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Hard Pathways Towards Autonomy and Adulthood. Understanding Youth Transition Patterns in an Italian Fragile Area

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Abstract: The paper discusses the life courses of young people towards autonomy and adulthood, analyzing the transition patterns between education, work and the building-up of one's own life project in a territory affected by multiple socio-economic and environmental crises in central Italy. The analysis is based on a pragmatist case study including in-depth interviews with 32 young people selected to reflect a diversity of conditions in terms of gender, education, employment, geographic origin, and age. Interviews have been designed around a comprehensive set of variables which extends well beyond the formal education and employment pathways. The aim was to reconstruct life trajectories and their embeddedness in the context, through a multidimensional analysis also in accordance with an intersectional approach. Method and socio-economic background data are presented before life history interviews are analyzed to identify the patterns of trajectories. Subsequently, their characteristics, similarities and differences are discussed. Data show how difficult working careers play an important role in affecting young people's life plans and expectations, and along with social contexts, networks, public policies, family and social inheritance and gender, interact creating unequal opportunities, conditioning the development of trajectories and placing various hindrances in the construction of citizenship of social identity.

Keywords: Youth transition patterns, embeddedness, intersectionality, pragmatism

1. Introduction

The paper discusses the life courses of young people (18-34 years) towards autonomy and adulthood in the province of Massa-Carrara (Tuscany), with the aim of identifying possible transition patterns between education, work and the building-up of one's own life project (Chevalier, 2015; Gauthier, 2007; Stauber & Walther, 2006).

The research aims to capture the experiences, perceptions, expectations and main coping strategies deployed by the young people in the context of a prolonged crisis. Furthermore, also based on an intersectional approach (Clarke & McCall, 2014), it explores the combined roles of multiple dimensions well beyond formal education and employment pathways in shaping patterns of transition.

The analysis is based on a pragmatist case study including in-depth interviews developed around a comprehensive set of variables and organized within the Polanyian scheme of *forms of social integration* (Polanyi, 1977; Andreotti & Kazepov, 2001). Here, reciprocity, redistribution, market and associative networks and institutions lay out the observation field of the life histories' relational, structural, and temporal embeddedness (Granovetter, 2017).

Such an approach has proven effective for studying social exclusion processes (Andreotti & Kazepov, 2001). Moreover, it finds additional reasons in the deep changes underway - for example - in labor markets and the polarization of the economy, production systems and technological innovation, territorial mobility and ecological crisis, including the implications of Covid-19. Here, the complexity and challenges of transition processes are increasing (O'Reilly *et al.*, 2018; Wolbers, 2014), placing young people among those most at risk of underemployment, inequality and social exclusion (Coppola & O'Higgins, 2016).

In such a context, despite the growing variety of contributions, research into youth transition still requires improving the capacity to identify the qualitative-quantitative dimensions of an evolving phenomenon, particularly given that they do not manifest themselves independently and do not appear to be merely transitory, conjunctural or contingent (Choo & Ferree, 2010; Clarke & McCall, 2014). This article aims to contribute to this purpose by testing an investigation approach that focuses on micro/meso aspects of these transformation processes with a look at young people's real-life contexts both "from below" and "from within" (Tight, 2017).

The paper first provides a few insights into the research design, including the context, people interviewed, and the methodological approach (§ 2). Subsequently, life history interviews are analyzed with the aim of identifying similarities and differences in patterns of trajectory starting from a

clustering procedure (§ 3). Moreover, the discussion (§ 4) analyzes how different dimensions and variables interact with each other, conveying opportunities and hurdles and contributing to shaping differences in the patterns of transition. The final section (§ 5) provides some further reflection about the concept of transition and offers brief comments on policy and research in this area.

2. The research design: context, people and method

2.1 Context

The province of Massa-Carrara (198,412 inhabitants) was chosen as a case study as part of a collaboration between the University of Pisa and the local institutions (see Acknowledgments), and above all because it is a territory with many fragile areas¹. Indeed, it is a peculiar context for many geographical, institutional and socio-economic reasons. Geographically, it appears to be divided into two areas, namely the coastal zone with the medium-sized cities of Massa and Carrara, and the mountain territory – the Lunigiana areas – comprising medium- and small-sized villages. Lunigiana is also characterized by aging and depopulation processes that have hampered the traditional local economies over the years, while the whole province is affected by hydro-geological risks and the severe impact of marble quarrying activities (Irpel, 2016).

From an institutional viewpoint, there are enduring difficulties in networking between political, economic and social actors (Benedetti & Matutini, 2013), hindering collaboration and governance processes and making the creation of local development strategies uncertain and ineffective.

In terms of socio-economic dynamics, long before the 2008 economic crisis a deep gap had developed between the province and the regional context. The key local economic sector – the marble industry – began its decline in employment levels in the 1960s,² alongside a long process of deindustrialization that started twenty years earlier than in other provinces. Once the third industrial economy of the region, characterized by a strong presence of state-owned companies, the local economy early shifted towards traditional service industries with a low level of differentiation (Irpel, 2012). A further reduction of production plants occurred from 2010, while an opposite trend has been registered in the retail and tourism sectors, with a growing presence of peddlers and non-traditional accommodation facilities. The added

¹ See https://www.ars.toscana.it/files/pubblicazioni/Rapporti_relazioni_sintesi/Comuni_fragili_finale.pdf.

² While the speed of marble quarrying has multiplied, increasing environmental impact and related conflicts.

value per capita and the index of competitiveness still confirm the province of Massa-Carrara as the most problematic in the Tuscany region, and below the national average (Camera di Commercio, 2016).

The labor market displays a critical situation, which is worsened during the economic crisis, reaching an unemployment rate of 16.4% across the research years (2014-16), compared to 12.7% nationally and 10.1% at the regional level. The situation does not improve considering the young population where in the same period the unemployment rate was 32.9%, 29.9% and 23% respectively, for people aged 15-29 (Istat, 2016).

Despite a partial recovery in 2018, the unemployment rate in the province of Massa-Carrara remains the highest in the region. Moreover, its occupational upgrading is mainly based on precarious and fixed-term contracts linked to the hospitality, entertainment and tourism activities,³ that have been hit hard by the current Covid-19 crisis (Fana, Torrejón Pérez & Fernández-Macías, 2020), and which can hardly be seen as key sectors alone for future development.

In this situation, no recognizable strategies emerge: the marine and marble industry, the port and the tourism sector are those that all actors highlight as potential areas for future innovation, although their priorities and interests hardly identify any kind of common ground (Camera di Commercio, 2016).

2.2 People

Thirty-two life history semi-structured interviews were conducted with young employed and unemployed people identified through indications from local services, institutions, associations and informal local networks. Interviewees were selected providing a balanced distribution among dimensions consistent with research objectives and context (*theoretical sampling*, Silverman, 2013): gender, age (19-24, 25-29, 30-34), education (primary, vocational and high school diploma and university degree), employment status, and territorial origin (Massa, Carrara, Lunigiana). Three respondents were of foreign origin (Eastern Europe, the prevalent area of provenience in the province).

Respondents' duration of the observed trajectories from the end of school to the time of the interview, are dependent on age and education combined. No relations instead emerges between duration and employment status (Table 1).

³ See https://excelsior.unioncamere.net/index.php?option=com_bollettini-year2017&Itemid=1681#massacarrara.

Table 1 - Distribution of the sample by education, age, years of trajectory, stable employment

Education	#	Average age	Observed trajectory (# years)	# Stably employed
Primary school	8	24.7	9.5	2
Vocational school	4	25.5	7.5	2
High school diploma	9	24.7	5.7	2
University degree	11	28.5	3.0	2
Overall / Average	32	26.2	5.9	8

Overall, the observed trajectory is about six years per interviewee on average, with a range between 1 and 18 years distributed as shown in Table 2:

Table 2 - Distribution of the sample by life trajectory

Duration in years	1-2	3-5	6-7	8-9	12 or more
# of interviewees	8	7	7	5	5

As previously mentioned, this timeframe identifies the “observed trajectory” or the life trajectory being analyzed. Its timing is established *a priori* (from end of education to the interview), and does not identify the “duration of transition”, that changes according to the criteria of observation and the perceptions of those involved. Given the complexity, uncertainty and instability of the paths and conditions of autonomy (see *infra*), almost all of the young people at the time of the interview considered themselves still “in transition”, making the duration of the latter actually quite similar to the one of the observed trajectory. For example, eighteen of the 32 respondents were employed with different contracts at the moment of the interview, although hardly anyone among them felt and appeared to be firmly inserted in the labor market. The best placed were a few in self-employment and apprenticeships, followed by formal and informal participations in family businesses (e.g. small commercial firms), precarious and on-call jobs, not-established and low-wage forms of self-employment and illegal work. The large part of them were part-time, with all of the other ones were unemployed. The achievement of housing and economic autonomy, the pursuit of a personal project and the formation of a family of one’s own were characterized by just as many levels of uncertainty. In this context, working conditions and the lack of related protection appear to be the main factor structuring transition paths, even in the perceptions and evaluations of those interviewed. For this reason, they have assumed a key role in the in the choice of variables for data analysis.

