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EXPERIENCING SOCIAL TRANSITION AT THE WORKPLACE: HARD TO REACH YOUTH AND THEIR SOCIAL CAPITAL

ABSTRACT

The research is interested in exploring how young people are experiencing their transition to work in a society that is reforming its institutions and revisiting its values. It looks into the meanings of social capital for young people performing on a precarious border between personal choices, institutional transformations, economic constrains and broader social expectations. In doing this, the concepts of *social capital*, *destandardisation* and *individualisation* of youth transition are instrumental. The research is based on semi-structured biographical interviews with young people from Romania.

The research suggests that institutional transitions are experienced as disruptive (for young people escaping through the nets of institutional reforms) and stimulating (for those who, even in a disadvantaged position, are having both the enabling circumstances and the individual agency to embrace unconventional opportunities). The paper argues that for the young persons undertaking semi-skilled jobs, age emerges as a fundamental dimension that shapes the power dynamic in the work place. The analysis confirms there are several underestimated benefits of bonding social ties, even if its possibilities for upward social mobility are minor.

However, the paper advises that the tendency to read youth working relations through the lens of affirmative social capital is limiting. In the absence of institutional support that is more likely to generate bridging social capital, young people tend to project such expectations in an authority figure from the workplace. The paper argues that such a process may be simultaneously rewarding and precarious, as it may lead the way for adult misuse of power and influence.

Key words:

| *Youth social transitions* | *work* | *social capital* |
social networks | *biographical perspective* |

1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Transitions to work (and not only to work) tend to escape a centralized control of the state, especially when the state is passing through several reforms itself. Under these circumstances, transitions have become 'wild zones', less predictable and controllable [Kelly, 1999, cf. Walther, 2006]. Given that routes into adulthood are no longer cohesive and predictable,[1] data from a cohort of studies has only a limited explicative value. A complementary strategy is the one of describing transitions in terms of their inner social dynamic.

Although social capital is a concept with an accumulated and debated history, understanding it through young people's perspectives has only recently emerged as a relevant sociological area. However, young people's social networks do have value for young people themselves and capturing these experiences is a legitimate research purpose in itself. Moreover, young people's social networks at the working place are meaningful, as they are able to speak about the values and priorities of a transitional society and about the way in which power and control are handled with reference to a relatively marginal social category.

Social capital is simultaneously an economic, sociological and political concept[2] [Szreter, 1999 cf. Mohan and Mohan, 2002]. As expected, its meanings vary and one needs to be specific about the definition in use. According to Coleman, 'social capital is defined by its function' [Coleman 1988: 98] and is manifested in a variety of entities characterized by an aspect of social structure and the capacity to facilitate people's actions. Coleman considered that social capital was 'an endowment of social structure' [Farr, 2004: 9], and it is not a characteristic of individuals.

Putnam has also described social capital in terms of connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. According to Putnam, social capital is a property of a collectivity [Putnam, 1995].

However, an important part of the literature states that positive outcomes are not always generated through social capital [Coleman, 1988; Edwards and Foley, 1998]. According to Coleman, social capital is a 'morally and ethically neutral resource that facilitates all manner of individual and collective endeavours' [Coleman, 1988]. Edwards and Foley [1998] emphasize that it is Putnam who added value to an otherwise morally neutral concept. A broader

1 Despite a strong scholarship arguing for a recent individualisation of transitions (Kovacheva, 2001; Walther, 2006), there is a strong critique stating that in the Western world, the individualisation of life trajectories never disappeared (Cockburn, 2001). However, for the former communist societies, the professional trajectories were, definitely, a matter of social control.

2 Some of the most relevant representatives are, according to Szreter (1999): J. Coleman (1988) in sociology; Tarrow (1996), Hall (1999) in political sciences; Fine (1999) in developmental studies and Putnam (1993) in political economy.

and more neutral approach is able to acknowledge the 'perverse social capital' [Rubio, 1997, cf. Mohan and Mohan, 2002]. In such a context, one may place the discussion on the strong internal ties that are simultaneously hostile to outsiders [Strathdee, 2001].

The conceptual choice this research is relying on is closer to Coleman's perspective. Its main advantages are the capacity to overcome the economic models by highlighting relational and structural factors such as networks and organizations [Edwards and Foley, 1998]. It also seeks to respond to a need to rehabilitate social capital as a concept that speaks about the networks and relations, separated by any social-psychological added value [Edwards and Foley, 1998].

BRIDGING AND BONDING SOCIAL CAPITAL

Previous research showed that social networks are instrumental in the transition from school to work for those with low formal qualifications [Strathde, 2001]. To a certain extent, working-class youth make the transition by use of the resources available through their social networks [Willis, 1977, Clarke et al., 1976, Doeringer et al., 1991, Lauder, 1992 cf. Strathdee, 2001]. The research on social networks highlights that their impact on labour market integration is not homogenous.

There is now a large body of literature that distinguishes between bridging and bonding social capital [Granovetteer, 1974 cf. Strathdee, 2001]. 'Bonding social capital' is the particularized trust of the in-group. It is based on strong ties among homogenous individuals, but also on the exclusion of outsiders. 'Bridging social capital', on the other hand, is the more generalized trust of the out-group, being based on weaker ties. It can connect the individual with less homogenous groups and, thus, facilitate upward social mobility.

Generally, bridging social capital is considered more likely to generate positive externalities than bonding social capital [Coffé and Geys, 2007]. For vulnerable young people, the possibilities of developing bridging social capital are small. However, bridging and bonding social capital are not 'either/or' categories to which social networks can be neatly assigned – 'but "more-or-less" dimensions along which we can compare different forms of social capital [Putnam 2000: 22]. The comparison between bonding and bridging social capital, especially in the context of employment, tends to marginalize the role played by bonding capital: evidence suggests that most individuals receive support mostly from bonding rather than bridging social ties' [Putnam and Gross, 2002: 11 cf. Coffé and Geys, 2007].

INEQUALITIES AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

Mizen et al. [1999] describe (for the case of Britain) the disadvantaged position given by the decline in the value of social capital as expressed in social networks in the case of disadvantaged youth [Mizen et al., 1999, cf. Strathdee, 2001]. The authors distinguish a polarization between 'work-rich' and 'work-poor families'. These differences are given by the degree to which the social networks can facilitate or be a barrier to employment. This divide becomes particularly detectable when there is an informal recruitment and high turnover of labour[3].

For the former communist countries, where the professional differences between generations are high, one could add what Edwards and Foley [1998: 130] described as 'the social capital of having wide-ranging network connections into a dying industry' is of little value for young people. The link between social capital and economic disparity is a matter of debate. It is uncertain to what extent social capital is able to lead to economic development and if 'social capital is not another way of describing social inequalities' [Mohan and Mohan, 2002: 206].[4]

2. RESEARCH PUZZLE

Social capital is a concept that has generated many contradictions, especially when it comes to its measurement. It is often been described as a characteristic of a society/community and consequently captured in macro-level analyses. However, an over-reliance on survey data overlooks the subjective meanings of social capital [Gray and Kurihara forthcoming, 2008]. This research is aware of the fact that any form of capital is created in different circumstances and may have different meanings for the individuals involved.

