



DESAFÍO Y PERSPECTIVAS ACTUALES EN EL CAMPO DE LA EDUCACIÓN

TRAINING NEEDS AND LIFE PLANNING IN THE NEW EDUCATIONAL AND SOCIAL LANDSCAPE: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY WITH ADOLESCENTS LIVING IN SOUTH-EASTERN SICILY

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ABSTRACT

Adolescence is a period of physical and psychological changes, it is the potential background to develop a life planning coherent with their own values and aspirations.

The reality of today, basically characterized by a strong discontinuity, a source of instability and insecurity, implies the need for flexibility characteristics that appear essential for the future of young people and for society.

Uncertainty, typical of current realities, involves young people's identities, especially as regards the dimensions of the Self, Present and Future, "what I am" and "what will I be", or "what I fear to become", those that Markus (Markus et al, 1986, 1990) has described as Possible Selves and which play an active role (Working Self), also in building the relationship with one's own context life and future.

This study explores the social representational framework in a sample of 360 adolescents living in South-Eastern Sicily in relation to: need of Education, Self, Work, Territory, Values systems, and Possible Selves articulation, in order to test the hypothesis that these dimensions are closely related.

The Likert Scale, Values Schwartz Scale (2003) and Semantic Differentials were used.

The data seem to confirm the hypothesis and underline the need for a better correspondence between the education received, personal expectations and the demands of the job market, as well as the learning of meta-skills useful to address the social background, characterized by an increasing flexibility, insecurity and instability. Attitudes of psychological distance emerge in relation to their own territory, both with regard to work and the present and the future social success.

Keywords: Training Needs, Possible Selves, Identity, Life Planning, Social Representations.



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INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is classically regarded as a period of fundamental change, the scenario in which the foundation is laid for the construction of projects for young people's lives and the possible realization of their aspirations (Bandura, 2000).

The reality of today, basically characterized by a strong discontinuity, is a source of instability and insecurity (Larson, 2002), and implies the need for flexibility characteristics (Schmidt, 2003), that appear essential for the future of young people and for society.

Uncertainty, typical of current realities, involves young people's identities, especially as regards the dimensions of the Self, Present and Future, "what I am" and "what will I be", or "what I fear to become", those that Markus has described as Possible Selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986, Oyserman, & Markus, 1990), which play an active role (Working Self), also in building the relationships with their life contexts and with their future (Larson, 2002; Piquart, & Silbereisen, 2005).

In this sense, however, even in the wake of Field Theory proposed by Kurt Lewin (Lewin, 1935), and exceeding the classical reification conception, the territory has been conceptualized in psycho-social terms "A place is the result of relationships between actions, conceptions and physical attributes" (Canter, 1977: 159). The territory, then, is not just a setting with certain physical characteristics, but it is a context of changing social relations and of the memory (Stokowski, 2002). A context characterized, therefore, by bijective relationships, for which, according to two fundamental axioms of social psychology, on the one hand, everyone helps to build their own reality and, on the other, the social influence pervades all social life (Smith & Mackie, 2004).

The planning of young people's lives, in a period of life characterized by "emerging adulthood" (Arnett, 2002), in which all the directions of the biographical construction of the individuals remain "possibles", involves the dimensions of the self. This involvement concerns personal expectations, desires and fears, as well as the scenario of the socialization processes, in relation to which the norms and the values that govern life, social relationships and identity construction are introjected (Bloch, 1995).

In this context, a particular problem is the emigration of young people of the South, a phenomenon which in this case takes the form of intellectual migration, so the majority of young people think they have to go elsewhere, to mainland Italy or abroad, to find the opportunities for personal realization and social work.

The representation of Sicily, as experienced in previous research, is of a negative type, especially regarding the standard of performances in daily life as regards social and economic aspects (Licciardello, & Castiglione, 2007). This fact helps to explain why the expectations and hopes of young people are mostly projected in an "elsewhere" away from their life context. At the same time, however, this calls into question the role of the School and the inadequacy of the contents and of the methodology adopted, compared with the requirements of the society of discontinuity.

Today's society is characterized by "horizons of possibilities" and we need to think of the future in the plural and at the present" (Zsuzsa, 1993: 47); result of a self-creativity process, that today realizes the inventions of yesterday, and produces new social practices that will shape our individual and collective life of tomorrow and post tomorrow (Zsuzsa, 1993: 47).