2.3 Method

The interview content is based on the aforementioned Polanyian scheme of *forms of social integration* including young people's background, experiences and coping strategies regarding education, work, consumption, family, social relationships, and access to public and private services, as well as their role in structuring, supporting and hampering the trajectories, whatever the duration. Following a well-known Lewinian assumption (Lewin, 1951, p. 161), responses to interviews have been treated "as reactions to a situation which are partly determined by the question, partly by the general situation of that individual".

Hence, data have been analyzed by integrating a double description (Bateson, 1972; Poth, 2018), the first aimed at capturing people's views on their situation, aspirations and path, learning from them about their stories, including their feelings and ways of dealing with daily issues or specific events, their ways of creating solutions and their ideas on why they worked or failed, as well as how they make sense about actors, situations and institutions with which they interact (Spradley, 1979).

Table 3 - Transitions variables

Variable	Description	Value
Activation	Level of activation in terms of quantity and variety of job search tools and commitment and continuity expressed by the respondent	Maximum level of activation = 10
Trajectory duration	Duration in years	Normalized on 1-10 scale
Current position	Position in the labor market in terms of employment and employability combined	Best positions = 10
Autonomy experience	Experiences of leaving the parental home with varying degrees of autonomy	Maximum autonomy experienced = 10
Back-and-forth education and work	Frequency of back-and-forth steps between school and work	Maximum frequency = 10
Fragmentation	Changes in work/business sector	Highest number off changes = 10
Stability/ precariousness	Stability versus precariousness in the working career	Maximum stability = 10
Employment/ unemployment	Employment versus unemployment during the trajectory	Maximum employment frequency = 10

The second was designed to identify differences and similarities and possible patterns of trajectories, as well as making results comparable for future research according to an abductive approach (Swedberg, 2014). It is based on a selective reduction of answers and their *coding* through a 1-10 value scale in sets of variables and indexes (Creswell, 2014; Silverman, 2013). The purpose of this kind of data analysis was to draw some formal distinctions of youth transition characteristics, identify diverse evolutionary patterns and distinguish possible clusters (§ 4). Three representations based on the sets of variables and indexes were organized.

The *first* identifies the characteristics of the transition period. It is built around an eight-variable set described in Table 3 and represented by a radial graph. Values refer to respondents' descriptions of the timeframe between the end of education and the interview (observed trajectory), except for "current position", which refers to the time of the interview. The variables identify the most structuring factors of the transition processes according to the views expressed by the respondents. In the Figure 1.a, we see high levels of activation, medium to low levels of employment, stability, autonomy, and current position, low fragmentation and returns to training, in a short transition.

The *second* representation is also based on an eight-variable series that identifies the level of young people' socio-economic integration in the context (Polanyi, 1977; see § 1) at the time of interview. This representation arises from series of questions designed to collect qualitative data at levels of integration achieved and the strategies being implemented within reciprocity, redistribution, market and associative ties: labor market and consumption, parental and own family, informal relationships and associative networks and organization, public and private services.

Table 4. Social integration variables

Market	Redistribution	Association	Reciprocity
Labor market	Public services	Associative networks	Parental family
Consumption	Other services	Informal networks	Own family

Values refer to the interviewee's level of inclusion in the above ties and networks and their possibility/capability to mobilize and obtain resources through them based on their description/perceptions and evaluation (Andreotti & Kazepov, 2001). Variables are organized as shown in Table 4 and Figure 1.b (maximum level of integration = 10).

The *third* representation identifies the patterns of trajectory through the combination of five indexes (Table 5), resulting in a line shape graph (Figure 1.c).

The indexes' value is obtained based on the average of the variables' values of which they are composed. Variables, again, identify the most structuring factors of the transition processes according to the views expressed by the respondents. The series of indexes are organized with the purpose of representing the evolutionary pattern resulting from their temporal ordering but without including any representation of the time spans between one and another.

The trajectory representation also aims to highlight possible aspects of interdependence between the elements included in the indexes themselves, including to help outline some hypotheses on the characteristics and consequences of such interdependencies in the trajectories. Examples of possible interdependencies can be seen in the relationship between family background, which partly reflects different class memberships, and future perspectives (Esping-Andersen, 2015); or between starting conditions, employment during transition and current position. In the chart, the duration in years of the trajectory is reported, considering the relevance of time for understanding the phenomenon, including respondents' perceptions, experiences, and meanings.

Table 5. Patterns of trajectory indexes

1. Family background	2. Respondent's starting conditions ⁴	3. Employment status during transition	4. Respondent's current conditions ⁵	5. Projects for the future ⁶
Education	Education, training	Employment / unemployment Stability / precariousness	Employment	Housing
Parents' employment	Expectations and skills		Economic condition	Education or training
Economic condition	Experiences, practice		Housing autonomy	Work

Drawing on the results emerging from the three representations, we identified similarities and differences through which we were able to pick out six clusters. The method for distinguishing the clusters was developed based on the technique of cross-checking (Creswell, 2014) by means of an in-depth comparison of the results of the interviews, with several steps back and forth

⁴ At the end of education.

⁵ At the time of the interview.

⁶ In terms of the existence of plans and the chances of their realization.

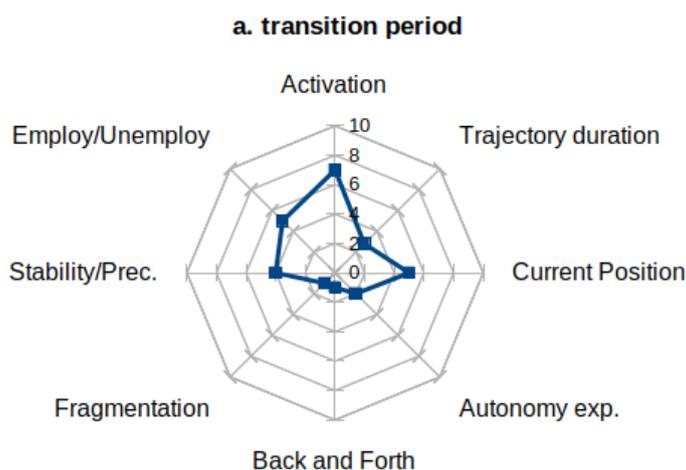
between the analysis of the text, the interviewer's recorded perceptions, the coded responses, and the resulting indexes. The qualitative processing was also subjected to quantitative control on the coded variables through a procedure of *principal component analysis* (Giordani, 2016) and a subsequent clustering process. The control carried out confirmed the appropriateness of the processing but also revealed a need to reduce the number of clusters from six to more significant four ones in case of future comparisons. For the purposes of the paper to exploring the specific case in depth, it was preferred to maintain the six-cluster typology illustrated below together with the graphical representations of an illustrative case for every group.

3. The trajectories of the young: six emerging patterns

In this section, life history interviews are analyzed with the aim of identifying characteristics, similarities and differences of the patterns of trajectory. The analysis is conducted based on the six clusters identified, as outlined above.

3.1 Follow aspirations, slipping towards precariousness

The first group comprises five females and one male with medium-high family backgrounds, a medium-brief duration of trajectory (2-4 years) and aged 28 or older. Levels of social integration appear to be strong in the family, informal and associative networks, while their positioning in the labor market still appears weak and in the making. In this group, people actively seek jobs for economic reasons but also for satisfying aspirations connected to their high educational qualifications (degree and several training activities), or they try to reinvent themselves after previous job search failures.



