# LIFE PLANNING AND TERRITORY REPRESENTATION IN STUDENTS OF CENTRAL-EASTERN SICILY

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ABSTRACT

A young person's capacity for existential planning and the construction of a path of personal and professional growth reflect the representation of *Self* in the future, in terms of "*Possible Selves*", or rather, what individuals think they can become, would like to become and fear becoming.

Life planning, as a function of the interaction between the subjective world and physical-social factors of the context of belonging, refers to the dynamic relationship between the individual and the environment, involving the processes of identity construction and correlating to the representation of the present and future *Self* .

The data of our research show that the young people in our sample have a capacity for life planning that, in terms of expectations and aspirations, is collocated far from the context of their lives; the data also shows that their representation of the territory is characterized by ambivalence, which is negative on a level of everyday operating and positive in affective terms.

The representation of one's own territory and planning investment in it appears to be correlated with the dimensions of the *Self*.

Key words:  *Self- life planning - work – territory - students*

INTRODUCTION

It is a fact that modern life  is characterized more and more by processes of change that regard everyone's personal role in the relationship with their own life context and future, since a  fundamental conceptual transformation has taken place that needs working on for "[…] the invention and the realization of future possibilities" (Zsuzsa, 1993: 40). It is a radical cultural transformation that derives from the fact that "now, the future is declined in the plural  and in the present, which is the direct result of the auto-creative path that sees  the present as time, the realization of inventions elaborated yesterday and imagined the day before yesterday as the object, and, regarding product, new social practices that will model our individual and collective lives tomorrow and thereafter.' (Ibidem: 47).

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In this framework, the capacity for existential planning and with it, the construction of a path of personal and professional growth, requires young people (and also those less young) to focus on themselves, regarding the choices that they have to make, examining, sifting through and elaborating aspirations and everyday plans of action, through a continuous process of construction and deconstruction, focalizing attention on the present but continually projecting themselves into the future.

Considering all these processes, according to a constructivist approach, the Self assumes a fundamental role, contributing to the dynamic construction of the reality that concerns it, referring to present experience but also to the projection towards the future. The representation of *Self* in the future, as a dialectic system of auto-definition and auto-projection, can be summed up in the concept of *Possible Selves*, significant aspects of the "Working *Self*" inherent in future planning, that reflects the ideas of the individuals on what they can become, would like to become and fear becoming, providing a conceptual link between motivation and cognition (Markus, & Nurius, 1986).

Recent scientific contributions have shown the function of "self-regulation" of the *Possible Selves*, that, in this sense, concern those auto-definitions that include specific behavioral strategies to achieve the aim (Hoyle, & Sherrill, 2006). Auto-regulation means not only canalizing energy, motivation and effort towards a goal, but also the relative strategies to obtain it. (Oyserman, 2007; Pizzolato, 2007). According to Oettingen et al, only a mental contraposition between the thoughts regarding the desired future and the consideration of the aspects of the present reality that are useful for achieving future goals, can activate the subject to transform the desired future into something that will be realized and the present reality into something that will be changed (Oettingen & Mayer 2002; Oettingen, & Pak, 2001). Therefore, the *Possible Selves*, through a mechanism of prevention vs. promotion focus (Higgins, 1996; Higgins & Shah, 1997, 2001), become auto-regulators when they are plausible (a characteristic that implies clarity of the objective) and contain strategies not only for personal action but also for use in the wider social context in which the aim will be realized. (Oyserman, & Fryberg 2006; Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry 2006; Oyserman, Bybee, Terry, & Hart-Johnson, 2004).

In this sense, the dimension of planning does not only refer to an objective definition or vision of one's own development, but constitutes a complex dimension that intersects with 'other' plans of idealization and desirability, that refer to a wider process of social adaptation. Motivation is not only a moving force inside the subject but a directionality of acting that is the result of the interaction between the subjective world and physical-social factors of the context and the territory they belong to.

The dynamic relationship between the individual and the environment has already been proposed by Lewin in his 'field theory', in which the environment takes on almost physical characteristics, almost psychological, almost mental and the behaviors become function (*f*) of P -person- x E -environment- (according to the famous formula: C= *f* (P.A.) (Lewin, 1935).

