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## Career development told through narrative research: exploring the stories of Italian and English young people

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*Abstract: To construct a career is a complex developmental task that involves several contextual and personal factors. Uncertainty and instability characterise modern societies, evident in some Mediterranean countries. The present study aimed to explore the processes of career development, and meaning making, and how cultural and contextual factors may affect students' career choices and development in 21 Italian and 20 English university students attending the first year. They produced written narratives inspired by the same prompt using a narrative approach. Findings confirm differences in career development and choices linked to the effect of contextual factors and to different lifestory trajectories.*

### **Introduction**

According to the literature, career development is a main task from both a developmental point of view (Holland, 1985; Super, 1957) and from an identity perspective (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1993). To construct the self as “worker” is a complex process that entails the whole life, from childhood to adulthood (Hartung, Porfeli, & Vondracek, 2005; Super, 1985, 1990; Skorikov, 2007), in a continuous organizing and understanding of personal experiences, wishes, interests and career goals, in order to integrate them in a coherent way (Kielhofner, 2007; Skorikov & Vondracek, 2007; 2011). Skorikov and Vondracek (2007) suggest that career development is a process that is aimed at the organization, the understanding and the integration of several selves experimented with as “worker”. **The** main goal is to establish a coherent sense of self at work. From an identity perspective, this process can be defined as the developing of the vocational identity. Thus, according to the authors (2007; 2011), this process allows individuals to control the assimilation and the integration of career information useful to construct a career project, and to face eventual career problems met during its construction. In other words, **the** career project is **taken to mean** the designing and the planning of a career path that has, as **its** final goal, the realization of whom the individual wishes to become as worker.

Super (1985) pointed to base-line conditions in order to develop adequately the career development tasks, such as individualising consistent vocational preferences, formulating career goals and planning long-term career projects. Savickas (2002, 2005) adds to Super’s theory with the dimension of adaptability as a framework to understand the process of career development. From

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this point of view, career development depends on several factors and on the interaction between personal characteristics and social and cultural contexts; the latter seems to influence the construction of self in the world of work (Usinger & Smith, 2010). According to several authors (Kroger, 2007; Savickas, 1985; Vondracek, 1995; Zimmer-Gembeck & Mortimer, 2006) the development of vocational identity and its progress is related to complex processes, influenced by both psychological and social aspects: thus *psychosocial* is the term we use in this paper. Despite the apparent continuity of career and vocational identity development, the pathways are variable and can be disrupted. According to a developmental contextual perspective on career development (Vondracek, Lerner, & Schulenberg, 1986), this points to a dynamic process influenced by relevant significant relationships and broader social factors, such as social, cultural and economic changes that characterize post-modern societies (Skorikov & Vondracek, 2011). Several studies on career and vocational identity development during the transition to adulthood, suggest that adolescents and young adults have difficulties with formulating career goals and making occupational commitments (Aleni Sestito *et al.*, 2015; Fadjukoff, Pulkkinen & Kokko, 2005; Mortimer, Zimmer-Gembeck, Holmes & Shanahan, 2002; Skorikov, 2007). These difficulties can make the transition from school to work or from one educational level to another as a step towards a career project, a “transitional stressor” (Aleni Sestito, Sica & Nasti, 2013). In this sense, the vocational identity domain, where decision-making takes shape, is experienced as difficult and stressful (Erikson, 1968). In Erikson’s conception, overall identity is articulated in and defined by domain-specific identities. Post-modern societies characterized by globalization, prolonged schooling and occupational uncertainty, make complex the definition and consolidation of vocational and overall identity. Research indicates that factors such as, rapid shifts in occupational structures and labour markets, technological innovation, the need for lifelong learning, a growing demand for flexibility and mobility at work, together with a decrease in the availability of normative, predictable, long-term career paths - have direct or indirect effects on career and vocational identity development (Blustein, 2006; Patton & McMahon, 2006, 2014; Skorikov & Vondracek, 2011). Life as lived is messy; individuals operate within complex changeable systems, where continuity and change interact in uncertain ways, affecting the possibility of rational planning for career goals; as outlined by Pryor and Bright (2011) in their chaos theory of careers.

The discussion above offers an image of post-modern societies as more complex, more fluid (Bauman, 2002) and unstable (Giddens, 1991) than in the past. Such characteristics coupled with the particularities of each job market, result in varied pathways leading to differences in terms of the timings of career and vocational identity development, as each are set within different cultural and socio-economic contexts. This suggests that different approaches to career development are

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required according to context. This is particularly the case where career development work is set in a context of high unemployment across Europe, with youth unemployment peaking at 19.2 million in the second quarter of 2013 (Eurostat, 2015). More recently, the figure stands at 4.280 million young people under 25 (Eurostat 4/2017) unemployed in the EU28, where the youth unemployment rate was 18.8% with the lowest rate in Germany (6.7%) and the highest rate in Greece (46.1%), with Spain (44.4%) and Italy (39.4%).