Thus, there is a need to plan appropriate training projects to offer contents and methods to the young, to make them "projectual subjects". The exploration of their training needs can be a first step in that direction.



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METHOD

Aim of the research

The research has been carried out in order to explore the following social representations. The usefulness of the received education, the education desired, the preferred job and the evaluation of: the Territory of residence, the Work, the dimensions of the Self (the Actual and the Future), the Values system and the future self-realization, in a group of Sicilian students. In particular, we aim to test the hypothesis that these dimensions are mutually correlated.

Sample

The research involved a sample of adolescents students, 360 altogether, attending all the high schools of a territory in the South-Eastern Sicilian hinterland characterized by a rich agricultural economy. The sample was balanced in relation to the type of school (Liceo, Technical Institutes and Professional), to the study level (second year and fifth year) and to the gender (males and females).

Materials

Representations of school, work, territory of residence and future.

We used a set of 7-point Likert scales, ranging from -3=strongly disagree to +3=strongly agree ("indifference point" = 0, for all scales).

Values system

We used the Italian version (Capanna et alii, 2005) of the Portrait Values Questionnaire (PVQ) (Schwartz et alii, 2003), consisting of N. 40 6-point items (1= Not at all similar to me; 6= Totally similar to me; "indifference point" =3,5). Each portrait describes a person's goals, aspirations, or wishes that measure the importance of a value implicitly. The portraits describe each person in terms of what is important to him or her. The PVQ was used to measure the 10 types of values, that were grouped into 4 areas: Self-transcendence (benevolence, e.g.: "It's very important to him/her to help the people around him/her. He/she wants to care for other people", and universalism, e.g.: "He/she thinks it is important that every person in the world should be treated equally. He/she wants justice for everybody, even for people he/she doesn't know"); Conservatism (tradition, e.g.: "Religious belief is important to him/her. He/she tries hard to do what his/her religion requires", conformity, e.g.: "It is important to him/her always to behave properly. He/she wants to avoid doing anything people would say is wrong"; and security, e.g.: "It is important to him/her to live in secure surroundings. He/she avoids anything that might endanger his/her safety"); Openness to change (hedonism, e.g.: "He/she seeks every chance he/she can to have fun. It is important to him/her to do things that give him/her pleasure", self-direction, e.g. "Thinking up new ideas and being creative is important to him/her. He/she likes to do things in his/her own original way", and stimulation, e.g. "He/she likes the surprises and is always looking for new things to do. He/she thinks it is important to do lots of different things in life); Self-enhancement (power, e.g.: "It is important to him/her to be in charge and tell others what to do. He/she wants people to do what he/she says", and achievement, e.g.: "Being very successful is important to him/her. He/she likes to impress other people").

Social Representations of the Self, of the Work and the Territory of residence.

Four Semantic Differentials (D.S.) (Di Nuovo, & Licciardello, 1997) structured with opposite adjectives, on a 7-point scale, ranging from -3 to +3 ("indifference point" = 0, for all scales): a)two consisting of 34 pairs of opposite adjectives were used to explore the Actual Self ("Me as I am now") and the Future Self ("Me as I will be"); b)two consisting of 28 pairs of opposite adjectives were used



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to explore the social representations of the Work ("Work is") and of the Territory of residence ("My Territory is").

By agreement with the headmasters of the schools, the questionnaires were administered to the students, during school time, in small groups and with the only presence of the researcher, in order to guarantee the reliability of the results.

Procedure

Regarding data analysis, we first calculated the reliability of the of the D.S. (Cronbach's alpha: Actual Self, $\alpha = .826$; Future Self, $\alpha = .905$; Work, $\alpha = .852$; Territory, $\alpha = .887$), considering each as a Likert Scale (ranging from -3, to +3; the "indifference point" = 0). With regard to the data obtained with Semantic Differentials, we have, moreover, calculated the Euclidean Distances#. Also we calculated the reliability (Cronbach's alpha) of "four areas" of the Portrait Values Questionnaire (PVQ) (Schwartz et al, 2001): Self-Transcendence ($\alpha = .781$); Self-Achievement ($\alpha = .759$); Openness to Change ($\alpha = .644$); and Conservatism ($\alpha = .749$).