Various studies, on the border of psycho-social tradition and psycho-environmental environment, have highlighted the relevance of places for the Self-concept and for the processes of identity construction. Proshansky speaks of "identity of place" (Proshansky, *et alii*, 1983), as a cognitive substructure of a more general self-identification (Gustafson, 2000; Fried, 2000; Twigger-Ross, & Uzzell, 1996), connecting it to those dimensions that refer to a complex pattern of ideas, sensations, values, objectives, preferences, abilities and behavioral tendencies belonging to the existence of the individual in the physical world (Proshansky, 1978).

The meaning of place is thus described in terms of multidimensional physical and psychological attributes (Pretty *et alii*, 2003). It regards those units of experience within which activities and physical forms merge; a convergence of knowledge, emotions and behaviors that people experiment with there (Canter, 1991, 1977). The places (or territories) are seen not only as a set of forces that give shape to behaviors, but also as material and symbolic products of human actions (Stokols, & Shumaker, 1981), and therefore, in relation to Identity (Bonaiuto, Twigger-Ross, & Breackwell, 2004), they can be characterized by their social 'imaginability' (or memorability), or rather, by the capacity to evoke meanings that are socially vivid and collectively used by the occupants and users of a place. The social 'imagin-

ability' of places, in terms of socio-cultural residues, poses the problem of the effects that (in terms of individual, ideological and social filters) the dominant culture in a fixed period produces on the representation of the territory, contributing to modeling (besides knowledge) the relationships with it (Moine, 2005), but also the need to reflect on the consequences that may come from this representation, concerning the specification of the 'potential' of the territory and the relationships with personal life planning (Licciardello, & Castiglione, 2008).

## METHOD

Considering the theoretical background outlined, we have carried out research to verify the possible link between life planning, dimensions of the *Self* and the representational framework that developing adolescents have regarding the potential of the area they live in. In particular, we have decided to verify: <u>a</u>) expectations and desires regarding personal and professional future; <u>b</u>)attitudes regarding the future of the territory and the young person's possible personal role in developing it; <u>c</u>)the relationships between the rating of one's own territory and dimensions of *Self*.

### Participants

The sample comprises 1905 secondary school students from central eastern Sicily, chosen randomly with equal distribution regarding sex, type of school (high school, tecnical institutes, and professional institutes) and level of instruction (II and V year).

### Tools

The following tools were used to gather data:
**A)**a semi-structured questionnaire to obtain general information regarding the subjects of the sample ( *background questions*);
**B)**six "scales of judgement", of the *Likert* type, to explore the following representational areas: *i)*their own 'life planning' *ii)* their own territory and its possible areas of development;
**C)f**our semantic differentials (Di Nuovo, & Licciardello, 1997): two, consisting of 34 pairs of opposite adjectives relating to the Present *Self* (Me as I am now*)* and to the Future *Self* (Me as I will be); two, consisting of 26 opposite pairs of words relating to "Work, in general" and to the "Provincial territory in general" (from now on referred to just as "Territory").
Testing of statistical significance was carried out through Manova, *One test* and the Correlation Analysis(*r* of Pearson).

### Procedure

The research involved various secondary schools of the provinces of: Catania, Siracusa, Ragusa, Enna, and Caltanissetta. The questionnaires were administered during school time, by appointment agreed with the school heads, in small groups of students and with only the presence of the researcher.

## RESULTS

### Area I- 'Life planning': where and how they think they will build their future

The life planning of our subjects was explored on two levels: expectations and desires.

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Regarding expectations, only a small part of the sample (15.7%) imagined they would build their future in their own province; some see themselves in Sicily (23.3%) and a large percentage (48.3%) imagine themselves in the rest of Italy.

Regarding desires, there is a slight rise in the percentage of those who would like to stay in their area (22.5%).

Regarding the possible type of work that the subjects imagine themselves doing in the future, the idea of finding a steady job prevails (*Mean*= 5.88) and also of doing freelance work (*Mean*= 5.42).

The score concerning the possibility of working for the development of the territory of their own province was slightly above the point of indifference (*Mean*= 4.52) (p<.001).

However, most students aspired to do a job with 'security and continuity' (*Mean* = 6.10); the possibility of working for themselves was considered ("*t*"= -10.890, p<.001), but was significantly inferior (*Mean*= 5.69).

### Area II- the possible lines of development of the territory

The possible lines of development of the territory were seen to follow a stereotype orientation: mainly tourism (*Mean*= 6.07) and, though with a significantly lower score, the service sector (*Mean* =5.63; *t*=-11.986, p<.001) and traditional jobs (commerce, banks, etc.) (*Mean*= 5.59; *t*=-12.682, p<.001).

