

The Transition to Adulthood in Europe: A Comparison of Different Models

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Abstract

In a few decades, transition to adulthood has undergone significant changes in the manner and timing of attaining adulthood. The objective of the paper is to focus on the most significant transformations: the transition to adulthood process has undergone in different European contexts, through the use of the findings of research performed in 2004 in Denmark, Germany and Italy. For the purpose of the comparison, in-depth analysis was performed of the interviews conducted on young people aged between 19 and 35, who had completed their education and were preparing to enter into the workplace. By means of the analysis of the interviews, the paper evaluates how youths perceive the passage from education to the workplace, taking into consideration the opportunities and resources provided by individual national contexts (social benefits, training and work opportunities) to facilitate the process of attainment of adult roles. The role played by family support to achieve transition is also analyzed. In particular, the type of support (financial, emotional and affective) provided by parents to their offspring during the various transition phases, with the aim of highlighting the existence of different parent-child relationships in the three countries examined.

Keywords

Transition to adulthood, parents and children relations, parental help, youth autonomy

For many years the transformations in the transition to adulthood patterns have been the subject of research and debate in sociology. At the beginning of 1980s, Cavalli (1980) shed light on how the youth phase had been transformed from the preparation to take on adult roles, to a condition of "awaiting an unpredictable outcome". The uncertainty permeating this life cycle is underscored by widespread non-linear transition patterns, characterized by the prolongation over time of several phases (extended education, late access to the labour market) and by the postponement of the steps which traditionally completed the process (for example, deferral of the creation of the first stable union and of parenthood). The transition model prevailing in the years following the Second World War, which was cadenced by socially predictable

milestones (completion of full-time education, entering into the labour market, leaving the parental home, and becoming a parent) (Elder 1985; Modell et al. 1976) had been flanked by more complex and individualized paths. As opposed to previous generations, occupational stability and the attainment of independence from the family of origin have modes and timing which are almost impossible to schedule: for a longer period compared to the past, young people are forced to live in a kind of limbo, experiencing

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incomplete transition steps, which are not necessarily brought to completion by leaving home or having a stable occupation.

Contributing factors to these changes are different structural factors. In particular, since the end of the 1970s, the prolongation of educational cycles, the labour market crisis, the restructuring of several production sectors (for instance, the recession in the manufacturing industry), and the decline of traditional family models, have provoked the disruption of the temporal sequence of the steps, in the meantime generating the proliferation of situations which may be defined as semi-independency. To clarify, young people may have set up independent homes but still be financially dependent on their family of origin, a widespread situation in countries where living away from home to attend university is incentivized (for example, in Great Britain). Just as there is the opposite situation (having achieved financial independency, though not having abandoned the parental roof), which is particularly characteristic of the young resident in Southern Europe, where marriage usually marks the departure from the parental home (Cavalli and Galland 1996; Cherlin et al. 1997; Holdsworth 2000; Jones 1995; Santoro 2002, 2006).

Notwithstanding, therefore the standpoints which consider achievement of financial independency as the essential provision to overcome the other phases, the different housing, occupation and family strategies, adopted by young Europeans, seem to depend on the complexity of the opportunities, constraints and challenges posed by the social and relational context to which they belong. More specifically, the analysis of the transition to adulthood patterns needs to be performed according to a multidimensional perspective which, together with the social policies, the educational and employment schemes, also takes into consideration the role performed by the family. Financial, practical and emotional support from the family of origin represent an essential component to facilitate accomplishment of transition to adulthood.

In many Western countries, for example, setting up an independent home has become problematic following the rocketing costs of houses and rent. In these cases, financial support from the family of origin is clearly crucial in order to achieve living independence. Compared to the past, young people have a greater need of emotional support from their close significant others because they are more vulnerable to the risks of unemployment, job insecurity and being forced to remain in training for longer periods.

The purpose of this paper is to set forth the results of a qualitative survey conducted in 2003-2004 regarding the transition paths of young Danes, Germans and Italians who are closer to complete (or had recently completed) their education (or degree) and training and are on the verge of entering into the labour market. More precisely, in each country, approximately forty young people were subjected to in-depth interviews, with the objective of examining the processes through which young people succeeded in elaborating the most important biographic decisions, in the lead up to taking on adult roles, more specifically, during the phase comprised between leaving school and entry into the labour market (Leccardi et al. 2004; Stauber et al. 2004; Stølan and Mørch 2004).

The different manner in which transition to adulthood is elaborated in the three contexts posed a problem for the purposes of the comparative analysis. Notwithstanding the fact that all respondents were transitioning into the labour market, some of them, irrespective of their age, were at different stages in the path to adulthood in comparison to the completion of other phases. In fact, some had already set up independent homes, were living as a couple and/or had become parents.

As in all qualitative surveys, the analysis of the interviews examines a limited reality and is therefore not significantly representative of the youth status in the three countries. The objective of the analysis is not to achieve generalization of the transition patterns but

rather, to outline the experiences of the young respondents, to then be able to examine the role played by the various types of resources (for example, the financial and cultural level of the family of origin, potential entitlement to social benefits, the educational qualification attained, etc.) which facilitate attainment of adulthood.

DIFFERENT EUROPEAN TRANSITION MODELS

The decision to analyze three countries such as Denmark, Germany and Italy has its roots in two forethoughts. Above all, according to comparative studies on longitudinal data, Denmark and Italy represented the opposite ends of the scale regarding transition to adulthood models (Iacovou and Berthoud 2001). The former is characterized by the rapid transition through the phases, whilst the latter by a markedly prolonged transition. Due to their opposite and extreme characteristics they are considered to best represent the two European transition models: Mediterranean and Northern. The former is widespread in the Southern European countries (Italy, Greece, Spain and Portugal); the latter in the Central and Northern European countries (France, Germany, Great Britain, Holland, Belgium and Nordic countries). The young resident in the latter group of countries follow more complex transitions, characterized by the experimentation of different living arrangements. The education, employment and family phases may overlap and not follow the traditional temporal sequence. In the first group of countries, the transition is generally more linear, living with peers is not widespread and leaving home usually coincides with marriage, after having achieved financial stability. For this reason, many young people tend to defer leaving home until well above the thirties threshold.

