

## Chances and choices: patterns of life planning and future orientations among Italian young people

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*Abstract:* This paper analyses how Italian young people perceive and construct their own futures, based on in-depth face-to-face interviews and data collected using a questionnaire administered to a sample of upper secondary school students in five Italian cities between 2005 and 2007. The paper opens with a brief review of the recent changes in the transition to adulthood and of the factors that are influencing young people's temporal horizons and approaches to life planning; it then turns to focus on (life) projects and attitudes towards the future among young Italians.

The analysis of the relationship between life planning, life-chances and choices of upper secondary school students confirms that young Italians primarily take a short-term approach to the construction of their biographies and frequently portray their transition to adulthood in a very uncertain fashion. Nevertheless, most of them do not totally reject the challenge of planning their future, and are able to focus on reflexivity, responsibility and autonomy as key issues for managing their own biographical projects.

*Keywords:* transition to adulthood; Italian adolescents; biographical projects; planning skills; restricted sociality.

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### Constructing the future in times of uncertainty

Data collected in Europe and other western societies shows that, compared with some decades ago, nowadays the transition to adulthood takes longer than before (Bidart, 2007; Van de Velde, 2008), and that, while differences among countries have to be recognized<sup>2</sup>, the transition is gradually becoming less linear and predictable, often reversible, fragmented and de-standardized (EGRIS, 2001; Biggart, 2005; Walther, 2006).

Along with these changes it is possible to identify, particularly among young people, a condition in which biographical construction seems to be less characterised by a sense of continuity. On a collective level, a «disconnection between life trajectories, social roles and ties to the universe of institutions» is taking place (Leccardi, 2006a, p. 17). Meanwhile, on an individual level, the past, present and future are less and less reciprocally interconnected, thus challenging both the meaning and patterns of life planning as well as young people's future orientations.

With regard to the first aspect, as pointed out by P.L Berger, B. Berger and H. Kellner (1974, p. 73), the life-plan can be seen as «the basic context in which knowledge of society is organized in the consciousness of an individual», jointly linking past, present and future. Thus, for an individual, life planning involves what P.L Berger *et al.* (*Idem*, p. 71) define as a «*multi-relational synchronization*» of his own values, social relations, needs, commitments and aspirations, together with the available life-chances, typical life careers and socially sustainable identities, in order to fulfil purposes considered as relevant for his own biography.

Such a way of considering life planning presupposes a «manner of apprehending temporality» that requires «thinking in long-range time spans» (*Idem.*, p. 75). However, when uncertainty, insecurity and risk seem to represent the main features of the relationship between individuals and temporality (such as in the contemporary phase of history), adopting such a perspective becomes increasingly onerous and (maybe) unsafe. Consequently, the prospect of long-term and large-scale life planning,

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<sup>2</sup> The extension of the transition to adulthood is particularly noticeable in Mediterranean countries (Cavalli & Galland, 1993; Van de Velde, 2008), and especially in Italy (Schizzerotto, 2002; Facchini, 2005; Buzzi *et al.*, 2007).

capable of thinking beyond the contingencies of the present, is seemingly being replaced by a new one, whose main features are a less secure future and shorter-term planning horizons (Wallace & Kovatcheva, 1998).

What does this involve? In the mid 1980s, particularly in Italy, studies highlighted that the present had become the only meaningful temporal dimension in young people's lives and that everyday life was the context in which they could find and give meaning to their own experiences (Garelli, 1984; Cavalli, 1985). Though supported by influential research centres (CENSIS, 2002) and probably useful in understanding the temporal horizons of part of the current generation, such an analysis does not allow for the whole range of possible biographical strategies among young people today. In fact, at least on a theoretical level, it is worth considering that, in dealing with uncertainty and insecurity, individuals could develop a range of strategies – apart from planning on a large scale or confining themselves entirely to the present – in order to recompose their own trajectories, identities and lives.

