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Squeezing or blurring: young adulthood in the career strategies of professionals based in Italy and England

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In moving the first significant steps into a meaningful graduate career, young adults need to elaborate strategies, which consist in identifying and activating what seems useful in one’s own context of reference. Specifically looking at the meaning of being young adults in two countries belonging to different welfare systems and thus diverging regimes of transitions to adulthood, i.e. Italy and England, this paper analyses how two groups of early career professionals conceive of and forge the specific position they occupy in the life cycle in the course of developing particular strategies of career construction.

The findings of 60 in-depth interviews compare and contrast a first dimension of young adulthood accounted for as a favourable condition to delimit, emphasise and be collocated within in order to maximise its potential. This is the case of young adults based in England, who ‘squeeze’ their youth to enact career strategies. The second dimension is constructed as a penalising condition not to be associated with, in an effort to reduce the discomfort it causes. It is the case of young adults based in Italy, who work out their strategies while feeling caught in the blurred and indefinite condition of youth.

Keywords: career; identity; young adulthood; Italy; UK

Introduction

At the political meeting ‘Flexicurity for Young Generations’ (Rome, 30 October 2006), delegates of both the Italian Ministry of Labour and the British Department for Work and Pensions discussed the problems that their young people face during their first few years of employment. The focus was on how to successfully integrate welfare provision with an increasing need for flexible employment. Being a qualified young person supposedly immune from needing welfare support, I found it striking that this issue was presented as a serious problem by both these parties on that occasion. The primary question addressed by this article is how the condition of youth matters in the construction of a meaningful professional career in the aforementioned contexts.

The ‘youth’ observed in this article refers to adult youth. There is general agreement that youth is increasingly extended in all European countries, and is thus studied more and more as a condition in and of itself, rather than as a process connecting adolescence to adulthood (Cavalli 1980). In a destandardised scenery (Cavalli and Galland 1996), many categories have been elaborated in order to...
understand this phase of life better, making transitions to adulthood a progressively more popular subject of study. Yet, there is another aspect to consider: most literature on youth is devoted to controlling and minimising risk in young people’s lives, rather than exploring the factors that enable them to achieve independence (Evans et al. 2001). I argue that apart from some major works seeking to compare and contrast certain European countries (Vendramin 2008), the condition of young adulthood is relatively under-researched in terms of the role that it can play in the construction of the self in both private and public spheres.

I thus propose to ‘isolate’ this specific position in the life cycle, and reflect on how two groups of early career professionals – one based in Italy and one based in England – find taking their first steps in the professionals’ labour market a very different experience. As a consequence, they activate diverging strategies of actions in their respective labour markets. In fact, early career professionals may consider being young to be one of their resources. While literature exploring the life-course tends to suggest that finding oneself in a specific stage of life entails similar issues for those involved, the condition of young adults based in England is of some help, relative to Italian youth in similar circumstances. I thus offer a contrast to think productively at how youth is ‘played’, conceived of, and forged by early career professionals, who accordingly may have an interest in squeezing or blurring youth.

Approaching the issue from another angle, it can be said that a study of careers must consider the specific stage of the actors’ life-courses (Leicht and Fennell 2001). More specifically, the study of young adults as a group highlights the relationships constructed within their families of origin, which in turn helps us grasp the significance of the cultural contexts of Italy and England, respectively. It is known that Italian and English families refer to different models within sociological literature, with reference to the structure of families, transitions to adulthood and, more broadly, state welfare regimes, not to mention peculiar class balances. In unpacking the dimensions of youth in this article, I also point to the more specific argument that families help to foster different strategies in the two contexts.

The interviews conducted for the research on which this article is based, were broadly aimed at reconstructing career strategies of early career professionals based in England and Italy (see Cuzzocrea 2011). While the focus was intended to be on work, evidence was found of a sharp age discrimination in both countries, which interestingly operates in opposing ways. It is known that in Italy, gerontocracy dominates institutions and organisations, while this does not seem to be the case in the UK (Hammer 2003, ILO 2006). In England, whilst the media and analysts express concern for those qualified youth who do not access the labour market at the level they are supposed to enter, in the main the liberal system affects mostly the unskilled and the elderly. In this way, most concerns about youth are focused on those who are ‘out of control’, namely the NEETs (‘Not in Employment, Education and Training’, see Roberts 2011 for a discussion on this group). I report that despite low employment protection, interviewees show over-confidence, both in the content of their narratives, as well as in their tone and gesture, as observed in the interview encounter. This article indicates some tensions caught in these mechanisms, and warns that distortions may arise from trapping young professionals in an ‘inadequate’ stage of life.
Negotiating strategies and resources: theoretical aspects

The leading question is thus how the two groups of professionals negotiate the opportunities and constraints related to the specific positions they occupy in the life cycle, and use them as resources with which to build a career. A relevant category for investigating this dynamic is that of ‘strategy of action’. In an exhaustive literature review of this concept, Crow (1989) underlines the usefulness of this perspective when trying to go beyond the inconsistencies of the classic debate over the structure/agents dichotomy. In other words, strategic actions – found at all levels of society (Crow 1989, p. 2) – reveal the possibilities found in structural constraints and are, therefore, symptomatic of human conduct in general. Looking at young adulthood, especially in the context of destandardisation of youth transitions, ultimately becomes an analysis of structure and agency, as Walther also suggests (2006).

