

Investigating Changing Work And Economic Cultures Through The Lens Of Youth Employment: A Case Study From A Psychosocial Perspective In Italy

Abstract

Changes in the forms and cultural meanings of work have gone deep during the last decades, with the transient nature of work becoming the norm rather than the exception. This is impacting particularly on youth employment, as Italy's case epitomizes. Based on interview and focus group data, our study provides a multidimensional model to read and map the multiple tensions young people experience, at an emotional level, on entering today's corporations. Our findings show, on the one hand, that young professionals' expectation of work as a place of social learning and exchange clashes with the corporate focus on assimilating young people into target-oriented environments. On the other hand, both in younger and older workers, we found the experience of labour relationships that struggle to direct themselves towards a creative purpose and a developmental prospect, while tending to collapse emotionally inwards, in a fight for security.

Keywords

Young people, work crisis, labour flexibility, life transitions, corporate cultures, development, Emotional Textual Analysis, Italy

Introduction

Changes in the forms and cultural meanings of work have gone deep during the last three decades, with the impact of such changes, both at the individual and the social level, still to be determined. Since 2006, Richard Sennet managed to provide a compelling sketch of the

new cultural ideal which had caught on during the nineties with the worldwide development of Neoliberalism. Central tenets of the new capitalistic discourse were: a) the demand for organizations and individuals to become highly flexible and thus willing to relocate and to radically transform their own goals in the short term, in order to follow the market's global dynamism and permanent innovation; b) a new model of success based on the idea of the 'gifted individual' with his/her talents and potential capabilities, according to a markedly individualistic meritocracy; c) the crisis of trust and belonging in working relationships and the opposite rise of competition as the main organizer for behaviours and mutual expectations in the workplace (Sennet, 2006).

Though the sustainability of this cultural model was called into question by the 2008 global financial crisis, labour flexibilization has further intensified during the last decade (ILO, 2015). Furthermore, due to the development and diffusion of digital technologies, the reshaping of systems of production and labour markets, in many economic sectors, has been such that the international debate is now questioning the future of work and its changing nature (De Stefano, 2017; Méda, 2016; World Economic Forum, 2016).

For multiple reasons, young people are at the centre of this reflection. The impact of the 2008 crisis on young people and young adults was profound, not only in terms of huge losses in employment (Eurofond, 2013) – as a result of the high share of non-standard contracts (fixed-term or temporary contracts) that already characterized youth employment (O'Reilly et al., 2015) – but also in terms of a persistent difficulty in accessing stable employment (Chung, Bekker, & Houwing, 2012; Van Lancker, 2012). This was for example particularly the case in Italy and other Southern European countries (Scarpetta, Sonnet, & Manfredi, 2010).

Since the 2008 crisis, a trend established in the recessions of the 1980s and 1990s has led to a structural change. Not only has the duration of the school-to-work transition increased (Mourshed, Patel, & Suder, 2014) but the transient nature of work is now protracted to the point of becoming the norm rather than the exception (ILO, 2017). Therefore, the very use of the term ‘transition’ to characterize the part of life we call youth as opposed to supposedly stable adulthood, loses its efficacy (Furlong & Cartmel, 2007).

This has corresponded to a further emphasis on the employability narrative within employment relationships – especially with regard to young graduates entering employment – which has been criticized in literature as promoting destructive competition and individualism (Hallier, 2009).

Nonetheless, there is still a lack of empirical studies investigating how young people are responding to the changes mentioned above (Franceschelli & Keating, 2018; Lam & de Campos, 2015); specifically, how they deal with and subjectively make sense of the multiple transitions they experience at work. In this article we address these issues by focusing in particular on the different meanings that work acquires today for young graduates, and the multiple tensions they experience, at an emotional level, entering corporate environments. We discuss the results of a study in an Italian sample that enabled us to explore how youth cultural expectations of work and working relationships diverge from as well as interact with the economic culture they encounter in companies.

This work is grounded on a psychoanalytic and psychodynamic theory of emotion as a specific way and level of sense-making, linked to the unconscious, which produces our experience of the world – namely, every aspect in it, including work – as something animate, involving us, engaging us in a relationship charged with affective connotations (Salvatore & Freda, 2011). These connotations are rooted in the culture and the context we belong to.

Italy was one of the countries in Europe most adversely affected by the great recession, in terms of productivity and employment. In 2013, the youth unemployment rate was 3.3 times as high as the total unemployment rate, making it one of the worst YUR/TUR ratios in Europe (Marelli & Vakulenko, 2016). Italy is also one of the countries that has most embraced making the job market flexible as the main strategy to help restart and energize the national economy (Fana, Guarascio, & Cirillo, 2017). Nonetheless, overall productivity has remained weak compared to Italy's main competitors (Battisti & Vallanti, 2013; Cappellari, Dell'Aringa, & Leonardi, 2012), while workers' legal and trade-union protections have been progressively and substantially downsized (Fanelli et al., 2006; Fana et al., 2017). Thus, the theme of labour flexibility as a way to create job opportunities or, on the contrary, as a source of instability and disempowerment for workers has been at the heart of an intense public debate, with the condition of young workers as a core issue (Gallino, 2007). This is the context of the study presented here. It was carried out within the framework of an apprenticeship programme promoted by a network of big Italian and international corporations, with the goal of fostering youth employment and employability in the country, by way of a new and more effective scheme of labour flexibility.

