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CREATING MOSAICS: HOW PROFESSIONAL IDENTITIES CAN EMERGE FROM FRAGMENTED CAREERS

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Abstract

In Italy today, as in most European countries, young college graduates start their careers facing very fragmented professional paths, often characterised by short contracts and many transitions. In the current socio-economic situation, where career transitions have replaced job security and individuals struggle to search for meaning and purpose in a 'puzzle' made of multiple work and life experiences, social institutions no longer provide the norms with which people used to answer the questions of 'How shall I live?' and 'How should I design my life to achieve my aspirations?' (Savickas, 2015). Today individuals are bound to answer these questions by building their own life and career projects, trying to give a sense of purpose to the many choices that compose a career. This process can generate anxiety and a sense of uncertainty. It demands that workers learn how to adapt to fluid societies and flexible organizations without losing the 'thread' that connects many episodes into their unique career story. How can a counselor effectively support young graduates to navigate our 'liquid modernity' (Bauman, 2000) and fluid job market, guiding him/her towards educative experiences and continuous learning? This paper comments data collected during career counseling meetings with Italian university students and graduates in the first half of 2016 and describes the approach adopted by counselors to help them build a professional identity from many and different work experiences, as if they were the tiles of a mosaic.

1. Introduction

In Europe, the transition of young people from university to the job market is characterized by the presence of fragmented paths, often entailing some forms of temporary work. Fixed-term contracts, collaborations, temporary supply contracts are more and more frequently utilized for the new entrants in the labor market, even when highly educated. Starting from the end of the '90s, the percentage of young people who enter the job market with temporary contracts has been increasing in most European countries (European Commission, 2014).

The economic crisis in 2009 has significantly weakened the labor market, leading to an increase in unemployment and hitting in particular the least protected workers, among which the young workforce. In many countries, long term unemployment has more than doubled and, again, young people were hit worst. Experts emphasize the potential "scarring" effects on people facing unemployment early in their careers, while underlining the opportunity that the recession presents to step up investment in developing and maintaining skills in order to contribute to a more solid and socially sustainable future growth (European Commission, 2014).

Starting from the end of 2013, employment rates began to rise again, but the majority of the new entrants have temporary or part-time jobs, that often entail lower salaries, less protection, less training and, in general, learning opportunities and lower contributions. Moreover, it is important to notice that while in many countries the young workers who start with temporary jobs slowly improve their status and obtain more stable contracts, in others temporary contracts can become real 'traps' (Baert, Cockx, Verhaest, 2013) that significantly limit professional growth. There are great differences among European countries as to the percentage of temporary contracts and the conversion rates into more stable jobs; generally speaking, a negative correlation has been observed between the two variables. Italy is characterized by a high diffusion of temporary contracts and a low rate of conversion into permanent jobs: that is, contractual stability and its corollary of rights and protection are, nowadays, rare for Italian young workers (European Commission, 2014).

In the current socio-economic situation, where career transitions have replaced job security and individuals struggle to search for meaning and purpose in a 'puzzle' made of multiple work and life experiences, social institutions no longer provide the norms with which people used to answer the questions of 'How shall I live?' and 'How should I design my life to achieve my aspirations?' (Savickas, 2015). Today individuals are bound to answer these questions by building their own life and career projects, trying to give a sense of purpose to the many choices that compose a career. This process can generate anxiety and a sense of uncertainty. It demands that workers learn how to adapt to fluid societies and flexible organizations, without losing themselves and their social/professional identity along the way. Educators and counselors are called in to support young high skilled workers in this adaptation process, that can get harder, the more fragmented and discontinuous is their career path. How can a counselor effectively support young graduates to navigate our 'liquid modernity' (Bauman, 2000) and fluid job market, guiding him/her towards educative experiences and continuous learning? This paper comments data collected during career counseling meetings with Italian university graduates in the first half of 2016 and describes the approach adopted by counselors to help young graduates build a professional identity from many and different work experiences, as if they were the tiles of a mosaic.