The level of strategy of action invoked in this article is that of the ‘agent’, although a strategy of action, according to Swidler (1986), ‘involves [a] characteristic way of solving problems and a characteristic set of problems to be solved. Such strategies depend on skills, styles, habits, and capacities for organising self and actions that are learned through culture’ (Swidler 1986, p. 86). Activating cultural repertoires allows people to move between situations, finding terms in which to orient action within each situation (Swidler 1986). This highlights how ‘culture actually influences people, shaping their social relations and their thoughts, feelings and actions’ (Swidler 2001, p. 79).

Looking at the extent to which a young professional is willing to diversify from existing working paths is therefore a matter of inter-play of a more general agents-structure dynamic. Another classification, Swidler suggests, is that between the settled and unsettled situation. In the first, ‘people are operating within established strategies of action; people can live with a loose fit between culture and experience’ (Swidler 2001, p. 89). People sustain multiple capacities for action, but may be reluctant to abandon established strategies of action. Normally, ‘people do not readily take advantage of new structural opportunities that would require them to abandon established ways of life’ (Swidler 2001, p. 105). Yet, in unsettled situations, ‘new strategies of action are being developed and tried out’ (Swidler 2001, p. 89). In this article, this distinction concerns a different institutionalisation of flexibility, a phenomenon that is ‘settled’ for professionals based in England, but not for those based in Italy. This suggests that different reactions are involved. Boltanski and Thévenot (1999) also argue that the focus should be placed on justifications provided by people for their own actions, as well as their repertoires of evaluation of the actions of others. Lamont and Thévenot extend the analysis across space. That is, if we can speak of ‘American thinking’ (Wagner 1999), then it is also plausible to think of ‘English thinking’ and ‘Italian thinking’ with regard to the construction of a graduate career. In this article, I thus discuss some elements at the core of interviewees’ accounts, belonging to both the private and the public sphere, in an attempt to reconstruct English and Italian ways of building a professional career.

Boltanski and Thévenot show that actors can switch between different frameworks and principles of justification within the very same social settings, depending on how they define a given situation. Thus, the contexts in which individuals draw boundaries become culturally understood (Lamont and Thévenot 2000). For Lamont, relatively stable schema of evaluation are used in different proportions.
across national contexts. According to this view, members of different national communities are not equally likely to draw on the same cultural tools to construct and assess the world around them (Lamont and Thévenot 2000, p. 9). One should investigate ‘the practical reasoning and reflective “accounts” that people use on a daily basis and that make social life an ongoing, practical accomplishment’ (Silber 2003, p. 429), and the range of arguments and principles of evaluation that individuals deploy in the process of trying to define the best way to act. These concepts define the theoretical framework embraced in this article, although my view is that such schema of behaviour should be seen rather openly, and by taking into consideration the reflexivity of agents and the existence of a set of opportunities, which is never given once and for all.

Methodology

The largest project from which this article draws is meant to investigate how employment flexibility\(^6\) may affect the construction of early career paths. Sub-questions investigated those resources effectively used, and the cultural elements employed to explain strategies. One of those resources has proved to be ‘youth’. This has taken the role of an institution, in that it provides people ‘with the definitions of situations that allow [agents] to identify the roles that they may adopt in […] particular situations […]’ (Scott 2006, p. 92), i.e. it provides people with reasons to behave a certain way. According to Maines, ‘interpretations of conduct’ are ‘means of creating a measure of congruity between the conduct itself and cultural expectations’ (2006, p. 113).

In this paper, the justifications around which interviewees’ accounts take shape are reconstructed. The interview encounter is recognised as an interactive process, ‘where both the interviewer and interviewee are actively constructing and interpreting the process […]’ (Cassell 2005, p. 168). The condition of the interviewer may make a difference in the construction of meanings, and efforts to equalise the power relationship should be considered (Cassell 2005).

Situating the researcher, as well as the researched, is especially worthwhile in comparative research, despite the difficulties in ‘equalising’ the relation between interviewer and interviewee (Glucksmann 2000, p. 21). My position as a young educated Italian living in England has facilitated the access phase, as introducing oneself as an outsider may encourage openness, but may also have caused difficulties in communicating practices that are taken for granted and ways of articulating this. For this reason, interviews were conducted in the interviewee’s mother tongue. The analysis of (full) transcriptions has taken into consideration that as a language, Italian often implies a more passionate, clear and dramatic form of expression in comparison to English, which is often more politically correct. Thus, efforts were made to search for interviewees’ genuine meanings.