The Italian case study proposed here is of particular interest because of the intensity of the youth employment problem in the country, which also affects highly-qualified young workers and in higher proportions when compared to other European countries (OECD, 2017). Given the kind of companies involved in the programme, mostly Italian subsidiaries of big multinational corporations, our data allowed us to investigate how a growing divergence between global economic interests and workers' local expectations (Thomas, 2013) is reverberating on labour relationships, on a subjective and intersubjective level.

Research context, design and data collection

The present study was carried out in the context of an apprenticeship programme that took place between 2013 and 2016. The programme was promoted by a network of big corporations (mostly in the mass media, telecommunications and energy sectors) in cooperation with a professional training institute and multiple universities, with the aim of creating employment opportunities and fostering the employability of 100 young graduates.

Outstanding academic results and an excellent knowledge of English were two main eligibility requirements to enter the programme. The selected candidates had the chance to work, under a work-training contract, at two of the companies involved in the programme (one year in each company consecutively) with the guidance of a line manager as their corporate mentor, and to follow specialist and transferable skills training sessions before and during the work experiences. The participants mostly had a masters in one the following fields: engineering, economics, statistics or mathematics. The main employment areas were marketing and sales, financial operations, computing and information technology.

The guiding rationale of the programme was to counteract the situation of severe youth unemployment in Italy by encouraging a new culture and approach to labour flexibility. This was based on an employment scheme offering job security and relatively high wages for two years while at the same time enhancing the participants' employability and future career prospects.

We conducted focus groups and individual interviews with a sample of the young workers participating in the programme and their corporate mentors. The inquiry concentrated on the two lead companies for the network, both multinationals in the telecommunication industry. The interviews were performed in two different times, at the beginning (T1) and at the end (T2) of the first working year, and were carried out separately

with the two research groups (young workers/mentors) involving in total: 24 young workers and 11 mentors at T1; 22 young workers and 10 mentors at T2.

This research design aimed at mapping possible meaningful differences in experience between the two groups as well as comparing initial expectations and final perceptions so as to monitor significant changes over time. Each mentor followed generally more than one new entrant; this is why the former are lower in number than the latter.

The focus group interviews (12 in total) lasted from one hour to one and a half hours, while the duration of the individual interviews (3 in total) was approximately 30-40 minutes. As far as the interview method is concerned, all interviews were based on one initial open-ended question aimed to let the interviewees freely narrate their expectations and experience. We used open-ended questions each time, always featuring the same keywords, with minor contextual adjustments. The constant presence of the same keywords is methodologically essential in order to compare the interviewees' considerations (between groups and over time). While focus groups and individual interviews do not produce *per se* the same kind of data, their combined use is quite common in literature. In our study, individual interviews were used only in a few cases, when one interviewee could not join the focus group. Like in other studies (e.g., Campbell, Foulis, Maimane, & Sibiya, 2005), using the same trigger question in both situations grants homogeneity in the context of reflection, in order to treat the data coming from the two sources together. More specifically, at T1, the young participants were asked what they expected of the new work experience; while the mentors were asked their expectations of the young workers who were about to start working in their company. At T2, both the research groups were invited to say what they thought of the past working year. Furthermore, both in the initial and the final interviews, the two research

groups were asked to outline what problems they expected to face/they faced and how to deal/they dealt with them.

Emotional Textual Analysis

All interviews took place in Italian. They were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim¹ and put together in a single textual corpus that was analysed by Emotional Textual Analysis (ETA). This is a method of psychological text and discourse analysis that was developed in the eighties by Renzo Carli and Rosa Maria Paniccia to enable psychological research and intervention with social groups and organizations (Carli & Paniccia, 2002; Carli, Paniccia, Giovagnoli, Carbone, & Bucci, 2016).