At the same time, whatever the span of their temporal horizons, a common challenge for all individuals is the need to maintain a reflexive attitude with regard to the range of possibilities for action (Giddens, 1991) and to assume responsibility in defining choices and assembling the system of options and ligatures – life-chances (Dahrendorf, 1979) – available to them by virtue of their social, cultural and economic backgrounds. This assigns a «leading role to the ability to work out autonomous projects» (Leccardi, 2006b, p. 17), thus reinforcing the relevance of individualization in the construction of the future and, in general, in youth life trajectories (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2001). Nevertheless, the relevance of structures, conditionings and constraints cannot be undervalued without falling into a rhetoric of freedom of choice or ignoring systemic and systematic inequalities and differences (Brannen & Nielsen, 2005).

In other words, it seems that, in the analysis of the ways in which young people construct their future and define their projects, both the variety of their temporal horizons and the interplay between individual agency and the structure (Archer, 2003) – or between subjectivity and «the social context in which young people's lives are lived» (Jones, 2009, p. 88) – need to be explored in greater detail.

### **Italian young people's projects and attitudes towards the future**

Starting from these considerations, the following pages will present and discuss the findings from a section of the research project “Adolescents and Life-chances”<sup>3</sup>. The general aim of the research project was to study the educational and professional choices and projects of Italian upper secondary school students in connection with the life-chances available in the local contexts of five Italian provinces (Turin, Milan and Bergamo in Northern Italy, Salerno and Bari in the South). The focus of the research project was on the ‘person’ (the student) – regarded as a dynamic actor – and his engagement with formal, informal and non-formal educational agencies. Through a quali-quantitative methodological approach<sup>4</sup>, socio-economic status, gender, ethnicity, location, along with social and cultural capital were taken into consideration, in order to understand their influence on the students’ choices as well as to examine the reflexive process through which young people could recover/increase or erode/waste life-chances.

In particular, the following will focus on the ways in which Italian upper secondary school students deal with temporality and biographical transformations, paying attention to their patterns of life planning and future orientations. Taking into account the framework set out above, our hypothesis is that analysing how young people imagine and define their own future could make it possible to identify the economic, social and relational resources that affect their biographical construction strategies. At the same time, by examining such patterns of life planning, it should be possible to recognize the ways in which young people connect (or try to

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<sup>3</sup> Part of this paper is based on the proceedings from the research project “Adolescents and Life-chances”, awarded in 2005-2007 with a PRIN grant by the MIUR (Ministry of Education, University and Research). The first outcomes of the study are published in *Tra sogni e realtà. Gli adolescenti e la transizione alla vita adulta* (edited by Elena Besozzi; Rome: Carocci, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> The research methodology included two phases of data collection: in the first year a set of 117 in-depth face-to-face interviews were conducted with a sample of 38 students, plus their parents and teachers, based in five Italian cities (Milan, Turin, Bergamo, Bari, Salerno). In the second year a quantitative enquiry was carried out in the same five municipalities, using a questionnaire administered to a probabilistic sample of 1294 public upper secondary school students enrolled in either a Lyceum, a Technical Institute, or a Professional Institute (Italian vocational schools). A stratified sampling technique was employed, which consisted of extracting only the 2nd and 4th year students from the 41 schools participating in the study.

bond) options and ligatures, in order to establish – in the present – the basis for constructing their own future (Rizza, 2003). Finally, through investigating their projects and attitudes towards the future, it should be possible to understand whether young people surrender to uncertainty and the seductiveness of the present, thus renouncing the opportunity to plan their own life, or reveal a (positive) apprehension about the future, thereby attempting to finding ways of reshaping their trajectories and identities.

In-depth face-to-face interviews have revealed a first key aspect: at least in its “long range” perspective, life planning seems to have (almost completely) lost the meaningfulness and relevance that it had for previous generations. When asked to compare their transition to adulthood with what they expected their children will face, both parents and teachers repeatedly claimed that, in sharp contrast to their own youth, where long-range planning was important if not crucial, nowadays it seems less viable, and perhaps impossible. This is also the feeling shared by a majority of their children and students, who acknowledged that they feel unable to plan their own lives in a long-range perspective. However, youth narratives, or at least a majority of the students interviewed in the research project, do not conform to the pattern proposed by M. Maffesoli (2006), who claimed that contemporary youth is even totally refusing the idea of projecting. In fact, despite face-to-face interviews clearly showing a general weakening of their planning capacity and a contraction of their temporal horizon, it seems that Italian students are not «making the immediate present absolute» (Leccardi, 2006a, p. 17). Even if the ‘present’ is their focal existential horizon, this does not mean that – in student representations – the latter is totally unbound to the future and past.