Among the young Europeans, the Italians have longer educational cycles however without obtaining higher qualifications (the percentage of graduates in

the range of 25-34 age is among the lowest in Europe and the percentage of those with secondary school qualifications ranks near the bottom), and are unemployed for longer periods before entering into the labour market (OECD 2010). In Italy, youth unemployment has reached a high percentage, especially in Southern Italy. In addition, the young Italians are more reluctant to experiment the various living and family arrangements which differ from living with their parents or marriage. According to 2010 estimates issued by Istat (the Italian Central Institute of Statistics), more than 31% of young people aged between 30 and 34 still lived with the family of origin and this percentage was close to 60% in the group of 25-29 age. According to European data, young people aged 18-34 who lived in couple (married or cohabitant) in Europe were respectively 47.6% of women and 35.8% of men while this percentage was by far lower in Italy (39.8% of women and 24.7% of men) (Eurostat 2010).

This is undoubtedly unlike the situation of the young Danes, for whom unemployment does not pose a problem, due to the massive youth employment schemes. Among the young Europeans, they are the most inclined to experiment multiple living arrangements and family situations, at a relatively young age.

The decision to analyze the transition models of these three countries also stems from the different welfare measures benefitting families with children and youth occupation.

Considering the Esping-Andersen's (1990) categories of welfare regimes and the social democratic regime, typical of Scandinavian countries adopts an individualistic approach aimed at granting individual rights by taking universalistic measures. The conservative regime, typical of countries like Germany and Italy, assigns the nuclear family the duty to support its dependent members, economic and fiscal measures are devoted to the family-households and guaranteed services are considered as integration

to family care. Ferrera (1996) included Italy, with Spain, Greece and Portugal, in a fourth category of welfare, characterized by a strong familism and little interventions to support the family.

In Italy, the policies on behalf of infancy and youth are almost totally lacking. Services for infancy are inadequate and young people are considered to be dependent on the family even over the legal age. The investment which Italy allocates to family and infancy policies is one of the lowest in Europe: In 2005 it was equal to 1.1% of the GDP, compared to Denmark and Germany which respectively allocated 3.8% and 3.2% of their GDP (Eurostat 2008).

Transition to adulthood is a particularly difficult process in those countries in which the public initiatives for the younger generations are limited, whilst, on the other hand, crossing some transition thresholds is smoother in those countries where young people can rely upon state benefits. In particular, it appears that moving away from home is less problematic for young people who can rely on abundant social policies (Aassve et al. 2001; Fussel and Gauthier 2005).

Prior to setting forth the results of the analysis, this study will outline the most significant social policies adopted by Denmark and Germany benefitting families with children and also youth employment, and measures which are absent in Italy. Contrary to Italy¹, both these countries have family allowance schemes of a universal nature, among the most extensive in the European context (Saraceno 2009).

STATE SUPPORT FOR YOUNG PEOPLE IN DENMARK

Vocational Training and Youth Unemployment Schemes

Since 1997 the Danish government has launched a series of programmes with the specific aim of

improving the conditions of the young generations. The main objectives were to improve the educational level and to obtain full youth employment.

According to official figures, in 2005 almost 80% of young Danes obtained a secondary school qualification and 44% graduated from university (degree or higher education). The objectives of the government's initiatives were to increase the percentage of secondary school qualifications at least five percent by 2010, to as far as 95% in 2015. For university education the target to be reached is 50% of graduates in 2015 (Danish Ministry of Education 2005, 2008).

The key importance attributed to education is evident by the level of public spending destined to education. In 2005, with an expense equal to 8.3% of the GDP, Denmark occupied first place in Europe with regards to investments in this sector (Eurostat 2009a).

Education is guaranteed by means of state benefits in the form of education allowances with a universal amount for all students up to 18 years, after which they are entitled to education grants from the State Educational Fund. The amount of the grant varies on the basis of the family income and the length of the course chosen. In addition to these funds, the state may provide long term reimbursable loans.

The problem of youth unemployment in Denmark has been dealt with by promoting the professional training of the unemployed youth. The adopted strategy has increased funding to youth education rather than facilitating rapid labour market integration². For this reason, the percentage of young people under the age of 25 in education is huge, whilst unemployment between 16 and 24 years of age is almost non-existent. For example, in this age range, unemployment figures fell from 4.2% in 2004 to 1.4% in 2008³ (Cirius 2008; Danish Ministry of Education 2004). For young people under 25 who have been unemployed for more than six months, it is compulsory to attend training courses and vocational

programmes which last approximately 18 months. Under these schemes, they are remunerated an amount, which is less than unemployment benefit, but double the education grant received by students. When they reach 25, the young unemployed are enrolled in adult life long learning training programmes with the aim of acquiring additional skills to finally be able to enter into the labour market.

The unemployment benefits in Denmark are quite generous despite the government's attempts to curb them since 2006. To be able to claim, workers must be a member of one of the numerous unemployment insurance funds, linked to the trade unions. Over the last ten years, a decrease in the percentage of young members has been recorded, caused by both the prolongation of the training period and also by the existence of other allowances granted by local authorities.

In addition, further forms of support are provided for housing for young people who do not live in university accommodation.