Whereas social capital is a property of social relations and not one of the individual [Edwards and Foley, 1998], this research aims to understand social capital through young people's perspectives, with an awareness of the context in which it functions. The workplace has frequently become a lens for describing the dynamic of social capital, in terms of *bonding* or *horizontal* (contacts and trust between co-workers), and *bridging* or *vertical* social capital (relations with persons in position of authority).

3 Mizen (1999 cf. Strathdee, 2001) argues there are some families that can intervene for their children in finding a job. There is an older sibling to ask around, to 'put a good work in' or 'keep an eye' on a vacancy. Otherwise, the absence of an adult or sibling is a barrier to work.

4 The debate takes place in the context of Putnam's circular definition that does not allow separating social capital from material circumstances.

Previous research has looked into the issues of gender and ethnicity at the workplace (in terms of organizational structure, recruitment, promotion, prestige and authority). However, very little of this research is in the areas that explore how age intersects the manifestations of social capital at workplace.

The purpose of the paper is to capture young people's understanding of social capital in their working experiences, with a focus on its social rather than capital side. To what extent are social networks able to compensate for less operational formal structures of labour market integration? In terms of social networks, the research is interested in their perceived value (a qualitative approach), and not in the extent of their use (a quantitative approach, according to Strathdee, 2001).

Besides the acknowledgement of various forms of social capital, there is an increasing agreement that institutions play a growing role in the formation of social capital. Given that in developed countries, young people's lives are also now increasingly institutionalized [Jensen, 2001; Näsman, 1994 cf. Cockburn, 2001], the paper is also interested in how the experience of institutions is reflected in individual biographies of young people from a transitional society.

What are the sources of capital for young people who, in an institutionalized world, appear to have weak institutional affiliations? The above issues are particularly relevant for designing policy recommendations that aim at 'hard to reach youth'.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Overall, this research aims to understand how young people experience the broader phenomena of social transition and what are their responses. The fieldwork was located in Romania, a country where the process of *de-standardization* of youth transitions [Kovacheva, 2001; Walther, 2006] is relatively recent. In terms of labour, this phenomenon involves the disappearance of predictable patterns of emancipation from family and labour integration. The assumption of linear transitions is no longer valid.

According to Kovacheva [2001], transitions to education, the labour market, and family life are now prolonged and insecure, more vulnerable and likely to be affected by social and economic risks, with less institutional support. Under these circumstances, young people need to undertake more individual decisions in order to navigate the labour market. This is the *individualisation* of youth transition, according to Walther [2006].

Given that this research was interested in documenting the types of experiences 'hard to reach' young people have during their social transitions in

Romania, a qualitative design was used for capturing their perspectives in ways that are sociologically relevant and respectful. The main method of data collection was a semi-structured interview with young people experiencing transitions to work[5]. The interview guidelines evolved during the research and were open to incorporating various working experiences: from the social relations at the workplace, to transition into adulthood, to networks, to trust in peers and to institutions.

The research looked to apply several Grounded Theory principles [Strauss and Corbin, 1990; 1998; Hammersley, 1992]. One of them refers to the fact that the unit of analysis is not the individual but the event. The same individual may present more events. Consequently, the research was interested in covering the various dimensions of the events that emerged during the interpretation of data (*process theory*, according to Maxwell, 2005), and not in describing the incidence of described phenomena (*statistical theory*). The sample and the topics covered in interviews evolved during the research itself, depending on the categories that were generated and which needed to be explored further. The collection of data and the interpretation were simultaneous processes.

The research did not aim toward statistical representativeness. It was interested in *theoretical* or *problem* representativeness[6]. Its final outcome was envisioned as *types of experiences* during social transition and young people's responses to them. The research was interested in the experiences of a 'population' that escapes the standardized data collection procedures[7]. By using a qualitative design, this research aimed to minimize the assumption that young people are a homogenous social category.

As the research was explorative, it did not start with a predefined sample but attempted to saturate the themes (categories) generated in the previous interviews. Especially when the purpose of the research was to reach the 'hard to reach', such a design might have risked reproducing the exclusion of groups that were less visible in previous studies. Moreover, for the inclusion of new individuals I did not use a snowball procedure (based on the recommendations of previous interviewees). This might have induced the risk of obtaining

5 Recent literature became aware of the fact that there are multiple transitions that young people experience. Different concepts have been proposed: role transitions (Carugati and Seleri, 1996), school-to-work transition and housing transition (Coleman and Hendry, 1999 cf. Zittoun, 2007; Galland, 1997 cf. Zittoun, 2007), social transitions (professional) and private transitions (sexual and relational) (Durkin, 1995). This research is interested in the transitions to work, but acknowledges that a linear trajectory of school-to-work is not able to capture the complexity of the process young people undertake. It is also to be acknowledged that transition to work is only one of the transformations in young people's lives, whereas transition is not exclusively a youth phenomenon (Zittoun, 2007).

6 This is the approach used by Du-Bois-Reymond, et al., (2001), in line with Grounded Theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

7 E.g. young people who are not in school, who do not have ID, who live independently (and occasionally on streets), who work without a contract, or who are not literate.

relatively similar data, whereas the interest was in capturing a large variety of experiences.

The research included a number of 17 young people: 7 girls and 10 boys between the ages of 14 and 21. Interviews took place in one city and two small towns in Transylvania[8]. Young people were approached through the assistance of two teachers who facilitated the contact with former students who dropped out of school, through the advice of residents from two poor neighbourhoods and from a former volunteer worker at a school for blind and partially sighted children. Five young people were also interviewed two-to-three years ago for a separate research on child labour.

Informed consent was obtained from the young people themselves and, for six of them, from their parents. Young people were informed about the purposes of the research, were told their names would not be used, that they could terminate the interview at any time. Two of them preferred that I take notes and not record the interviews. Interviews lasted between 30 minutes and 2 hours, with the majority lasting approximately 1 hour. As many young people who are making their transition to work are mobile, work unconventional hours and tend to have less free time, I did not succeed in interviewing four of the young people initially approached.

The collection and interpretation of data were simultaneous processes. The interviews were transcribed and introduced in QSR Nvivo7, a software program for qualitative data analysis. First level categories were generated and thereafter determined the need for further collection of data. The software facilitated the writing of Memos and the creation of relations between categories that were generated.

4. ETHICAL DILEMMAS

The research looked to incorporate ethical aspects throughout the entire process: from the selection of the topic (that reflects the experiences of one the most vulnerable social groups in Romania today), to data collection (in ways that value young people's own views as epistemologically relevant) and interpretation (in ways that search to be sensitive to young people's perspectives).

The research process aimed to empower young people who have a marginal position due to a combination of factors including ethnicity, age, gender, poverty and sometimes disability. The main idea underlying the fieldwork is that

8 Due to the close working relations between rural areas and small towns (Ghinararu, 2004), the research included young people who were coming from rural areas to work in the city, as well as young people who moved into urban neighbourhoods from the countryside while maintaining closed relations there.

it is misleading and unfair to understand young people as powerless victims of the situations they are living in. Apart from the structural constraints that shape their lives, one should acknowledge young people's agency and their capacity to make sense of the world they live in and to shape it to a certain extent.