Despite Isin’s claim that ‘all sociological method […] either involves explicit and direct comparison of time and/or space differential or involves concepts that were developed through such comparisons’ (Isin 2006, p. 84), this research has presented some typical challenges of comparative research. The contexts under examination seldom are seen as equally relevant by lay people; when the fieldwork was conducted, graduate careers in England were certainly more appealing and represented as more successful than graduate careers in Italy.
Ten in-depth interviews have been conducted in each country, for each profession, i.e. Accountancy, Engineering, and HR. Interviewees were recruited mainly through the snowball method of sampling, were interviewed in-depth by the author, and their interviews were fully transcribed. In this article, of the 60 early career professionals interviewed in total, 11 are quoted. A comparative axis has been constructed between young professionals based in the two countries. The element holding the two groups together is primarily their position at a specific moment in the course of their lives (in relation to the construction of their careers), at which they have concluded their studies, have had some experience of the labour market and professional work and are still investing a lot in this, but, on the other hand, are keeping their options open, as their careers are still open to substantial development. As a result, they differ the most from the standpoint of the professional element. The fact that these interviews were conducted before the current global financial crisis offers the opportunity to highlight very clearly the differences between the two strategies of action identified and discussed.

Since the sample was chosen according to the length of work experience after graduation (approximately 5–10 years), the interviewees based in Italy were older than their English counterparts, as the Italian educational process requires a lengthier period to qualify for employment. The interviews were conducted in Cagliari and Naples for the first group, and in London and its surrounding areas for the second. These countries were chosen for their different extent and modulation of flexibility of their markets. Italian flexibility remains conceived of as an employment phenomenon; it is not integrated with the whole economic system, and it is culturally justified only for limited groups of people, provided that it does not last for a long time.

Cagliari and Naples were chosen as significant for southern Italy, where the rhetoric of a job-for-life as the preferable option is still being negotiated. In this way, the cultural contrast with England is sharper than if I had focused on other areas of the country, such as northern Italy. In fact, it is not England and Italy as economic contexts tout court that are compared. Rather, the focus is on the justifications for action that arise in the accounts given by early career professionals who are embedded in those contexts. The context chosen reflect diverging social and economic traditions and values, and such a background distance makes the comparison especially revealing of strategies of career construction in their very motivations.

Along this sociocultural line, it has to be said that English roots of flexibility can be traced back to the 1980s, when the ‘Thatcherite project’ involved a profound liberalisation of the ways in which working conditions were negotiated with the state. Then, a ‘moral crusade’, to quote Du Gay (1996), started with the liberalisation of the economy, and culminated in the famous dictum ‘there is no such thing as society’. Interviews with professionals based in England were conducted in south-east England. This allowed the inclusion of professionals based in the London area, as well as small villages outside the capital’s employment basin. Considering a wide area allows different degrees of prosperity to be seen. Given the willingness of many to commute long distances, the positive effect of London as a source of potentially infinite employment opportunities has been difficult to avoid completely. The analysis included professionals working in huge multinational companies based in the city, where various ethnicities hold a variety of views on working routines, but
also professionals working in small or micro-practices. This variation was not present in the sample of professionals based in Italy.

Squeezing or blurring: ways of playing with youth

In this section, I discuss how the two groups of early career professionals interviewed employ different cultural repertoires with reference to their specific position in the life-course. Thus, a space is created for the emergence of diverging strategies of action. As anticipated, professionals based in England demonstrate a very confident and determined attitude towards the world of employment. Simon, an HR professional who works for a multinational company, has a degree in Sports Science. This is relevant to his job in so far as he understands his role as primarily motivating and managing a group of employees, as if they were playing in a team. His job ‘is a bit like playing sport’ too:

If you get to the top of your game in sport the main thing is maintaining it, so you need to make sure you continue to play competitive games to keep fitness, your agility, things like that. (Simon, HR, England)

This excerpt suggests how short the ‘life-course’ of such competitive careers is: an athlete cannot perform at his/her peak for a long time, but gives the most in the early years of his/her sport career; likewise, a professional plays the majority of his/her cards in the first years of employment. When asked to predict the course of his career, Rob, an accountant with a typical trajectory, did not see any other route before him than an upward one, despite being defined by his partner as being fairly unambitious:

I think I just frankly arrogantly always assumed, it would just sort of work out over the coming years. I guess, I kind of, I expect that eventually ... I will become a partner someday. A partner in accountancy. (Rob, accountancy, England)

The self-assertiveness and self-confidence of the interviewees, consistently shown throughout interview encounters, is combined with the pretence of being immune to the negative side of the flexible labour market. What often emerges is an eagerness to participate fully in the world of adults, and the impression that they are able to make a difference in it. This is certainly so in Martin’s case, whose interview takes a peculiar self-congratulatory direction, to the point that he even asks me – as other interviewees based in England have done – whether he sounds arrogant. He is clearly satisfied with the position he has obtained, and in his belief that, by wearing a suit every day, he stands out from all the other anonymous men in the area where he works (this is in spite of his recognition that everyone in central London looks the same as him).