2. Theoretical Foundation and Related Literature

The theoretical framework of this research project is the wide corpus of works on career guidance in the current socio-economic situation. As defined by the OECD, career guidance refers to services and activities intended to assist individuals, of any age and at any point throughout their lives, to make educational, training and occupational choices and to manage their careers. The activities may take place on an individual or group basis, and may be face-to-face or at a distance, including help lines and web-based services (OECD, 2004).

While in advanced economies traditional forms of work are declining, technological change and globalisation are creating new socio economic contexts within which people live and work: these changes have made it increasingly difficult for some to navigate their careers. Investing in career guidance is an important way to support young people and adults through transitions, to help them internalising the need to take responsibility for their career, making effective use of their skills and be resilient in the face of change (Hooley, Dodd, 2015). There is extensive literature that highlights the impacts and efficacy of career guidance in helping individuals to manage their careers and maximise their potential. Career guidance does not simply provide expert advice about a difficult decision, but rather leaves participants with enhanced human capital which delivers various economic benefits, including aiding labour market flexibility and enhancing the skill base of the country (Hooley, Dodd, 2015). Although career guidance is primarily concerned with the individual, there is evidence that it also brings major social and economic benefits that justify public investment in the area, and that these outcomes can be seen at a range of levels, from individuals making better decisions to overall effects on the global labour market (Hooley, Dodd, 2015; Hooley, Matheson, Watts, 2014). As far as the outcome on the individual is concerned, a number of studies exist which demonstrate that career guidance has positive impacts on participants' reactions, learning, behaviour and results (Holey, 2014). It can support adults to make successful transitions in a turbulent labour market (Bimrose, Barnes & Hughes 2008) by strengthening career management skills, the abilities that individuals need to make decisions, build their professional identity, cope with change and setbacks (Holey, 2014).

Relevant characteristics of autonomy and subjectivity are needed by individuals for surviving in our epoch, usually defined in terms of neo modernity or late modernity (Beck, Giddens & Lash, 1996). These characteristics are integral part of present tendencies in Western societies where individuals are facing swiftly changing situations of their own social and private life and are experiencing the need for increasingly higher personal responsibilities and choices (Bauman, 2000). Today, much more so than in traditional societies, individuals' 'agency' is no longer a variable entirely dependent on surrounding institutional rules and resources or their 'structure'; yet individuals are still far from being autonomous from these restrictions. In the same way that agency and structure can be considered inextricably intertwined (Giddens, 1979), human identity can be observed in the light of the shift from a 'given' into a 'task' (Beck & Beck-Gemshein, 2002). Modern living seems to be represented by the need to become what one is, putting a sort of compulsory self determination in the place once occupied by hetero-determination (Bauman, 2000). While the workplace was traditionally a very important source of personal identity, changes in the economy have rendered it far less reliable. The long lasting identities once associated with work have given way to looser and more provisional identities that are subject to constant change and renegotiation (Bauman, 2000). This process can generate anxiety and a sense of uncertainty; young workers in particular struggle to adapt to fluid societies and flexible organizations, while attempting to maintain the thread that connects multiple distinct episodes into their unique story (Beck, 2002; Giddens, 1991; Hall, 1996)

3. Methodology

Data was collected during career guidance meetings with Italian university graduates in the first half of 2016, in the realm of a collaboration between University of Rome La Sapienza, Department of

Education, and a public service offered by the Lazio Region ('Porta Futuro') to all citizens in need of career guidance, placement support and training for employability. The service was open to all citizens, therefore career guidance was offered to many different targets. However, this paper focuses specifically on young graduates, which represented nearly 40% of all users[1]: each of them met with the counselor for a guided reflection on their skills, interests and aspirations and on their career development.

The approach we adopted for counseling is defined as 'narrative counseling' (Savickas, 2011):

Today's mobile workers may feel fragmented and confused by the restructuring of occupations and transformation of the labor force. As they move from one assignment to the next assignment, the must let go of what they did but not who they are. […] *By holding onto the self in the form of a life story that provides meaning and continuity, they are able to move on in a way that advances life purpose and approaches overarching goals* (Savickas, 2011, p.37).