The research acknowledges the influence of structural constraints, but is also aware of various forms of resilience and agency of young people. Privileging one perspective (structure or agency) is limiting. Consequently, the research looked to balance the two perspectives by avoiding either victimizing the youth or else overemphasizing their capacity to modify the world they inhabit.

5. INDIVIDUAL BIOGRAPHIES AT A TIME OF INSTITUTIONAL TRANSITION

The schools young people were attending (or else neglected, missed or never joined), was a crosscutting theme in the interviews. Young people's biographical experiences were often intertwined with the often-convoluted recent history of their schools. As stated in the introduction, transitions to work are not direct and unidirectional processes, but often part of broader personal and institutional transformation. The next section is building on this argument.

In the search for cutting the costs of education, schools are now in a process of reform that may have ambivalent consequences for their students: the small ones are closing down, and children and staff are reallocated to the nearest school. For the rural areas, transportation means are provided. Whereas such a process could offer children better-equipped schools and, especially in rural areas, teachers with higher qualifications, there are, however, several reasons for concern.

The first section will argue that the economically driven process that closes down small schools and reallocates students is actually increasing the drop-out risks of the already vulnerable children. The second part will touch upon the way several institutional transformations influence the lives of the young people from disability schools and former orphanages.

To start with, especially in urban areas, small schools were often the consequence of social isolation. Pupils attending were frequently coming from deprived neighbourhoods that often included a large Roma community. Young people were developing group cohesiveness and the small class size allowed teachers to know them well. Young people were also in a favourable position to negotiate their status and to voice their concerns.

When transferred, the students carry a degree of social stigmatization in the new school that is often unprepared to minimize prejudices. Under these

circumstances, the social dynamic from the previous school is changing. Children report bullying, intergroup violence and experiences of marginalization in the new classroom environments. It also appears that when learning in larger and more competitive classes, transferred pupils do not enjoy the same attention and encouragement from the teacher they have previously experienced.

The institutional transformation is experienced by students as a rupture. The above argument may risk being interpreted as a case against school desegregation, whereas it aims to raise the concern over the potential risks encountered when the educational choices that 'allocate' pupils to one school or another are taking place in a social and organizational context shaped by racism and indifference to the long-term consequences.

Whereas there are pupils who get along and manage to finish the first eight grades and then enter high school, the transition is more intricate for the most vulnerable. Especially when corroborated with reported misbehaviour, their situations pave the way for atypical school trajectories. As the expulsion from school is illegal for those under 16, in practice there are two are the routes for the removal of students: pupils either drop out or else they are transferred to a part time school. Both situations are problematic and open the way for early entry into work.

Whereas in the first case, the school tends to delegate the responsibility for dropout to the child, for the second option there is often a negotiation process together with the family. When the student is three years older than his or her colleagues, the law permits (but not requires) the transfer to part-time schools for 5th–8th graders. Such arrangements function mainly as literacy programs for people whose education remained behind. For them, part-time classes do offer a second chance. However, for those coming directly from a mainstream school, the part-time classes may worsen their already weakened chances.

The educational expectations at the part time school are less stimulating and generate ambivalent feelings: high sense of competency, but also a sense of being different from the former peers. The less extroverted students tend to experience the power dynamic of the new school group as more stressful. What is more, girls are more likely to drop out of school altogether than to attend the part-time (male dominated) classes.

> — Do you have friends [at the part-time school]?
> — Yes…there is one of 20 something years old coming who can barely read. I help him from time to time. There is another one who can barely enter the class. They are good guys…At the beginning they were calling me names, but after a while we became friends.
> — Are there many boys?
> — Only boys. We are seven in the class.
>
> Cristi, 14 years old.

If not yet working, pupils coming from the mainstream school will enter a form of work sooner or later. Particularly vulnerable are those below 16 years who can neither work with a contract nor be in full time school. Despite the contribution of their work to family life, their work is often socially constructed as a hobby [Boyden in Hames and Prout, 2006], as gender socialization and play [Nieuwenhuys, 1996] or as experimenting and apprenticeship. Under the above circumstances, young people are more likely to undertake poorly paid physical work and less likely to articulate their concerns.

The calendar for part-time classes is designed in order to respond to the needs of working persons. Part-time classes bring together young people of different ages, with different life experiences that may facilitate the early entry into informal work, especially when the school calendar leaves a large amount of time unoccupied. Because they accommodate and legitimize child labour, flexible and unconventional schooling programs are controversial [Edmonds, 2007]. In addition, there is a strong criticism that renders them as violations of children's rights to full-time education [MV Foundation].

The only small size schools that are by rule excepted from the reallocation process are the ones that function for children with special needs. Despite the insufficiency of qualified staff and the fragile job stability of personnel, one can speak about a sense of community these schools are creating. The more recent openings for alternative activities are able to encourage participation, even if many children remain left behind.

Dan, 18 years old, blind, is overcoming his disability by attending a debate club and by co-chairing the students' city council. With the support of a schoolteacher that involved him in several European projects, he develops a strong sense of competency that allows him to plan for entering a law faculty and to envision a career in politics.

The labour market, however, does not seem ready to accommodate the needs of young people with visual impairments. There are few protected working opportunities that are able to utilize their competencies. The university education may be an option for those with family support, whereas those coming from socially isolated environments are more likely to experience dependency on social services[9].

One of the most frequently recurring experiences of injustice and exclusion that emerged from the interviews with young people was linked to school evaluation practices. Besides the more acknowledged social differences at school [see Lareau, 2003], young people occasionally referred to alleged situations of corruption. The recourse to personal networks and questionable intrusion into institutional practices appear as a strategy for navigating the

9 Conclusions dropped from discussions with teaching personnel from the High School for Children with Visual Impairments.

school environment for families that are rich in social capital: 'It is by the mercy of God and connections that I've stayed in College' (Ana, 21 years old). These practices generate feelings of frustration and exclusion for the most vulnerable.

For young people that experienced living in orphanages, the transition to an independent life is uniquely convoluted. Whereas the transitional family-type accommodation can include some of those above 18, the temporary night shelters are providing a form of support, even if poor and stigmatizing for many others. However, young people's exploratory attempts for an autonomous life (especially when related to behaviour problems) often seem hindered by troubles in the event that then need to return to the shelter. Those left behind at some point are unable to make up for their losses.

Mirela, 21 years old, previously lived in an orphanage and was returned to the care of her natural mother at the very time she was supposed to enter a housing program. At that time she ceased to be affiliated to any assistance agency. She soon ended up at a night shelter and worked as a street newspaper vendor for four years. A new link with a local NGO was helping her secure food and medical assistance for her cardiac problem. Recently, she entered full-time employment and consequently the charity support terminated.

In these circumstances, other forms of capital than the institutional ones are accessed: with the help of a former employer who provides her with an address, she manages to have a valid ID that allows her to start the process of medical registration. She is starting an independent life together with her boyfriend, living with his family in an overcrowded apartment. Two months after employment, she is preparing to go abroad as an unqualified worker.

As seen above, institutional changes are often experienced as ruptures in the lives of young people. The lives of the institutions are to some extent engrained in the individual biographies. The process of institutional transformation may be linked with Zittoun's concept of transition as a process of reducing uncertainty following a rupture [Zittoun et al., 2003]. Consequently, one may read young people's experiences of institutional transition as disruptive (for those escaping through the nets of school and foster care reforms) and stimulating (for those who, even in a disadvantaged position, were having both the enabling circumstances and the individual agency to embrace unconventional opportunities).