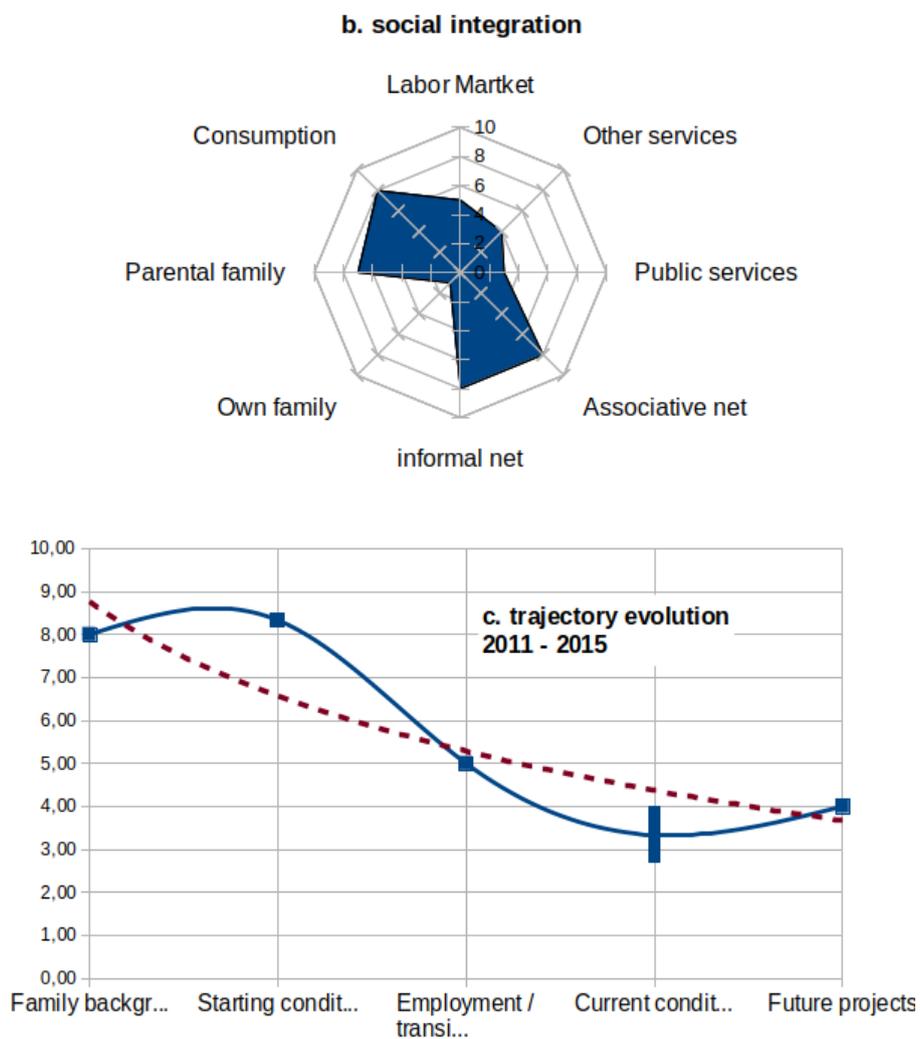


Figure 1. Case 32, F-28, MA Economics and management of cultural heritage

Work has never had continuity but I am satisfied with the things done... they are consistent with my studies (Case 32, Figure 1).

Now I am a part-time apprentice waitress in a restaurant of a friend: it is a job... I also feel good and passionate, I had to learn many things I didn't know and yet I'm losing the ones I knew (Case 10, F-28, MA, International Studies).

Unlike other groups, the relative brevity of the transition still allows for a certain optimism and opens up the possibility of future developments. However, in interviewees' experiences a few years matter, affecting their

perceptions and feelings: “Did I waste time? Have I gone in circles? Am I doing what I want to do? But more importantly, what will I be able to do tomorrow?” “It matters a lot” whether you still have confidence in yourself and your means, and whether or not “there seems to be work out there”. After many experiences of precarious job or traineeships, some interviewees indeed start to feel fatigue, the fear of not finding anything in the foreseeable future, and the temptation to give up on their expectations:

It’s important to be trainees, but... it’s not enough... Some traineeships are mere exploitation... and it also becomes an economic problem. If something else comes out, saleswoman, dressmaker, even peasant, absolutely I get it! (Case 19, F-30, MA, History of art and museology).

these jobs are a good temporary compromise and I’d like to continue in this field. But there is much uncertainty and next year I probably won’t have these contracts (Case 17, F-31, MA, Foreign language and literature).

A representative case of this group is depicted in Figure 1. Here, the evolution of trajectories shows the risk of sliding towards a prolonged precariousness partly counterbalanced by the family resources that help to remain attached to the labor market and one’s own aspirations.

In some cases, equilibria are nonetheless difficult, and aspirations clash with feelings of insecurity and the shadow of an endless transition:

I had jobs fully consistent with my studies and skills. But there is no expectation of stability... there are important contacts, you meet opportunities, remain in the circuit, but everything is hard to settle... I cannot take a step, I have no income I can use for... fix the PC, recharge the phone, repair the scooter... (Case 2, M-33 MA, Sciences of show business and multimedia production).

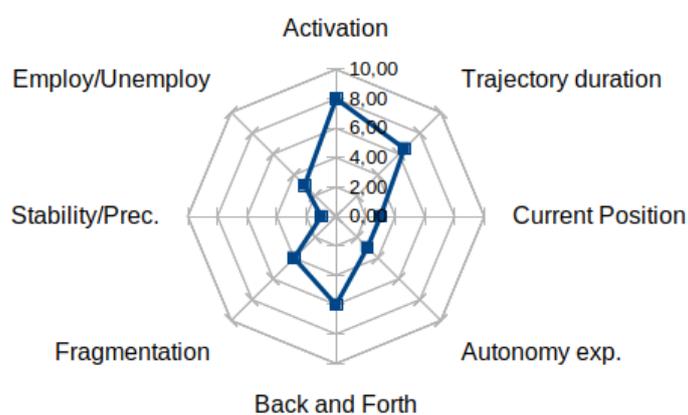
3.2 Precariousness, towards marginalization?

The second group also comprises five females and one male, but they have long trajectories after leaving education (6-9 years) and more differentiated ages, between 24 and 34. Apart from the case in Figure 2, interviewees have medium family backgrounds, and compared with the previous cluster their families have fewer tools and greater economic difficulties in supporting youth pathways. The level of social integration is lower than the former group and particularly weak in three cases, and three of the interviewees also have poor informal and associative networks.

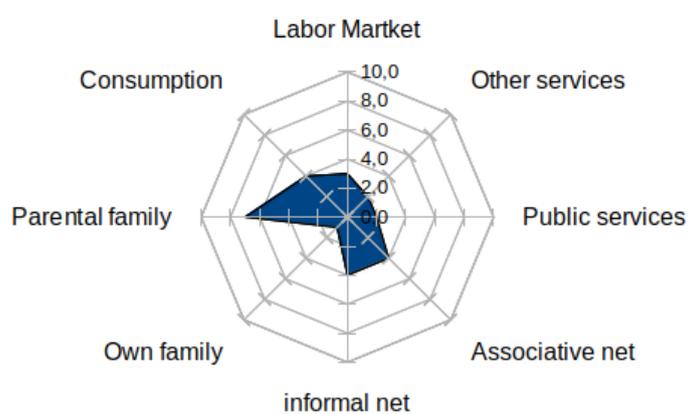
The positioning in the labor market continues to be weak after many years of fixed-term, precarious, and illegal working experiences, civil service, internship and returns to training/education, as well as periods of unemployment. Working experiences are disjointed from educational qualifications,

partly because financial difficulties force the respondents to seek and accept any job. If position in the labor market is similar to or slightly worse than the previous group, here informants interpret their in-the-making process as being more at risk of permanent precariousness and undermining personal life plans, even short-term ones such as cohabiting with a partner. After several years, expectations start to fade or turn into tighter projects, albeit which remain difficult to achieve. In fact, they rely on weaker family backgrounds, but differences in the latter as well as personal capabilities, education, and relationships make a difference in allowing some interviewees to attempt reinventing themselves:

a. transition period



b. social integration



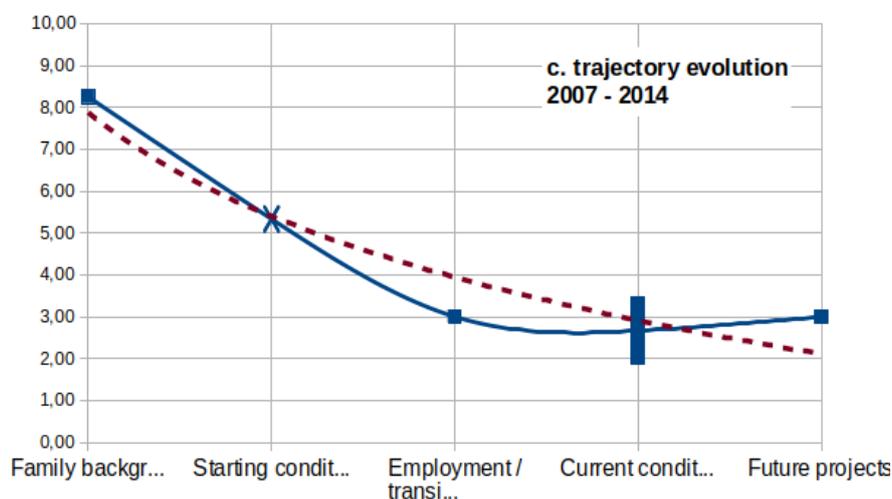


Fig. 2 – Case 1, F-34, MA Communication Science

I was negative, restarting looking for a job is tough.... Instead, after the e-commerce course I'm positive again and focused... because I have a project! (Case 1, Figure 2).