Support to Families

Denmark adopts universalistic criteria when allocating child allowances. Until the child reaches legal age, the parents receive an annual child allowance, the amount of which varies on the basis of the overall family income and the age of the child. Single parent families or families with disabled children are eligible for further state aid.

Prolongation of the Transition to Adulthood

Toward the end of the 1980s, various indicators pointed to the prolongation of the dependency phase on the family of origin. More precisely, the young Danes left home and became adults at a higher age compared to the past.

The prolongation of living at home was attributed to a number of factors, including the longer educational and training cycles; the improved housing situations of the older adult generations, thanks to

which their children had their own room inside the family home; the condition of the housing market, especially in cities where the real estate prices had increased by 250% over the last 20 years. Another contributing factor was the increase of non-antagonistic parent-child relationships, based on dialogue and reciprocity (Mørch and Stølan 2002).

Moving into independent accommodation is still problematical, in spite of government efforts. In the scope of the policy to improve the educational level of the youth population, the government has also set itself the goal of meeting the accommodation needs of young people in further education. Only a small percentage (approximately 3% of the young people aged between 15 and 29) live in university accommodation or in student flats. In the majority of cases, young people manage to achieve living independence thanks to the assistance of their parents. For those who cannot rely upon family resources, finally leaving home still remains a critical phase.

STATE SUPPORT FOR YOUNG PEOPLE IN GERMANY

Vocational Training and Youth Unemployment Schemes

In Germany vocational training carries out an important role in the process of attaining adulthood. As only the young people who have obtained the Abitur⁴ can access to university studies, approximately two thirds of the young people who complete compulsory education obtain a vocational qualification through the dual training scheme. This system combines apprenticeship in a company, with vocational training in professional schools, for a period of approximately three and a half years. The apprenticeship contract stipulated between the young person and the company thus grants them access to social insurance and healthcare system and a monthly salary, which varies on the basis of the type of work carried out and the academic year attended.

However, since the late 1980s, the success of the dual system in ensuring a rapid transition to adulthood had begun to show a few cracks. The new economic policy, inaugurated following the re-unification, has limited the expansion in the production sectors (manufacturing and craft) from which the majority of apprenticeship requests originate. In a short period, the recourse to the scheme has increasingly become an instrument to limit unemployment of youths with a low level of education, instead of guaranteeing them stable access to the labour market (Witzel et al. 1996). In particular, to combat the unemployment crisis, the German governments have attempted to conduct specific programmes aimed at increasing youth employment. School leavers with no qualifications⁵ and unemployed youths who do not attend apprenticeship schemes are encouraged to attend a pre-vocational year of training with the aim of supplying them with greater professional skills to validate their employment in the workplace.

Support to Families

The state allowances in aid of families and young adults are varied and diversified according to the beneficiary. The Kindergeld is a state benefit paid to families with children, independent of the level of income. For every child until the age of eighteen, the family receives a monthly sum of 164€ a figure which increases to 195€ for the fourth and every other child. The subsidy may extend to 21 years if the young person is unemployed and to 27 years for young people in education or apprenticeship. For dependent young adults up to 27 years of age⁶, specific tax deductions are foreseen.

The second type of subsidy (Bundeserziehungsgeld) entitles young couples who are unemployed or work part-time (less than 30 hours per week) a child care allowance. Parents can choose between a regular amount of €307 a month for two years and alternatively €460 monthly, only for the first year.

Young couples with or without children can also benefit from special tax relief. The incomes of the partners are not taxed separately, but jointly, with the advantage for both partners of an overall reduction in payable income taxes.

Another type of allowance is dedicated to poor families or those not entitled to unemployment benefits, who are guaranteed a minimum level of income (approximately €286 monthly to the head of the household) and access to healthcare.

The benefit scheme includes the Bafög: support in the form of an education grant, to which students (university and apprentices) under 30 years of age, are entitled, if they are unable to pay for their education. The amount is established on the basis of the type of education, income and accommodation situation of the young persons. Those students who do not live under the parental roof are entitled to a correspondingly higher amount, to a maximum of €65 monthly. Starting from 2001, all students, regardless of their income and utilization of Bafög, are entitled to special loans guaranteed by the Ministry of Education and Research.

Prolonged Transition to Adulthood

According to research carried out from the early years of the nineties, the path towards independence from the family of origin of young Germans has experienced a significant attenuation. The pointers of this trend are the prolongation of the phase of financial dependency on the family of origin and the delay in setting up an independent home. Even though financial support from the family becomes less significant after 21 years of age, the percentage of young 30 year olds who are financially dependent on the family of origin remains extremely high (approximately 30% of those aged 29 compared to 80% of 18 year olds) (Buba 2002).

The reasons behind the prolongation of dependency are not only the transformations in the work market, but also the absence of adequate housing

policies to deal with rising house prices. With the exception of university students, who are entitled to accommodation in university campuses, the income and eventual housing benefits of apprentices or the unemployed are not sufficient to pay rent expenses.

A salient effect of the manifest modifications is the assertion of unsettled living arrangements, like that of the so-called boomerang generation (Da Vanzo and Goldscheider 1990; Goldscheider et al. 1999). For some young people, setting up an independent home is subordinated to the presence of contingent situations which, when lacking, force them to return under the parental roof, even temporarily. The termination of education, break ups of cohabiting partners and unemployment are the most common reasons motivating the return to the parental home (Buba 2002).

THE SURVEY IN DENMARK, GERMANY AND ITALY

The group of young persons interviewed in Denmark was composed of 42 subjects aged between 18 and 30, residing in Copenhagen and the surrounding area. The majority were employed, a large section were in education, nine were unemployed, whilst a young woman was on maternity leave (see Table 1).