However, the primary economic activities (agriculture, fishing) were barely considered (agriculture, fishing etc.) (*Mean*= 4.42) and crafts (*Mean*= 4.59) (p<.001), though these are activities that have characterized the development of Sicily in the past.

There was quite a lot of consideration for the need for greater personal commitment in work and the presence of an entrepreneurial class willing to invest in innovative sectors (*Mean*= 5.86 in both cases), and also greater investment in higher education, specifically based on the needs of the territory (*Mean*= 5.80).

However, the need to overcome the idea of 'a permanent job', which is essential for the development of the area, comes around the point of indifference. (*Mean*= 4.05).
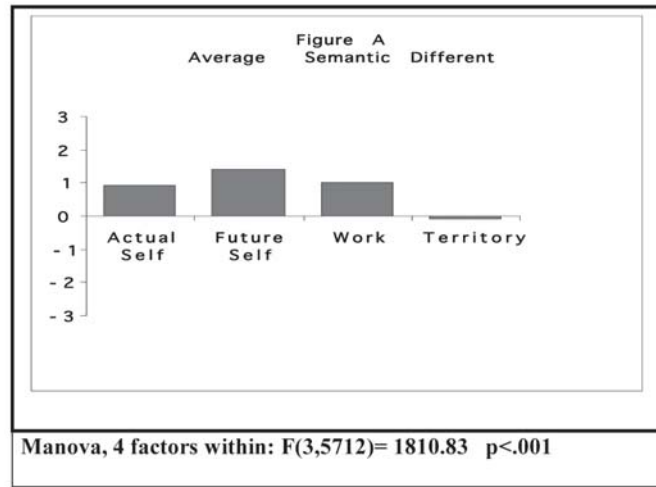
### Area III- the dimensions of the *Self*, "the province", "work"

Regarding semantic differentials: *1*) First we calculated the *reliability,* through Cronbach's *alpha,* of the present and future *Self*, of Work and the Territory, which enables us to consider each of them as a scale, calculating the mean value of the sum of the score of each opposite pair (for each one the score goes from –3, absolutely negative to +3 absolutely positive and positive, with a point of indifference =0); 2) subsequently we went on to calculate the Euclidean distances, using, for example, for the present *Self* and the future *Self*, the following formula: $\sqrt{\sum (PS_i - FS_i)^2}$ , PS=Present *Self*, FS=Future *Self*, i= each pair of opposite adjectives in both semantic differentials.
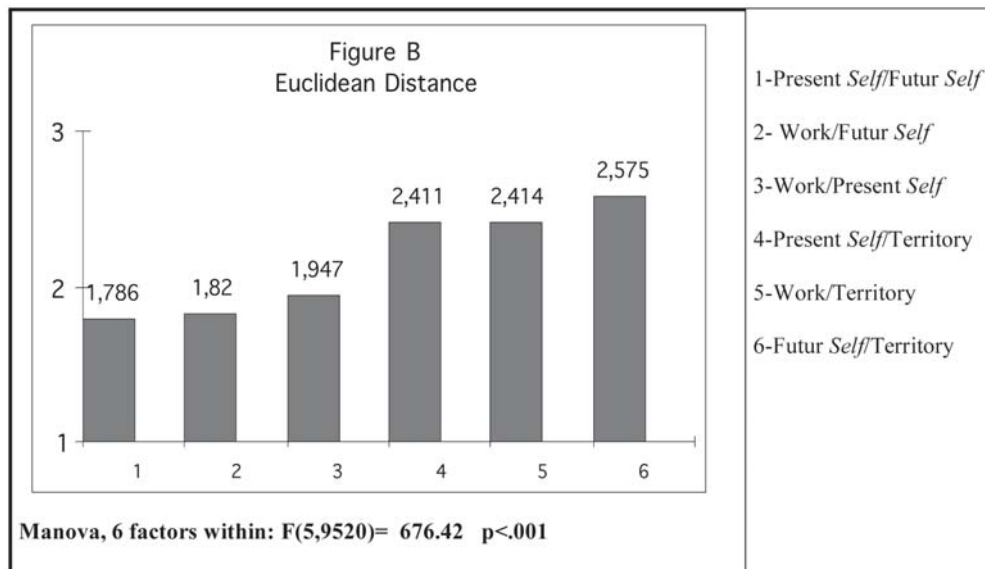
The general framework clearly indicates the negative representation of the 'territory', both compared to other measured dimensions (Manova with 4 factors within: $F_{(3,5712)}=1810.83$, p<.001), and in absolute terms: the assessment of 'future *Self*' has a medium level assessment (*Mean*= +1.40, *alpha*=.885) and the assessment of 'the present *Self*' has a low-medium average (*Mean*= +0.94, *alpha* =.808), the latter is substantially overlapped to "Work" (*Mean*= +1.01, *alpha* =.859); however, the representation of the 'Territory' has a negative and significantly inferior result to the point of indifference (*one test* p<.001) (*Mean*= -0.08, *alpha* =.897) (Fig.A).