6. YOUNG PEOPLE'S MEANINGS OF SOCIAL CAPITAL AT THE WORKPLACE

For the young persons undertaking semi-skilled jobs, age does emerge as a fundamental dimension that shapes the power dynamic at the work place. Based on the discussions with young people, there appear to be three positions of a young person within a working group: 1) working in relatively age-homogenous teams, but under the control of an adult; 2) working *inside* the adult community, sharing the workload; 3) occupying a singular role, *aside* the adult group, formalized as different from the rest. In the last case, the young person works for the team, but in a distinct position.

The next section will explore the individual meanings of social capital as experienced by young people in the three types of work situations. The paper will look into the way age intersects gender, class and ethnicity in the process of work.

6.1. MEANINGS OF SOCIAL CAPITAL IN HOMOGENOUS WORK GROUPS

Whereas the workplace is more likely to open the individual toward heterogeneous others (bridging social capital), those undertaking semiskilled jobs are more likely to remain clustered in homogenous working groups (bonding social capital). Nevertheless, there is a degree of control exerted from the outside. Where the working group is relatively homogenous, the future work opportunities mediated through it are likewise relatively similar. However, as a large part of the previous research has demonstrated, there are several underestimated benefits of bonding social ties [Putnam and Gross, 2002 cf. Coffé and Geys].

Young women working in a clothing plant, for example, tend to move from one semi-skilled job to another that appears to offer a small increase in salary, or else more flexibility in setting break times or a different weekend schedule. The move is often a shared endeavour.

If not competing[10], the working communities that have a large group of young people are a source of networking and peer support. Such examples are the group of young women working in a small plant or employed as waiters, or else the street vendors who, once having the working sectors negotiated, support each other in handling the unanticipated difficulties (including conflicts with police) and in sharing accommodation. The adolescent street vendors coming from the isolated countryside take care of younger peers. Often, this takes the form of private custody, with younger peers' parents entrusting their children to more experienced young fellows.

10 'Homogenous working groups' are not always supportive. Powerful emotions may generate discord between individuals and groups.

The bonding social capital developed among peers at the workplace is a component frequently overlooked in the studies on youth, when institutional support is often given priority over the in-group care. Moreover, it appears that 'scholars have devoted more attention to the support aspect of social support, than the social aspect' [Reis and Collins, 2000, cf. McGuire, 2007: 126]. The support entails empathy, moral obligations, mutuality and practical actions. This way, young people that work together help each other in coming to terms with breakdowns in relations, financial troubles, housing arrangements and conflicts with employers or police:

> Diana made it with my help…last summer when she was on the streets. I helped restore her favour with this guy, Sandor, my former boss from the newspapers. It is due to me that she got through. There were those rains…I was walking with her, staying with her in the park, I was going to the shelter late in the night. And all this only to make her feel better. She was afraid during the night: 'What if he [an acquaintance who abused her] is coming again?' I told her: If you want, I can speak with Sandor and you'll stay in his place. 'Noo, cause maybe he's going to rape me'. That would do it! I said that I'd wring his neck. But no worries: there was no way Sandor could cause her any harm or anything... He said: if you left her into my care, you should not worry. It's not about the rent, cause I'm paying my share, you are paying and she's paying. Until the guys got unloved…And I was visiting them each day, and cooked a bit cause Diana didn't have any clue. I told her: watch and learn! When you're alone, you make it yourself. All she knew was how to make poached eggs and French fries. A man needs a warm meal. You can't give him French fries every day.
>
> Mirela, 21 years old.

The highly controlled working environment (by video cameras, through a hierarchical job structure and ultimately by the lack of trade unions) does not allow for a potential collective action to emerge. Work in 'homogenous groups' is rather an improper name for what is, in fact, work in groups with a majority of young people, but still under the control of adult authority figures[11].

The presence of an adult co-worker may be experienced as a source of distress (e.g. as a conflict of competencies: experience vs. recent training) or, on the contrary, as cooperation (when the work is not undertaken under pressure and the age difference is not high (e.g. selling in a department store or at a mail delivery office).

When the employer control is a source of distress, various forms of in-group cohesion and mutual trust emerge (e.g. young waiters are buying goods from a supermarket in order to replace a presumptive lack in the stock). Alternatively,

11 For young people, each adult co-worker is a potential source of authority. Intergenerational cooperative relations are rare. When these do happen, they are emphasised as out of the ordinary and unable to challenge the structure. The implicit understanding is that such adult co-workers are atypical and that young people are experiencing a fortunate working situation.

forms of subversive behaviour are generated (from gossip and insubordination, to the appropriation of petty goods to compensate for poor payment).

However, one should not assume that peer networking is always experienced in positive terms. This is one of the limitations of previous studies McGuire [2007] draws attention to. Interviewed youth recalled situations of incrimination among colleagues of the same age, violent disputes in the process of negotiating the working sector, stealing among colleagues, and even recourse to the police as an ultimate instance of authority.

6.2. MEANINGS OF SOCIAL CAPITAL IN HETEROGENEOUS WORKGROUPS

The work in relatively homogenous groups, discussed above, does not exclude the adult forms of control (often subtle). The next section explores the social dynamic as experienced by young people who work in age heterogeneous groups.

6.2.1. Working inside the adult community

The disappearance of large working enterprises during transition corresponded to an escalating number of small working enterprises that occasionally include young people. These teams are far from being unbiased in regard to the allocation of tasks among their members. When young people are working *inside* the adult community itself and share the workload, the relations are often experienced as inequitable. The youngest (and often the newest) member of the team is allocated more or harder tasks, whereas the strategies for avoiding the work are yet to be discovered. The increased visibility of the young person, associated with his or her compliance and capacity for work, make the work experience ambivalent.

On the one hand, working inside the adult community may be experienced as fulfilling, as young people are more likely to develop a sense of maturity, competence and social recognition:

> — What were you thinking about when you were working?
> — It was like I was an adult already. That I had children and I had to look after the family…And I had to make money.
>
> Cristi, 14 years old.

For those with difficult familial relations, who are leaving independent lives that occasionally may entail living on streets, the bonding offered by the working group, is experienced as a familial union:

> My first day at work was really difficult: I didn't speak to anybody and I didn't

> eat anything. I was very ashamed. The employer told me to ask for cigarettes from anybody. Now we all eat together. When I have something I share I share it, and when I don't, others are handing over from their food. We eat together. These days a new boy joined the group. He's like I was at the beginning. There are other young ones complaining about the work: that it's hard, that they are not used to it. They will get used to it!
>
> Traian, 16 years old.

On the other hand, working inside the adult community may be experienced as frustrating, because the young persons tends to receive the tasks avoided by other team members. In construction work, for example, this would involve excessive carrying (e.g. cement, pails of mortar), transportation of dangerous materials (e.g. lime), work at heights and in claustrophobic and dusty environments (e.g. in attics, or during the reconstruction of roofs) or the execution of the unspecialized and repetitive tasks. The work ethic that is part of these working environments is often based on inequitable use of power and abusive authority. Often, working teams are introducing the young person into typically adult behaviours.