From a theoretical-epistemological viewpoint, ETA rests on a psychoanalytic theory of emotion as a form of knowledge linked to the unconscious. In particular, the contributions of Matte Blanco and Fornari to a shift in psychoanalytic theory from a drive model to a semiotic model of the mind were central to the development of ETA. According to Matte Blanco (1975), conceptualizing the unconscious as the place of contents repressed out of consciousness because morally unacceptable, was inadequate to describe mental phenomena. He proposed that conscious and unconscious mind could be described in terms of a *bi-logic*: in other words as two modalities of sense-making, profoundly different from one another, as regards the rules by which they are governed, but equally systematic and continuously interacting. The former is ruled by conventional cognition and by the non-contradiction principle (which states that, e.g., if $A > B$, then B cannot be $> A$ at the same time; thus, A and B are distinct objects). The unconscious mental activity, by contrast, is symbolic and emotional, and governed by principles of symmetry and generalization (the unconscious treats any relationship as if it were symmetrical and any part as if it were the whole; thus, objects can be

assimilated with each other along potentially infinite associative chains. E.g., if Marco is the father of Bruno, then also the reverse is possible). This *bi-logic* implies that those aspects of reality that we perceive as endowed with a clear and univocal sense in terms of cognition, are, at the same time, emotionally polysemic: that is, they evoke multiple experiences and associations in terms of unconscious meanings, which determine our subjective relation to reality. This double level of meaning is reflected in language and can be inferred by studying language (Fornari, 1976).

In the eighties, from this theoretical perspective Carli and Paniccia described how emotional symbolization unfolds within and through social relationships (that is, beyond the intrapsychic domain) (Carli & Paniccia, 1981). According to their notion of *emotional collusion*, people belonging to a certain social or organizational context (e.g., teachers and students in a school, doctors and nurses in a hospital unit and so on) share ways to emotionally symbolizing it (Carli, 2006). This is expressed for example in the etymology of words. Commonly used words have particular emotional connotations that often only become clear by explicitly addressing their historical roots in people's speech. Social relationships reduce the variability of the emotional meaning that we attach to aspects of social reality (variability which is virtually infinite at the individual level as it is linked to unconscious polysemy) and organize a common symbolic process between social actors (Carli & Paniccia, 2002)². This emotionally shared symbolic process plays an important role because it works as a kind of implicit premise that primes and orients the participants' subsequent interpretative activity and interactions within a context: i.e. ways of interpreting events, evaluating, decision-making (Salvatore & Freda, 2011).

Carli's and Paniccia's work within a broadly varied research and clinical field, shed a new light on the functioning of social groups and organizations by mapping emotional sense-

making inside them. They developed ETA with the goal of establishing a standardized tool for conducting such analysis.

ETA analyses aim at fostering reflection on the emotional meaning that the research participants attach to the topic at the centre of the exploration. Such emotional meaning, as conceived in the ETA approach, is never univocal but always made up of a multiplicity of affective connotations, connected to specific cultural and historical features of the local context into which the research unfolds, that can be mapped in a systematic way.

To this end, ETA uses an operational procedure combining quantitative and qualitative data analysis. This procedure breaks up the narrative order of the text, which answers to a communicative aim and is based on the dividing and heterogenic logic of conscious thought, so as to produce a new organisation of the text, which is assumed to allow us to grasp a different order in the text, namely its emotional order, based on the symbolic logic of the unconscious.

The quantitative analysis is carried out by means of software for textual data analysis, *Alceste* (Reinert, 1993), and starts by isolating in the textual corpus what we call *dense words*, whose emotional meaning (emotionally charged with polysemic values) is immediately evident even when we take the word out of its discursive context. *Dense* stands here for emotionally dense. For example, words such as ‘to go away’, ‘hatred’, ‘failure’, or ‘ambition’ are characterized by a maximum of emotional density. On contrast, words like ‘to go’, ‘to think’, ‘to do’, like modal, auxiliary and widely used verbs, or many adverbs, have a low emotional profile and do not indicate emotions except, at times, within a sentence (Carli et al., 2016). These are considered non-dense³. The software generates a dictionary of all words contained in the text, with related roots and frequencies, thereby allowing the researcher to select among them only the dense words. Subsequently, the program cuts the

text into homogeneous segments, called Elementary Context Units (ECUs). These are sentences or fragments of sentences delimited by punctuation (in order of priority: . ; ? ! : ,) so as to have similar length. In so doing, the text is modeled in terms of a logical matrix of dense words and EUCs. On this matrix Alceste conducts a descending hierarchical classification (Reinert, 1993), designed to classify the context units according to the similarity or dissimilarity of the words occurring in them so as to map the most significant lexical repertoires in the text. Clusters of dense words are thus discerned, and then projected into a factorial space which clarifies their reciprocal connections (figure 1 and table 1)⁴. Each cluster contains a list of the dense words that characterize it, ordered by chi-square value (χ^2 ; table 2). The larger this value, the more significant the occurrence of the word within the ECUs belonging to that cluster. We know also how the clusters are in relation to the illustrative variables considered: i.e., group (young workers/mentors) and time (T1/T2), also expressed in terms of χ^2 (table 3).