My boyfriend has a job, at the 'Pubblica Assistenza' for about 350€. During summer he also works as a gardener. We talk of living together, but I don't think it's economically sustainable (Case 11, F-24, High-school diploma, 4 years unemployed).

The economic situation is... in the middle, unexpected events make it complicated, with just 1000€... Sometimes I still cannot get through a month, but I don't want to deprive myself of everything (Case 26, M-25, High-school diploma, apprentice).

In this cluster, the form of trajectories is more varied, but the lengthy downward trends underline the risks of marginalization, particularly for those with weaker capabilities and low family backgrounds.

3.3 Family balancing in the path of inclusion

This group is predominantly male (six out of seven) and significantly different from all of the others in several aspects. They have varied but roughly medium family backgrounds, with parents with medium-low educational qualifications but good economic and employment conditions (Figure 3). Apart from one case, the respondents come from long trajectories after education (6-12 years) and are aged between 22 and 31.

The level of social integration is similar to the first group, with a generally strong integration with families and – apart from two cases – informal

and associative networks. Apart from the only female, of foreign origin and who lives a complicated family history characterized by poor support and pending debts, the 'members' of this group can also rely on better family economic conditions, which reduce the pressures on daily issues.

The positioning in the labor market is the best among the clusters, based on a mix of apprenticeship contracts, self-employment and participation in family business. Interviewees have had various working experiences and some have experienced unemployment, including on a long-term basis. Nonetheless, their paths appear to be more stable, continued and straightforward, with less traineeship experiences, volunteering and returns to training/education. They also seem better positioned for the future, partly thanks to family assets and activities and the ability of some of the interviewees to capitalize on them to build up new careers (e.g. in agriculture or long-term care services). It is noteworthy that this group has a medium-low level of education and shows a lower level of activation but more success in securing jobs.

People in this group have mixed feelings about their current jobs, identifying the main problems in the use of apprenticeship by employers ("only to save money"), the pointless and disconnected training activity, and the heaviness or repetitiveness of tasks. Ultimately, apart from one respondent, they interpret their positions as a process that is not very established and in the making: they have expectations of improvement but also complain that after many years they are still paid too little and cannot afford "to walk on their own legs". In fact, the greatest risk for this group is seemingly the persistent condition of family dependence, albeit which remains the only reliable vehicle for achieving their expectations.

I have a 4.5-year contract for elementary tasks. I feel... I know nothing... take 5€ per hour and something. I'm not that much looking for a job because I know that three more years... with zero costs (work nearby home)... I can't find anything much better... (Case 28, Figure 3).

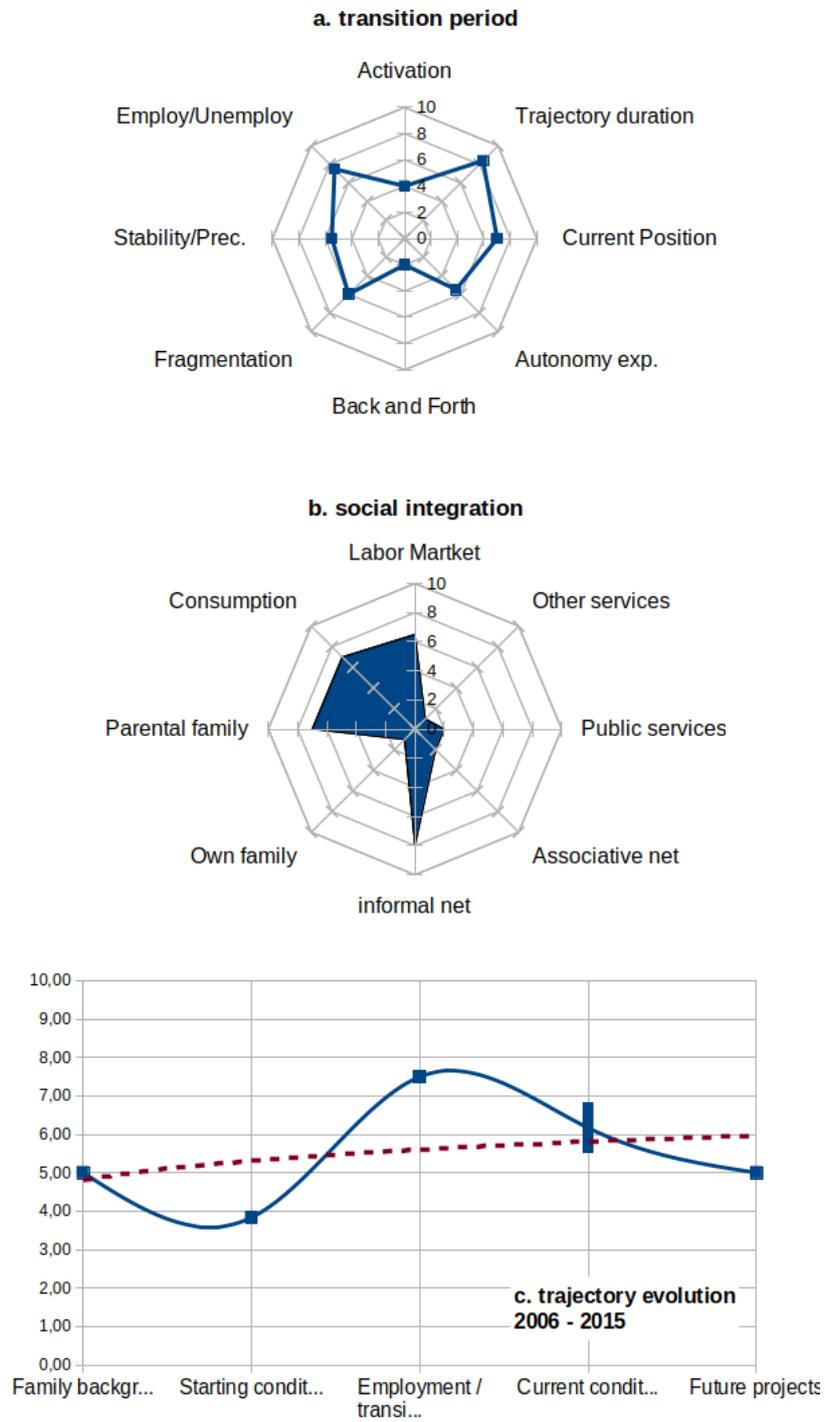


Figure 3. Case 28, M-26, Professional qualification in odontology

However, two respondents think that there are opportunities in this territory, they have projects and confidence in being able to carry them out, including thanks to family resources.

The dream is to enlarge the family business and also create agritourism from that (Case 27, M-22, High-school diploma).

The trajectory shape of all of the interviewees is very similar to case 28 (Figure 3), where a sort of more or less extended oscillation is balanced by the family resources, which contribute – alongside the work position – to keeping the curve at medium or medium-high levels. Moreover, in this group a certain correlation between the levels of family background (input level of the curve) and the possibility of realizing future projects (output) is more evident.

3.4 Starting to slide and then recovering?

This is the youngest group (20-25 years old) and the only one balanced by gender (three male, three female), with short trajectories after school (1-2 years) and on average high family backgrounds (parents' education, employment, economic conditions). The level of social integration is fairly strong regarding family and – in four cases – informal and associative networks.