We also conducted descriptive analyses, "t" of Student, Manova, Anova to check the univariate effects (tests) and the Discriminant Analysis.

We analyzed the data using SPSS 15.5 for Windows.

Variables

As independent variables we used the future representation of the personal life (on the own territory of residence or out), the study level (second and fifth year) and the level of satisfaction for the received education in school. Furthermore, we used the followings research variables: the Euclidean distances between the Self (Actual and Future), the Territory and Work representations, and the system of Values.

RESULTS

Global framework

In general, the analysis of the data indicates the following framework:

1) a low level of satisfaction toward the education received ($M = +.61$), it regards particularly ($p < .001$) the students of the Technical ($M = +.46$) and of the Professional Institute ($M = +.45$); furthermore the education received has been considered of little use in relation to the needs of the job market: the score attributed was just a little higher than the "indifference point";

2) a medium-low social representation of the Actual Self ($M = +.92$) identical to that the Work ($M = +.98$), significantly ($F = 241.43$, $p < .001$) less than the Future Self ($M = +1.37$) and greater than that of the Territory ($M = +.17$); the low score of the Territory, just above the "indifference point", it is indicative of a lack of appreciation of it.

3) a value system characterized by: a medium level trend toward Self-transcendence ($M = 4.48$) and Openness to change ($M = 4.41$); the two scores were significantly higher (Manova with 4 Factor Within, $F = 108.78$, $p < .001$) than those attributed to Conservatism ($M = 4.02$) and to Self-enhancement ($M = 3.71$); the last score was just a little higher than the "indifference point" (3.5);

4) a representation of their future life far from their territory of residence: more than half of the sample, regardless of study level and of gender, think they must build their own future far from their territory (58,6%) or, in any case, they would like to do so (60,8%);

5) the analysis of the Euclidean distances, has confirmed the greater appreciation of the Work than the Territory. The Euclidean distances between the Territory and the dimensions of the Self (Future and Actual), and between the Territory and the Work were significantly greater (Manova with



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5 Factors Within, $F= 56.52$, $p= .001$) than those between Work and the dimensions of the Self (Actual and Future);

Influence of the study level: the second year compared to the fifth year

The level of education seems to have a negative influence on satisfaction regarding the education received and the type of education desired, as well as appreciation of Territory and preference of the kind of job.

In particular, when the level of education increase, from the second year to the fifth year, most significantly:

1) decreased: a) satisfaction for the education received (" t "= 2.732, $p= .007$); b) demand for a job consistent with the specific background (" t "= 6.011, $p<.001$); c) appreciation for unpaid apprenticeship (" t "= 2.557, $p=.011$); d) appreciation for one's own Territory (" t "= 3.693, $p<.001$); e) and, at the same time, social personal involvement to develop the Territory (" t "= 2.467, $p=.014$); f) the Euclidean distances between the Future Self and the Work (" t "= 2.222, $p= .027$)

2) increased: a) appreciation of Work, in general (" t "= -2.542, $p=.011$) and for a stable and continuous job, particularly (" t "= -2.548, $p<.001$); b) the claim for an education characterized by meta-skills (" t "= -3.665, $p<.001$), useful for self-entrepreneurship (" t "= -2.391, $p=.017$) and for an intellectually stimulating job (" t "= -2.242, $p=.026$); c) the Euclidean distances between the Territory and the dimensions of the Self (Actual, " t "= -2.171, $p=.031$; Future " t "= -2.158, $p=.032$) and between the Territory and the Work (" t "= -3.140, $p=.002$).

Differences related to the social representation of future life

The students who think they must go outside Sicily or abroad to build their future, compared to those who think they will stay, have appreciated:

1)-less: a)-their Territory (" t "= 2.437, $p=.015$); b)-a job consistent with their training (" t "= 2.99, $p=.022$); c)-crafts as an activity on which to base the development of the territory (" t "= 2.956, $p=.003$); d)-starting an entrepreneurship (" t "= 2.016, $p=.045$); e)-actively to contribute to the Territory development (" t "= 4.683, $p<.001$);

2)-more: a). an intellectually stimulating job (" t "= 4.165, $p<.001$); b)-personal involvement in the development of the Territory (" t "= 2.034, $p=.042$); c)-Tourism as an activity to contribute to the Territory development (" t "= 2.016, $p=.016$).