Finally, the meaning of the clusters inside the factorial space is interpreted through qualitative analysis. The interpretative work is guided by specific psychological models (Carli & Giovagnoli, 2011) and proceeds as follows: beginning with the dense words with the larger χ^2 in each cluster, we first study the word's etymology, as a way to explore its emotional polysemy. This refers to the ability of a word – according to the symbolic logic of the unconscious – to activate simultaneous semantic connections with a multiplicity of other signs, based on its present and past usages (Matte Blanco, 1988). Then, by studying the meaning of a single word in relation to the other words in the cluster, and by analysing relationships between clusters inside the factorial space, we progress in grasping the emotional sense of the issue at stake for the research participants in its various components, increasingly differentiated and specific.

While interpreting the clusters, in the qualitative part of the ETA, we also study the link with the interviews' content; relevant literature on the topic of study; and background knowledge of the research context and of the local culture. This is in order to understand how the affective symbolisations that we have been examining give rise to specific social dynamics or are the outcome of specific cultural processes.

Three researchers performed the qualitative analysis. They worked independently on the interpretation of different clusters and factors, and had periodic discussions until a good level of agreement between all judges on the reading of the factorial space as a whole was reached. At the end of the study, several meetings were devoted to discussing the results with the interviewed groups and with the management of the corporations involved, which allowed us to verify and further develop our conclusions.

Results

Of a total of 1.151 ECUs, 840 units (72,98%) were classified in a stable way in the clustering process, which indicates a very good fit between model and data.

The data analysis produced four clusters⁵ of dense words within a factorial space of three factorial axes. Figure 1 and table 1 illustrate the factorial space and the statistical relationships between clusters and factors. We discuss now the clusters' and the factors' interpretation, starting from the first factor, which accounts for the highest proportion of total variance (table 1).

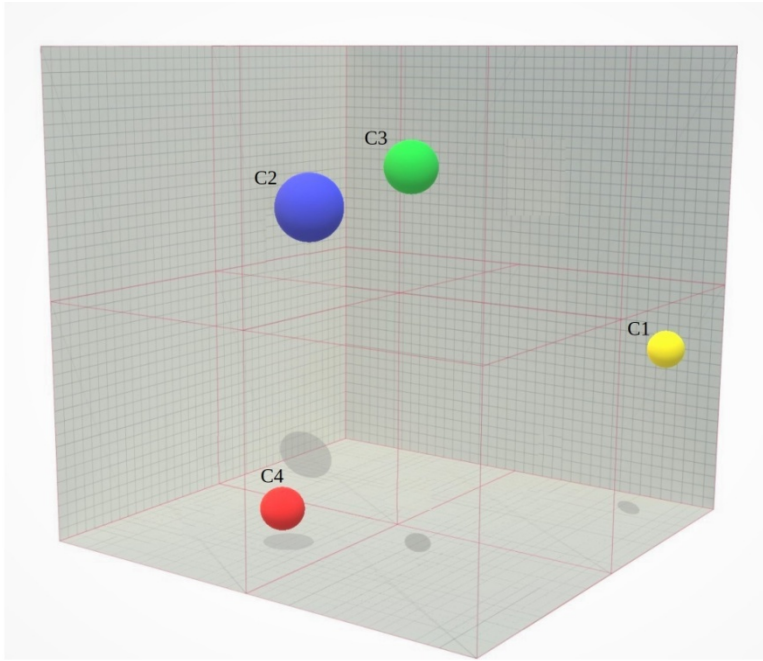


Figure 1. The factorial space

Note: the three factorial axes correspond to the three spatial dimensions: horizontal (first factor), vertical (second factor) and distance (third factor, broken line).

Table 1. Relationship between clusters and factors (*cosines*^a)

	Factor 1 (39% ^c)	Factor 2 (34% ^c)	Factor 3 (27% ^c)
Cluster 1 (15.96 % ^b)	.790	-.156	-.593
Cluster 2 (38.76 % ^b)	-.823	.406	-.398
Cluster 3 (20.20 % ^b)	.493	.608	.622
Cluster 4 (25.08 % ^b)	-.141	-.906	.400

Note: Each factor has to be considered as a continuous dimension with a positive and a negative polarity, and a central point that corresponds to the central point of the whole space where the factorial axes intersect.

a The cosine function expresses the intensity of the correlation between factor and cluster (from 0 to 1); in other words, it indicates which factors contribute more to explaining the position of the cluster within the structure of the data. The most significant correlations are shown in bold.

b Percentage of ECUs included in each cluster amongst the total number of classified ECUs.

c Factor's eigenvalue. It expresses how much of the total variance a factor explains.

