

Fight or Flight?

Exploring Employment Uncertainty and Geographical Mobility amongst Youth in Portugal and Northern Ireland

David Cairns

Introduction

European youth today face the challenge of finding work in fragmented and de-regulated labour markets (Leccardi, 2005: 125; Walther, 2006: 120-121; see also Vinken, 2007). In such uncertain contexts, young people may be required to be reflexive in their occupational planning if they are to successfully negotiate a path through education and into stable employment, which may involve consideration of geographical mobility as a means of accessing opportunities. This chapter explores the reactions to perceived labour market uncertainty of a number of young people in two different European regions, Portugal and Northern Ireland, including spatial strategies of mobility and immobility: ‘fight’ responses involving behaviours such as prolonged residence within the parental home and ‘flight’ responses, typically making recourse to geographical mobility, including migration strategies.

Youth Mobility and Immobility

Considering the potential importance of mobility and immobility in youth transitions, it is not surprising that the spatial dimension of youth transitions has begun to attract discussion, challenging the notion that despite the increasing complexity of transitions to adulthood, attaining adult status will (still) be a sedentary experience. At European policy level, there has long been awareness of the importance of mobility in young

people's lives (see for example European Commission 2001, 2002), while in mainstream academic debate, the significance of locality has hardly gone unnoticed. For instance, Giddens has argued that in late modern societies, the influence of local area has declined in importance, with place becoming 'penetrated by disembedding mechanisms which recombine the local activities into time-space relations of ever widening scope' (1991: 136). For young people themselves, we can see that a geographically static education-to-work transition may not necessarily be the best choice trajectory if a successful labour market is to be made where a more peripatetic labour market entry strategy may be more apposite.

Available statistics on youth mobility make it clear that not only are the majority of young people in Europe sedentary, but also that practices such as prolonged stays in the parental home are often the normative experience, particularly for those in full-time education (Wallace and Kovatcheva, 1998; Cherlin *et al.*, 1997; Bendit *et al.*, 1999; Billari *et al.*, 2001; Aassve *et al.*, 2002). We hence need to consider the significance, and the value, of both mobility and immobility in discussing youth transitions to the labour market. In relation to more in-depth empirical work on youth mobility and immobility, pioneering work has been conducted by Jones (2000) and Jamieson (2000) amongst young people in the United Kingdom, focusing upon issues such as the need to be mobile for young people growing up in rural areas. More recently, also in the UK, mobility has been discussed as being a potential resource in the transition to adulthood, perhaps even the 'central motif' in young people's account of adulthood (Thomson and Taylor, 2005: 337).¹

¹ Different spatial strategies amongst young people have also been discussed by Cairns and Menz (2007), who note the different responses of youth in Northern Ireland and Eastern Germany: in the former region, towards foreign destinations with linguistic compatibility, in the latter, preference for internal migrations.

In southern European contexts, recent studies in Spain, Portugal and Italy illustrate how young people are able to move towards adulthood without leaving the parental home through maintaining a high degree of independence (Iacovou, 2001; Pappámikail, 2004; Holdsworth, 2005). These societies have well-established home-staying traditions, with many young people staying at home until, or even after, they find secure employment (Sgritta, 2001; Santoro, 2006). In the UK, youth immobility has also been discussed by Holdsworth (2006), who highlights not only the difficulties experienced by young people living at home in the face of social norms emphasising independent living but also satisfaction gained through being able to maintain existing friendship networks and avoid ‘the same sense of discontinuity with home compared to those who move away’ (2006: 508).

Research Contexts and Methodology

The study from which the results presented in this paper are drawn is called Culture, Youth and Future Life Orientations (CYFLO).² The aim of this project, initiated in April 2005, is to examine the present and future life orientations of highly-skilled young people, focusing upon geographical mobility and immobility. To date, fieldwork has been conducted in both Portugal and in Northern Ireland. The Portuguese research was focused upon Lisbon, with the Northern Ireland research concentrating upon the Greater Belfast area. In both cases, respondents were drawn from third level educational institutions: eight different universities in Lisbon and two

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in Belfast. Young people at such a stage in their educational careers are perhaps the most potentially spatially mobile section of the population (King and Ruis-Gelices, 2003), more so than those still in compulsory or post-compulsory education, who may not as yet be considering geographical movement in their education trajectories, or those already settled in what may become sedentary careers. The two chosen locales also illustrate different northern and southern European social contexts: the former, a region of rapid transformation in youth transitions (e.g., in the withdrawal of the state and changing role of the family in supporting young people) (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007: 1), not to mention political change (Smyth and Cebulla, 2007); the latter, with a tradition of family support for youth transitions (Jones, 1995: 28-29).