Thirty-seven persons interviewed in Germany were aged between 16 and 37, lived in Tubingen and Reutlingen, two small to medium sized industrial cities⁷ located in an area of ex-West Germany, which in 2003 had a lower unemployment rate (5%) than the average national rate (9%). Almost half the subjects interviewed were working (nineteen precisely), nine were continuing their education at university level (post-graduate) or by vocational training, four youths had just completed their studies and were looking for work, whilst six young people were unemployed at the time of the interview (see Table 2).

In Italy, 40 young people, aged between 19 and 38, were interviewed and all the subjects lived in Milan,

or the surrounding area. Very few worked, whilst the majority were studying at university or continuing education after their high school diploma (see Table 3).

The most strikingly differentiated data of the young people in the three countries is their housing and family situation. In Denmark, the majority of respondents had set up an independent home, were married, were living together, with or without children, or were co-habiting with friends. The living arrangements and family decisions were not so much dictated by the socio-economic class and by age. Thanks to state allowances, even students and young unemployed managed to precociously achieve independency from the family of origin. The young Danes, who after 25 years of age, lived with their parents were an exception to the rule (Iacovou 2002).

The same trend was evident in Germany, even though the number of respondents who had set up an independent home was significantly lower. The socio-cultural level of the respondents was the determining factor in their living arrangements: the university graduates with suitable employment had left the parental home, whilst the young persons with a medium⁸ or low level education experienced greater difficulty in making this step. The respondents who lived with their parents had an age range between 17 and 25 years and, as in Denmark, the threshold age for completion of transition was set at 25 years (Cook and Furstenberg 2002).

The situation in Italy was diametrically the opposite: All the young respondents lived with their parents, with the exception of a girl who lived alone. The financial situation in the family of origin and the educational level do not appear to be influential variables decisive for living arrangements, whilst a certain influence is recorded regarding the employment situation. The young single woman was the only member of the respondents who had been in stable employment for the last five years and her wage allowed her to pay the rent, albeit with some sacrifices.

Table 1. Features of Young Respondents—Denmark

Number of respondents	Gender	Age	Occupation	Living arrangements	Place of residence
42	23 boys	18-30	17 employed	7 live at home with their parents	Copenhagen and hinterland
	19 girls		9 unemployed	19 cohabit/are married with/without children	
			3 looking for first job (graduates)	11 live alone with/without children	
			15 study at university or in further education	5 cohabit with friends	
			1 on maternity leave		

Other than this young girl, only one other respondent had experienced living away from home. In the past, she had lived with her partner and when the relationship broke down she returned to her family of origin. Finally, none of the respondents had children.

TRANSITION FROM EDUCATION TO THE LABOUR MARKET IN THE THREE COUNTRIES

The data which the young respondents of the three countries have in common, is the prolongation of the transition period from education to the labour market. When moving through this phase, the young people encounter various employment, education and personal experiences which can make this passage particularly complex. On the basis of the stories of the young respondents, the duration of this phase and the manner in which it is completed depend on a multitude of factors, such as: the opportunities in the labour market and in the education and training sectors; the entitlement to state subsidies and the socio-cultural level of the family of origin. The latter variable seems to strongly determine the control of biographical decisions: in fact, it is in all three countries that the culturally advantaged young people voluntarily undertake non-linear transition trajectories. This happens with different modes and frequency in the three countries. In Denmark, specifically, it is the respondents with a higher level of education who experience complex transition trajectories. The

biographical trajectories are however goal-directed: periods of unemployment, deferring the choice of the university faculty or protracted training courses before entering the definitive one are rather the result of adaptive strategies aimed, on the one hand, to overcome the structural limitations of the labour market, and, on the other hand, to achieve their set goals. For example, Emil, a 27-year-old psychologist, who has been unemployed for six months, is not willing to lower his aspirations, although he is frustrated by being unemployed. His preference is to wait for a job matching his qualifications and to continue to improve his skills by writing articles in scientific magazines. Overall, the transition process is fragmented, where delays in education and employment spheres are accompanied by definite transitions to parenthood. For instance, Birgitte, a 29-year-old psychologist, has decided to look for a job after her baby is born.

Those who showed greater uncertainty regarding their education trajectories were those graduate respondents originating from families of a lower cultural level. Frequently they went through uneven transitions, above all due to lack of knowledge regarding the education possibilities available:

It took me a long time to find out what I really wanted to do. I was 27 years old when I enrolled at university. Before that I had done several different things: I had chosen to do a course and for a certain period I had wanted to become a dancer. (Majken, Danish, 33 years old, Psychologist)

Table 2. Features of Young Respondents—Germany

Number of respondents	Gender	Age	Occupation	Living arrangements	Place of residence
37	19 boys	16-37	19 employed	18 live at home with their parents	Tubingen and Reutlingen
	21 girls		6 unemployed	4 cohabit with friends	
			4 looking for first job (graduates)	2 Single mothers	
			9 attend doctorate course or further education	4 are married/ cohabit and have children	

The apprentices move through more complex transitions from school to the labour market, passing from one training course to another, with the hope of securing a fixed job. The only alternative to unemployment is, in fact, to enrol in a new apprenticeship scheme. The prevailing attitude of these respondents is fatalistic with very little personal initiative. The most widespread feeling is one of lack of control over their biographical events, addressed with a passive attitude.

A similar fatalistic attitude is evident among the young German apprentices interviewed. For these subjects, the possibility of accessing apprenticeship schemes can represent the possibility to avoid prolonged unemployment, just as it may become the opportunity to postpone the final entry into the labour market. Some of the respondents declared that, in spite of enrolling in an apprenticeship scheme, they were not satisfied by the type of vocational qualifications they would achieve; for this reason, once they terminated the training course, they planned to retrain in a successive apprenticeship.

