead of creating expectations which are either unrealistically optimistic or too negative to be paralysing, they should prepare them to read the changed society

around them. The flexibility which the labour market so much values should, thus, also translate in the capability to educate the future workforce to conceive of themselves as projects that can always be updated and effectively allow them to develop a multiplicity of skills. In this sense, it is crucial what will be made of the recommendation contained in the Employment Guidelines of providing improved education and training systems, as well as of the White Paper's priority theme of providing information to young people.

• **Mobility**

Given that spending periods abroad is increasingly part of the everyday experience, as well as of the educational curricula of young people, more should be made in terms of the integration of European studies and qualifications. The White Paper explicitly refers to a Mobility Action Plan, approved by the Nice European Council in December 2000, which has invited Member States to eliminate barriers to the mobility of students and researchers, and to take measures in order to promote a European qualifications area. It is important that work is done to ensure that Member States actually do implement these resolutions, since at present the national educational systems are still to a great extent regarded as incommensurable. The young people who study abroad are faced with a system of barriers when re-entering the system back home which in practice prevents them from re-investing in their country of origin the cultural capital they have gained. The experiences made by a few of my Italian participants, as well as by myself, indicate that after studying in the UK one's prospects of finding a job in Italy are severely curbed by the existing laws, which, without granting recognition to academic qualifications, make participation to the job market very difficult.

• **Anti-racism**

The White Paper assigns a special priority to the need of tackling racism and xenophobia as well as all forms of discrimination, and quite rightly so. All over Europe there are in fact worrying signs of the resurgence in popularity of ideologies based on prejudice and discrimination amongst young people, who react to society's uncertainties by projecting them on the other, typically immigrants. In a contemporary reality that is increasingly multicultural, it is vital for educational practices and cultural programmes to promote the value of the encounter with the other, creating the conditions for a culture of tolerance and acceptance of diversity. In this way young people may be encouraged to construct hybrid and

communicating identities, rather than foreclosing into a bounded and monological definition of self. The observations which my research has allowed me to develop regarding the dynamics of identity construction within an environment 'other' and the creative potential of the 'foreigner' condition suggest contexts of critical self-reflection which may be of great interest to policymakers and multicultural educational practitioners alike.

• **Equal opportunities**

The higher resistance to fully accept change in gender roles that this research has documented in the Italian context suggests that the culture of equal opportunities between men and women may have developed rather unevenly in Europe. Although the relations between the sexes may be changing in practice, that change is not yet adequately reflected at the symbolic level. In the case of Italy, the innovative gender contents that are already present in society are accompanied by the backlash message put across by the media, which daily reproduce a very reactionary and male-dominated view of gender relations. In order to favour the diffusion of an equal opportunities culture also at the symbolic level, further action would thus be required. There would be a need for a concerted effort at the European level to promote equal opportunities policies in the educational and cultural programmes of the Member States. Through a reframed agenda and the elaboration of new and more effective languages, such policies should aim to be more incisive on the daily lives of young people, and to improve the legitimacy of alternative gender constructions. Although stressing the importance of tackling any form of discrimination, the White Paper lacks an explicit focus on the promotion of a culture of equal opportunities.

• **Mental health**

The amount of suffering which this research has documented as being part of young people's lives in the contemporary age is striking. Any youth policy should take this into account. New forms of malaise arise from the many uncertainties young people encounter in their lives regarding their educational and work itineraries, as well as their family and private worlds. The multiple and contradictory demands which they are exposed to are particularly difficult to reconcile in a context which constructs every life-choice as an ultimate individual responsibility and which promotes a view of life as a competition against all others. The widespread character of these new forms of suffering suggests new areas of intervention for mental health services. The White Paper mentions individual counselling as one of the

points with which the Employment Guidelines specifically target young people for the prevention of long-term unemployment. Indeed, the provision of counselling services, equipped to fight these contemporary forms of suffering, should have a preventive approach and be integrated within the educational curriculum, with a focus on the holistic well being of young people.

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