> **Sandu:** Well, what sort of people are those that come at work and drink?? Why do they come, after all? Just for me to see them drinking and me working… shouldn't one be upset that they receive the same salary? At least they should work on something…not as much as I'm doing, because, of course, I'm younger and I can do a bit more, but at least something…
> **Me:** How old were they?
> **Sandu:** More than 30 years old…All of them.
>
> Sandu, 21 years.

The ways young persons respond to such a working environment are intricate. When there is a previous link with the working group (e.g. a family member present, relative stability of the team), the young person may tend to conform to the expectations and gradually be recognized as a full group member. Several reasons that keep a young person in an apparently abusive workplace may include the family's need for money, the lack of opportunities, a special relation with the employer[12], or the sense of quilt and obligation to an employer who accepted the working relation at an early age.

The relative isolation of the young person in these working environments makes the resignation a lonely endeavour. Young people tend to dismiss the abusive work relation either when a parent notices the exploitative conditions and then mediates a better option, or when precipitated by an unanticipated event: a work related accident, an imputed damage (e.g. for stolen or damaged goods), or the systematic delay of payment. Alternatively, pull factors given by other sources of bonding social capital may also intervene (e.g. joining a work-

12 See chapter 6.3.1.

place left by an emigrating friend, following another at his or her workplace).

Besides the insidious forms of inequity operating inside the group, one should acknowledge the way a cohesive working team maximizes its gains by excluding a potential newcomer. Such examples are the group of young people selling newspapers who delimitate their areas (including the traffic lines at a crossroad) and the family-based group of forest workers that exclude a young person with weak social ties[13].

One could argue that the initial reluctance in integrating a newcomer into a working community occurs whenever a new member joins a cohesive group: exclusion of outsiders is a characteristic of a group with strong ties among homogenous individuals [Coffé and Geys, 2007]. For young people, however, such a situation is part of a broader, structural power dynamic. To some extent, their position is situated in the continuation of childhood, described by Jenny Kitzinger as 'a state of oppression' [Kitzinger in James and Prout, 2006: 182].

To sum up, even when it appears that young people are functioning inside the adult working communities, their position is shaped in ways that generate inequities. Ultimately, these working situations enable one to recognize the structural power imbedded in young people's social relations, which situates them in a disadvantaged position.

6.2.2. Working aside the adult community

Besides the work in adult dominated groups that integrates (even if inequitably) the young person in the team, there is a secondary work structure that formalizes the differences in the execution of tasks. Here, young people occupy a singular position, which is a role necessary for the well functioning of the group. However, this role has a different nature than the work usually performed (e.g. washing taxis and busses at a garage or transferring the mail and packages from and to the drivers).

For those occupying atypical positions *aside* a more cohesive community (e.g. car washers for a taxi company, or at a hospital garage), the sense of community may be experienced as very strong and positive. Because the position is unconventional, it is socially visible, especially when undertaken by a young person. These jobs offer a potential for peripheral earnings and clientele rela-

13 E.g. a female-headed household, living in an isolated rural area, with relatives in another village. The orphaned young boy takes on the financial responsibilities and needs to migrate to the city to be a seasonal street vendor for 8 years. His prospects of working in the teams already established at home (based on family ties) are very limited. The migration solution and the poor social capital at home reinforce each other in a context where, as described in Kovacheva (2001), the traditional, informal sources of support to navigate the labour market are replacing the formal job search.

tions[14]. The short time spent with clients and colleagues leaves enough room for socializing and little room for conflict generation:

> **Me:** What friends do you have at the car service?
> **Sandu:** The taxi drivers! All of them! When they see me they already… [note: exultant]. Of course, I make something for them…[note: wash their personal car, besides the cab]. But I don't ask them for anything, they are my colleagues, you know. Well, they insist, but I've told to the manager once: 'Boss, tell them all not to give me money anymore. Because it's *our* business and of course I'm doing this for them: their car, not the one in service'. But if they insist, I can't go against them. If they put money in my pocket, it's their problem.
> **Me:** Of course, but, you know, you are doing them a favour. You don't have any obligations to wash their own car.
> **Sandu**: I see, but we are colleagues. We help each other.
>
> Sandu, 21 years.

When the main working group is temporary and unstable, young people experience work more as a lonely occupation, with hassled social contacts and a strong sense of isolation. Young people lack the time for building trustful relations. This appears to be the situation of the community of track drivers for whom a young person works as a local mail receptionist:

> Do you feel being part of a team?
> The drivers are being redistributed to a different route each two months. One comes, another leaves… I stay at the mail delivery. And I have the other colleague around. But it's really boring… Around Christmas or Easter, you have work to do, otherwise, one-to-two packages a day...
>
> Paul, 19 years.

6.3. Social relations with employers and other authority figures at the workplace

For young people, each adult co-worker is a potential source of authority. Young people recalling considerate and supportive adult colleagues do not contradict the above statement. The implicit understanding that emerged from young people's accounts is that their adult co-workers are atypical and that young people are experiencing a fortunate working situation. The next section will try to capture young people's perspectives on the social relations with their employers[15], on a scale that ranges from warm and friendly to impersonal and conflictual.

14 Bus drivers at a local garage are required to clean the bus regularly. The presence of a young person ready to undertake this job is reported as being mutually gainful.
15 In this context, 'employer' denotes the person who has a working contract or agreement (formal or informal) with a young person (or with a family member on his or her behalf).

6.3.1. The employer as a significant other

Young boys tend to see their relation with the employer as highly beneficial when the employer appears to fulfil a social role the young person did not experience in other social encounters. From boys' accounts, there are particular bonds that make the relation with the employer reciprocally valuable. These bonds transcend an ordinary working relation, into an area of shared emotional investment. The employer is presented as a father figure, a good friend or a helper.

Several forms of trust from the employer's side appear to make the working relation a personal one: the young person may be allowed to drive the employer's personal car or to have easy access to valuable personal belongings (money, keys, jewellery); another is describing himself as a familiar presence in employers' house.

The employer is often portrayed as a benefactor: he keeps one young person's earnings in a special box, or lends cash whenever necessary; he believes in young person's potential and entrusts him with specialized tasks from the early stages, or hires him instantly. Boys also recall moments when an apparent sense of empathy and bonding is built: the employer appears to share his plans and concerns about business matters (costs of equipment, recent investments, risks) or about casual troubles with other employers.

Based on this common understanding of the business process, an occasional delay in payment may be accepted by the youth employed. Likewise, the youth may hesitate to speak about the legality of his employment status in the first interviews or may take employer's side when a labour inspection comes about.

In the above circumstances, young people may easily envision the potentiality for solving other pressing personal problems, whereas employers are apparently playing an active role in maintaining these expectations. For example, one of the recurrent accounts in the interviews with these young people referred to employers' promise of helping them secure a house. Especially in cities, where there is a housing crisis, accommodation is a pressing problem for many young people.