The situation of the respondents who have obtained a degree is markedly different. Their transition trajectories are considerably linear, even though prolonged by the greater investment in education. Unlike the Danish respondents, they did not appear to be driven to adopt strategies centred upon experimentation and optional reversibility, preferring instead to pursue definite objectives by exploiting the available resources.

In both countries, employment instability does not necessarily translate into deference of parenthood. The transition to parenthood and transition to work phases frequently overlap and, even when a stable occupation is lacking, forming a stable union or parenthood are conditions which many of the respondents, especially the older ones, have already attained.

As previously illustrated, the young Italian respondents were characterized by the homogeneity of their employment, education and housing status. The element which differentiates them from the young Danes and Germans is not so much experimenting uneven or delayed transition trajectories, but rather, the manners in which the transition trajectories are modelled, originating from the opportunities that the national context offers. For example, the most evident characteristic of the sample group is the widespread contact between the professional training education system and the academic world. The young people who had attended a technical institute decided to enrol in university much more frequently than those who had vocational qualifications. Rarely, however, the decision to enrol in university seems to be a confident choice. Instead, it appears to represent an attempt to obtain education credentials which should guarantee occupational alternatives to the training received at school. The decision to enrol in university studies is therefore linked to the scarce belief in the employment opportunities available. This decision seems to be consistent to the experimental approach, a marker of the current difficulty in structuring individual

Table 3. Features of Young Respondents—Italy

Number of respondents	Gender	Age	Occupation	Living situation	Place of residence
40	19 boys	19-32	10 employed	39 live with their parents	Milan and hinterland
	21 girls		4 unemployed	1 woman lives alone	
			3 looking for first job (graduates)		
			23 study at university or in further education		

education trajectories. For example, Cinzia, 20 years old, with a senior high school qualification in tourism, who was unenthusiastically attending a university course in Cultural Heritage. The first two exams had gone well, however she still doubted about the choice she had made:

Now I'm doing Cultural Heritage Studies and I'm giving it a shot, however I have several ideas for change, but I'm not sure, now I feel like doing Psychology, because I did sit the test for Communication Sciences but I didn't pass, there were a thousand of us. Then I would have liked to do Social Sciences Studies, but I realised that there were very few places available and I didn't have enough background knowledge and so I thought I'd better not even try. (Cinzia, 20 years old, Italian)

For the adolescents of the lowest socio-economic level, the alternatives to university studies are the training courses financed by the European Social Fund, which are very often accessed by sheer chance, in alternative to unemployment or an unsatisfactory job. The channel through which the training opportunity becomes known is generally the school, less frequently by direct involvement of the adolescents⁹. The decision to lengthen the education path by a year after obtaining a high school diploma is also the best solution to a labour market which offers scarce guarantees from a contractual and financial point of view. An emblematic case was illustrated by Marco, aged 21, with a vocational qualification as an electronics technician, who, disappointed by his experience as an apprentice, seized the opportunity to

attend a computer course with the hope of widening his employment opportunities:

I really wanted to be an electrician, so I overlooked the financial aspects... if you want to become an electrician, you have to be an apprentice at 600 € a month and that wasn't bad for me since I don't have many expenses... Being a worker is tough... it's hard, eight hours is tiring... Then my boss wasn't a nice person; he never paid on time and he was never around, so I left... Now, I don't know, I'm only doing this course hoping to get an office job in front of a computer. If I don't make it, I really don't know what to do. (Marco, 21 years, Italian)

The overall picture denotes the strong uncertainty of the young Italians in the relationship with the labour market. Entry into employment, especially of the young high school leavers, is configured as a process in which active periods alternate with inactive periods, passing through different stages which cannot be described by the usual categories of active (employed or unemployed looking for work) or inactive (all other status). For these adolescents the choice of continuing education represents an alternative, sometimes temporary, to the status as unemployed.

FAMILY AND STATE SUPPORT

The spheres in which family support generally occurs refer to financial, practical and emotional help. The young respondents, with no marked differences between the three countries, most frequently mention

help of a financial nature, an essential element in order to overcome some transition phases. The following is an in-depth examination of the forms of support in the three countries.

In Denmark, financial assistance from the family is fundamental during the school or vocational education of adolescents and is normally more substantial until 18 years of age, when the young people are entitled to grants from the State Educational Fund. Financial independence from the family of origin, for both parents and offspring, represents a fundamental goal to establish individual independence and so, for this reason, the young people are oriented from their teenage years to earn their own income and to contribute to the household expenses. According to official national figures, almost 60% of thirteen years olds had odd jobs after school, whilst adolescents between 16 and 18 managed to earn a considerable amount monthly, usually integrated by state support (Mørch and Stølan 2002). Whilst the offspring are financially dependent on their parents, they contribute in various manners to the household budget, usually supplementing to their upkeep and part of the rent. This, for example, is what the majority (four sevenths) of the young respondents living with their parents do.

The financial exchange between parents and offspring can also take on the role of long-term agreements. In this instance, the parents take responsibility of the state funding to their children (for example, setting aside a part in the bank for future housing), who in exchange, continue to live free of charge in the family. Parents may act as a guarantor if their children need loans to buy or rent housing or for their education to integrate state funding. In one case, the parents had bought a flat for their son, who then paid them monthly rent (Stølan and Mørch 2004).