The study reported in this paper examined the differences that emerged in distinct contexts, alongside searching for what may be common. Paying attention to context is essential, in order to avoid the slide into over-psychologised approaches focused on individual decision making, which can overshadow social, economic and cultural aspects that affect career development and the choices individuals are able to make (Sultana, 2011, 2014). Part of the rationale for the study was to highlight the complexity experienced by young people as they think (or avoid thinking) about their future plans. There is a need for more sensitive understandings of the social and economic forces that limit clients' career thinking around aspirations or indeed constrain a young person's ability to move towards satisfying work. Attention paid to context, at the level of the individual, the community and the nation state, reminds us that life as lived can be overwhelming at times; thoughts about a future career may not seem relevant in challenging economic times. Established theories of career development can lead to over-individualised methods of intervention that will be irrelevant in times of economic hardship. The experience of many young people is that opportunities to pursue a career matched to personality traits or to one's stage of development are simply not available (Roberts, 1977, 1997, 2005). As indicated above, the current employment opportunities for large numbers of young people across Europe remain gloomy. As is shown later in the paper, young people's stories in such circumstances are "constructed" by the economic organisation of work, rather than their job matching, aspirations and capabilities (Sultana, 2014).

According to recent international literature (Nota & Rossier, 2015; Savickas, 2011), career development cannot to be considered only as an intra-individual process, overlooking individuals' interaction with and within their contexts. Constructivist approaches suggest placing individuals in an open system characterized by continuous exchanges and interactions with contexts aimed to establish stability (McMahon, 2017). This kind of approach has had a growing application to vocational psychology and especially to career counselling.

Constructivist career counselling recognises the importance of story as an attempt to make meaning of and to construct one's life (Patton & McMahon, 2014). Thus, the counsellor acts as co-author in the storytelling in order to facilitate the exploration of career stories to construct and re-construct meaning (Savickas, 2011). In addition constructivist career counselling suggests

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considering, in this process of construction and reconstruction, the context of the individual (McMahon, 2017), thus the aim is to develop a more holistic understanding of career development.

### **Narrative approach to career development**

Moving on, according to McAdams (2011), in late adolescence young people are able to use the construction of stories in order to represent their identities in a coherent way. They do this via their capacity for meaning-making and self-reflection. In this perspective, a narrative approach allows young people to integrate their sometimes contradictory experiences in order to make sense of their lives and main life events, and at the same time to reflect on them: this is viewed as a main developmental task (Bruner, 1993; Kunnen & Bosma, 2000). A narrative approach can explore how each person manages changes that may be perceived as a threat to their sense of personal continuity (Pasupathi, Mansour, & Brubaker, 2007) and can contribute to vocational/career identity formation, especially during transition periods. Giddens (1991) suggests that narrative helps to maintain a coherent sense of identity through time, despite being in a social context characterised by fragmented identity and conflicting social rules. Career development and vocational identity, however, can find expression in a story about career through life themes (Ashfort, Harrison & Corley, 2008). According to Wijers and Meijers (1996), constructing a career story can help self-definition, and help to deal with the changing context of work using meaning-making processes that can lead to a sense of future direction.

Storytelling, we argue, is fundamental to a nuanced approach for career development intervention, emphasising the need to understand what the young person, in context, finds culturally relevant in terms of practice. In the current context of migration into Europe, the methods we use to support young people need to encompass a reflexive and critical approach to cultural relevance (Watson, 2013; Arulmani, 2014; Reid & West, 2014). As the paper highlights, there are differences within the two groups from two countries within Europe, but across Europe there are young people entering the education system who will have little or no understanding of the host language and little or no experience of a European educational context. As we move on to discuss the context for two different groups of students in two European cities, we are mindful this does not represent the wider context, albeit it will illuminate a number of relevant issues, as discussed later.

### **The Italian context**

The configuration of the transition to adulthood has changed over time because of several social changes. First, this transition takes longer than in the past to reach the different steps that, in normative terms, characterizes the move from childhood to adulthood. For instance, leaving the

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parental home, entering the job market and starting a family (Leccardi, 2006). This new configuration can be found in a number of European countries (as described in the *Mediterranean model*; Cavalli & Galland, 1995), and among these, Italy is characterized by a specific “delay syndrome” (Livi Bacci, 2008). This is characterised by a prolonged stay in education, as a high percentage of Italian students chose to continue their educational path in university. Even after the completion of a degree course, the uncertainty of the Italian job market compels them to add specialisations and job experiences, which are often unpaid (Istat, 2015). The outcome can be a delayed entrance into the job market with consequent instability, insecurity and economic uncertainty (Berton, Richiardi, & Sacchi, 2009; Boeri & Galasso, 2007; Iezzi & Mastrobuoni, 2010). During this long period (through education into the first occupation) it is common to stay in the parental home, more so than in other countries (Crocetti, Rabaglietti & Sica, 2012; Sica & Aleni Sestito, 2014), and the moving out occurs, in the main, for marriage and parenthood (Livi Bacci, 2008). The percentage of unemployed Italian young people has increased since 2012. Even if the situation, as a result of tax breaks, seems to have improved during the last year, the general Italian work situation is still critical, especially for young people for whom the rate of unemployment is again at 40.1% at December 2016 (Istat, 2017). The national youth employment rate is equivalent to 39.4% (Eurostat, 2017). This data places Italy third from last in European countries, with a significant gap between the north and south of the country: worse in the southern regions of Italy. The Italian data for the project were collected in a large city in the South of Italy.