The tone of his account is similar to that of a job interview (where the prospective employer would be the interviewer). Plans for changing jobs, or even career, are often mentioned. The tone in which such wishes are pronounced suggests that they are not simply evasion dreams, but are considered to be a real and possible alternative. That in England, one is expected to be extremely ambitious and ready to compete, is also demonstrated by Bill, a young accountant working for a small accountancy practice...
in Essex, who describes it as an arena where everything starts and finishes very quickly:

I think the business mentality in the U.K., at the moment, is very short-term. Get rich quick. [...] which is why no one stays in a firm for longer than two or three years. They stay two or three years, then they don’t get enough so they go and join another firm that will pay them what they want. (Bill, accountant, England)

The workplace described by Bill is definitely one which welcomes young, energetic and enthusiastic people, as youth implies both the willingness and ability to constantly play hard, aiming at fast promotions through quick learning and change. In its intensity, Bill’s account contains some elements that show the importance of position in a given stage of the life-course in building a career path. First, it suggests that workers may be treated differently depending on whether, at that point in their lives and careers, they can give their utmost or not. Bill mentions that, if that is not the case, they are ‘disposed of’. By using this expression, Bill interestingly suggests the metaphor of consumption, and evokes a slight sense of bitterness at being part of the game. Secondly, the importance of conventional success is confirmed: to construct a successful career path means to climb up the ladder, be promoted and earn more money. In this way, a precise horizon of meanings is depicted.

An unproblematic understanding of this mono-dimensional conception of career is typical of young adults. They perceive their current situation as exciting, and this convinces them to emphasise what they are at that specific moment, clearly defining the boundaries between ‘younger youth’, on the one hand, and ‘more mature adults’, on the other. Strangleman points out that, contrary to ‘rhetorical claims’, apparently ‘what is really valued […] is docility or passivity [among young workers]’ (2004, p. 137), thus suggesting to us that young adults’ self-representations tend to overemphasise agency.

Such emphasis on a self-celebratory position is completely lacking in the strategies of action employed by professionals based in Italy who were interviewed. There is no such a thing as a ‘short term mentality’, to use Bill’s words, as there is no possibility for making plans in the first place. Instead, it is much more a matter of swimming in the flexible labour market for some years, trying not to sink, and hoping at some point to land on the island of secure employment, where real life properly begins. This is partially related to the educational and vocational system, which, particularly for professional pathways, relies on a long apprenticeship. The young professionals interviewed in Italy repeatedly describe aspects of work that function as delayers of their proper adult entry into the labour markets. The account given by Carlo, a young accountant working in Naples who collaborates with an established practice and at the same time is trying to create his own practice, is exemplary in this respect. He distinguishes between the different career stages involved in the field of accountancy:

I graduated from school at eighteen/nineteen, one year military service, nineteen, five years of university and I am twenty four, three years of apprenticeship and I am Mr Nobody. I have the qualification, pay attention, but the practice needs to be opened, set up, done. And I am twenty-seven, and the practice needs to be opened, to be oriented and to me this means getting clients, and I am Mr Nobody, really Mr Nobody. Then considering that if you are learning either you are not paid or you get 310 Euros per
month, for me the family... at the end... As a consequence, I have no intention at all of having a family [...] The fact that the family allows you not to pay rent, it’s an important thing for this path, I’ve said, five years plus three years, then acquisition of clients [...] Today, I have my own practice, I am economically independent, in the sense that if I earn 10, the practice costs me 9.50 [...] I could do this and not encounter any problems because I have a healthy family, no problems at all. (Carlo, accountant, Italy)

This strategy reveals some of the difficulties experienced in attempting to become established under a gerontocratic regime and suggests that, if youth is conceived of as a resource that needs to be activated in order to construct a career, it can be either squeezed, to make the most out of it, or diluted to minimise the discomfort. In the first case, it is a positive resource, and its boundaries should be clearly defined for those in the condition of ‘using’ it. In the second case, being young defines a condition of disadvantage that young adults must disguise, attenuate and blur as much as possible so as not to feel trapped in a condition that most Italian institutions undervalue. Vincenzo, an engineer from Naples, identifies some of the aspects involved in feeling caught in a working culture requiring long-term commitment. He talks extensively of how much he suffered through trying to make himself suitable for the company he joined after graduation, which forced him into an incongruent working lifestyle when compared with previous experiences and expectations:

Regardless of what one does, the company life has its own mechanisms, which I have acquired, I have seen... I have learnt being there. [...] From that company I have learnt very few specific, technical things, let’s say... I didn’t like it because when you complete a professional path, coming from university, mechanical engineering, that requires you to make a lot of sacrifices, I have studied so much, I sacrificed myself a lot, and once you enter in the company you start to go down, that is, all the competences you have are used only minimally, in some cases... (Vincenzo, engineer, Italy)

He then explains why he left this position, by describing how he felt uncomfortable there, as if he could not fit into the wider frame:

I felt limited in what I wanted to do, likewise in the development of my career [...], in any case I had to follow their passages, their channels, wait for their rhythms, while I wanted, on the one hand, to lead a riskier life, and, on the other, to invest more in my potential, because once you are on a path, it’s true, if you are better you proceed faster, but basically everyone is put on the same level and laid flat, that is, everyone gets promoted anyway, everyone gets stuck, you go along with the company, and I couldn’t bear that. (Vincenzo, engineer, Italy)