On the other hand, while their pathways are yet to be well-defined, and are often still strongly tied to familiar resources, Italian upper secondary school students indicate in their narratives how important planning could become when facing a growing uncertainty, just like their older (young-adult) brothers and sisters (Crespi, 2005; Cesareo, 2005). However, it is important to clarify that, rather than speaking in terms of “life plan”, students were more likely to refer to “projects”, defined within a shorter timescale, intended as a sort of guide for action that is, if needed, easily modified, transformed or even reversed, depending on whether the external conditions change.

Starting from this point, young people seem to be conscious of having – compared to their parents – a growing amount of opportunities. They are also aware – as explained by a 14 year old student from Salerno – that the interconnection between options and ligatures depends chiefly “*upon my will and passion in doing things*”. In other words, a significant proportion of them seems not to totally refuse the challenge (or, at least, the desire) of planning the future. Nevertheless, they are conscious that this goal may be pursued only by means of a strategy, which gradually adapts to the contingency, always looking for new relational and normative anchorages (Bauman, 1995), and grounded in the need for an incessant reflexive redefinition of the relationship between the subjective and inter-subjective levels (Archer, 2003).

Obviously, this does not exclude the possibility – as shown by a less prominent but still relevant proportion of the students from the five Italian cities – of a feeling of inadequacy or powerlessness in dealing with the future, even the near one. However, as acknowledged by several girls<sup>5</sup>, Southern Italian and immigrant students<sup>6</sup>, the (positive) apprehension about the future seems to increase along with the aspiration of improving their own social and cultural circumstances.

Data collected during the second phase of the research project, with 1294 upper secondary school students from the five Italian cities being interviewed using a standardized questionnaire, confirm – generally – the main outcomes of the first (qualitative) phase. In particular, the following will focus on two aspects: the first refers to the students’ project(s), the second to their attitudes towards the future.

It is worth starting by considering the answers given by the students to the following question: “*Do you have any projects (studies, work, etc.) for the future?*” (see Table 1). Only a minority of the respondents claimed not

<sup>5</sup> The results of our research confirm that, as revealed by other surveys (Cavalli & Facchini, 2001; Besozzi, 2003; Buzzi, 2005; Buzzi *et al.*, 2007), compared to their peers, girls exhibit not only a most accentuated apprehension about the future, but also a greater autonomy in governing their choices: nevertheless, this often implies a growing feeling of uncertainty and insecurity.

<sup>6</sup> At this respect, it is important to highlight that, as claimed by a teacher, those of immigrant students could be seen as maybe “simpler, but more concrete projects”. At the same time, immigrant students are likely to show signs of a bounded planning, both when they try to accomplish their own parents’ life plan, as well as when they try to define their projects autonomously, even in sharp contrast with their family (Besozzi & Colombo, 2006; Colombo & Santagati, 2010).

to have one: 13.2% has never thought about it and 3.7% think it is “*completely useless to make projects*”. On the other hand, 19.6% considered it “*to be essential to plan for the future*”. The vast majority of the students (just under two-thirds), while claiming to have projects for the future are “*still confused*”.

Table 1. “Do you have any projects (studies, work, etc.) for the future?” by gender

Do you have any projects (studies, work, etc..) for the future?	Gender		Total
	Boys	Girls	
No, I've never thought about it	17,0%	10,3%	13,2%
No, I feel it is completely useless to make projects	4,6%	3,0%	3,7%
Yes, but I'm still confused	58,8%	67,1%	63,5%
Yes, I consider it to be essential to plan the future	19,6%	19,6%	19,6%
Total answers	100 01 100%	100 01 100%	100 01 100%

The latter statement is more evident among the female students and those living in the northern cities; whereas those who claim to have no projects for the future – because they have either “*never thought about it*” or consider it to be “*useless to make projects*” – are predominantly male students as well as, although in a smaller proportion, students with a medium-low family status. The awareness that it is essential to plan their own future is more evident among respondents living in the two southern cities, students with foreign origins as well as those with a high status family background. On the other hand, the tendency to make projects becomes greater with the increasing of school satisfaction and well-being, as well as with high levels of significance attached to family, school and peer networks.