Table 2. Clusters of dense words (ordered by chi-square value*)

Cluster 1		Cluster 2		Cluster 3		Cluster 4	
χ^2	Dense words	χ^2	Dense words	χ^2	Dense words	χ^2	Dense words
138.16	Hope	50.88	Project	70.80	To learn	56.68	Absolutely
63.20	Available	43.42	Responsible	46.40	Environment	46.36	Immediately
53.52	Mentor	36.04	Effects	40.18	Challenge	30.36	Junior
51.96	To assign	30.66	Role	40.18	Life	28.02	Management control
32.86	Constructive	25.96	Contract	33.46	To share	28.02	Fast
32.86	Engagement	19.60	Training	31.00	Competence	27.56	Autonomous
31.90	To listen	19.60	Level	31.00	True	27.56	Line
29.06	Skills	19.34	Vacation days	30.62	Contact	27.40	To integrate
21.06	To agree	19.34	Corporation	30.28	Engineer	24.22	To go away
21.06	Force	17.08	Resource	26.44	Human	24.22	Content
18.12	Feedback	16.06	To welcome	23.94	Awareness	24.22	Deadline
17.86	Task	13.30	HR	23.94	Written	24.22	Senior
17.86	Support	13.30	Risk	22.56	Friend	22.20	Proactivity
15.82	To ask			22.56	World	22.10	Age
15.82	Academic degree			22.56	Stress		
				21.50	To improve		

* In decreasing order.

Table 3. Illustrative variables (ordered by chi-square value*)

Cluster 1		Cluster 2		Cluster 3		Cluster 4	
117.38	T1	266.88	T2	78.98	T1	256.04	Mentors
55.50	Young people			73.96	Young people		

* In decreasing order.

Cluster 1

Cluster 1 (C1) is opposed to Cluster 2 (C2) on the first factorial axis. We will address the sense of such an opposition later in this section. Looking at the illustrative variables, the cluster is predominantly associated to the *initial interviews* with the *young workers* (table 3); specifically, it casts light on one component of their expectations before entering the work context (another component is expressed in Cluster 3).

The words with the highest χ^2 value in the cluster (table 2) are *hope – speranza* in Italian –, followed by *available – disponibile* in Italian –, *mentor* and *to assign*. From Latin *spēs*, the Italian word *speranza* indicates aspiration towards a goal, feeling drawn to the latter and keen to reach it. *Disponibile*, from Latin *dis-porre*, literally means to place separately and therefore to put in order, to place everything in an order designed for the achievement of an end. Similarly, *to assign*, from Latin *ad-signare*, means to fix, to establish. Finally, *mentor*, from Ancient Greek *mon-eyo-*, etymologically indicates he who admonishes the spirit with knowledge. The experience which emerges in this initial stage seems to be that of reaching towards a desired goal which, nevertheless, in its uncertainty, triggers the need for a power or a principle of order capable of solving the uncertainty by setting rules and showing the right way. This, however, as suggested by the following words in the cluster, fosters the fear of yielding to such power. In our interpretation, the participants wish to play a *constructive* role in their future workplace and *engage* in work, but at the same time they seem to be worried about being put in a position where they must passively accept the *tasks* they are assigned, as they have little or no power of negotiation (see the words, *to agree* and *force*). In this sense, the relationship with the mentor takes on a greater relevance as a mediating space in which the participants expect to be *listened* to and *supported* in putting their *skills* to better use (consistently with their *academic degrees*) as well as to be able to *ask* questions and get *feedback* on work.

Cluster 2

On the opposite pole of the first factor, C2 is closely related to the *final interviews*, i.e. at the time when, after a year's work, the employment at the first company comes to an end and the participants are about to start their second work experience at another company. Unlike C1,

C2 encloses elements that regard both the mentors and the young employees, thus are indicative of a communal experience.

The first three words in the cluster (those with the highest χ^2 value) are *project*, *responsible* and *effects*. *Project*, from Latin *pro-jàcere*, throwing forward, indicates movement forward in the effort to anticipate the future, but also conjures up the thought of being exposed, being tossed ahead in this effort. *Responsible* – from Latin *responsus*, response, answer – refers here, in our interpretation, to the demand for a response concerning the *effects* of the working experience, that is, for someone to pass a judgement on the experience, making the latter actually effective. Pending the response, the experience is on emotional stand-by. The word *responsible*, in Italian, is also a noun that indicates the person in charge, the manager. Thinking of the future is therefore associated with the need for answers (which, apparently, must come from the outside) and to see the effects of the commitment undertaken.

The following words in the cluster – *role*, *contract*, *training*, *level*, *vacation-days* – corroborate and develop this emotion. The *role* was, originally, the roll (of paper) on which an actor's part was written; similarly, the *contract* is the writing that regulates the relationship between two parties. At the end of a working year, in which the participants were atypically employed under work-training contracts, the demand emerging in this cluster – as we can see from the words just mentioned that evoke normative dimensions – is to regulate and regularize the work relationship, to be considered on the same *level* as all other employees, as to see one's own position in the workplace clarified and strengthened. The reference to vacation days is very interesting, we believe, in this sense, i.e. they are the epitome of a relationship in which the suspension of work is a right – literally the right to rest – and not the result of an exclusion. There is the wish to rest from the tension of uncertainty.