Educational qualifications include four university graduates (bachelor's or master's degrees), one high-school graduate and only one respondent with professional qualifications, while the positioning in the labor market is very weak, likely mirroring the brevity of the trajectory. However, the four of them who have most actively looked for a job have already had various internships, illegal and on-call working experiences as well as unemployment periods. The form of trajectories shows a sort of downward slipping (Figure 4) that could be typical of the first period after school, and it may potentially move towards a possible/probable recovery. However, while four respondents have exactly this view and show confidence in their own path forward, two graduate females already feel frustration about an unsuccessful job search and their first long-term unemployed experience. It is noteworthy that both have the lower family backgrounds in the group and express the need to quickly secure a job to follow their expectations, as well as paying back their parents for the support received.

Again, family resources play an important role: while, an interviewee with both parents as doctors says that “Within a couple of years, if I have a fixed-term contract I move into an already prepared house...” (Case 6, M-25, BS, Computer science), one of the graduate females (Figure 4) with precariousness and unemployment experiences – currently living with her partner, also thanks to her parents' help – laments the hardships encountered in finding any work but also claims to have a plan:

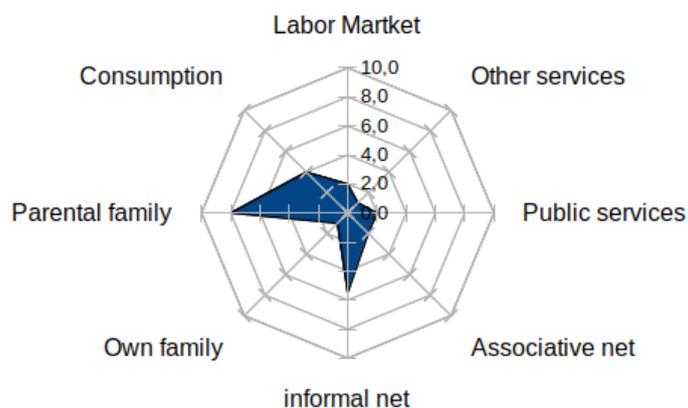
My boyfriend is moving in England to be a nurse and I will follow him. I trust that I'll find something: there are more opportunities for the young... I will try a master course. I'd like to make the work for which I studied... but I'd be happy with anything, even as a scavenger... (Case 5, fig. 4).

The other graduate female says:

I'd like to live alone, but without work I can't, and it will last for long... because even if I find a job it will be precarious... I'm disappointed by the PES, they don't have the tools... and there aren't other services. Young people are alone... inequality is evident, things depend on your family conditions (Case 4, F-24, MA, Sociology).

In the interviews, the younger age and lesser experience of the group was apparent: interviews were shorter and stories more synthetic with less self- and hetero-reflection, especially by those who currently feel more distress. Likewise, a greater solitude emerges in their attempts to become oriented and active, as if they were lacking actual references for the purpose.

b. social integration



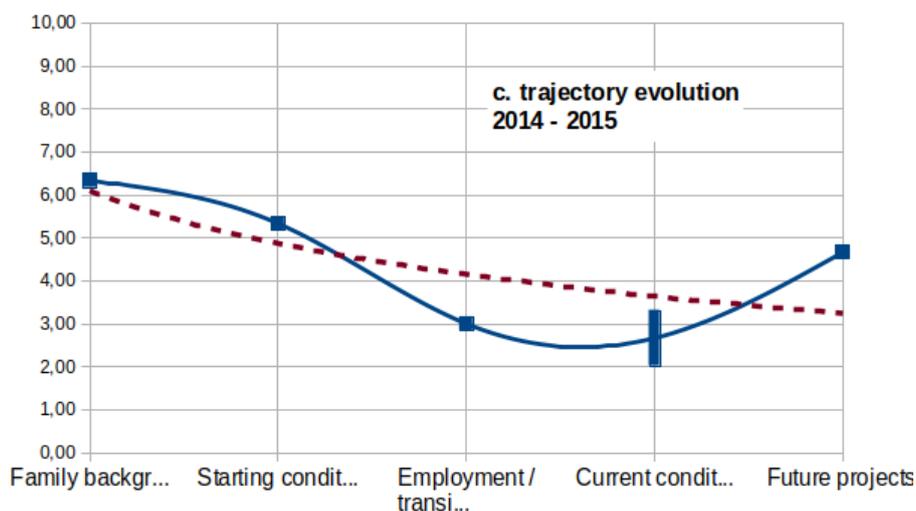


Figure 4. Case 5, F-24, BA Psychology

3.5 Flat trajectory, risks of exclusion?

This is a four-member group entirely composed of very young (20-26 years old) males with mixed length trajectories after school (2, 4, 8 and 12 years, respectively), low educational qualifications (three with primary school certification and one with a high-school diploma) and low family backgrounds in all aspects (education, employment and economic conditions). Family ties appear particularly weak from the perspective of socio-economic exchange, but not necessarily from the affective/relational one. Their level of social integration is the lowest one in the sample, while – apart from one case – all have decent or strong informal relationships with peers:

sometimes there is embarrassment with friends, because I have no money... say, when they want to eat something out together... but they give a hand... without making you feel bad (Case 18, M-23, Primary school)

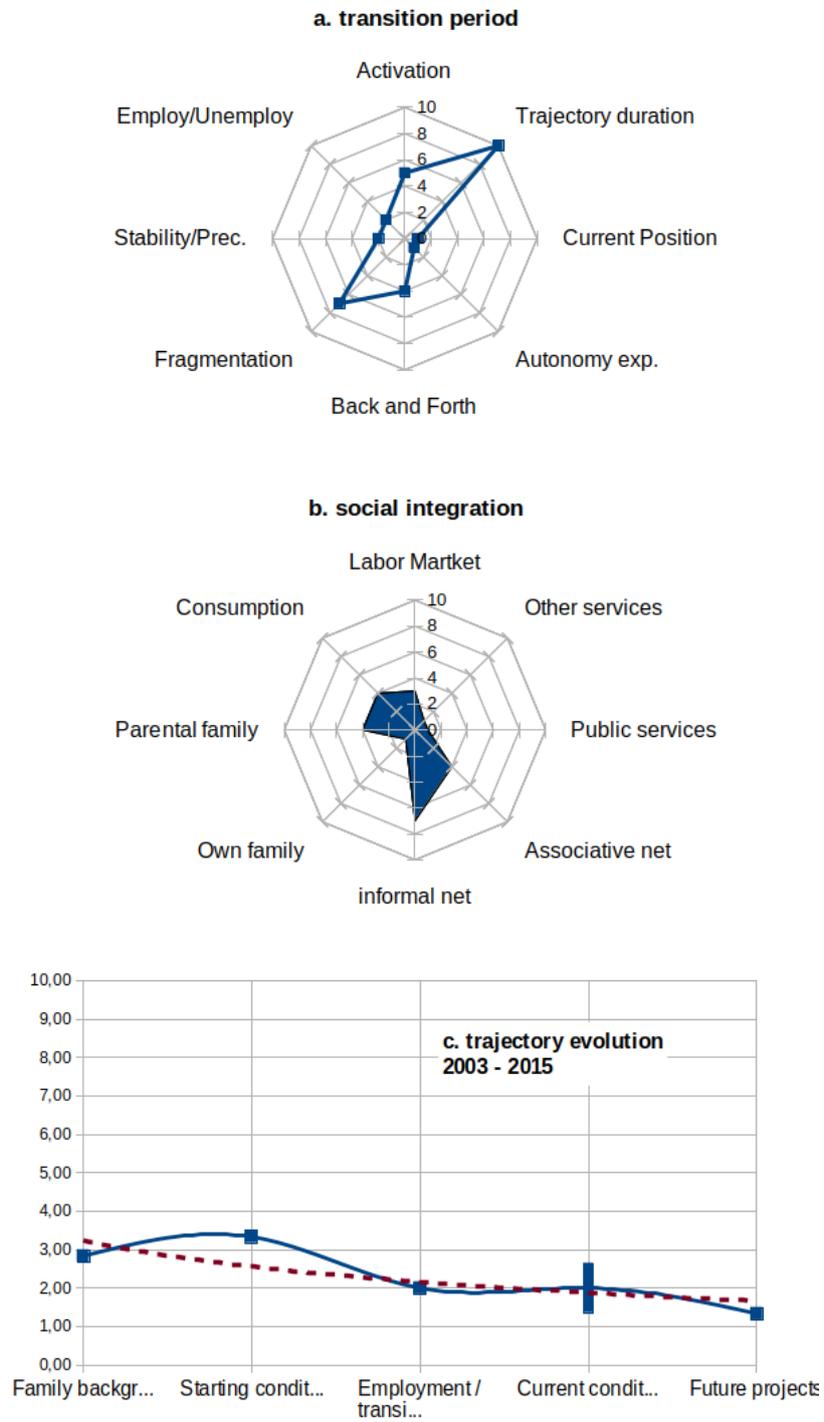


Figure 5. Case 7, M 26, Primary school

Three of them have undergone social issues such as drug use, risky behaviors while being part of gangs, law troubles, and difficult parental separations.