In respect of methodology, both quantitative and qualitative methods have been utilised. Firstly, a questionnaire was administered to a total of 200 young people in Lisbon and 250 in Belfast. In each research context, respondents were spread equally across four different academic fields of study: namely, Arts and Humanities; Social Sciences; and Science and Engineering. These disciplines were chosen in order to provide diversity and equilibrium within the sample. The samples were also balanced in terms of gender and included young people from different ethnic minority backgrounds. The questions themselves covered a broad array of topics, ranging from family and peer relationships to future occupational plans. For the qualitative part of this study, a total of 15 follow-up interviews were conducted with respondents in each context, sourced from the initial quantitative sample. These interviews were essentially semi-structured, consisting of initial biographical questions and followed by more in-depth discussion of individual-specific experiences.

Quantitative Analysis

As mentioned above, the questionnaire was administered to 200 young people in Lisbon and 250 in Belfast. Besides biographical data and assessments of peer and family relationships, the questionnaire included a range of questions relating to young people's orientations towards employment. In respect of regional differences, disparities emerged in relation to a number of issues, including self-assessments of fear of unemployment and regional salary levels.

Table 1 Salaries are Too Low in My Country by Region

Region	Salaries are Too Low in My Country (%)				Total
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	
Belfast	9	44	45	2	100
Lisbon	20	61	16	2	100
All	14	52	32	2	100

Source: CYFLO 2007 (Pearson Chi Square=.000)

Table 2 Fear of Unemployment by Region

Region	Fear of Unemployment (%)				Total
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	
Belfast	13	38	40	9	100
Lisbon	36	40	19	5	100
All	23	38	31	7	100

Source: CYFLO 2007 (Pearson Chi Square=.000)

We can see statistically significant regional differences in responses to these two statements, with Lisbon youth agreeing to a much greater extent that salaries are too low in Portugal and that they fear unemployment, although more than 50% of all young people agreed with these two statements to some degree, highlighting the

significance of this issue across the board. In respect to internal differences within the two regional contexts, Tables 3 and 4 present the results of logistic regression analyses in relation to agreement or disagreement to each of these two statements.

Table 3 Salaries are Too Low in My Country by logistic regression

	Region	β	Exp. (β)
Gender (male)	Belfast	.473	1.605
	Lisbon	-.313	.731
	All	.260	1.297
Ageband (youngest)	Belfast	-.067	.936
	Lisbon	1.009	2.743
	All	-.116	.630
Ethnicity (majority)	Belfast	-.200	.818
	Lisbon	.602	1.826
	All	-.376	.686
Class (skilled)	Belfast	-.105	.900
	Lisbon	-.930	.394
	All	-.316	.729

Source: CYFLO 2007

Table 4 Fear of Unemployment by logistic regression

	Region	β	Exp. (β)
Gender (male)	Belfast	-1.046	.351
	Lisbon	-1.521	.219
	All	-1.023	.360
Ageband (youngest)	Belfast	.519	1.680
	Lisbon	.571	1.769
	All	.126	1.134
Ethnicity (majority)	Belfast	-.135	.874
	Lisbon	.424	1.528
	All	-.193	.825
Class (skilled)	Belfast	-.327	.721
	Lisbon	-.595	.552
	All	-.334	.716

Source: CYFLO 2007

From Table 3 we can observe that in respect to gender, Belfast males are more likely to feel that salaries are too low in their region compared to Belfast females, while the trend is reversed in Lisbon. In regard to age, we can see that those in the youngest age band in Lisbon are significantly more likely to agree that salaries are too low. Also in Lisbon, we can observe that those from ‘Portuguese’ as opposed to ethnic minority backgrounds are more likely to agree and those with parents from skilled occupations much less likely. In respect to fear of unemployment, we can observe from Table 4 that males are much less likely to agree with the statement, particularly in Lisbon; those in the ethnic majority community are more likely to agree, again in Lisbon; and that in both contexts, those with parents from skilled occupations are much less likely to agree, although more so in Lisbon.

Key measures of mobility and immobility were also included in the questionnaire, specifically the likelihood of seeking work abroad or elsewhere in the same region. The following two breakdowns explore working in another country in Europe and in other regions of the country of origin in each of the two regions under scrutiny.

Table 5 Like to Work in Europe by Region

Region	Like to Work in Europe (%)				Total
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	
Belfast	17	48	32	3	100
Lisbon	25	59	18	1	100
All	20	51	26	2	100

Source: CYFLO 2007 (Pearson Chi Square=.001)

Table 6 Like to Work Elsewhere in Same Country by Region

Region	Like to Work Elsewhere in Same Country (%)				Total
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	
Belfast	9	55	31	5	100
Lisbon	10	47	34	8	100
All	10	52	32	7	100

Source: CYFLO 2007 (Pearson Chi Square=.276)

As we can see, in relation to work mobility, even taking into account the high level of agreement in both regions (20% strongly agreeing and 51% agreeing) the Lisbon young people are much more favourably predisposed towards movement within Europe (84% agreeing to varying degrees), while in respect to internal regional labour market mobility, there is a majority of young people in both regions who are in agreement but no statistically significant difference.