Early career professionals based in Italy attempt to dissociate themselves from the condition of youth and enter the next stage of life, as if they need to escape a sort of age-trap. The younger they are, the more illegitimate their right is to become part of the ‘real game’. This is compounded by recruiting practices in the two contexts. Most interviewees based in Italy, when asked to comment on the requirements set for vacancies, are very cynical towards what they see as unrealistic criteria. Indeed, such adverts often emphasise the importance of considerable length of experience that, in Italy, is in fact unusual if associated with a very young age and graduate degrees. The formal recruiting system is thus seen as unfriendly and is not considered as a possible route. On the other hand, professionals based in England, when interviewed, show they systematically refer to the demands of the market that are in turn ‘objectified’ in
vacancy adverts. They are knowledgeable about the ups and downs of their respective areas of employment, and regularly update their CVs so that they are always ready for new applications; some even prepared a revised version of their CV after being interviewed as part of this research project. Anne-Marie, an HR professional in a multinational company, has a clear grasp of the steps she has taken so far, as well as her possible future directions:

My role is very general and I am meant to do a bit of everything, but if I wanted to I could specialize in training and development or I can specialize in HR systems, which is sort of an IT side of HR, um or I could specialize in compensation and benefits, so working solely on pensions um private medical care. To me, personally, there’s enough for me within HR, I like HR, I’m happy where I am um and maybe later on in my career I may decide to ...

(Anne Marie, HR, England)

Anne-Marie is very knowledgeable about the strengths and weaknesses of her CV, and conceives her strategies for her career as a mixture between the demands of the market – which she knows are ‘out there’ – and preferences relating to the private sphere.

The role of the family

In reviewing the term ‘strategy of action’, Morgan (1989) notes that, in sociology, this often refers to negotiations taking place within the household, and therefore concerns aspects such as the division of labour, and paid and unpaid work. This view suggests that the family of origin may play a central role in the elaboration of career strategies of early career professionals who seek to launch themselves into the adult community. In particular, negotiations inside family boundaries influence the development of individualism and individualisation. These may be useful lenses through which to interpret the different strategies of action taken by the early career professionals interviewed. The deficiencies of the structural context in which Italians are embedded force them to find ad hoc, personal solutions to solve their problems. On the contrary, the emphasis on individualism for early career professionals based in England, and the smoother system in which they act, enables them to activate already existing routes, which they can follow and/or depart from at their convenience, reducing the need for individualised strategies in this way. I argue that relations within the family in Italy are such that Italian youth are discouraged from developing an individualist side, while the situation is reversed with respect to English families.

In Italy, the role of the family is very strong in all early stages of career construction, as an all-solving institution in which the young are supported. First of all, it plays a pivotal economic role. In justifying his passion for wearing cashmere sweaters and taking expensive holidays, Carlo raises the issue of the consumption of expensive goods that many professionals are not willing to give up. This contrasts sharply with British interviewees, many of whom have already bought and sold their first house, and are now investing in a second, bigger one, where the mortgage is paid using rental income from house mates.

In a social and economic context in which family provides the only source of funds to enable university study, and in which a high percentage of people do not ‘leave’ the parental home to go to university, families do have a say in career
Even once married – and this is the most popular reason for leaving the parental home (Mazzuco et al. 2006) – Italians tend to reside very close to their parents. Due to the low percentage of working women in the previous generation, a cheap and trustworthy source of childcare is thus made available (Facchini 2008). The family provides a sort of economic support that is not temporally bound, starts before children are born and, if there are not specific problems, proceeds after they have grown up. Congi (2001) lists the sources of material support, ending up justifying why ‘they don’t emigrate’. While in previous Italian generations the youth played the role of the supporters, now they have become those for which support is morally justified. There is also evidence that even in families where the previous generation has moved away, the flow of economic support from the family where one has grown up still exists. Also, the state bases its policies on the model of a traditional family, in which youth are only a part of the whole and, as such, are denied agency. The traditional emphasis of the Italian government on the institution of the family, realised by delegating to it many services that should be provided by a healthy welfare system, is a contradiction whose negative effects appear now to be resting on young people’s shoulders.

Crow (1989), discussing Redclift (1986), warns that the concept of strategy is problematic whenever ‘survival strategies’ are sought after, i.e. in difficult situations, such as self-employment practices among minorities (in which constraints are so compelling that agents’ power is reduced to a minimum). In other words, we should pay attention to whether alternative strategies are really to be found in all circumstances. In Italy, a precarious equilibrium is made possible by a system of mutual protection, which allows young adults to live on and consume very little earnings because they can count on the production of domestic goods and eventually on the retirement/disability pensions of their elders; individuals are thus never alone. If we therefore consider the family as a resource that may be activated by early career professionals, some semblance of the sadly well-known amoral familism may help in explaining the readiness of families to support their grown-up children.