The last words in the clusters are *corporation*, *resource*, *welcome*, *HR* and *risk*. *Resources*: this is the way the new entrants were called in the programme, using a word borrowed from Human Resources jargon. From Latin *resurgere*, rise to new life, this word tells us about the emotional experience linked to the young professionals who, coming into the corporation, have the power to resurrect it. Conversely, the *corporation* too is experienced as a safe place for the youngsters, since it *welcomes* them and protects them from the risks inherent in the high instability of the job market. Thus, leaving the company is represented as a danger (*risk* comes from 16c. Italian *riscare*, ‘run into danger’), which makes one think of *HR* divisions and the importance of what their managers will decide, upon completion of the programme, concerning whether or not to renew the participants’ contracts.

Summary of the first factor

C1 and C2 oppose each other on the first factor allowing a comparison between the participants’ expectations at T1 and their experience at T2.

The main point highlighted by this comparison is, in our view, a specific difficulty emerging from the interviewees’ experience, at an emotional level, in the construction of a *third element* towards which to direct the labour relationship. By third element we mean the creative purpose defining a relationship (Carli & Paniccia, 2002), like the product or service a company produces, or, more generally, any element in a relationship that might be identified as something valued, which, through their cooperation, the parties involved aim to develop and pursue. From a psychoanalytic perspective, this *third* has an important role in limiting the affective ambivalence fundamentally implied by any social interaction, as it provides a symbolic framework that produces safety and predictability in the relationship between the individual and the other (Vanheule, Lievrouw, & Verhaeghe, 2003; Benjamin, 2007).

In C1 we find engagement in work driven by a wish for creative achievement: the young participants envisage they will have to go through a conflict, which will require their strength and negotiation, but it is a conflict aimed at the definition of their tasks, thus at an agreement on the third element that will enable them to act and succeed. They expect the mentor to help them navigate through this towards a constructive involvement in work.

In C2, by contrast, at the end of the first working year, the reference to the third element – e.g., to the competences developed through the apprenticeship – seems to be missing, on an emotional level, thereby not providing support to thinking about the future. Rather than being directed towards a creative purpose, the experience of labour relationships that prevails is based on ensuring dependency in a struggle for safety.

It must be noticed that in C2 little or no mention can be found of the work product. This does not mean in any way that the young people involved in the programme did not work productively. Nonetheless, we find that in the subjective representation of the workers interviewed, the interest in the product – i.e., its creation, quality and development – no longer seems to be the core and the organizing principle of labour relations.

The disappearance of the product as a third element in the emotional symbolization of labour, we can assume, is coherent with the general context of a financialized economy (Thompson, 2013). However, for Italy, this acquires a specific value. In a renowned book published in 2007, the sociologist Luciano Gallino compares the incessant debating on labour flexibility and flexible contracts in Italy to the crew of a vessel discussing the amendments to be made to the logo on the sails, instead of taking steps against the storm coming. In fact, he firmly maintained that the real problem of the Italian economy was not the form and duration of employment contracts in itself, but rather the severe underinvestment in Research & Development. Italy's expenditure on R&D activities, both in the public and the private sector,

has constantly been below the EU average in the last thirty years, making it harder to be successful in international competition and to be resilient during the recession following the 2008 crisis (Fana et al., 2017) (the reason for which partly lies in the country's gradual dismantling of large-scale industry beginning in the eighties). With Gallino and a broader economic literature, it is the absence of real investment in product development that converts employment flexibility into work precariousness and uncertainty. This seems to be true also in terms of the emotional dynamics of labour relations.

Second factor

The remaining two clusters, C3 and C4, load onto the second factor where they are opposed. Like C1, C3 is mainly associated to the *initial focus groups* with the *young workers*, but it casts light on a significantly different way of approaching the work context (C3 and C1 are opposed on the third factor as discussed below). By contrast, C4 is strongly associated to the *mentors'* accounts and is the only cluster in the factorial space that is time-independent (no significant relationship with T1 or T2 emerged; table 3).

Cluster 3

The main expectation of the young workers mapped in C3 is *to learn* (in Italian, *apprendere*, from Latin, *ad* (intensifier) and *prehendere*, 'to grasp' new knowledge). Moreover, here the new employment takes on the value of a *challenge*, relevant to their *life*. We will see now in what sense.

Unlike C1 where a dual relationship (mentor-mentee) was salient, central to C3 is the encounter with a more complex reality, an environment. Namely, a learning environment where technical competence (see the word *engineering*, the field in which many of the

participants were trained; from Latin *ingenium*, intelligence) cannot be separated from human and social exchange. Thinking of the first work experiences they are about to start, what the participants value most is the *sharing of competencies* as well as the *awareness* arising from *truly* coming into *contact* with the issues they studied (beyond what is *written* in books) and with people, even forging new bonds of *friendship*.