In interpreting these results, we can see that the Lisbon young people have more positive orientations towards working abroad in particular and more apparent discontent with salary levels in their own country, alongside a greater fear of unemployment. This picture might lead us to expect that these same young people would be more likely to have intentions to live abroad in the future.

Table 7 Always Want to Live in My Country by Region

Region	Always Want to Live in My Country (%)				Total
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	
Belfast	12	33	37	18	100
Lisbon	15	53	23	8	100
All	13	42	31	14	100

Source: CYFLO 2007 (Pearson Chi Square=.000)

The results presented in Table 7 illustrate that this is not the case and that in fact it is the Belfast young people who are significantly more likely to want to live abroad at some stage in the future. This is a fascinating result, considering what we have already discovered, pointing towards the significance of factors other than external economic and/or political conditions as being the main influence upon future life planning; most prominently in the case of these Portuguese young people, we need to consider the influence of the family. This is a finding consistent with other research conducted on Portuguese youth and emphasises the significance of the family in education to work transitions (Pais, 1995; Pais, 1998; Pais 2003; Pappámikail, 2004; Pais et al., 2005).

Regarding internal differences within each regional sample, Table 8 presents an overview of gender, age, ethnic background and social class relationships, with registering intentions to live outside the region of origin as the dependent variable.

Table 8 Intentions to live outside region by logistic regression

	Region	β	Exp. (β)
Gender (male)	Belfast	.356	1.427
	Lisbon	-.220	.803
	All	.251	1.286
Ageband (youngest)	Belfast	.408	1.504
	Lisbon	.385	1.470
	All	.247	1.414
Ethnicity (majority)	Belfast	-.690	.501
	Lisbon	2.393	10.949
	All	-.580	.560
Class (skilled)	Belfast	-.273	.761
	Lisbon	-.254	.776
	All	.251	1.286

Source: CYFLO 2007

From Table 8, it is evident that few internal disparities exist in relation to intentions to living abroad, with the major exception of those belonging to the ethnic majority community in Lisbon, who are over ten times more likely to want to always remain within their country of origin, amounting to 95% of the ‘Portuguese’ respondents within the Lisbon sample. In contextualising this result, we need to bear in mind that amongst the young people from ethnic minority backgrounds within the Lisbon sample - approximately 14% of all those surveyed - many have a history of mobility in their family, having moved to Portugal from former colonies (most notably Angola and Cape Verde). They may therefore have intentions to return to these countries and re-unite with their families upon completion of their studies.

Qualitative Analysis

Out of the evidence gathered, four case studies have been selected, two from each region, in order to illustrate different ‘fight’ and ‘flight’ responses amongst the young people surveyed in both regional contexts. As noted previously, within the Belfast sample, 55% of the young people surveyed want to live abroad at some stage of their lives in the future (see Table 8). Additionally, further analysis show that a third of all those surveyed had experienced some form of geographical mobility in their lives outside of the leisure sphere, such as internal or trans-national migrations, while approximately a quarter had undertaken more short-term forms of trans-national mobility, typically visits abroad for work or study purposes. The following case illustrates the orientations of mobile youth in Belfast.

Peter is a 21 year old Civil Engineering student at Queen's University, Belfast. In respect of his past mobility experiences – apart from visits to England, Scotland, the Channel Islands and the Republic of Ireland to visit friends and relatives **and** holidays to Spain, Portugal and France - Peter has in the last year undertaken a work placement in Goiânia, Brazil via IAESTE (International Association for the Exchange of Students for Technical Experience). While not entirely sure, as yet, what advantage this experience of mobility will bring him in respect to his present studies, Peter certainly thinks that he has not only gained confidence as a result of his experiences but also a possible advantage in the labour market. Regarding his future, Peter is planning to go to New York this summer for an internship at Price Waterhouse Coopers. He is unsure whether to pursue a career in engineering or the financial sector and therefore wishes to test different options before making a decision. We can however observe the importance of geographical mobility in both Peter's past biography and future life planning and the use of this mobility as a means of furthering his career while attaining personal development.

One of the most interesting outcomes from the research conducted in Belfast was the fact that 71% of these young people were presently living with their parents. While it should be noted that the majority of these young people are dissatisfied with this position and are staying at home for pragmatic reasons such as saving money towards the purchase or rental of a home of their own, there are exceptional cases that illustrate how young people use residential immobility as a strategy to cope with difficult local housing market conditions whilst simultaneously maintaining a firm grounding in their local communities (see also Patiniotis and Holdsworth, 2005 and Holdsworth, 2006).