Moreover, besides a considerable exchange of tangible and intangible resources, family also plays a pivotal emotional role in the lives of early career professionals. Franco’s career in engineering is disappointing to him, but he compensates for this with the satisfaction he gains from family life. Now that his one-year-old daughter recognises the ring-tone of his mobile when he calls his wife on the way home, ‘everything is fine’. Pietro, an HR professional, seemed to have sacrificed many ambitions for the sake of seeing his family living happily on one of the islands in the Gulf of Naples. This implies many difficulties for his career, as he has already tried moving to Milan, where his expertise could reap more rewards. He maintains that ‘when you are facing a move alone there is no problem, but when your family has to get involved as well, obviously it is more difficult, harder’. In contrast, in the accounts of professionals based in England, the family is not referred to in significant ways by professionals and does not seem to provide strong emotional support. The young professionals interviewed have been encouraged to look ‘out there’ for something they like and can fit into by themselves. According to their cultural repertoires, the family (as a group) does not seem to intervene in their career choices.

Secondly, various members of the family are portrayed as powerful agents in England. In other words, strategies based on the individual are stronger than those
intended to defend family needs. This is valid both for those who are married or in stable partnerships, as well as for those who are single. In fact, only one out of the group of 30, Amanda, has decided to continue living with her parents, finding this solution both convenient and pleasurable. Côté (2002) argues that when the cost of education is sustained by students (and not by parents), they are more likely to become independent soon afterwards and integrate more promptly into an adult setting.

English interviewees seem to take leaving the parental home at a relatively young age for granted. Yet, the independence of professionals based in England is also due to easy access to forms of credit for various needs, including financing higher education and buying properties. Instead, their Italian counterparts are excluded from forms of credit if their jobs are not considered by banks to be stable; banks often ask for the parents’ signature as guarantee. Antonio, an engineer from Cagliari, has bought a small flat in the hinterland of Cagliari, and likes underlining the fact that he is paying his mortgage himself, in contrast to many of his friends ‘who have it paid by their parents’. In this way he underlines that he is going it alone and that his parents’ intervention is unnecessary – in contrast to his mates.

This situation is made clearer if further specifications are made in relation to the gender structure of the family. Throughout the three decades after Second World War, female participation in the labour market was discouraged, unless the support of the mother and/or mother-in-law was given (Mingione and Andreotti 2005, p. 103). The economic crisis in the 1970s forced women to question their roles in the world of paid employment. This legacy is difficult to extirpate: the process of defamiliarisation, i.e. the tendency to provide for various family needs by themselves or through the market, has never completely taken place in Italy (Esping-Andersen 1999). This, Mingione and Andreotti warn, has only happened fully in northern European countries, while in Italy ‘the transformation of the social regulation of female work is internal to the role of the professionalised housewife, who is wife and mother of workers’14 (2005, p. 103). These aspects are worth keeping in mind, as different levels of female participation in the labour market entail different amounts of informal work that women can perform for the family and, in particular, to accommodate ‘grown up’ children.

The young professionals interviewed in Italy are likely to have mothers who are either housewives or who have had little formal employment. These mothers are thus unlikely to pressure their sons and daughters into building an independent life early on, firstly because they can still materially work for them, and secondly, because ‘losing’ their dependants would involve a redefinition of their own primary identity. In so doing, these families are a prime site for throwing up obstacles to the growth of their sons and daughters. On the other hand, emotionally and economically speaking, these aspects are simply lacking in the contexts in which professionals based in England are embedded. British youth are more independent, as they are in fact directly responsible for student loans and mortgages and are personally entitled to state benefits.15

My data suggest that British families seem much more aligned with individualistic horizons for their youth. Young adults interviewed in England get inspiration from the model of the self who ‘searches for increasing autonomy and self realisation’ (Paci 2005, p. 12). And in fact, it is widely known that individualism is mostly associated with an Anglo-American reality. It should be distinguished from
individualisation, although the two are often confused. Beck (1992) suggests that, so far, individualisation has been understood as personal emancipation and uniqueness, while less has been said about the subjective impact of these issues, relating to how individuals cope with their consciousness in such situations. For him, ‘individualisation means that each person’s biography is removed from given determinants and placed in his or her own hands, open and dependent upon decision’ (Beck 1992, p. 15).


In discussing some family and gender issues, a constitutive element of the life cycle emerges, namely, that different cultural repertoires prompt graduates based in England to concentrate on their careers from the time they leave university until they establish themselves in their given professions. During this period, they tend to think solely of themselves and tend to do so in individualistic terms; they are directly responsible for scholarships, student debts, rent (they mostly cohabit) and so on. They are already independent of their families, and even those who have already constituted a family themselves tend to think of themselves as individuals. Indeed, a number of the interviewees stated that they could still choose because they ‘did not have a family’, not meaning that they weren’t married or in a partnership, but rather that they did not have the responsibilities that come with children. They reaffirm that they are alone in constructing their path, i.e. free to choose and maybe to go in the wrong direction; they even suggest that they are in a phase of their lives in which they are entitled to think of themselves and their careers without restriction, or special support from their loved ones. This phase in their careers then becomes well-defined and easily identified and ‘activated’.