One must notice that participation in the programme brought about changes and new developments at several levels. For example, some of the participants had to move to another town. This is significant if we consider the re-emerging of youth labour mobility in recent years, both nationally and internationally, in Italy as well as all across Europe (European Commission, 2012). Labour migration brings with it concerns about social integration or isolation, with the workplace often being a primary place of social life for mobile workers. This is one of the reasons why, we can assume, social relationships are central to C3. Moreover, in our case study, the entire programme was organized around the idea of dealing with a group of young people entering the labour market, not single individuals (training and monitoring sessions, for instance, always took place in a group setting). Thus, the *friendship* mentioned in C3, we believe, also relates to that experience of sharing.

In our eyes, this cluster expresses an ‘ecological’ view of work, as a social learning experience and an integral part of a wider life transition. The dense words in it express belief in competence, in the unifying power of intelligence, and also in the possibility of development and of *improving*. Exchange is seen as essential (both in terms of knowledge and of friendship), especially when one feels faced with an oppressive (from Latin *strictus*, *stress* means tight, compressed) *world*.

Cluster 4

On the opposite pole of the second factor, C4 is strongly associated with the mentors' accounts. The most significant words in this cluster are *absolutely*, *immediately*, *junior* and *management-control*.

From Latin *absolutus*, *absolvere*, the word *absolute* literally means 'unrestricted, untied, free from limitation; complete, perfect in itself'. The corporation is here emotionally represented as a closed, independent system governed by its own rules and goals. *Immediate* literally means 'with nothing interposed, direct'. Young people become *Junior* in the corporate language, as opposed to the older employees, the *Seniors*. This sequence of dense words represents the entry of new workers as an incorporation by translation into a corporate code, which serves the structuring of relationships and power.

Management-control is precisely the operational system that translates the complexity of company life into measurable indicators allowing control of the organizational activities towards desired strategies. Control seems to be a dominant feature in this cluster, which exposes mentors to conflicting demands. Whilst helping young mentees to *fastly* achieve *autonomy* in fulfilling their tasks is mentioned as an important objective, at the same time, autonomy implies a certain degree of freedom thereby opening the possibility of conflicts with the company's strategic *line*. Mentors are asked to facilitate the new entrants' *integration* into the working teams, but at the same time the latter are supposed to *go away* after one working year to switch to another company. This employment scheme was intended to provide the participants with a diversified working experience which might enhance their future employability. Thus, mentors seem *content* to have contributed to the mentees' professional pathway. Nonetheless, from the mentors' viewpoint, working in a company also, and primarily, means learning to cope with *deadlines* and being *proactive*.

C4 closes with the word *age* denoting lifetime in its natural course. Lifetime connected to youth formed the backdrop of the whole cluster shedding light, by contrast, on how time is experienced and culturally transformed in the corporations alongside the problem of change.

Summary of the second factor

The opposition between C3 and C4 points to an important difference between job starters and their mentors, which might have a historical and a generational basis.

The key issue at stake is, we believe, the emotional symbolization of change and, likewise, of time, which lies at the heart of the symbolic link between youth and work. Young people wish to learn from experience, which in their mind is fundamentally an experience of exchange and relationship-building enabled by competence. Companies, on the other hand, are culturally represented as a powerfully auto-referential, closed (*absolute*) system, that is, a system tending to assimilate any variability connected to the relationship with the external reality (including the human and social variability) in terms of an internal code designed to follow given organizational patterns.

From the perspective of the young people that we interviewed, work is meaningful as it is fully involved in a life and development trajectory. By contrast, from the mentors' perspective, the hiring of young people appears to be emotionally problematic in an economic culture where managing goals is the guiding principle. No development-related hypothesis can be detected in C4, except that young employees should learn to act *autonomously*, albeit under the control of the company⁶. C4 seems to express the corporate focus on assimilating young people into target-oriented environments. This becomes evident from the emphasis

placed on meeting *deadlines* and acting *proactively*, and the need for young people to learn such skills, with the mentors being a role model for them.

As mentioned above, C4 is the only cluster that is not associated to T1 or T2, in other words which does not seem liable to be reorganized through experience. In fact, the kind of time we encounter here is not the time of experience, but the dimension of time related to achieving targets.

Third factor

The third factor detected by the analysis is important in terms of the difference between C1 and C3. Entering the labour market involves an adaptation process and the relevant models to deal with it. The opposition of C1 and C3 on the third factor reveals two different models of social adaptation prevailing among the young people interviewed. In C1, adjusting to the workplace seems to bring into play primarily the worker's individual skills and capability to perform tasks. The relationship with the mentor is called upon to facilitate the encounter between worker and work context, each thought to be driven by different needs and priorities. The question is how to match them.

In C3, by contrast, the main emphasis is not on the two parties involved (worker and organization, as two distinct, potentially conflicting individualities) but on the sharing and learning stemming from their encounter. Since it is assumed as a shared dimension, competence becomes an integrating factor.