> And he promised my colleague and me that not this year, but the next year, it's 100% sure that he settles us. They are going to move away, 'cause he wants to have a space three times larger than this one. Well, from the space left, he is going to make a small house for my colleague and me. But that one is going to be ours! And for themselves, they are going to make a bigger house […] And he said: Sandu, would you like a house with one room only and a toilet? I said: of course! Even a single room and would be enough. I would repair it a bit […] And he said that each of us will have our own contract, in our names, to stay there with our families… And I like him because he's an extraordinary boss. I've never met a boss like this! The world is full of stupid bosses who don't pay

> their employees because they don't have money. Why do they bring the people to work for them??
>
> Sandu, 21 years old.

For others, the work for the employer is perceived as being able to increase the possibilities of legal emigration, of obtaining a professional certificate (based on a supposed recognition of the skills) and, especially in a rural community, even inheritance. Where it appears that the young person has a strong bond with the employer, several influential achievements seem to follow: e.g. a young person recalls how he learned to read from his employer, another how he gained a different approach toward issues like friendship, networking, honesty, social mobility, profit making and even leisure:

> Do you recall a situation when you needed to take an important decision and there was somebody who…
> **Sandu:** my boss! All I have, I have from him! From him I've learned to be honest, from him to help others, from him I've learned…how to put it: to show compassion to people. Form him I've learned to have real fun and to talk to all people around me, and not to say: 'You should leave, 'cause I don't have time for you!' This is the way we are now there: it's not that you are staying there and watching us talking. No! Come here and let's talk! And we'll make more and more friends! And once you have friends, you see: wow! How many friends I have! It's normal that others are going to come even more! […] I want everybody to grow, not just one. This is how my boss has done; he started with us from scratch: we were all out of the frame. And look at us now: we are all 'on the dot', as he says.
>
> Sandu, 21 years old, works as a car washer at a taxi garage.

The presentation of the relation with the employer in affirmative terms may respond to the individual need for social recognition. Such working experiences (and not only) deserve a longitudinal research, able to capture the dynamic that intervenes in time in terms of relationship development, the bonding/bridging dynamic and personal priorities.

The above observations were generated in the interviews with boys. There were, also, several instances when girls experienced their relation with the employer as positive, but, apparently, less intensely. Boys' perspectives on their relation with he employer appeared to be directed by their search for a relevant authority figure, which might not have been the case for the few girls interviewed.

Girls appear to see the relation with the employer in more practical terms, for example by recalling the experience of asking employer's agreement for attending school exams[16]. In one situation, having as boss a woman with a close age appeared to be a source of comfort (in the case of a small department store, run by the boss herself and one girl employed).

16 In the interviews, this appeared as both a source of support and conflict.

Occasionally, a person for whom a boy or a young girl is doing occasional household work is described as a friend. This approach removes a part from the stigma attached to a young person doing daily labour: the 'friend' or 'neighbour' is 'asking for help', or the young person 'is helping out others for money'.

6.3.2. Impersonal relations with the employer

For young people employed in relatively large working settings, other persons in position of authority mediate their relation with the employer:

> I know my employer from a Google search. I also met somebody important at the interview, but I don't remember whom…
>
> Paul, 19 years old

When working in rather invisible communities, young people experience pervasive forms of control that go beyond the competencies of the closer supervisor. These forms of control may entail video camera supervision or distance monitoring of any Internet access (which it is not allowed). In contexts where employees have experienced closer contact with the employer, they may express an inclination for a more personal understanding of the relation with the employer:

> Previously, the employer was greeting us, shaking our hands in the morning, asking how are we were doing and stuff like that. Now, he doesn't seem to know anybody any more. He's well heeled.
>
> Andrei, truck driver, 22 years old.

6.3.3. Conflictual relations with the employer/ supervisor

One of the recurrent themes in the interviews was a conflictual relation with a former or current employer. The conflict may be experienced as individual: due to the discriminatory allocation of tasks, a group 'conspiracy' against the new comer, the refusal of the employer to respond to a personal request (e.g. to allow one day off for the purpose of applying to university). Young people, also, recall shared experiences of prejudice: burnout due to the insufficient number of staff and unrealistic demands, work under emotional pressure.

When the conflict is individual, the economic and emotional costs of finding a solution are higher: it takes more time to discern the working situation and the unbalanced position of young person. The strategies used for problem solving often aggravate the conflict. For Mirela, a girl who was a newspaper street-vendor for four years, the restricted working environment inside a plant

and the work in a collective that is no less resistant, is a big challenge, both physically and socially:

> The supervisor of the unit is shouting if you're staying a bit. I am more impulsive than I should be and I got in a bit of trouble with my colleague near by. But the supervisor held me responsible. I told her not to argue with me 'cause I'm making a complaint against her and she'll get a deduction from the salary: 'You're hired here and you're not allowed to speak like this! Maybe I put the age difference apart and I'll beat you up first!' […] When I was selling newspapers, I could move…Now it's not a problem, there are rules. But they are far beyond the limits: you're not allowed with bracelets, with rings, necklaces or sandals. Not allowed to speak on the telephone, you have to ask to go to the bathroom… After the 15 minute break, you should hurry back. I think the break is not even 15 minutes, as they say. The other day I've heard they are going to put video cameras in the bathrooms, as some are some going there for a cigarette.
>
> Mirela, 21 years old.

When it appears that other young co-workers share the tension, the opinions are checked and strategies for conflict management (including dismissal) are a common endeavour. However, when the conflict is shared tacitly in a heterogeneous group, young people are less likely to articulate their concerns. Under these circumstances, young people become aware of the various power relations that exist inside the group (given by age, working experience, economic constraints and presence of working alternatives). They start developing their personal understanding of issues of power and voice.

6.4. Volunteer work

Volunteering is one of the activities that is considered to be simultaneously generated by social capital and a means of fostering it [Putnam, 1995]. On the one hand, volunteering exposes young people to different others and increases the potential of networking and further support. On the other hand, young people who are volunteering tend to posses the social capital that promotes their endeavours. Such a circular relation renders an ambivalent relationship between volunteering and young vulnerable people.

Young people who are doing volunteer activities are exposed to more heterogeneous groups than those who are working. Volunteers develop a sense of belonging to a professional community, a feeling of self-worth and refine their understanding of their own competencies and social value. This may compensate for initial social limitations given by ethnicity and disability.

Peter, a 20-year-old Roma living in an extremely poor urban neighbourhood, attends a high school and has a four years volunteering experience at the emergency service of the town, at a religious organization and during elections for a political party. These experiences broadened his social network

that now includes doctoral students, medical personnel and former patients.

These positive social interactions with dissimilar others increase the level of generalized trust [Marshall and Stole, 2004, cf. Coffé and Geys, 2007]. Additionally, it appears that for the few interviewed young people, the experience of volunteering[17] widens the social distance from the social network of origin, a finding that requires further research. Due to his various commitments, Peter's social encounters with his neighbours (a large proportion of whom dropped out school and are undertaking occasional semiskilled jobs) are extremely rare. He plans experimenting with an independent life by moving out with a few other volunteers:

> This month, for instance, as the electoral campaigns started, I used to come home around 1 am. In the mornings, at 6.30–7, I woke up and left again. I saw my family when they were sleeping and they saw me when I was sleeping. […] My brother is a bit different. He works and has his life alone. He's another kind of person…I cannot go besides a person in a bus without saying something, making acquaintances. If I'm travelling 5 meters, then 5 meters! He's not like that. And I can see so many other young people living in their small little world! […] Other young people are afraid of people. This is the main problem in [the neighbourhood]: they wait to be helped but are not searching for work themselves, and are afraid to go and meet others. I was myself this way.
>
> Peter, 20 years old.