The students who would like to go outside Sicily or abroad to build their future, compared to those who would like to remain, showed a greater trend (Manova, $F=5.458$, $p<.001$) towards Openness to change (hedonism, self-direction, and stimulation) ($F=8.214$, $p=.004$) and, on the contrary, less towards Conservatism (tradition, conformity, and security) ($F=12.449$, $p=.001$);

The Discriminant analysis

The Discriminant analysis confirmed the difference between the students who think they can build their future in the Territory and those that think they must go out of Sicily or abroad.

The former: a)-preferred a short and not demanding education (Wilks' Lambda, $p= .023$, Function= .143 Vs -.101); b)-considered their own Territory positively (Wilks' Lambda, $p= .029$, Function=.144 Vs -.093); c)-felt able to contribute to its development (Wilks' Lambda, $p= .001$, Function=.289 Vs -.204); d)-showed a strongly preference towards Conservatism (.785) and a negative orientation towards Openness to change (-.646), (Wilks' Lambda, $p<.0001$, Function=.305 Vs -.197);

The latter preferred: a)-an intellectually stimulating job (Wilks' Lambda, $p<.001$, Function= -.261 Vs .184); b)-political and social commitment to develop their territory (Wilks' Lambda, $p= .041$,



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Function= $-.129$ Vs $.091$); c)-orientation towards Openness to change ($-.646$), (Wilks' Lambda, $p < .0001$, Function= $.305$ Vs $-.197$).

Discussions and conclusions

The data seem to confirm our hypothesis. The students in our sample are dissatisfied with the education received, because they consider it as little use compared to the demands of the labor market. Moreover, while the concept of Work was positively assessed with the same level of their Actual Self, they showed very little consideration of their Territory, seeing it as being far from their dimensions of the Self and Work, to the point that more than half of them feel the need to go away.

Regarding the Values system, the orientation toward Self-transcendence and Openness to change prevails, while Conservatism and Self-enhancement were little appreciated.

A particularly relevant fact was noted: increasing the level of education further increases the appreciation for a kind of education characterized by meta-skills (relational skills, communication, organizational, of planning) that can be utilised in any working environment, and increases the appreciation for the learning of skills useful for self-employment and for self-entrepreneurship. It also increases the appreciation for Work, especially intellectually stimulating, seen as closer to their Future Self. At the same time, however, it further decreases the already low appreciation for their own Territory, and for the idea of work on its development, considered far from the dimensions of the Self (Actual and Future), and far from Work.

The comparison between those who think they can stay and those who think that they must go away is also interesting: the first group expressed greater appreciation of the Territory, crafts as a source of development, a short training course that is not too challenging, a job consistent with their training course, the possibility of starting a business, and showed more orientation to Conservatism; the second group appreciated a more intellectually stimulating job, tourism as a source of development, the possibility of a social and political commitment to Territory development and showed more orientation to Openness to Change.

The data confirm, also, the phenomenon of intellectual migration, which mainly affects those most likely to contribute to the development of the area, resulting in the depletion of human resources. At the same time, however, this helps to explain the psycho-social causes of this phenomenon, indicating the need to adapt the educational processes to changing social needs.

The training processes are not confined to the learning content but also involve the structure of the Self and the representation of reality, in which "it build itself" (also with an active role: Working Self, Markus & Nurius, 1986).

In this sense, there is a need for training projects, as the EU (1999, 2001, 2007) has repeatedly emphasized, adequate to actively address social scenarios characterized by flexibility, insecurity and instability (Schmidt, 2003). Training programs with a vision of social reality characterized not by the "reification" of the same but by the knowledge that the same is also a function of potential projects and of a flexible Self, capable of living change positively. It appears, therefore, important to involve young people in the activities of continuous co-construction of scenarios of social reality characterized for metacognitive approaches; approaches that provide for the awareness that the "reality" is also a function of how (with the "eyes of the mind") we are capable of "pre-seeing" and of how we can be "active actors" in our relationship to the reality in which we live (Licciardello & Castiglione, 2008).



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