The positioning in the labor market is weak whatever the duration of trajectories. Respondents have had few working experiences (fixed-term, precarious, on-call and illegal jobs, besides internships) and unemployment periods, and only one of them has a professional identity as a baker, with mixed success between regular and illegal work as well as long-term unemployment.

Their level of activation is medium but characterized by a reduced variety of instruments and a discouragement that has grown over time:

I seek as hairdresser from a list handed out in a training course... as lifeguard delivering flyers and CVs in seaside resorts or through informal contacts. After months you continue to look for work, but then you have enough of that... I have thought about a training course, but I don't have the mind... and then... it is useless because even those who have studied cannot get a job... I have been at PES but it does not work (Case 7, Figure 5).

Two interviewees have some rough ideas about what they would like to do or continue to do, but even more than group 4, their activation attempts occur in solitude and - unlike those in group 3 - people in this cluster have no family resources to rely on, nor do they have positive experiences behind them. They instead perceive the burden of defeat and failure.

Maybe I'll get this job... I'll get-up at six o'clock to make pastries, my life will be that way... I'm tired, I don't say that I think about suicide, but... I take things as they come... confidence is underfoot. A job of 3-4000€, get right... have your own home that is not always social housing... But I know it won't be so. I don't believe in myself, others are better than me... I know it can be a wrong discourse but I'm 'wretched'... start working at 17 when the others go to school, I felt a little different, a little excluded. Many friends have somewhat helped me to pull myself up (Case 18, M-23, Primary school).

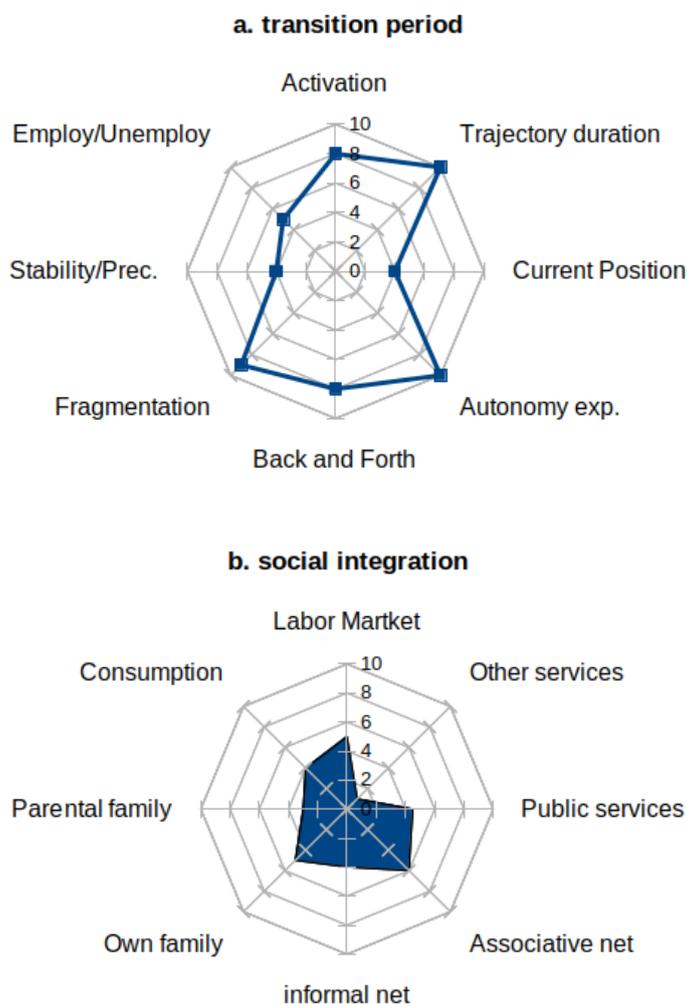
Forms of trajectories in this group tend to be flat, starting and remaining low, and it is not difficult to see some risks of social exclusion, depression or other forms of psychological distress. Again, social class and family resources play a decisive role, for better or worse.

3.6 Trying to do what I like

The final three interviewees can hardly be identified in a group but have certain aspects in common that warrant being discussed apart: they have long and particular stories of autonomy achieved outside of the parental home, and more or less successful attempts to have a satisfying job that

allows them to be free and creative, despite the difficulties. They are 30-32 years old, with a high-school diploma or primary school certification. their family backgrounds are medium-low, and the level of social integration is differently distributed compared with the previous cases, with a diminished role of parental family and a stronger role of their own household/cohabitation, territorial relationships and the labor market.

These informants have followed unusual paths, partly by choice and partly by condition or as a result of personal events, capitalizing on certain resources (e.g. parent-owned home), investing based on some expectations and intuitions, making the most of some opportunities (e.g. funding, training) and dealing with some difficulties:



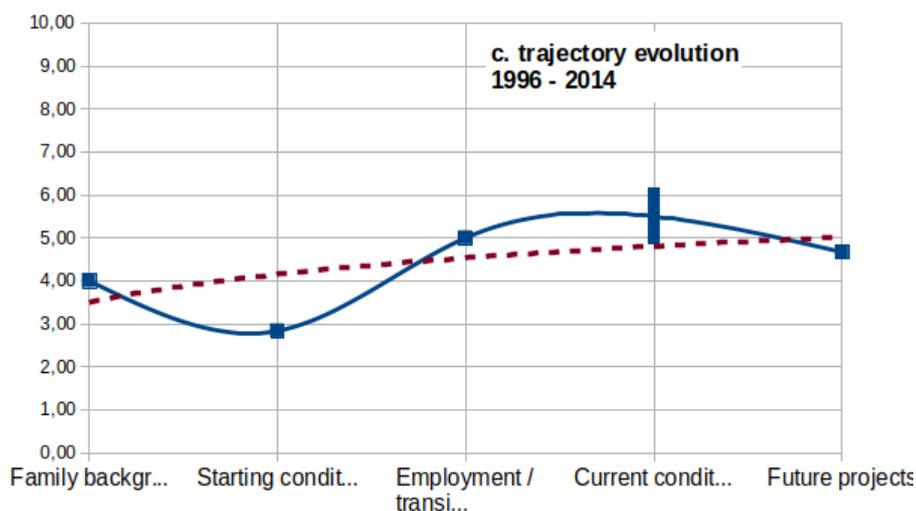


Figure 6. Case 3, F-32, two kids, Primary school

Having children that young... I went a little detached from peers and mothers of other generations... When I was unemployed I always did something: courses, writing articles, etc. I thought that the internet could be useful, it fascinates me, and I invested on it. I look for training experiences because I like and need them. I'm still enrolled in art school but for two years I didn't move forward. But... I'll try to do the exams as a private student, and work self-employed on web marketing and e-commerce. [...] I cannot stay in a tightly regulated work. The problem is the low income... I'm a bit presumptuous, schizophrenic, bipolar, with ups and downs. I would not do... e.g. cleaning or say "I am... primary school" ... always thinking of doing something different, diploma, degree, etc. (Case 3, fig. 6).

I was sure that I would have had a career where I could express creativity. I did seasonal work with the sole expectation of making some extra money. Then I've been able to make it as a tattoo artist... After experiences in London, I opened a shop using loans and other benefits (Case 12, F-30, High-school diploma).

They have had seasonal, temporary, on-call and illegal work experiences, even abroad, and unemployment periods, while their current positioning is built around more or less established forms of self-employment. They also maintain a housing autonomy that is economically supported by partners or relatives, and/or family home ownerships.

Forms of trajectories in this group (Figure 6) are partly different from the others and highlight an upward evolution from not very advantageous backgrounds and starting conditions. For them, the risk is a long-term insecurity.

4. Discussion

Following the description of the clusters identified above, we try to discuss some differences that make a difference in transition pathways. We focus on the role of family background, education and working paths, housing autonomy and life projects, gender, public policies and social and institutional relationships, without considering them independent of one another but observing how different dimensions and variables interact each other (Clarke & McCall, 2014), conveying opportunities and hurdles as well as contributing in shaping differences in the patterns of trajectories.