For Ana, a 21-year-old girl who was living in the care of her grandparents, participation for four years in a residential religious voluntary mission was experienced as a source of learning and moral development, but also as anxiety once dropping out of medical school.

> I've changed so much! I've lost there [at the college] on the one hand, but I gained so much personally! […] God is everywhere: it's only people who have put limits such as religions […] During the first religious camp, God changed my life so much that I couldn't be otherwise than transformed! God touched me.
>
> Ana, 21 years old.

For the volunteer work, the in-group dynamic of control is more refined: the young volunteer needs to prove his or her commitment and to overcome in time various suspicions, such as those related to age and body size for the physical work or else those partially generated by previous casual volunteers. A particular window of opportunity (e.g. emergencies on Christmas nights when many staff members are on holiday) may render the volunteer work indispensable. This fills the gap between the team members and overcomes existing barriers. These are all 'old' inequalities [Furlong and Cartmel, 1997, cf. Walther, 2006] coming from social class, ethnicity, gender, and culture,

17 If undertaken in other settings than the community of origin.

which are then incorporated in the new non-standardised transitions (such as volunteering).

> At [the emergency service] we are like a family: you call the doctor by his or her short name […] This weekend, for instance, I've been to a concert with other volunteers, then, around 2 a.m., we said: 'Let's go to [the emergency service] for a coffee'. We walked across half the city during the night, only to have a coffee together with the colleagues from the night shift.
>
> Peter, 21 years old.

Conversely, the presence of a volunteer may be experienced as an intrusion in an organization that prioritizes its inner cohesion. Ana, a young girl, recalls her subjective experience of exclusion (an inherent characteristic of the social networks, according to Mohan and Mohan, 2002) in a religious organization. The ideological tools promoted there help her elucidate the ambivalence. The religious experience shaped her entire perspective on life and offered explanations for solving moral and practical dilemmas over which she had no control:

> More recently, my life was affected by leaders [note: the religious coordinators of the centre she is living in]. They took decisions differently than they should have [note: apparently she was abusively replaced with a colleague and it was suggested she leave the centre]. But if I'm revolting, I'm not legal in front of God. I have to obey and wait for God to bring justice. It takes as much as it takes. God is bringing order when he deems appropriate and he raises you at the right time.
>
> Ana, 21 years old.

The experience of volunteering is framed as a resource for future career and personal development. The less conventional routes (e.g. dropping out of college to join a religious mission in a convoluted search for the sense of duty; neglecting high school due to an intensive volunteer involvement; gap years) speak to a broader transition processes. These were described as '*prolongation of youth*' [Cavalli and Galland, 1993 cf. Merino and Garcia, 2006; Kovacheva, 2001], '*de-standardization* and *deregulation* of youth transitions' [Kovacheva, 2001; Walther, 2006], and '*individualization* and *fragmentation* of transition' [Walther, 2006].

6.5. Work during training

The formal training is a common practice in vocational schools. In Romania, these are, for the moment, the schools that have the highest dropout rate, with relatively lower academic standards. In a country with a low demand for industrial occupations but with an increased need for qualified workers, these vocational schools are a continuous terrain for reform.

However, there appears to be little research exploring how young people themselves experience the formal training and the personal and professional benefits they extract from it. Internationally, moreover, the sociological research of professional training is now beginning to open up as a stimulating field of inquiry. The next section will give a brief overview on young people's experiences of formal professional training, with the remark that the topic is unquestionably rich and deserves a study in its own right.

The training in artificial working settings (e.g. school workshops) is often a rewarding experience (especially for the work that requires specialized tools). These are also more protected and familiar environments. The training in real work settings comes later and this is where the less-anticipated challenges come into place. Ultimately, one may discern two levels of interpretation: one that corresponds to an old pattern of labour integration, another to the more individualized transition strategies.

Besides being a matter of institutional management, the training appears also as an issue of individual agency: to what extent the young person is able or willing to maximize the gains of the training experience and likely to overcome institutional barriers. There appear to be three main strategies young people develop: 1) to undertake only the minimum requirements, especially when the training is perceived as less valuable[18]; 2) to undertake the required training at any rate, because it responds to the individual needs for qualification, for marks or simply as a matter of compliance; 3) to use individualized strategies. These may refer to negotiating training at a different organization, or else employment at the place of training.

> — At the Royal Hunter [restaurant], for instance, there was only heavy wood furniture. Take hold! We received one Pronto spray and got started polishing the wood! This was supposed to be training! At the restaurant! Like a cleaning lady. This is the job of a cleaning person.
> — Why would you think they put you to work this way?
> — Because the waiters think they are working with money. There are clients with money coming there. And they are going to lose them otherwise. Not anybody is dining there. Those clients have money; they leave tips. How would it be to leave us making tips??
> — What about your colleagues?
> — The same as me. They left home when they saw this…There were some girls who were caring about their grades and…they were cleaning… the rooms, also. I was staying home. I've been to other activities and I've got a 10.
>
> Paul, 19 years old.

18 The training may be perceived as less valuable when the young person considers he or she is not going to practice the profession (attending a vocational high school may be considered accidental, as the young person may intend to secure a working place in a different field or to emigrate). Ultimately, the training itself may involve work that is (or is perceived to be) less stimulating, poorly qualified and marginal.

The teachers responsible for organizing the training are often mediating other occasional forms of employment[19]. The practice appears, however, as ambivalent. On the one hand, it helps young people gain first-hand experience in a genuine work environment in exchange for payment. Teachers are, informally, fulfilling a mediation role for a group of young people who are just beginning to become of interest to formal recruitment agencies[20].

There are, however, several other shortcomings: the workplaces secured informally through teaching personnel are often situated at the borders of employment, with long and tiring working hours (uncovered in the contract) and poor pay: 'The deal is to stay until the last client leaves, not as they put it in the papers. But we have some days off and this is fine with me' (Ramona, 16 years old).

The main reasons young people do stay in an (apparently) inequitable job are linked with the possibilities to develop the skills they need for future employment (including job placement abroad), the need for money, and the small number of alternatives for spending a three-month holiday[21] in small towns and in the countryside. Their experiences can be read through the ambivalent lenses of individualisation of transition, but also of the structural circumstances that encourage or inhibit individual choices [Zittoun, 2007].

6.6. Performing on the border of legality

One should not underestimate, still, young people's awareness of the relative protection given by a contract (be it for a potential maternity leave, medical insurance, a bank loan, or as security against potential abuses of power). If given the chance to opt for a better paying job without a contract instead of a poorly paid one with a contract, personal rationalities are in place. For the majority of interviewed boys, the option not to comply with the law is considered a temporary solution, until the financial security will allow 'the comfort' of entering legality. The option of complying with the law appeared more clearly in the girls' accounts. It appeared to be sustained by the concern for an eventual release and poor medical conditions.