Discussion and conclusions

This study reveals multiple tensions characterizing the relationship between job starters and companies at an emotional level. These tensions are clearly and meaningfully related to

differences between both parties and to transitions over time. In total 4 clusters of dense words could be discerned across all interviews.

The opposition between C1 and C3 on the third factor shows that, interestingly, at the start of their trajectories the young people did not have a single view of work; rather we found two significantly different sets of concerns and expectations. On the one hand (C1), they wish to engage in work and to be allowed to have a constructive role. At the same time, they feel a need to be guided and supported in facing this new commitment, which activates the fear of finding themselves in a powerless position, with no real room to negotiate the tasks they are assigned. This is in line with a representation of the worker and the organization as two separate and conflicting entities, each one striving to achieve its own goals and interests (Verhaeghe, 2012). Hence the importance of the corporate mentor as a mediating function.

In C3, by contrast, in a view that we called ‘ecological’, the job starters think of work as the focal point and trigger of a wider life transition. The sharing between colleagues within the work environment takes centre stage not just in terms of knowledge and competences, but also as a primary source of learning, friendship and social integration. A core issue appears to be the desire to reconcile technique with humanity and the demands of work with the demands of life. So, when they talk about *learning* (the most representative word in the cluster), their wish, at an emotional level, seems to be literally that of ‘ap-prehending’, that is of fully grasping reality, against the multiple splitting to which they feel culturally exposed. Such a demand for integration, we believe, takes on greater importance in the current work scenario, in which workers are challenged by numerous transitions and changes at multiple levels.

However, it is precisely this expectation that clashes with the corporate culture which we found associated to the mentors' accounts in C4. Namely, the opposition between C3 and C4 on the second factor shows that the meanings associated to work, from a certain point of view, tend to polarize. In fact, while to young people work means the chance of grasping reality by learning from experience, in the mentor's experience companies take the shape of closed and target-oriented systems. This is clear in the way time is symbolized (C4): in the corporate myth of being *fast*, with its emphasis on deadlines and proactive actions, time loses any subjective and relational reference and becomes an external constraint that must be managed, controlled – and possibly deleted. Even the terms senior and junior used by the mentors to denote their relationship with the mentees, seem here to evoke a hierarchy that responds to management goals, but does not refer to a career path and a development model in which mastery is gradually achieved over time through exchanges with a mentor.

We believe this is in close connection with the struggle we observed in C2, common to both mentors and young professionals, to make sense of their job in project-like terms.

As appeared in previous works (e.g. Hallier, 2009), also in our case study the employability message proves to be highly ineffective in reassuring and orienting workers faced with labour flexibility. We suggest that this can be interpreted as related to a specific current difficulty, to which this study draws attention, in the construction of the *third element* towards which to direct emotionally the labour relationship. By third element we mean the transformative and creative purpose and overarching goal that human work pursues and which, optimally, both parties (organization and workers) can identify with and invest in, as a shared basis and perspective. When going from the initial (C1) to the final interviews (C2), as highlighted by the analysis of the first factor, the feeling that the meaning of one's actions and experiences depends on external decisions alone seems to be intensified, along with the need

for safety and affiliation, while no reference is made to the product, existing and future, of the apprenticeship in which the young professionals are involved.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, this is important because the interest in the *third element* is symbolically closely connected with the capability of a relationship not to collapse emotionally inwards, but to direct itself towards development. We suggest this might be a useful lens to study the issue of employment, especially of youth employment, in future psychosocial research.

The Italian case, we believe, has been particularly effective in bringing a difficulty in the emotional construction of the third element to the fore as a key question in employment relationships nowadays. Remarkably, in Italy, the liberalization of labour markets did not correspond to a proportionate investment in research and product development in the country, and the reform process outlined was therefore devoid of a real development framework (Gallino, 2007; Fana et al., 2017). At the same time, in line with other works (e.g., Verhaeghe, 2012), the results of this study highlight the broader tendency of the contemporary corporate world, in particular of big multinational corporations, to operate on a self-referential basis, thus regardless of the pursuit of products whose value and meaning might be subjectively and socially shareable (Gallino, 2011; Méda, 2016).

Notes

1. Particular attention was paid to reproducing the flow and rhythm of speech by means of punctuation.
2. *Colluding*, from Latin *cum-ludere*, literally refers to this process of shared emotional symbolization.

3. Depending on the context, a word may acquire particular emotional relevance. Thus, the selection of dense words is guided by knowledge of the local research context.
4. The factors are outlined through a correspondence analysis performed on the matrix crossing the dense words and the clusters resulted from the hierarchical classification.
5. This kind of partition, in four clusters, was determined by the hierarchical classification as the one that best represented differences and similarities in the way the dense words occurred within the text.
6. ‘The development of a multi-skilled, autonomous workforce has gone hand in hand with the overall persistence – the amplification even – of prescriptions and control: though work has become more autonomous, it is a controlled autonomy’ (Méda, 2016, p. 8).

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