Early career professionals based in Italy who were interviewed seem simply to lack this phase of life; they tend to construct their careers along with their families. This can be understood in two senses: they either tend to live in the parental house for a very long time, most of it well after completing university studies and vocational apprenticeships (in which case it is easy to see how the family can influence choices and directions to be taken, and even for those who clearly state that ‘they are free to do what they want’), or they have already started their own families (even in this case it is easy to grasp how this can intervene in one’s choice of career). For professionals based in Italy, that phase in early adulthood in which one concentrates solely on one’s career as an independent individual is blurred, undefined and ontologically uncertain. Existing literature fails to address this issue, thus preventing a comprehensive understanding of young people’s issues.

Conclusions

In devising their strategies of action, early career professionals must come to terms with the structural aspects entailed in the positions they occupy in the life cycle. In looking at this as a resource for constructing a career, the comparison between
professionals based in Italy and England suggests different cultural repertoires. Even when the same resource is activated, it is always configured as multi-faceted and complex, and thus transfigured into a comprehensively different strategy of action. For instance, in Italy, the family is a multi-solving institution, yet at the same time Italian youth struggle to leave it behind and act autonomously. Strategies implemented are by their nature short-term and not organic until, at least, the early phase is overcome. In turn, this forces them to act by developing abilities outside the working sphere. In this sense, a resource that in a ‘survival strategy’ dimension may be considered positive, i.e. the family, also turns out to have a limiting effect in terms of the development of young adulthood. Through such a limitation, a new creative adaptation emerges. Many accusations levelled at Italian youth are centred on a supposed passivity and docility, which most have translated into invisibility (Diamanti 1999).

As the demographer Alessandro Rosina stated, the older generation is taking over not only the role, but also the resources of Italian youth; however, this does not seem to have provoked the same sort of rebellion that one country would have, if another country were to invade its territory. However, if this is true in terms of traditional forms of political engagement, it is not what emerges from this interview data where, to put it more sociologically, despite an apparent restriction of their options, young Italian adults do seem to act as powerful agents at least on the level of everyday activities.

As far as the group of early career professionals based in England is concerned, their strategies of action are quite conventional, as it seems that professionals activate the myth of the self-made person, simply utilising routes already designed for those in a similar condition, as early career professionals in a certain position in the life cycle. Being young is a pre-defined, well-constructed resource, which is convenient to them.

To sum up, early career professionals based in Italy who were interviewed struggle to find clear limits to their youth. It is in their interest not to be associated with it, as it is seen as a limiting condition. This is so prolonged as to superimpose itself into (full) adulthood. In this prolonged transition, they take whatever opportunities arise here and there, but in a very non-organic way. They feel the need to discard the condition that literature calls ‘wait-hood’, in which they are not entitled to direct rights, while risking remaining stuck in it for a long time.

On the contrary, their counterparts based in England play the youth card deliberately, since they have an interest in defining themselves as young workers. In this way, the condition of youth is squeezed and concentrated in order to gain the most out of it, and it is ultimately played as a ‘winning card’. Professionals based in England can claim, in a more legitimate way, to follow the route they prefer as capable, reflexive individuals. In their justifications, decisions are taken on the sole basis of individual needs and will. However, one must not overlook the fact that, in claiming such a freedom – a symptom of what Furlong and Cartmel (2007) call ‘epistemological fallacy’ – paradoxically, they mostly end up following very conventional routes; the ‘youth card’ is intuitive and established, paths are already forged, and young professionals simply join them in their own capacities, not really through any need to enact individualised and alternative routes.
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Notes
1. Among others, see such concepts as ‘emerging adulthood’ (Arnett 2000, 2007), ‘young adults’ (Donati and Scabini 1988), ‘yo-yo transitions’ (Walther 2006) and so on. With reference to the British context, MacDonald et al. (2001) have argued that these new conceptualisations build on two, less recent, perspectives: one which traces back to the youth cultural studies traditions associated with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies; and the other, which deals with youth transition issues. These are dated back to the 1970s and the 1990s, respectively.
2. The expression ‘young adults’ may be under-used, in that some scholars seem to refer to young people at this life stage, while not explicitly using this label. See, for instance, Côté and Byner (2008), Côté (2009), and Roberts (2011).
3. According to Esping-Andersen’s model (1990, 1999), the UK belongs to the liberal group of countries, characterised by a modest level of welfare-state provisions and reliance on means-tested benefits. According to Ferrera’s version of this scheme (1996), Italy would fall in the residual category of the southern group of welfare states, whose features are low-levels of welfare provision, and reliance on the family as a form of support. However, others indicate common trends throughout European nations towards disinvestment in welfare measures, which in turn puts pressure on parents and young people. In Britain, working-class youth tend to leave their parental homes significantly earlier than their middle-class counterparts (Jones et al. 2006), defining a fast-track versus a slow-track transition. However, other sources of division could also be identified.
4. For instance, many professional associations define young members to be affiliates under 40 years of age.
5. The reference here is both to common sense and sociological understandings, according to which there is a ‘right’ age to assume certain roles and responsibilities. However, critiques of this approach have recently been put forward (Cuzzocrea and Magaraggia, forthcoming 2011).
6. Brought by the growth of temporary and fixed-term contracts, the spread of employment flexibility across Europe has meant increased variability in hours worked, in job content and pay reward. The dimension that has brought about more difficulties is that of insecurity, as it has been written very extensively. New entrants in the labour market, i.e. mostly young adults, are more affected by it.
7. All names have been changed for reasons of confidentiality. For the same reason, only basic information is provided about them in the Appendix.
8. Naples is the most important city in southern Italy, with the highest density of population. Cagliari catalyses Sardinia’s population, where movements are delimited by the sea. In the last decade, this area has seen the development of scientific and highly technological campuses, suggesting the image of a Mediterranean ‘Silicon Valley’ (Ferrucci and Porcheddu 2004). However, the choice of locations where the interviewees work and live have turned to be mostly irrelevant due both to the high job mobility of professionals in their early careers and their willingness to commute long distances.
9. It actually also refers to a new adulthood dimension (Blatterer 2007), at least as an unquestionable point of arrival (Kelly 2006).
10. For a complete analysis of the family in the UK see Morgan (1996) and Charles et al. (2008).
11. ISTAT Multiscopo survey reveals that 61% of Italians in the 25–29 age group live with their families, as well as 29.5% of those in the 30–34 age group, as reported in Mazzucco et al. (2006).
12. By traditional family, I indicate here the nuclear family originating from a marriage. This definition is important given the resistance shown by recent Italian governments to the
recognition of formal visibility (and thus, often, access to credit) to unmarried couples. It is well known that this contrasts with the high number of babies born outside marriage in the UK, and in general with other European policies (including other southern European countries). Such positions have stark effects on so-called slow-track transitions.