It is therefore possible to claim that most of the students interviewed during the study show a positive attitude towards their biographical construction, even if characterized by a consistent level of uncertainty.

It is now worth considering the second aspect. In the questionnaire, the students were offered a set of *items* that express different ways of imagining the future and relating to it, asking them to choose the two they thought best summed up their attitude.

Almost half of the students indicated that “*In life it is important to have goals*”. On the other hand, just under one third saw the future as “*full of possibilities and surprises*” and a quarter indicated the need to keep their options open. In contrast, only one pupil in ten saw a future “*full of risks and uncertainties*”, with a similar proportion insisting on the role of luck or the need for time to choose their own way.

In order to give a concise interpretation of the results of the suggested *items*, they were grouped into four dimensions. The first refers to the future envisaged as *projected*, something to prepare for and pursue. The second refers to the future as a *possibility*, full of surprises and the need to deal with many open options. The third summarizes the *items* that refer to the future as a *necessity*, requiring that the choices are made on time or from which there is no return; and the fourth refers to an attitude of *fatalism*, in which the future is perceived as risky or linked to luck.

The *projected* dimension is highly significant among the female students; whereas, either the *items* summarized in the category of *possibility* or a fatalistic attitude prevail among the male students. On the other hand, the future seen as *projected* is particularly evident among those respondents who attend Lyceum, and as a *possibility* by those with either a high status family background or who declared being strongly religious. The *necessity* and *fatalism* dimensions are more pronounced among those respondents with a low status family background as well as who attend Technical or Professional Institutes.

Table 2. Attitudes towards the future by significance of family and school networks  
\* Percentages refer to the proportion of respondents that selected at least one of the items included in each category.

Attitudes towards the future	Significance of family network			Significance of school network			Total
	Low	Medium	High	Low	Medium	High	
Projected	53,1%	59,1%	62,6%	53,0%	58,8%	64,7%	58,1%
Possibility	47,6%	53,9%	58,5%	47,4%	53,3%	61,7%	53,1%
Necessity	38,4%	33,3%	34,5%	36,6%	36,4%	32,0%	35,4%
Fatalism	25,3%	22,8%	14,7%	27,2%	18,3%	16,8%	21,2%

Compared to the objectives of the research, the relationship between the four dimensions and the significance that the family and school networks have for the students is particularly relevant.

The figures in Table 2 show that upon increasing the level of importance attached to these two relationship networks, the propensity to express an attitude towards the future understood as *projected* or as *possibility* increases. In contrast, when their importance decreases, the propensity towards a future represented in terms of *necessity* or *fatalism* increases. It is therefore possible to claim that a constructive and purposeful orientation towards the future is more likely to occur within a context of significant relationships that the person is able to activate, drawing upon them as an important resource for his own planning.

### Choices, life-chances and planning skills

In order to obtain a concise interpretation of the findings collected during the second phase of the research (i.e., from the administration of the standardized questionnaire) and verify the relationship with the life-chances and choices of the students a *Planning skills index*<sup>7</sup> was created.

This index was divided into three levels: low (which includes 22.5% of the students interviewed), medium (45.6%) and high (31.9%).

Consistent with what has previously been pointed out, planning skills are higher among females than males. This can be related to a broader pattern whereby they have significantly a higher school performance than their male peers, as well as a greater interest in culture and more significant social ties (family, school and peer groups). Ultimately, girls seem to be more capable of exploiting the resources available as well as taking control of their pathways and choices, even though this involves – as previously discussed – increased insecurity, thus resulting in a more pronounced desire to have people to count on<sup>8</sup>.

Although present, the relationship between family status and planning skills of children is less significant. In fact, despite the research confirming the strong correlation, even in Italy, between the academic qualifications of parents and educational and work choices of their children (Ballarino &

<sup>7</sup> The Index expresses a concise measurement of the information relating to the propensity to planning, to the attitude and expectations towards the future as well as to the things that the respondents would not want to give up.

<sup>8</sup> The students were asked to indicate “Which of these things would you not want to give up?” For both the male and female students, the most selected answer was “*someone to count on*”, with 19.4% for boys and 29.7% for girls.