If the financial support for young Danes mainly appears to be limited to the educational phase, the emotional, affective and practical support is unconditional. The social background of the family of

origin is a significant variable in determining the manner and circumstances of the provision of such support. The respondents belonging to higher social classes stated that they had received a great deal of support from their parents during the various transition phases, particularly regarding their education and career decisions, in addition to searching for accommodation, or setting up or moving house. Other than the above, they also mention the emotional support received when they had problems:

For me [my parents] have been a mental and social “lifebelt” and this has helped me and made things easier for me. When I moved [from Jutland to Copenhagen] they helped me with the practical aspects... If I needed a lamp or any other thing, they would bring it to Copenhagen. They also supported me emotionally; for example, when I was having a hard time with my studies or was depressed, they would notice and ask me what was wrong. (Emilie, 25 years old, Danish)

However, there were cases in which such support has been totally lacking: some respondents accuse their parents of being unable to help them make education and job decisions and to give them affection. Then again, these forms of support are particularly appreciated because, contrary to financial support, this kind of support cannot be supplied by the state. The opinions regarding the latter form of support are extremely positive. The respondents considered it to be amply sufficient to support oneself while studying and some admitted that they didn't even need to work part-time to supplement their income. The prevailing attitude towards this type of support is indifference: it is neither considered “positive” nor “negative”, but “normal”, given that they had not terminated education and attained financial independence.

In Germany, the financial support provided by the family of origin is fundamental in the school/training period. With the exception of those who are in apprenticeship, the students are almost totally dependent on their parents or on subsidies obtained through educational grants. Given the exiguous

amount of this type of support, the young Germans during their training—especially the apprentices interviewed—prefer to live at home with their parents and take advantage of the practical advantages that living together brings (laundry, housework, meal preparation, etc.). Young parents however have a different situation as they are entitled to special benefits.

In the interview sample, the most privileged youths at a financial and cultural level, received not only financial, emotional and practical support, but also advice regarding education and career matters. Their parents also appeared to be more willing to help them through difficult periods in these two spheres.

Fortunately my parents helped me enormously... I wanted to switch Faculty and study Law. I discussed the payment issue with them in depth. I didn't get any state support and this meant that they would have had to pay at least the taxes of the first four semesters. They understood and said that if I thought that Law was the right faculty then they would have helped me... When I broke up with my girlfriend, I had in-depth discussions with my parents. They told me to put on a brave face, that it was only a passing moment. On that occasion, I found it very constructive to talk with them. (Gert, 32 years old, German, postgraduate)

There were however some respondents who were dissatisfied by the support provided by their families. Among these, some young people declared to have received mainly practical support, but little affective or emotional support. On the other hand, some young people complained about the indifference shown by their parents, particularly in the case of exceptional circumstances. There were the cases of a young lady who fell pregnant when she was 16 and of a 24-year-old young man who was practically abandoned by his parents when he reached 18, and at the time of the interview, was living in a community and was unemployed.

These were not dissimilar to the types of support that the young Italians declared to receive from their family of origin. Above all, their parents provided care

and support “in difficult times”, caused by unsatisfactory school results, by the difficulty of finding a job and by heartbreaks. Furthermore, younger people frequently sought their parent's advice on the so-called “important decisions” matters, such as those concerning education and work. At the other end of the spectrum, the young adults, nearing their thirties, are more aware of the generation gap between their parents and therefore, they no longer perceive their parents as key reference figures when they have problems. Unlike the young Danes and Germans, the Italian respondents were unable to imagine any alternatives to the financial support from their family, as they could not rely upon any state support. The condition of total dependency on their parents is considered the only solution, pending attainment of job stability. The earnings deriving from “odd jobs” or part-time jobs are not sufficient to achieve the status of financial independency, nor much less, to be able to significantly contribute to household expenses, a contribution which however, their parents do not seem incline to ask for.

The transition becomes particularly tiring and slow for those young persons who do not possess the necessary family resources to support themselves while studying. Beatrice aged 30, a final year university student, for example, had to work throughout her entire university education thus delaying her degree by several years:

I did many different jobs. At first, I worked full-time in the summer in a factory to pay for my university fees, after that, I worked almost two years as a dentist's assistant. Then I had to leave because the hours weren't suitable, then I worked in a sandwich bar, then I left and worked in a bakery for almost three years, then as a barmaid in a shopping centre and now as a cashier... it's been hard... I've had to make so many sacrifices... for example I couldn't go on holiday because I had to work.

Some young people feel a strong sense of obligation towards their families, their only source of support, and in the future plan to reciprocate what they

have received from their parents. The respondents coming from families with low incomes were aware of the sacrifices made by their parents to provide for their upkeep and, for this reason, were planning to allocate part of their wages to their family as soon as they were able to. Walter, 20 years old, whose parents had just closed down their business and had been forced to take up some casual jobs, hoped to find a job rapidly so that he could contribute to the household's finances: "If all goes well and I find a job in September... I'll give my wages to them and just keep some pocket money for myself, at least for the first few years".

The young people coming from more affluent families mainly envisage providing companionship, affection, care and practical help, especially when their parents grow older. Quite a few respondents planned to live close to the family home, a trend in line with tendency of young Italians, once they leaved home, to live in close proximity to their parents' home (Barbagli et al. 2003; Istat 2006).

TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD IN THE THREE COUNTRIES

The structural transformations which have occurred in the education and employment sectors over the last twenty years have contributed to the prolongation of the transition phases, thus rendering the route towards acceptance of adult roles harder and slower. It appears that each country has elaborated different transition models as a result of these transformations, giving rise to new forms of dependence on (or independence from) the family of origin. For different reasons, in the last decades, the financial and emotional support of the family of origin has proven to be an essential element, to ensure completion of the education and training cycle and the final attainment of setting up an independent home by young people. Essentially, the state subsidies do not always manage to guarantee the rapid accomplishment of the transition and the

financial contribution of the family is proven to be fundamental to overcome some phases, especially regarding leaving home. Then again, the emotional support from parents allows the young people to deal with the risks linked to the transformations of the labour market with greater determination.