A typical career guidance path was organized as follow:

o *First meeting*: the counselor gets an overview of the graduate's current situation and his/her level of satisfaction. The graduate is asked to 'narrate' the recent developments in their life/career story which brought to the state of art at the time of the interview.

o *Second meeting*: the graduate 'narrates' his/her experience with formal education, starting from school and up to the end of the university path. The focus is on how education has contributed to developing knowledge, skills, personal characteristics and attitudes.

o *Third meeting*: the graduate narrates his work experience and, if present, his volunteering experience, focusing on its continuity, coherence with university studies, contribution to competence development.

o *Fourth meeting*: the counselor discusses with the graduate about his/her personal interests, values, aspirations and constraints, how they match with the current work situation and future professional perspectives.

o *Fifth and following meetings*[2]: based on all inputs from previous meetings, the graduate, supported by the counselor, drafts his/her career development plan, featuring goals to reach in the short, medium and long term. This process very often requires a reflection on the resources that are already available and the ones that need to be acquired, such as new skills or material goods.

4. Results

After every career guidance meeting, the counselor summarized its content. At the end of the career guidance path, he/she produced a report covering the following areas: brief analysis of the demand (explicit and implicit); crucial moments in the user's education and career path; brief description of the user's current professional situation; strengths and weaknesses; description of interventions selected by the counselor; final evaluation of the user's response to career guidance service.

According to the career construction theory (Savickas, 2005), making a self is a task. Individuals construct a self by using reflective thinking to re-elaborate experience. In order to do so, they need

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[1] The service reached approximately 90 users, 40 of which already had a university degree.
[2] The career guidance path consisted in 5 meetings, for approximately an hour each time. However, very often graduates ended up meeting with their counselor more than 5 times, up to 7 or even 8 times.

language, which both constructs and constitute social realities[3] (Savickas, 2011). Identity is the self 'located' in a social context, assuming a role that continuously adapts and changes while negotiating social positions. This is why identity development is a lifelong process.

When identity gets challenged or 'problematised' (Savickas, 2011), appearing inadequate to support the individual's movement, or desired movement, into a new social role, it becomes necessary to re-model it. 'Narrative counseling' supports individuals to grasp order in their lives through a 'biographical reasoning' able to bridge transitions, so to 'keep the story going' (Savickas, 2011, p.22).

In our career counseling experience, narrative counseling proved to be effective in supporting young graduates in their career development. The use of narration helped the counseling process in many ways, starting from the initial phase when, very often, the user's real demand and needs are 'hidden' behind mere practical requests, such as reviewing a resume or a cover letter. In many cases, we heard the user telling his/her story, reflecting on it based on inputs given by the counselor and, in the end, being surprised at how certain passages suddenly made sense, had become clear and understandable as episodes of their 'occupational plot' (Savickas, 2011).

Mary's[4] story is a clarifying example of how experience and narration can build and re-model identity. A young graduate in history, living in a small town 60 km south of Rome, Mary came to career guidance honestly stating that, having been recently selected to offer vocational guidance to high school students, she needed inputs on how to effectively build a relationship with her own users. She admitted feeling insecure and unprepared for her new role, which had 'happened' to her by chance[5]. During career guidance meetings, Mary narrated her story, which revealed much more to the counselor, and to herself. She had studied for three years in a *Liceo*[6] focused on psychology and pedagogy, then she had transferred to an *Istituto Tecnico Commerciale* for the remaining two years. After obtaining the high school diploma, she had spent a few years working as a bar tender in her family-owned business. This job had allowed her to become economically independent, to learn some practical skills, to build relationships in her town. Mary used to recognize all these positive aspects of her job and the 'privilege' of having a family-owned activity, but very soon the routine of being a bar tender had become boring and unsatisfactory for her. As a result, Mary had decided to enroll in university to obtain a bachelor's degree in history, her passion. Simultaneously, she and a group of friends from the university had won a local competition to 'revive' the town's library: they had started a number of new services and initiatives to promote reading and culture in town, especially among school kids. The relationships May had cultivated during her years as a bar tender turned out to be very useful to sustain this new role that she had embraced. Just a few months before the beginning of Mary's counseling path, the local administration had launched a new vocational guidance service for students and she was selected to manage it, together with a couple of collaborators.

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[3] Differently, traditional career theories state that language is merely representational, providing a mean to express a reality that has a prior existence.