Checchi, 2006; Giancola, 2009), there is a significant increase in the planning resources found among those who come from low-middle status families.

Table 3. *Planning skills index by gender and family status*

Planning Skills Index	Gender		Family status			Total
	Boys	Girls	Low	Medium	High	
Low	27,1%	19,0%	19,7%	24,5%	21,8%	22,5%
Medium	48,7%	43,2%	50,2%	45,5%	40,7%	45,6%
High	24,2%	37,8%	30,1%	30,0%	37,5%	31,9%
Total answers	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%

It is also worth analyzing the performance of the *Planning skills index* in relation to the type of school attended. In particular, there is a similar proportion of high values of the index among students from both Lyceum and Professional institutes. This highlights the fact that, while they are different from each other, each school environment can stimulate and strengthen the projects of young people, whether oriented primarily towards the continuation of studies (such as with most Lyceum students), or towards an early entry into the labour market (like most students enrolled at Professional Institutes).

Table 4. *Planning skills index by type of school attended*

Planning skills index	Type of school attended			Total
	Lyceum	Technical Institute	Professional Institute	
Low	23,0%	24,7%	18,4%	22,6%
Medium	43,6%	47,3%	48,7%	45,6%
High	33,4%	28,0%	32,9%	31,8%
Total answers	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%	100,0%

In fact, when analyzing the reasons for which the students interviewed say they go to school, it is worth noting that the highest levels of the *Planning skills index* correspond to both the hope that the academic qualification will make it possible to “*find a good job*”, primarily among those attending Technical and Professional Institutes, and the desire to

“*learn new things*”, particularly strong among Lyceum students. In contrast, the lower levels of the index correspond to reasons which refer mainly to a constrained or endogenous school choice.

Furthermore, planning skills develop with an increasing educational achievement and school well-being, as well as with a greater familiarity with the new media. On the contrary, a greater propensity to transgression corresponds to lower planning skills. Finally, there is a positive correlation between the *index* and the significance of the family, school and peer networks.

The relationship between planning skills and different local contexts is also worth mentioning. In general, the study indicates a substantial consistency in the values, lifestyle, consumption habits, pervasiveness of new media and models through which students of the five cities define their own transition to adulthood. This highlights the profound transformation that has cut across Italian youth culture in recent decades, and confirms the hypothesis that it is no longer possible to identify cultural trends among the younger generation which can be directly attributed to geographic location (Cavalli, 1990). However, the fact that the five cities where the survey was carried out reveal specific economic and social conditions, which are not solely a result of the North-South divide, cannot be overlooked, as well as the fact that they offer different educational opportunities and life prospects which significantly affect the biographical construction skills of the young people. Secondly, local youth cultures do have their own specific characteristics: secular and multicultural in Milan, while in Turin there is a predominantly pragmatic and instrumental attitude. In Bari and Salerno, the family and religion are determining. Finally, Bergamo seems to be in between the two models<sup>9</sup>. Starting with these considerations, it is interesting to note that the *index* is unevenly distributed between the cities of the North and South. In fact, the students of Turin and Milan, in the North, as well as Salerno, in the South, have index values on average higher than those recorded in Bari, and especially in Bergamo<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> For more information about the socio-economic features of the five provinces, as well as the specific portrayal of youth cultures in the different local contexts see: Merico, Scardigno (2009) and the paper by Fausta Scardigno in this issue of IJSE.

<sup>10</sup> When evaluating the results, it is worth considering the different set-up of the cities under study. In particular, in the interpretation of the index values of Bergamo, the large number of foreign students cannot be overlooked.

It is clear that the interpretation of these results is likely to simplify more complex processes and pathways, due to it having taken into account the desire for emancipation that accompanies the choices of boys and girls. This desire calls into question the relationship of the individual with the context in which he lives, with the young people of Bari and Salerno – as highlighted by face-to-face interviews – seeming to be aware of the constraints they have to face, without this being translated into a generalized neutralization of their aspiration to make projects or plan the future. In fact, compared to their peers living in the three northern cities, the young people in the South are much more likely to consider the possibility of having to move away in order to carry out their projects. Ultimately, when considering the planning of young people from a territorial aspect, there are no differences that mark a decisive discontinuity: the local context does not appear to represent either a conditioning factor or be decisive in itself. However, to the extent that it outlines the opportunity structure available to the individual, it can stimulate or inhibit the reflexivity of young people, and especially their ability to find and organize the resources necessary for the preparation and organization of their own pathways and biographical projects.