During the interviews, several respondents had pointed out how their parents had helped them to make education decisions and supported them during the education and career trajectory. Nevertheless, in spite of the fact that the prolongation of the young person's dependence on the family of origin is a widespread phenomenon, the Danish transition model is strongly oriented towards individual independence. It distinguishes from the other models by the precocity in which financial independence is obtained and by the symmetry in relationships between parents and their offspring. Young people, beginning in their adolescence, work and contribute to the household expenses, according to an exchange model based on reciprocity. The state subsidy and the youth unemployment schemes represent actions which are coherent to this educational approach, which is oriented to the early attainment of independence from the family. It is the state that is the guarantor of the independence of young people from their families, intervening, even in a prescribed manner, to facilitate entry to the labour market through professional training. Many of the respondents emphasized the importance of financial independency from the family, whilst they did not seem to be overtly worried about the prospect of a prolonged dependence on state subsidies which they instead considered themselves to be entitled to.

Therefore, we are dealing with a socialization model focused on taking on individual responsibilities precociously, among which, the attainment of financial independence from the family of origin is the cornerstone for acquiring adult identity. The early work experiences undertaken during the scholastic period are elements which favour experimentation

during adolescence of different work and education states. What emerges is a fragmented transition model in which education and work periods alternate and is overlapped by various living arrangements and parenthood situations (Van de Velde 2006, 2007). Lingering in intermediate “borderline” positions (Cavalli and Galland 1996) deferring the entry into stable occupation, does not however prevent them from making decisive family plans (for example, parenthood), as they are entitled to state support.

Therefore, it is not surprising that, if among the young Europeans, the Danes perceive financial aspects to be of little significance to setting up independent homes, this is a more pressing question for the young Germans and Italians. According to the statistics in a recent Eurostat (2009b) survey, 44% of young Europeans aged between 15 and 30, affirmed that the main reasons of prolonged permanence in the family home were of a financial nature. Only 31% of the young Danes perceive the latter as a priority issue, compared to 57% of the Germans and 49% of the Italians. Moreover, a higher percentage of young Danes (57%) compared to their European peers, place their job in first place as the main source of income, followed by training subsidies or education grants (22%); only 5% affirm to be dependent on support from their family or from their partner. However, the latter source of income appears in second place for the young resident in other countries of the European Union. For example, the young Germans, declare that they mainly rely on the income from their job (35%), but 26% are supported by their family or partner, whilst a fair percentage (13%) rely on education grants and training subsidies. On the other hand, the young Italians quote their main form of income to be their family or their partner (50%), their job is mentioned in second place (37%); and only a meagre percentage (2%) declare that their main means of maintenance to be education grants or subsidies.

The Danish transition model, centred on experimentation and individualization, appears to be

more easily applicable among the more financially and culturally privileged young respondents. Instead, the poorly qualified young people experience inevitably complex transitions, where work periods alternate with training periods, as the only alternatives to unemployment. Even among the German respondents, the young apprentices encountered similar difficulties and were forced to avoid unemployment spells by repeatedly enrolling in different state training schemes. Their income was not sufficient to attain independence from the family of origin and they were forced to live with their parents. However, it must be stated that some young people admitted that they had deliberately chosen to live with their parents. Living at home allows them to benefit from a series of practical advantages which they do not seem to want to give up (meal preparation, laundry, and housework). Notably, the young boys are the ones who have a greater postponement of setting up an independent home, whilst the young ladies tend to accelerate crossing this threshold by living together with a partner or cohabiting with friends. This trend was amply confirmed by the 2007 European statistics, which indicated that young girls left home at an earlier age than their boys counterparts (Eurostat 2009b).

The young Germans belonging to families of a higher socio-cultural level experience smoother transitions, less uncertain at career and financial levels. Contrary to the Danish respondents, they did not follow complex trajectories deliberately oriented towards experimentation, even if the sequence of the phases was the end result of a complex weave of decisions pertaining to leave home and start a family (in addition to career decisions), which might or might not have lead them to a condition of stability. Occasionally, these decisions may lead to “micro-transitions”, i.e., they may be reversible and for this reason, not mark the crossing of the threshold of one of the steps in transition to adulthood. For example, students may live away from home for the duration of their studies and then return home to their

parents; young people may break up with their partner or stop cohabiting with friends.

The transition of the young Italian respondents was profoundly different to that experienced by the other young Europeans. What is striking is the immobility of the young Italians when compared to the dynamism of their Danish and German counterparts. In particular, there is a clear perception of the disorientation of numerous young people when faced with the choice of their education or training paths. Rather than an opportunity, education or training become a stopgap measure to avoid unemployment and does not provide any undertaking regarding the achievable job opportunity. Most of the time, the decision to enrol in further education after obtaining a high school qualification is the consequence of the lack of job opportunities. Unlike the educational trajectory of the young Danes and Germans, which slides along the fixed tracks of the state schemes, the Italian training context includes "intermediate positions", in which the young Italians combine several work and training situations. For example, it may occur that they begin a university course, at the same time as a training course and keep an eye open for any potential job opportunities that may arise.

The social class the young Italians belong to plays a more decisive role than that is witnessed in the other two countries, above all, because they can only rely upon the financial support of their parents. The greater the financial resources of the family, more substantial are the forms of assistance that the offspring can rely upon during the transition process. For some respondents, the job title of their parents, especially the paternal profile, ensured a secure job for the future. Those young people who follow in the footsteps of their parents are driven towards linear transitions, given that the problem of finding a secure job does not exist.

In Denmark and Germany the training schemes guarantee, sometimes temporarily or in a compulsory

manner, a concrete opportunity to avoid unemployment and to partially or totally become independent from the family of origin. Although such measures are not sufficient to stabilize the transitions of those young people who are financially and culturally underprivileged, they are, however, important measures for the promotion of employment through training. The young Danes and Germans have less difficulty compared to the Italians to undertake family plans because, other than support from their family, they can rely upon state aid.

