Looking into the future. Young people's capacity to aspire

ESA 2013 Crisis, Critique and Change - RN30 Youth and Generations
Why doing research on youth & 'capacity to aspire'?

Is there any future for young people in Italy?

- Poor resources and opportunities, plus lack of policies at the national level.

- Italian welfare system and familistic culture seem to erode young people's capacity to aspire.

- Moreover, uncertainty about the future does not affect all young people in the same way. Within a framework of “individualized futures”, the cultural resources young people are able to use to project themselves into the future are pivotal.
Theory and method

We combine Appadurai's concept of capacity to aspire (2004) and Bourdieu's (1998) forms of anticipation (practical and reflexive) to the frame of social futures studies (Adam 2009; Adam & Groves 2007; Leccardi 2005) and methodological reflections on future narratives (Misches 2009; Elliott 2010; Lyon, Morgan, Crow, 2012) in order to understand young people's imagined futures.
Theoretical frame (Appadurai, 2004)

Capacity to aspire has:

- Two dimensions:
  
  - 'Cognitive': anticipation more or less complex experience of the relation between a wide range of ends and means.
  
  - 'Narrative': ability to produce justifications, narratives, metaphors, and pathways through which bundles of goods and services are actually tied to wider social scenes and contexts, and to still more abstract norms and beliefs.
How are we addressing these issues?

Being the capacity to aspire mainly a narrative capacity, a large part of the analysis concentrate on dealing with a variety of forms of narratives of the future.

1. The theme of the future is explored through the analysis of ca. 250 essays, written by high-school students on the theme of the future. Some focus groups with students and teachers (scheduled in autumn 2013) will provide further information on the context.

2. Since narratives of the future emerge also from digital story telling (especially in Social Networks Sites, blogs and forums), a second part of the research will focus on the study of some discussion groups of young people on the Internet.
From a methodological point of view, the research project draws on an already established research method/approach (see amongst others Elliott 2010; Lyon and Crow, 2012; Lyon, Morgan, Crow, 2012) and focus on the analysis of some essays written by high-school students.
The essays

• Essays were collected during the autumn.
• Numbers of essays: 253 (161 girls and 92 boys)
• Authors: Students between 17 and 19 years old attending the last two years of high school.
• Title of the essay: “Imagine to be 90. Tell the story of your life”
• Schools: five high schools located in Cagliari (Sardinia, Italy) and chosen according to some socio-demographic variables (students’ social class, students coming from rural areas or living in the city)
• Type of analysis: both qualitative and quantitative using Nvivo Software.
What are our research questions?

The present through the future

- How are in forms of narrative anticipations gender, transitions, careers and work are positioned?

Capacity to aspire

- How does this projection into the future take form?
- What kind of cultural resources are used?
In the analysis of the essays we focus on different topics:

- Work and public life
- Family and the private sphere
- Media imagination
- Mobility
- Capacity to aspire as a narrative ability (?)
Focus on imagined mobility

• One striking element is the space devoted to geographical mobility (146 essays)

• Two different type of accounts of mobility (Isabella, Mandich, forthcoming):
  1. it is described as a dreamt travel experience, often shared with friends.
  2. mobility is part of a life experience based on migration, which will hopefully realize professional and personal ambitions.
Imagined geographical mobility

Two basic categories of mobility projects emerge from the essays:

1. a more *realistic* account of mobility, largely based on the migration experience as lived by students' families

2. An imagined mobility characterized by the extensive use of references to the media world
What is the role of mobility in students’ imagined biographies?

1. It seems a *magical device* that can bring about a change in young people's lives (bypass uncertainty)
2. Mobility as a space-less, easy and weightless experience: the space in which mobility occurs resembles ‘space’ on the Internet, a global and virtual space where there are no references to territorial borders.
Concluding remarks: Imagined mobility and capacity to aspire

1. Experiencing mobility implies the existence of opportunities but also involves the capacity to see mobility as a "realistic" possibility and to give this possibility a tangible meaning in a real life project.

2. Mobility aspirations is a cultural category (grounded in different social and cultural contexts) rather than an individual trait.
3. No trace of support from educational institutions, in terms of providing awareness of mobility opportunities. (family’s migration experience or media narratives prevail over other forms of socialization).

4. The influence of media narratives and the “celebrities cultures” is a factor that has to be taken into account as an element shaping young peoples' aspirations to mobility.
Bibliography

Thank you!

More information at:

http://people.unica.it/ifuture/