4.1 The role of family background

Family background and social class play an important role for young people's education, protection from poverty risks and chances to build their own life projects. Indeed, higher education of youths - particularly females - often reflects higher parental education and professional positions. Youth higher education also appears to be positively linked to levels of future expectations, participation in out-of-school experiences, and perceived skills that they believe they possessed at the beginning of the trajectory. However, the same young people do not credit education as such, but rather a diversity of experiences throughout the life course and while at university.

Family backgrounds also seem to facilitate a more articulated integration in the social context, especially regarding informal and associative ties, making easier to access and develop networks as part of an economic, cultural and social capital that young people try to capitalize on to experiment with housing autonomy, invest in personal aspirations and skills, develop a family business, remain attached to the labor market, or simply manage daily issues. Indeed, the distribution across consumption levels accurately reflects that of the integration in reciprocity ties and family backgrounds, again highlighting the interviewees' economic dependency.

Moreover, family background plays a role in the modes of youth labor market activation, which actually presents a rather controversial picture. Almost all respondents show high levels of activation with a certain prevalence of traditional job search modes and tools: informal networks, direct job applications, public employment services (PES *henceforth*). However, more differentiated approaches and higher commitment were found to be related to family backgrounds, social relations, gender (female) and education, including a varied use of the internet, public competition, access to private agencies, training, internship and civil service activities. The latter in particular have been employed to increase their chances through contacts, up-skilling and alleged "bridges" towards market positions, while returns into education or training have made or planned by several employed and unemployed interviewees "to conclude something left aside", "fulfill some

unmet aspirations” or find alternatives to fruitless paths. Finally, respondents who have moved in multiple ways most likely have also had access to PES, albeit with results that they all judged quite negatively (see below), apart from the necessary bureaucratic procedures to gain access to internships or the Youth Guarantee.

However, perspectives pursued by the most active have mostly remained in their minds, frequently discouraged by facts (e.g. group 1), while the best positioned in the market (group 3) are among those who have taken advantage the most of family and territorial connections and resources while committing less to job search efforts.

Therefore, a rather strong balancing effect of family backgrounds on the forms of trajectory emerges, for better or worse (Esping-Andersen, 2015; Filandri & Nazio, 2020; Santoro, 2020). However, while family backgrounds and connections play an important role in labor market participation, they do not result in rapid and stable work integration, calling into question the hypothesis that youths benefit from strong social ties through faster access to jobs (Lin and Erickson, 2008). Depending on the family’s bridging ties, young people seem to benefit from strong social ties to build more articulated networks of weak ones, which - combined with education - leads to a greater variety in the modes of job search, to meeting social and cultural opportunities, but only achieving better employment outcomes in some specific cases. Moreover, this happens regardless of the youth’s education attainments, and partly even regardless parent’s education. Nonetheless, even better outcomes do not appear satisfactory for most of them, in terms of stability, income, job content and employability gains, with the exception of group 6 members who have managed to build more or less stable self-employment positions from not very advantageous backgrounds.

4.2 Labor market participation

Precarious work conditions alternating with unemployment spells frequently recur in the informants’ trajectories.

Unemployment experience is significant for eighteen respondents, long term for fourteen of them, and repeatedly experienced in several cases, particularly by those with low skills at the beginning of trajectory. At the time of the interview twelve respondents were jobless, but unemployment and job-insecurity are ever-present aspects of almost all interviewees’ thoughts and feelings.

Subsequently, 29 out of 32 interviewees gained experience in a variable number and variety of jobs, up to a maximum of eleven different positions and an overall count of 145. Eighty of them were seasonal, precarious, on-call and illegal work positions. Fixed-term contracts follow, including apprenticeships, and some experiences of self-employment, at times in con-

nection with family businesses. Internships are indicated by respondents as fully-fledged work activities in terms of their content, time, commitment and competences required and expressed, and also due to pressure from employers to extend their working hours beyond those formally stipulated. Overall, regular and remunerated employments that take longer than a season account for around 20%.

Most young people's careers thus appear to be fragmented into a multitude of mainly unstable episodes. In some cases, they laboriously pursue sorts of continuities in the hope of remaining linked to a specific sector and network consistent with their expectations: "I am satisfied about what I am doing, absolutely not about contracts, wages and precariousness". In other cases, such episodes remain merely occasional, merely functioning to "satisfy the urge of doing something", "see if something else will come", "meet economic needs" and ensure that they "don't miss any chance". For these reasons more than half of the respondents have worked in very different employment sectors, making their own professional identities quite fragmented and disconnected from education.

Then there are the most stably employed in group 3, where fixed-term apprenticeship contracts prevail by far. The latter are fairly long in duration (3-4 years) but involve repetitive and easy-to-learn tasks. Indeed, respondents mostly complain about a distorted use of apprenticeship and an unsatisfactory and little-remunerated position that are not useful for improving their employability yet instrumental in reducing costs for employers. Moreover, they deem the training activities contemplated by such contracts as pointless, poorly organized, not aimed at developing expendable skills nor related to the current job.

Overall, underemployment, precariousness and uncertainty characterize the trajectories of all of the informants, regardless of their educational attainment, which in this context does not seem as important as usually supposed in facilitating or addressing mechanisms of work entry (Wolbers, 2014). In fact, among the best positioned in the labor market of groups 3 and 6, primary and professional education prevail and no graduates are present.

4.3 Leaving the parental home

Twenty-three respondents were living with their parents at the moment of the interview, five alone and four in some form of cohabitation. The pathways to housing autonomy are limited in number, rather complicated and strongly intertwined with family and class differences as well as their working careers. Only one of the respondents engaged in cohabitation can economically count on job stability, while respondents living on their own – including a single mother with two children – are in flats currently or previ-

ously owned by their parents, at times in the same building. All of them underline “the current impossibility to go beyond this sort of semi-autonomy”.

Overall, twelve interviewees have experienced some form of housing autonomy overtime, ten of whom were females, including six cases for study reasons. The latter mostly returned to their parental home experiencing difficulties and partial disappointment, while others moved - directly or after a lapse of time - to one of the above conditions of semi-autonomy.

Only three of the youths have experienced parenting, all in precarious economic and relational conditions, while none of the other respondents feel any close possibility to do so. Almost all of them have expectations of forming their own families, but they have to face economic hardships, and most of them neither have clear plans nor the means to achieve them, feeling frustrated in their aspirations. The only clear plan of a female interviewee is following her partner, who will move abroad to be a nurse.

On the other hand, three male respondents claim to be “able to go to live alone, but not reasons to do so”: they have apprenticeship contracts and can count on their parents’ resources for housing and/or work opportunities in family businesses.

Overall, we can hardly speak of housing independence: family and (male) partner resources are the decisive factors to experience forms of semi-autonomy. The lack of job stability and/or the low income makes it not easy to take further steps for those who have such resources, and almost impossible for those who do not, because the unexpected events in life could not be faced without this (Bertolini, Moiso & Musumeci, 2018). Within this picture, it is women who are making every possible attempt to gain greater independence.

4.4 Gender differences

Females show a greater level of activation throughout the trajectory, from multiple perspectives concerning training, employment, the search for housing autonomy and the formation of their own family.

At the beginning of the trajectory they show similar expectations and perceived competences compared with males, while experiencing a greater number and variety of out-of-school activities.

Then, the job search shows important differences based on education and family background and above all gender: indeed, it is women who use more varied and innovative tools.

Moreover, female interviewees have had a much higher number of work experiences (1,68:1), characterized by less related contents to their (higher) educational qualifications, more changes of employment sector (about 2:1), more precarious positions and less strictly professional activities (including

volunteering, civil service, internships), all of them punctuated by a more frequent return to training (about 2.5:1).

Finally, events of unemployment are slightly more numerous for females, and more often long term.

Nonetheless, as noted above, they are clearly distinguished from their male peers in attempts of autonomization from their birth family.

Put briefly, young women's transitions appear even more complicated and fragmented than those of their male peers. Their trajectories are built around complex plots between work, study and job search activities, with periods of unemployment and long-term unemployment, attempts to get out of home, experiences of new partnerships and important family events. Regarding social integration, females appear to be less integrated in the labor and consumption market, more integrated in the public and private service systems, equally integrated in family relationships and associative and informal networks, while expressing a greater sense of belonging to the social context. Despite being more active, skilled, experienced and qualified, and having stronger family backgrounds, their results ultimately appear even less encouraging. Moreover even if they have more plans for the future, they are less confident of succeeding in them. All this translates into more evident feelings of frustration.