Rachel is a 20 year old second year Sociology student at Queen's University, Belfast. She lives at home with her parents, approximately 30 km south of Belfast in the town of Ballynahinch, County Down. This is very much her preferred living option, and aside from financial considerations, there are further benefits to living at home such as having a good study environment and close proximity to her friends. Regarding mobility, Rachel confines herself to holidays, typically to Spain or other European destinations such as France, Holland and Germany. As she explains, 'Two weeks is definitely long enough. By the end of it I'm always dying to get home so I can't see my going abroad for any long period of time.' Therefore, in the future, Rachel sees herself remaining in Ballynahinch, and would only move if there was absolutely no other alternative.

Within the Lisbon sample it can be observed that while there is an extremely high level of geographical movement in the leisure sphere, in terms of mobility for work or study and in respect of future life mobility plans there is considerably less interest - with 68% always wanting to live in Portugal (see Table 8). This, as noted previously, is despite a relatively high degree of fear regarding unemployment and evident dissatisfaction with working conditions in Portugal, particularly in relation to salary levels. The following case study illustrates the position of those living at home contentedly, despite negative perceptions of their local labour market conditions.

Ana is a 21 year old Social Communications student, currently in the third year of her degree at ISCTE in Lisbon. She lives at home with her parents, also in Lisbon. While Ana notes the financial pragmatism involved in living at home in terms of saving

money, she also admits that living with her parents is her preferred situation. Not only is this arrangement convenient, she would also find it difficult to cope without her family as they provide not only financial sustenance while she is studying but also personal support in everyday matters. There is also an inference that her family are equally happy with this arrangement. Living at home also offers an opportunity to remain close to her long-term friends who live nearby. In relation to mobility, Ana's foreign travel experiences have so far been limited to a single holiday in Spain; however more travel in the leisure sphere is something she would like to undertake in future. Regarding travel in other areas such as work and study, while Ana feels this may be a valuable experience, she has no plans to undertake any such mobility herself.

While Ana's account is in many ways typical of the young people encountered in Lisbon, there are others within the sample with different experiences and orientations with regard to mobility. Zé is a 23 year old Sculpture student in the second year of studying for a degree at Art College in Chiado, downtown Lisbon. Like Ana and the majority of his counterparts within the Lisbon sample, Zé lives with his parents, in the city of Almada, directly across the River Tejo from Lisbon. Unlike Ana, however, Zé is less happy with his current living situation and would prefer to live independently, either by himself in a flat or with friends. A further contrast with Ana lies in the fact that while her peer network is largely home-based, Zé has made new friends from different parts of Portugal while studying. Regarding foreign travel experiences, Zé's experiences are limited to one holiday in Tunisia. However, Zé has positive opinions regarding working abroad when he has completed his education, particularly since opportunities in the art world may be limited in Portugal. Nevertheless, he does feel

that it may be expensive and difficult to do so and his horizons are limited by a lack of fluency in foreign languages.

Conclusion: Youth in Flight?

At the beginning of this discussion, the idea was posited that young people making the transition to adulthood in contexts of uncertainty and instability in relation to labour markets may need to make recourse to spatial strategies in order to successfully reach their personal and professional goals in life, be they plans for mobility (e.g., geographical movements in order to follow opportunities or immobility, principally extended stays in the parental home). We can see from the evidence presented, that while both mobility and immobility paths are present within each of the two research contexts, the young people in Northern Ireland are more likely to preference geographical movement while the Portuguese young people generally want to remain in the parental home and within Portugal in the future. The main reason for this differential would seem to be the prevalence of strong family relationships: with the the provision of practical and emotional support in Portugal and the presumed absence of such relationships in Northern Ireland. Likewise, there would seem to be corresponding regionally specific social norms in existence in each of these societies, effectively validating these respective behaviours; although as we can observe from cases such as Rachel and Zé, there are exceptions to prevailing trends in each region. With regard to the future, it may well be the case that with heightened marginalisation within the local housing market, young people in Northern Ireland may have little choice but to remain with their parents: they will either have to adapt to this situation and forge their own futures within the family like many of their Portuguese

counterparts or simmer in heightened discontent and contemplate 'place-polygamy' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001: 25).

Considering the popularity of extended co-habitation with parents, whether through choice or otherwise, we need to consider that alongside or instead of there being an external 'youth flight', there is also an internal 'youth fight', with resources such as the family home and inter-generational relationships being used as an alternative to mobility: sheltering from difficult labour market conditions at home rather than attempting to plot a course through challenging circumstances. The choice to stay at home would appear to be a well-established course of action in southern European contexts and an emerging one in northern contexts, at least in the two regions explored in this discussion. The extent to which this trend is present outside the two research contexts discussed here remains to be seen; likewise, the increase or decrease in inward movements.

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