

What will I be when I grow up? The Place of Work, Family and Values of Young Adults planning their Future after Secondary Education

Cosa farò da grande? Lavoro, Famiglia e Valori nei Progetti dei Giovani che hanno concluso gli Studi Superiori

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Riassunto: Frequentemente gli atteggiamenti che i giovani assumono portano a considerazioni fuorvianti su quello che è il mondo interiore che anima invece i loro progetti di vita. La conclusione del ciclo di studi superiori segna un'importante tappa nel passaggio alla condizione adulta ed un momento in cui i ragazzi sono chiamati a prendere, forse per la prima volta, delle decisioni “serie” che influiranno sul loro futuro prossimo e remoto. Cosa fare dopo il diploma? Lavorare? Studiare? E quali prospettive nei confronti di una famiglia propria? Si è voluto pertanto sondare quali siano i progetti dei giovani nei confronti del lavoro e della famiglia e i valori che guidano le loro scelte, attraverso un'indagine presso gli studenti delle classi V degli istituti scolastici superiori della provincia di Udine.

Keywords: Projects of life, Values, Young people, Family, Post-diploma choices, Separated parents.

1. Introduction and method

What desires and projects do young people have at the end of their educational path? How do they consider the family? What are the leading values in their lives and for the choices they make? To answer these questions a survey was administered with the aim of exploring the extremely varied and heterogeneous world of young adults. Their attitudes are often misleading as to what actually animates their inner world and their life projects. The end of secondary education is an important milestone in the passage to adulthood and a moment when young people are called to take ‘serious’ decisions, maybe for the first time, which will influence both their near and distant future. What to do after the secondary education exam: work? Study? And what prospects are there if one wants a family? It is this delicate moment of transition that we wanted to investigate, to understand young people’s projects regarding work and family and the values that help them make their choices.

The survey took into consideration all students of age who attending form 5 in the secondary schools of the Udine province.

The method chosen for administering the survey was an exhaustive distribution throughout all Friulan secondary schools of a structured questionnaire containing 37 questions specifically designed to obtain quantitative type of response. The questionnaire considered the following subjects: family structure and socio-

demographic characteristics of family components; transition from full-time education to work; the university route or the work alternative; education and school; free time activities; interpersonal relationships; family networks and family of origin; future family; gender roles and attitudes regarding the couple's life; experience of family crises; values and the perception of the future.

Carrying out the survey was possible thanks to the cooperation of the school masters who allowed questionnaires to be circulated on the premises.

Only 5 out of 27 declined to participate, due to a lack of time or problems related to the management of the survey on the premises. Over 56 schools were contacted and 47 took part in the survey. The questionnaires were given to a representative at each school who then followed the guidelines provided by the survey coordinator for the distribution to all form 5 students. Therefore the survey was carried out by direct contact followed a questionnaire to be completed.

The distribution and collection of questionnaires took place between May and June 2005; 2403 questionnaires were distributed and 1705 returned.

Specific checks were carried out on the completeness and correct manner of filling the questionnaire. After checking, 1685 questionnaires were valid (that is 50% of all these enrolled in form 5 in the secondary schools in Udine province for the school year 2004/2005). The students surveyed were mostly born in 1986. The sample is composed of 677 males (40.2%) and 1004 females (59.6%), with 4 undeclared (0.2%) while in the student population there are 47.9% males and 52.1% females.

2. Post-diploma choices

Young people finishing their secondary education mostly have a clear idea regarding their future: among them 51.9% want to continue studying; 29.5% want to start work immediately and the remaining 18.6% still have not made up their minds on. The reasons for such choices are varied. Among those who intend to continue studying 66% realize that an academic degree is necessary to find their desired job, while 54.7% believe it is important to have a university degree. Some of them regard it as a natural continuation of the type of secondary education chosen previously (14.1%). Others enjoy studying (13%) but some admit to not wanting to work (3%). There were many academic fields represented in the responses, with traditional courses predominating such as architecture, economic and business, medical and surgery, law and engineering. Among those considering an immediate entry into the marketplace the need to be financially independent is the predominant reason (75.4%), 12.6% consider having a job as the natural outcome of their studies, 29.7% want to work because they do not like studying while 22.4% look for work due to financial need.

It is important to underline the fact that the decisions taken are declared absolutely autonomous for 87.4% of those surveyed while a 10.9% admit to having been influenced by their family (parents, brothers or sisters).