However, despite the fact that the law enables young people to work with a

19 E.g. summer jobs, especially for young people preparing to work in the service sector.

20 According to the Law 72/2007, the employers who hire pupils or students during holiday can benefit from monthly amounts equal to the half of the minimum salary. In 2007, due to the difficult application process, very few employers applied to receive the benefit. In 2008, summer jobs for pupils and students began to be more formalised (e.g. job fairs). However, illegal employment of young people also appeared to increase.

21 Several young people migrate to the seaside where they undertake various summer jobs in the service sector. What initially appears as an efficient strategy of combining work with holiday is experienced as unrewarding and exhausting work: the timetable is fragmented (between preparing and serving the three meals) and often leaves around 5 hours of sleep during the night. The living conditions are often improper.

contract from the age of 16[22], the majority of the interviewed young people do claim that the age of 18 is actually legitimizing this capacity. Each interviewed person had a current or previous experience of working at the border of legality: either with a contract that was disrespected or else without one altogether[23]. Moreover, it appeared that even when working with a contract there were significant differences between the written stipulations and the actual practice (in terms of working hours and even payment[24]).

7. CONCLUSIONS

This research was interested in exploring how young people are experiencing their transition to work in a society that is reforming its institutions and revisiting its values. It explored the process through which young people from Romania are negotiating their labour integration. In doing this, the concept of *social capital*, destandardisation and individualisation of youth transition (theorized by Kovacheva, 2001; Walther, 2006; Zittoun, 2007) were instrumental. The central concept was the *experience of social transition*, and not *the youth* (which would imply the designation of certain age limits). The research looked into the meanings of social capital for those performing on a precarious border between personal choices, economic constraints and broader social expectations.

One needs to acknowledge that besides the transition to work there are many areas young people experience transition, and it is hard (if not impossible) to separate one from another. This research recognized its limitations in capturing the complexity of transitions. It chose to examine transition to work as a place where other transitions (emancipation from family, family formation, political and civic participation) intersect one another.

Analysis of the interviews suggests that age is a critical dimension that organizes the patterns of social capital at the workplace. Further research needs to incorporate age, along gender and ethnicity, as main constituents of the social dynamic within the work process.

However, the dynamic is not straightforward. Based on the interviews, three patterns were outlined, namely: 1) the positioning of a young person in a relatively homogenous workgroup, but under the control or leadership of an

22 Even 15 years old, with parental written consent.

23 Young people reported the delay of contract making: the employer postponed for various reasons the procedure or else invoked lengthy bureaucratic procedures. Occasionally, other means were used in order to create the appearance of legality, such as special tags used for legitimising work status.

24 The contract may refer to a smaller salary than the one practiced. This allows the employer to avoid higher taxes.

adult; 2) the positioning of a young person *inside* an adult dominated working group; 3) the positioning of a young person *besides* an adult dominated group. At the horizontal level, the relations with peers ranged from highly supportive (inside and outside the work setting) to conflictual and untrustworthy.

This research embraces McGuire's suggestion that the tendency to read working relations through the lens of affirmative support is limiting [McGuire, 2007]. The perspective corresponds to a more inclusive view on social capital, able to include its non-beneficial effects [Coleman, 1988; Edwards and Foley, 1998].

The analysis builds upon the argument developed by Putnam and Gross [2002] that there are several underestimated benefits of bonding social ties, even if the possibilities for upward social mobility are minor. It brings in the example of young people who experienced weak familial relations and who are more likely to take advantage of the bonding social capital developed at the work place.

In the absence of institutional support that is more likely to generate bridging social capital, young people tend to project such expectations onto an authority figure from the workplace. Such a presence is understood in a way that is able to meet simultaneously the drive for bridging and the need for bonding social capital.

Under these circumstances, the position of a young person is ambivalent: both secure and precarious. Secure, as he or she is experiencing a sense of social recognition, bonding and has several practical needs covered; precarious, as he or she is vulnerable to adult misuse of power and influence. Such working situations (often at the border of legality) are particularly intricate. Further interventions aimed at young people need a deep understanding of the social dynamic in which a working relation is incorporated, in order not to do more harm than good.

This paper argues that the individual experiences of transition are often intertwined with larger institutional transitions. Young people do search for solutions for navigating their transition to work in often-hostile institutional environments (e.g. the closure of small schools or the termination of social assistance at the age of 18 for those in foster care).

The process of young people building their life trajectories can be understood differently, depending on the way external constraints and individual agency are balanced. The research focused on the way vulnerable youth experience the relations with the social groups and institutions during their transition to work, and moreover took an interest in the subjective, 'lived experience' of transition. However, such an approach explores, undoubtedly, one side of the story, which, by far, has inherent limitations.

First, it may convey the assumption that ascribes to young people the capacity to control their own itineraries. Several authors warn against this approach: they argue there are structural circumstances that encourage young people's choices, and other circumstances that inhibit and constrain these choices [Zittoun, 2007]. According to Bangerter et al., 'youth transitions remain bounded by social, economical and historical landscapes' [Bangerter et. al., 2001 cf. Zittoun, 2007: 195].

The research confirms that young people live in circumstances that may severely limit their 'choices' [Du Bois-Reymond, 1995 cf. Merino and Garcia, 2006]. Moreover, individual itineraries are not independent of class, gender, and ethnicity, which are all able to generate social constraints [Merino and Garcia, 2006].

This research was interested in exploring the ways vulnerable young people are experiencing the transition to work, the sources that inform their choices and the place of formal institutions in this process. The interest in this is legitimate and relevant for informing future policies addressing youth in vulnerable situations.

Second, this research focused on young people's transition to labour. However, labour market integration is not the only way young people can gain social integration [Levitas, 1996 cf. Cockburn, 2001]. The choice of privileging the experience of work over other transitions (e.g. family formation, political behaviour) brings another set of limitations.

Third, the current debate on social capital is not politically neutral. Farr [2004] identifies two major tendencies in social sciences, having the concept of social capital at their core. On the one hand, there is the initial economic model that looked at the social side of capital (e.g. Marx, cf. Farr, 2004). This is described as the 'non-capitalist perspective of society' [Farr, 2004]. On the other hand, there is the current tendency to look at the capital side of the social (e.g. Bellamy, cf. Farr, 2004). According to the same author, this is reflected as an 'unsocial perspective upon capital' [Farr, 2004].

More critically, Fine [1999] considers the privileged position of social capital in the social sciences as a 'colonization of social sciences by neoclassical economics' [Fine, 1999 cf. Mohan and Mohan, 2002] that tends to give economic rationales to 'non-economic' behaviour [Mohan and Mohan, 2002]. The persistence on social capital in devising policy recommendations is not politically neutral. According to Fine's critique [1999, cf. Mohan and Mohan], a focus on social capital loses sight of the macro-relations of power and perpetuates a discourse that 'blames the victims' of poverty for not developing forms of social cohesion that would enable economic development [Mohan and Mohan, 2002].

My position in such a debate is to inform the research by raising awareness of the process of transition as experienced by youth in vulnerable situations, and not only of the outcomes. The research was informed by a literature that acknowledges the inequality of various forms of capital. It was interested in social capital as a dynamic and personal experience, not in the statistical indicators able to measure it (e.g. membership to voluntary organizations). Nevertheless, the research acknowledges the influence of broader economic and social constraints that shape the experiences of young people.

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