13. For a comprehensive and problematic view on household formation in the UK, see Ford et al. (2002) and Heath and Cleaver (2003). They discuss data contrasting to this.

14. The responses of Great Britain and Italy to female participation in the labour market are quite different. Great Britain has experienced higher levels of female participation, with high participation until their early 1920s, followed by significant rates of drop-out for childcare reasons, leading to high levels of participation once again when their children enter school. This movement has been dubbed the ‘M curve’ reflecting its high-low-high pattern.

15. In Italy, one is eligible to claim unemployment benefits only if he/she has lost a permanent position. In the UK, which is more sympathetic to the NEET logic, all those over 18 and not in employment can apply for JSA support, provided that they can prove they are actively looking for a job, and they do not have substantial savings.

16. I have developed elsewhere a more general proposal to use these concepts as interpretative lenses in relation to different institutions, see Cuzzocrea (2011).

17. Plenary session of the Youth, Society and the Mediterranean Conference, Forli 26–28 March 2009. The point made by Rosina is also known as generational warfare. There is a great deal of literature on this topic.

References


Appendix

Profiles of the interviewees quoted in the article: Martin is an engineer in his mid-1920s and works in central London in a multinational company. He plays an active role in professional associations and appears to be very involved in the engineer mission. Bill is a young accountant who lives alone and works for a small accountancy practise in Essex. Though his education and work experience are consistent with that of the average accountant, he places distance from the ethos and working attitudes of immediate colleagues. He is committed to a number of activities outside working hours, having nothing to do with socialisation with colleagues, and considers career development outside accountancy as a possibility. Anne-Marie is a HR professional, employed in a multinational company in Surrey. Notwithstanding that she is specifically trained as a HR professional, she has a flexible approach to her career path, as well as the overall organisation of childcare responsibilities and career breaks. At the time of her interview, she is in her late 1920s and about to get married. Amanda is a HR professional, working for an academic department in Essex. She lives with her parents, and seeks a different lifestyle from those who commute to London, or move there solely for the sake of climbing the career ladder. Son of a manager, Carlo has recently opened his own accountancy business in Naples and continues to work for an established practice. He is facing all the difficulties usually faced by a newcomer, and suffers most of all from the poor social recognition associated with his job. Vincenzo is a mechanical engineer who, after leaving a permanent position in Naples, has embarked on a Ph.D. program. At the time of his interview, he is about to complete his project, which he considers as forming a basis for a career in the newly established practise where he works with his sister, an architect, and another colleague. Franco is trapped in a disappointing career in engineering. He feels that he is rather insecure in his position. However, he states that he compensates for this with the satisfaction he gains from family life. Pietro graduated from a prestigious university in Northern Italy. After the birth of his first son, Pietro moved back from Milan to a Naples HR secondary branch. Pietro acknowledges that his achievements must be framed within a low-profile and at a low salary level, and in the face of exhausting travel commitments. Antonio, an engineer from Cagliari, is very self-conscious of his particularly successful achievements. Son of an engineer, partner of an engineer, having resigned from a multinational, cutting-edge enterprise to join a traditional, fordist company, Antonio has developed a reflexive view on his work. None of the interviewees graduated from exceptionally prestigious universities such as Oxbridge, except one of the Italians, who studied at Bocconi.