3. Family

It's interesting to describe the young people's family context because it clarifies the possible relations between personal experience and life choices.

10.8% of those surveyed has separated parents and 20.9% are single child, concentrated 28.2% in families with separated parents and 20% others.

What kind of relation is there between these young people and their families? What do they do with their parents? They describe themselves primarily as great communicators: 74.7% usually 'talk' with their parents. 30.6% take part in the housekeeping (they go shopping together); while 16.3% watch TV together. Many of them regret spending too little time with their busy father or mother, and the children of separated parents complain more about it (23.3%) than the others do (12.9%).

The key words to describe the relationship between the children and their mother are: a peaceful relationship (59.4%), mother help with difficulties (22.1%), gives valuable advice (21.2%) and friendship (15.5%). It should be noticed that 12.8% do not want intrusion in their life and that 10.9% say they have always had a conflictual relationship. The relationship with the father is reported as being peaceful by most of the young people in the non-separated families (57.2%) while the same happens for only 27.5% of the children of separated parents. The gap remains when considering all the other aspects: the father gives advice to 11.5% of the children of separated parents and to 21.4% of non-separated ones; he helps to solve the children's problems in 11.5% of the separated cases, and in 16.2% of the other cases. An important point is the rate showing the children of separated parents who do not have a relationship of any kind with their father (20.9%) or having a rather conflictual relationship (17.0%).

The family climate in which the young adults live can be derived from the kind of relationship existing between parents; it is described as quarrelsome or indifferent by 60.6% of the children from separated parents, while it is reported as balanced and peaceful by 85.9% of the sons and daughters from the non-separated ones. The remaining data do bring out an apparently contradictory reality: 27.1% of youngsters from separated parents say that the relationship between their parents, although not living together anymore, is mostly balanced and peaceful; this could lead to believe that once the first phase of separation is over the partners are in many cases able to find a renewed equilibrium allowing for positive exchanges to take place in time. On the other hand, families with non-separated parents seem on the verge of crises because the children say that their parents either have a quarrelsome relationship (9.0%) or are mainly indifferent (2.0%).

Although the relationships with their parents are on the whole positive and cooperative, in moments of difficulty young adults prefer the support and advice of their girlfriend or boyfriend (when there is one) or of their friends (49.2%) rather than of their family. Sometimes the mother is most trusted (32.6%) while the father is consulted far less (8.2%). However, many (about 20%) prefer to manage by themselves.

Apart from the experience of having separated parents, the survey suggests why most young people believe that forming a family of their own (82.3%) is 'very' or 'rather' important, as is having children (76.1%). Less than 3% do not wish to have children of their own, while 21.2% have not made up their mind. 47.6% think that the ideal number of children in a family is two.

4. Values

The system of values referred to by young adults in the survey is quite homogeneous, independent of the experience lived in the family. Thus it emerges that thinking about

their future they put in first place a secure job (an average of 76.4%) followed by the wish to see their dreams come true (an average of 75.0%). In the third place comes the importance of owning their home (64.5%) and then having a family (57.1%), while less than half of them thinks about having children (43.8) or getting a degree (30.7%).

The essential position of the family as a value in today's society is confirmed by data concerning the question '*Is marriage an old fashioned institution in modern society?*' to which 9.0% answered affirmatively (that is 'I agree completely'). Among these the number of young adults from separated couples is higher than the that of those from non-separated ones (16.9% and 8.1% respectively). This means that the remaining 91% do not agree with the given question or, if they do, it shows a certain degree of doubt.

Even the following question shows the importance of the family, and how it is felt more deeply by the children of separated couples. In fact 42.1% of them agree that '*It is right for separated parents to build a new family*', while the importance of such an event is underestimated by the children of non-separated parents (20.8% of the young adults completely agree)

Finally if we look at the list of those values considered by young people as being a priority in their lives we will discover that for all of them the first six places are taken by love (71.7%), friendship (70.8%), family (67.4%), health (56.4%), respect (28.7%) and freedom (24.4%).

With these comforting data at hand it can be concluded that the new generation has internalized behavioural models in which the family continues to play an important role. Those who live in a non-separated family see it as a model to be repeated and those who have experienced the parent's separation still regard it as a vital point of reference to keep as one's goal.

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