[4] All names have been changed to respect the users' privacy.

[5] Youth unemployment is very high in Italy, even for high skilled individuals; therefore, young graduates are often forced to take whatever job they find, rather than choosing among alternative paths based on interests and aspirations. These objective conditions make the process of 'identity building' even harder and more conflicted.

[6] There are many types of high schools in Italy. The *Licei* offer a more theoretical preparation in different fields, while the vocational schools, among which the *Istituto Tecnico Commerciale*, are more practically oriented to the job market.

Being known as a person who believes in education and in the importance of culture, she seemed the right fit for the new service. Mary accepted the new job and she even liked it … the only 'problem', she told the counselor, was that she felt unprepared for it, since 'vocational guidance has nothing to do with history'. Before narrating her story, and finding her career theme, Mary had many colored 'tiles' but seemed unable to create a 'mosaic'.

5. Discussion

Mary's story can be analysed using the concepts of 'occupational plot', 'character arc' and 'career theme' (Savickas, 2011).

In career construction theory, each occupation may be viewed as a short story in the novel of a career. The mere sequence of occupations held by an individual is defined as 'objective career', while explaining connections and relationships among the occupations 'emplots'[7] the objective career and, in doing so, creates a 'subjective career' (Savickas, 2011).

If people organize their lives around a problem that preoccupies them and a solution that occupies them (Savickas, 2011), the 'character arc' can be visualized as the process in which an individual realizes that something is missing in his/her life and subsequently projects concerns and efforts towards a goal to achieve. The progress from need to goal transforms individuals as they grow, develop and learn; their strongest capabilities actually emerge from the solutions to the problems and obstacles they've encountered and overcome in their life.

The career theme can be seen as a 'thread' keeping the many episodes of an occupational plot together. It's a pattern providing the 'primary unit of meaning used to understand the facts of the occupational plot' (Savickas, 2011, p.26) and carrying to work settings the concerns that matter most for the individual in defining self and expressing identity.

In Mary's example, we can emphasize:

o what happened: the *career story*, as described in the previous paragraph;

o why it happened: the *occupational plot*, which reveals a drive towards education and culture (three years of high school focused on psychology and pedagogy), put aside for more practical concerns (two years of vocational school and many years in a low skilled, but economically rewarding job), later on revived by enrolling in tertiary education to study history;

o what it means: the *career theme*. Mary strongly believes in the importance of culture and education. She could not feel accomplished in a merely practical, commercial role as that of the bar tender. Her drive towards culture expressed itself first in the decision to enroll in tertiary education, then in the initiatives she and her group organized at the local library around the intent to 'share' and spread knowledge. There, Mary embraced the role of educator, being recognized as such by the people around her: 'because a self is built from the outside in, not from the inside out' (Savickas, 2011, p. 17). Such recognition turned into an offer to take the lead of a new vocational guidance service, fulfilling the role of educator in a new context.

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[7] *Emplot* means assembling elements into a narrative with a plot (Ricoeur, 1984)

6. Conclusions

In today's constantly changing society, the labour market becomes a stage where actors are asked to interpret many different roles. Young workers, who are at the beginning of their career, can find this extremely difficult, experiencing anxiety and a sense of uncertainty. In this paper we explained how narrative counselling, based on the career construction theory, can be an effective tool to support them, increasing comprehension, coherence and continuity.

Our experience showed how narrating the self helps individuals to comprehend 'what moves them, what they built their lives around, and what ideas their life serve' (Savickas, 2011, p.39). Contradictory stories can coexist within one plot and determining how they fit together prompts significant progress in sense making: 'coherence forms as links join and holds together' (Savickas, 2011, p.40). When individuals tell their stories, a sense emerge, as they recognize the repetition of themes and the presence of values that guide their actions. Themes and values can build continuity in a 'subjective career' even when the 'objective career' appears as extremely fragmented and discontinuous.

This way, the young graduate navigating a 'liquid' (Bauman, 2000) labour market can be seen as a mosaic maker, holding a myriad of coloured tiles in his hands, each representing a bit of lived experience. Narration can be seen as the artistic and reflective process that transforms a myriad of tiles into a beautiful mosaic.

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