In summary, it is possible to say that, like the other dimensions investigated in the study, increases or decreases in young people's planning skills are not determined by any one single variable. It is necessary to consider the interaction between the individual, structural and contextual factors in order to understand what occurs. In this direction, the research shows that, although it plays a significant role, ordinary capital is not in itself sufficient to support young people's attitudes towards the future. In fact, those young people who are best equipped in terms of resources, opportunities and incentives do not necessarily appear more confident and safe with respect to their future, revealing potential situations of inertia and waste of life-chances. At the same time, even when resources are perceived as scarce, it is possible to see levels of openness to the future and not negligible planning skills.

### Living in the present, planning for the future

The analysis in the previous pages highlights the feeling of uncertainty that is widespread in the individual biographies and accompanies young people in their choice processes and in the forms of their orientations towards the future.

However, not all of the students interviewed reacted in the same way. Even within fluid pathways, open to possibilities of transformation through the growth process, it is possible to identify five different ways in which students define the relationship between the present and the future, their planning as well as the process of transition to adulthood<sup>11</sup>.

The first *cluster* refers to respondents who expressed a feeling of deep mistrust in relation to their future, which they see as fraught with risks and uncertainties in both the reproductive and productive spheres. They are individuals who seem substantially *disengaged* from their pathways and choices. They also declared having no projects for the near future. This condition includes a minority of respondents (about 15% of the sample), and in particular those in marginal conditions, with unquestionable weaknesses in terms of social and cultural resources. They are, therefore, disadvantaged and de-motivated, with a significant likelihood of gradually withdrawing into themselves.

The students in the second *cluster* (which includes little more than 10% of the sample), while hoping for a future full of possibilities, still expressed considerable difficulties in imagining or envisaging their own biography and had yet to make a definitive plan. They are mainly the youngest students attending upper secondary schools, mostly males, who still feel *confused* and are drifting. They prefer to wait until they have more tools to shape their pathway. They are also students who manifest the need, which arose several times during face-to-face interviews, for more adult support and therefore stronger and more stable ties.

The third *cluster* refers to students who expect to face a long educational path, which is mainly oriented towards work and careers, and anticipate forming a family and having children only after the age of thirty. In addition, they feel a greater responsibility to themselves than to others and

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<sup>11</sup> These ways were identified through a *Multiple correspondence analysis* (MCA) followed by a Cluster analysis. The following variables were considered: the propensity to planning, the representations of adulthood, attitudes and expectations towards the future, the choices that the respondents expected to make after having finished upper secondary school.

tend, in general, to refer to *postponing the planning* of their own lives. This scenario includes less than one in five respondents. However, it indicates the presence of a significant number of students who, perhaps because of having too many opportunities, are orientated primarily towards the present and reluctant to commit to decisions about the future that might be difficult to reverse.

Alternatively, the other two *clusters* identified refer to an attempt to draw life trajectories oriented to a more autonomous construction of the self, based on the contextual activation of both available opportunities and ligatures. From this common basis, in the fourth cluster, there are those who attribute a significant value to the *responsibility towards themselves*, considering it imperative to make projects as well as organize their choices, using as a primary reference the educational path (addressed specifically to higher education and university) and work (which they hope will allow them to express their own skills better). It consists mostly of students with a high school achievement and very low levels of propensity to transgression. The students in the last *cluster* imagine their biography as a transition characterized by *early adult life*, both in terms of family and reproduction, as well as of the workplace. They are people who attribute great importance to setting goals, with little interest in culture, coming from low status families and attending mainly Technical and Professional Institutes. Each of these last two scenarios explains the future orientations of more than one in four respondents, with an overall size that exceeds half of the sample. They are students who, while setting different goals and moving between autonomy and heteronomy, show that they have become aware of having to deal with uncertainty and claim a sense of apprehension about their projects, both in the choices made as well as those that are pertinent to their future.