While these contradictions appear striking but not unexpected (Iannelli and Smyth, 2008; Murgia and Poggio, 2011), the clear gender divide emerging from the clusters' composition is somewhat surprising, and makes it quite clear how the better female performances in almost any field only work to temporarily reduce the risks of exclusion. Sadly enough, female stronger propensities in experimenting autonomy more likely end up hanging between their parental family resources and economically-reliable male partners.

4.5 The role of public policies

As previously discussed, almost all respondents clearly showed - albeit diverse - active approaches to find opportunities, facing adversities and risks of discouragement. They have employed the accessible tools to find solutions and pursue the aspirations in which they have invested for years. More selective stances have only been taken by the group 6 members and those with more family resources.

In this context, a weak role of local labor policy emerges. The young express strongly negative perceptions on the topic, claiming in particular the uselessness of PES in providing opportunities and supporting their search paths. During interviews, they react always with the same words: "nothing, anything about, it's no use", or "I never have anything done with them and never got anything", "they have nothing to offer", "there are no information

about, please put a sign!”, and so on. As previously mentioned, those who gain access with a scope are moved by bureaucratic reasons; otherwise they have already found a job and are applying for services upon the recommendation of the employer who can thus achieve a reduction in costs.

Interviewees also highlighted the limitations that they found in the policy measures: the apprenticeship, because - as previously mentioned - the implementation appears distorted and harmful for youth employability; the Youth Guarantee, because at best it makes formally possible accessing internship or civil service; and the internships themselves, because they appear to be mainly used as a substitute for paid work that never translate in job positions. On the other hand, sporadic training initiatives organized by local public and private actors have instead served as opportunities for some of the groups 2 and 6 members to gain specific skills and motivations, invest in new professional profiles or sketch out a personal project.

Overall, policies do not seem targeted to people and the context and helpful in facilitating the orientation of the former according to the characteristics of the latter. As already highlighted by Benedetti & Matutini (2013), even valuable but occasional training initiatives fail to have an impact because they are not linked to socio-economic strategies of any kind, leaving most young people without any guidance, and mainly relying on their backgrounds and skills (Maestripieri, 2020). In fact, services and institutions have generally little meaning in the perceptions of the young, expressed through both words (“Institution, services, who....?”) and stunned, disgusted and/or desolate facial expressions. While this is unsurprising, it underlines the very limited role of the public system in supporting their trajectories and reducing inequalities.

4.6 The role of networks and institutional context

Regarding context and social relationships things partly change: many interviewees express a sense of belonging to the context even if they do not seem to have many connections, with few friends and limited participation in associative networks. Few appear to be highly integrated and they are also among the better positioned in the labor market. On the other hand, informal ties seem to be rather strong and tend to stick over the years, from childhood onwards, showing both a certain density and rootedness of networks, and a low mobility between them. In young people’s opinion, informal networks are more significant than associative ones, yet the former only prove effective in supporting their pathways to work when intermingled with the latter.

Almost all interviewees recognize potentials in this territory for its geographical features and the people, but they very negatively judge what it offers to young people nowadays. They also express strong criticism about the “institutions’ inability to valorize a place that would have everything”

and to deal with its problems. For instance, they show disorientation towards the immigration phenomenon and disappointment in the way that it is managed: in their opinion, it is changing the social and economic fabric, for instance making “the informal economy grow”, “increasingly difficult to conduct business legally” (e.g. in the buildings sector) and “finding good jobs”.

Some interviewees do not exclude the possibility of leaving this place for another part of the country or abroad. However, this does not seem to be a widespread and deep-rooted idea as the expression of loss of expectations of where they grew up.

5. Concluding remarks

Overall, the patterns of trajectories highlight three main directions of young pathways and ensuing possible risks:

1. A few informants (within clusters 1, 3, 6) consciously deal with constraints/opportunities of the context and seem effectively achieving the material and social conditions that enable taking some steps towards realizing their own expectations. Nonetheless, their trajectory appears anything but smooth and risk-free in the medium and long term.

2. Many pathways seem to develop in terms of slipping/floating in an ill-defined space. Here, the interviews reveal a substantial disorientation, where many attempts to seize opportunities appear rather random, if not disorganized, as in cluster 2 and 4. However, in some cases, opportunities are more or less randomly seized, making a fresh start possible, a new and at times intriguing “process in the making”, still full of unknowns.

3. Finally, other paths reflect the shape of trajectories that tend to flatten out (cluster 5 and overtime possibly 2 and 4), reflecting the difficulty of getting out of conditions of economic and cultural poverty, with potential risks of social exclusion overtime (Andreotti & Kazepov, 2001).

Overall, a problem of “context of learning” (Bateson, 1972) emerges, concerning the achievement of certain goals as much as the construction of identity. The young have to deal with a fairly undynamic socio-economic context, where skills, expectations and qualifications are hardly recognized, institutional integration is weak and the same institutions are seen as incapable and unreliable actors in enhancing local resources.

As previously discussed (§ 2), in the province of Massa-Carrara, the economic crisis first and subsequently the pandemic, have uncovered all of the limits of the local model. In such a situation and in absence of a somehow discernible development strategy, the *context markers* (Bateson, 1972) facilitating an understanding of functioning, expectations, behavior patterns, and possible reward systems remain few, dispersed, hidden or crumbled.

Hence, young people are required to manage on their own, namely learning to learn to have double- or even triple-loop learning processes to find any solution (Villa 2007): learning for themselves how to identify sets of alternatives, choosing among them, understanding the context of choosing, as well as modifying it, while obtaining the resources to make this happen. In this picture, education per se may be helpful, and social class clearly is. Nonetheless, they are not enough.

Difficulties in the labor market also reverberate in the other spheres of young people's life course. In almost all trajectories, work takes on a central but problematic role making pathways fragmentary and uncertain in all of their aspects, including personal projects, relationships, belonging, identity and self-esteem, autonomy from the parent family. Only those who combine strong family backgrounds, skills and qualifications, confidence in their own means, and still have short trajectories do not feel deep concern about the future. Hence, it is the very assumptions of social citizenship that appear to be extremely weakened (Chevalier, 2015), including the formation of social identity, economic autonomy, and job careers with related social entitlements.

As a result, clear transitions appear difficult to identify, raising some issues about the use of the concept for describing these youth pathways towards adulthood (Brzinsky-Fay, 2014). The concept reminds of the passage from one stage of life to another, whereby many scholars have already highlighted the existence of different types and an increasing de-standardization (Stauber & Walther, 2006; Wolbers, 2014). However, in many cases, the identification of passages has also become more complicated amidst continuous transitions between planes and sliding of the same planes that informants perceive as endless, made of continuous steps back and forth between the labor market and education, dependency and autonomy, unsuccessful projects and other ones that are waiting to be outlined: where does the transition start and where and how does it end?

Therefore, whatever the transition, it is not simply a matter of education, work and human capital formation, at least in the narrow sense of much literature and political discourse (Kwon, 2009). So that, it seems possible to say that in such a context, improved transition, activation and social investment policies designed around universalistic- or category-based criteria may be necessary but only effective in supporting the above processes in some cases, as those in the first and partly the second among the three directions above identified. Including proactive and context-based policy approaches may be instead a key factor for reducing inequalities and risks of exclusion, which means developing capabilities to support the complex individual learning processes that young people are asked to undergo while implementing local

development strategies that are able to influence the system's capability to create socio-economic and cultural opportunities.

For this reason, it may therefore hold some interest to develop more case studies research that are able to highlight the complexity of the investigated phenomena against the different and changing characteristics of the contexts. In particular, the need to consider the embeddedness of life trajectories in contexts through an intersectional approach and an articulated conception of learning appears to be critical to deal with multiple dimensions and understanding the emerging challenges in shifting landscapes, as well as young people's ways of addressing them.

Therefore, also looking at the approach taken here, it would be desirable to develop a research program based on pragmatist observations "from below" as part of trans-contextual and comparative analyses (Villa and Johansen, 2019) of regimes, variations and practices of youth transition processes and policy, namely moving between the limits of universalistic totally context-free research designs and overly-strictly contextually-bounded ones, thus overcoming the limitations of both.

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