The greatest discrepancy among the transition models was recorded at the age in which the various phases are partially or wholly completed. By the age of 25, the young Danes had set up independent homes, had formed a stable union or live alone and some had become parents. A similar trend, albeit to a lesser extent, was recorded in Germany where, after 25 years of age, none of the respondents lived with their parents and by 30 mainly lived as a couple, with or without children.

In the sample group of Italians, the transition experience appeared to be stranded at the transition from school to work phase, blocked by the total inability of the respondents to make decisions in other spheres. Of the forty respondents, only two young ladies (one of whom lives alone) had spent significant periods away from the family of origin. The remainder confessed to only having left their parents' home for the summer holidays, and for periods of several weeks, accompanied by friends or their partner. It is crystal clear that it is difficult to build a future around deferred parenthood, deemed to be practicable only after attaining a secure job and setting up an independent home, or achievements which are often vouched for by their parents.

CONCLUSIONS

To complete the outlined picture regarding the differences recorded in the transition experiences of

the three groups of young people, it is necessary to accent some aspects which have been overlooked in studies of the transition to adulthood. In comparison to the young Danes and Germans, the young Italians do not only experience greater difficulty in accessing to the labour market, in obtaining qualified training and setting up an independent home; they also carry the burden of the progressive aging of the population together with the National Debt inherited from the adult generation (Balduzzi and Rosina 2009). This study want to examine further how these two factors will make the transition process increasingly difficult.

The slump of the birth-rate together with the increase in life expectancy has modified the age structure of the kinship network¹⁰, inside which the individuals are inserted during the crucial times of their lives. Compared to previous generations, in the future, the young persons will have to take care of their elderly family members for longer periods, and as a result of the declining birth-rate, and will only be able to rely on the assistance of a lower number of family members (husband/wife, sisters/brothers). The weakening of career opportunities in the labour market and the worsening of the financial position of young persons mean that the forms of solidarity that they will be able to dedicate to the future generations (the future offspring of young people) are very uncertain. The future also appears less glowing, if one considers how the growing marital instability will produce single parent families, usually less capable of providing their children with adequate resources.

The situation of the young Italians appears even more dramatic if one considers the impact of the National Debt on the intergenerational distribution of resources. According to the Eurostat figures, in 2008 the Italian National Debt had almost touched a 106% ratio of the GDP, the highest percentage in Europe. In the years to come, the distribution of public spending will be heavily and disproportionately allocated to the more adult generations, to the disadvantage of the generations currently in their twenties and thirties.

According to the Eurostat outlook, in the coming years, the social security expenditure will remain at the current high levels, until it peaks in 2040,¹¹ to then start to decrease as of 2050, when the generations currently in their twenties and thirties approach retirement, as a joint result of the minor numerical incidence of these generations and the savings envisaged by the implementation of the 1995 pension reform (Dini Reform). Conversely, the percentage of expenditure for education in relation to the GDP, an investment which benefits young people, will progressively decrease until 2035 and successively show signs of recovery until peak at 3.7% in 2050 (in 2005 it stood at 4.2).

The picture is more pessimistic if one calculates that in Italy, every year, 2% of the GDP is assigned to pay the interest on the national debt, a percentage which is detracted from more useful investments which could be utilized to correct the uneven distribution of resources among the generations and to modernize the country. The per capita expenditure for interest on the national debt is quite burdensome: the Italians pay one third more than the Germans, more than double compared to the French and English and triple the amount paid by the Spaniards (Balduzzi and Rosina 2009).

It is highly unlikely that the transition to adulthood models in Italy will undergo significant transformations. Due to the absence of measures of a political and social nature, aimed at facilitating the transition of young people from education to the workplace or the provision of social policies capable of easing the dependence on the family of origin, the completion of transition to adulthood will acquire new elements of criticality linked to the demographic and labour market transformations.

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Notes

1. In Italy family allowance is mainly provided for employees, even if retired, penalizing atypical workers and the self-employed professionals who are only entitled in certain circumstances. As a result, these measures do not include the neediest families (Saraceno 2007).
2. In actual fact, the policy of increased funding to training of the unemployed was launched at the beginning of the nineties by the Labour Market Reform to contrast long term adult unemployment and to control the level of youth unemployment. For further details consult Grunow and Leth-Sørensen (2006).
3. This trend is also present in the global unemployment rate which fell from 5.4% in 2000 to 3.4% in 2007. In 2008 the unemployment rate increased slightly, especially among boys (Statistics Denmark 2009a, 2009b).
4. This is the secondary school diploma which enables access to any university course.
5. For the former this provision is compulsory.
6. This claim limit has been reduced to 25 years for offspring born as of 1983.
7. Tübingen has 80,000 inhabitants whilst Reutlingen's population is 100,000.
8. These are young people who after the high school diploma have continued education not necessarily at university level. Among these are skilled workmen and clerical staff.
9. Only one young girl, among the respondents, interested in training in the fashion sector, had actively sourced information regarding the available courses and had successively managed to attend one.
10. Istat (2000) compared two generations of women born respectively in 1940 and 1960. The former can potentially divide the burden of care giving to the elderly and the children of the household with other nine adults (husband, brothers/sisters, brothers and sisters-in-law); the latter can only rely upon the potential help of five adults. According to calculations, the women born in 1940 will have, for at least twelve years of her life, one or more elderly persons in her kinship network; this period will lengthen to eighteen years for the women born in 1960. These changes have caused the increase of the average age of the kinship network, further increased also by the slump in the birth-rate. Considering the close relatives (parents, husband, children, sons/daughters-in-law, grandchildren), this average age rises from 26.1 for the forties generation to 44.6 for the women born in 1960.
11. In 2005 the social security expenditure reached 14.8% of the GDP, while in 2040 it will reach at least 15.6% of the GDP (Eurostat 2009a).

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