After having analysed the research findings and discussed the main features of the perspectives through which Italian students define their projects and attitudes toward the future, several conclusions can be made.

As presented in the previous pages, facing an uncertain future, young people primarily define their (life) plan and projects in a short-range and temporary perspective. Simultaneously, when compared to their parents, they demonstrate less apprehension about the future, which makes life planning uncertain in itself. This implies a growing risk of facing *contingent trajectories* or *irrelevant transitions* (Gil Calvo, 2009).

However, in a manner only apparently paradoxical, the awareness of uncertainty demands that young people maintain a *pragmatic* strategy in constructing their own future. As highlighted by the face-to-face interviews carried out during the first phase of the research project described in this paper, such a strategy seems to be based on the consciousness that «eyes need to be kept permanently open and ears need to be constantly pricked to promptly catch the sights and sounds of the new» (Bauman, 2008, p. 46). At the same time, this planning strategy seems to be increasingly defined according to a *variable geometry* (Cesareo, 2005), whereby young people need to be ready to change their pathway when a new approach is required so as to keep and/or enhance available life-chances.

In order to portray the basic model through which young Italians deal with the transformation of temporal dimensions, several decades ago A. Cavalli (1985) and his colleagues proposed assuming the image of an *extended present*: «that time span short enough not to escape the social and human domain but long enough to allow for some sort of projection further in time» (Leccardi, 2006a, p. 13). Taking into account the results presented in this paper, it is possible to propose a new image, which does not substitute the previously mentioned one: it is the image of a “*continuous future*”, a way of dealing with temporality in which the willingness and ability of young people to plan their lives does not fully disappear. In fact – as highlighted by other studies on young adults (Anderson *et al.*, 2005) – a majority of the students interviewed, of both genders, wish or aspire to exercise forethought with respect to their future, which is not simply seen as an extension of the present. Moreover, this “*continuous future*” is framed by multiple belongings and identities, as well as characterized by a constant overlapping of roles, experiences and relationships.

At the same time, the future orientations and projects of young people seem to depend, rather than on a single structural variable, upon a complex array of aspects, and chiefly upon cultural and social capital. In particular, a crucial role is played by “*restricted sociality*” (the family, friendships, the couple). On the one hand, the family and peer group are the context in which young people acquire values and cultural patterns as well as obtain resources for both their everyday life and biographical construction (Garelli, Palmonari, Sciolla, 2006). On the other, “*restricted sociality*”

becomes (and represents) a *safe haven* or *safety-net* which may (try to) protect young people from uncertainty<sup>12</sup>.

Upper secondary school students of the five cities recognize difficulties that, in contemporary society, lie behind life planning. They do not often have a clear idea about their own future. Some of them take a 'day at a time' view and totally refuse to plan their own lives and trajectories, and seem to be unable to find cultural and social resources for their own growing experiences. Others are facing an economic and socio-cultural deprivation which – together with the postponing of projects – could lead to further disadvantages and exclusion. However, even though dealing with tangible difficulties in drawing up longer-term views and plans, only a few of them display fatalistic attitudes. Amongst those interviewed, a large majority of the students show a valuable consciousness of the need of self-managing their personal projects (Evans, 2002; Jones, 2009). They reveal a kind of planning that lies between "adaptability" and "predictability" (Brannen & Nilsen, 2002), based on the capacity of incessantly re-thinking, re-defining, re-framing their own projects. These projects are, in turn, represented within a short-term and step-by-step perspective, and are mainly oriented to *stay on course*.

In conclusion, it seems that a large part of the Italian upper secondary schools students interviewed are aware of being asked to take personal responsibility for their own growing up and reflexively construct their own future. They are, therefore, young people who reveal a willingness to interconnect options and ligatures, wishes and resources, with a view to defining an ever new balance between *chances and choices*, or – quoting the title of the book in which the main results of the research project were synthesized (Besozzi, 2009) – *between their own dreams and the reality* of their everyday lives.

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<sup>12</sup> However, it is worth noting that the research has clearly highlighted how the resources offered by the family, school, peer groups and, in general, the local context are independent from each other, giving the individual, through his own personal skills, the task to assemble the various life-chances in relation to his own choices and projects.

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