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Figure A
Average     Semantic    Different

Manova, 4 factors within: F(3,5712)= 1810.83   p<.001

The analysis of the Euclidean distances confirms the framework outlined above  (Manova with  6 factors within: F(5,9520)=676.42, p<.001): both 'work' and the dimensions of the *Self*, present and Future, are collocated far from  "Territory" (Fig. B).



Figure B
Euclidean Distance

1-Present *Self*/Futur *Self*
2- Work/Futur *Self*
3-Work/Present *Self*
4-Present *Self*/Territory
5-Work/Territory
6-Futur *Self*/Territory

Manova, 6 factors within: F(5,9520)= 676.42   p<.001

The analysis of opposite pairs, carried out with reference to the point of indifference (*one test*), indicates that the link with the "Territory" is prevalently represented: <u>a)</u>negatively, regarding the aspects referring to the 'functionality of everyday life'; it is  significantly (p<.001, in all cases) denoted  as: "weak", "dependent", "superficial", "fragile", "unstable", "slow", "untidy", "inefficient", "indecisive", "dissatisfied"; <u>b)</u> positively on the  "affective-emotional" level (p≤.004, in all cases): "warm", "important", "active", "agreeable" and "tranquil".

### Area IV- Life planning, interpretation of role and territory

We have explored the relationship between life planning and the interpretation of the role through the analysis of the correlations.

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Personal commitment in the development of one's own territory positively correlates with: *a*)the idea of setting up a business ($r$=.283, p<.001), *b*)the representation they have with their territory ($r$=.225, p<.001) e *c*)the image of the present *Self* ($r$=.109, p<.001). However, there is a negative correlation with the distance between the dimensions of the *Self* and the representation of the "Territory".

The idea of being satisfied with what life offers in the future correlates positively with the image of one's own "Territory" ($r$=.145, p<.001) and, on the other hand, correlates negatively with the representation of "Work" ($r$= -.135, p<.001), and of the future *Self* ($r$= -.170, p<.001) and with the distance between the dimensions of the *Self* and the representation of the "Territory".

The idea of a secure, steady job is positively correlated with the Future *Self* ($r$=.193, p<.001).

DISCUSSION

According to what has come out of this study, the vast majority of our subjects, on both levels of expectations and desires, visualize their future as being far away from their current life context. However, the general picture appears characterized by remarkable ambivalence regarding their working future , both expected and desired: the idea of a steady, secure job prevails though they do not reject the idea of have their own business.

We can see the same ambivalence regarding the possible development of the "Territory"; they do not go beyond pointing out lines of development that are quite obvious, and the idea of personal commitment of a political and social nature is barely considered. However, regarding the aims of this development, most agree on the need for greater personal commitment in work, besides the need for an entrepreneurial class willing to take risks in innovative sectors and further training based on the needs of the territory.

This ambivalence is confirmed also by the analysis of the data obtained with Semantic Differentials, from which a negative view of the 'Territory' emerges; it is seen as 'distant' compared to their personal and working future, but also as a complex bond which tends towards the negative regarding aspects of daily functioning but positive on an affective level.

The analysis of the correlations confirms the existence of varied links between the dimensions of *Self*, assessment of 'Territory' and investment in it.

CONCLUSIONS

The ambivalence that characterizes the complex relationship between the young people of our sample and their life context, their life planning founded on the expectations and desires to fulfill themselves in 'another place' that guarantees security and stability, the scant investment in the development of their own territory and the relationships that can be seen with the dimensions of *Self*, pose challenging questions of particular importance.

Considering the characteristics of the society of change, the need has arisen to run training courses that are different from those that have been traditionally experimented with. In actual fact, this is what has already been explicitly recommended by institutional authorities for some time (both in Italy: Circolare MURST-MPI, 1997; and in the EU., 2001). Training courses should offer everyone the opportunity to develop planning skills and a *Self* that will enable them to interpret their own roles in terms of co-construction of a possible future that, since it is plural, has edges that are getting fuzzier all the time.

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