The factors described above have an impact on planning for the future, especially in terms of career. Italian young people seem to postpone the defining of their career projects and, consequently, their vocational identity formation is interrupted because of the distressed economic situation in Italy (Aleni Sestito et al., 2015; Sica & Aleni Sestito, 2014). Furthermore, according to Livi Bacci (2008) the future is not viewed and/or felt as controllable and predictable. As a consequence there is more focus on the present by Italian young people, including the definition of future career projects. Moreover, these issues seem to be negatively influenced by limited welfare support, where existent, in terms of public expenditure.

### **The English context**

The transition from compulsory education into further education, training or employment in England is affected by a number of factors related to socio-economic class position, abilities and disabilities, and geographical location, amongst others. It is important to note that the four nations in the UK (England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) have different services for young people and diverse policies relating to entry into Higher Education. Those young people not making

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a successful transition into further education, training or work have been labelled NEET (not in education, employment or training) and, in England, the help that is available from guidance services has been significantly diminished by funding cuts to services and local government authorities (Watts, 2013). The lives, experiences and barriers faced by NEET young people in the UK have been examined extensively (e.g. Simmons, Thompson, Tabrizi & Nartey, 2014; Furlong, *et al.*, 2015). Geographical location also makes a difference whether this is, in broad terms, related to the divide between the North and more affluent South of England, or inner city areas or rural locations. These divisions are complex however, as areas in the South of England affected by both rural and coastal processes of economic decline can also have an impact on life chances (Reid & Westergaard, 2017).

Within the UK, the work of Roberts has been influential when considering the transitions of young people from education into work (1977, 1997, 2005). Roberts' work, based within structural theories that focus on socio-economic status and the organisation of work, highlights how career outcomes are stratified along divisions that aid or constrain the possibility of choice – this contrasts with theories that focus on psychological traits and individual “free choice” in terms of decision making, as alluded to earlier. From Roberts' perspective, the first job gained is largely determined by social class, family background and access to social capital: all of which shapes the educational experience, career aspirations and possibilities for the majority of young people. With the decline in traditional employment routes for young people, Roberts suggests they often become warehoused in further education and training schemes that do not necessarily offer the kinds of qualifications that are valued by employers or the society at large (Roberts, 1997). Since the recession from 2010 onwards in the UK, Roberts' sociological macro approach remains pertinent (Roberts, 2013).

In England economic pressures and the introduction of increased fees for Higher Education, have not significantly increased the numbers of students who study near to home and continue to live with their parents (approximately 5%), as the tradition of moving away from home to study in another area of the country continues (THE, 2013). In England and the other home nations, like elsewhere, work and occupations are now dispersed and unemployment has become an individualised experience, where responsibility for unemployment can be felt as a failure by the individual, rather than as the result of wider factors (Sultana, 2011). Market forces work at all levels of education, but the level of individual agency that young people are able to demonstrate as they move through Higher Education, can, however, be increased with the gaining of higher qualifications (BIS, 2016) and, potentially, their career resilience might be enhanced. To put this into a broader context, between September and November 2016 there were 573,000 young people aged 16-24 unemployed, an improvement on the previous year where numbers cited were 630,000

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(HoC, 2017). In April 2016, a public policy reporter commented in the Financial Times (Vina, 2016) that there was a 2.2 percentage decrease in the number of 21-30 year olds in skilled work compared to the previous year, and that on average across the whole population one in five (20%) were in low or medium skilled work. Thus although a higher education degree did mean that on average a graduate would earn more than a non-graduate, the rate of increase was slow and for many this questions the value of a degree at £9,000 per year for fees (living costs are additional).

### **Current study**

The present study has aimed to explore the processes of career development and career planning in two different groups of university students. The two groups of students, one from a large city of the South of Italy and one from a city in South East England, are at the same level of education and timing of transition. In particular, all students attended the first year of a university degree, which is considered a transitional moment (e.g. Wintre & Morgan, 2009). Transitions are considered as biographical turning points because processes of re-elaboration, reconsideration, and construction and reconstruction are activated in response to changing life circumstances (Kroger, 2007).

As described above, modern societies are characterized by factors that create a sense of uncertainty and instability. These aspects assume specific peculiarities in some countries (Mediterranean model; Cavalli & Galland, 1995; Delay Syndrome, Livi Bacci, 2005). Therefore, assuming that social and contextual factors may influence career development (Skorikov & Vondracek, 2011) and make transitions stressful and difficult (Erikson, 1968), the present study has aimed to illustrate how cultural and contextual factors of different countries with specific particularities, may affect students' career decision making and development.

The study was not designed to be make generalisations from a comparison between two groups in different countries, as a comparative study of any significance would need to involve a large sample, but it is intended to be descriptive and to provide an illuminative case study.

Finally, as specified above young people use their capacity of meaning-making and self-reflection to construct their stories in order to represent their vocational identities in a coherent way (McAdams, 2011). Along this line, the present study aimed to understand the meaning-making and its level, drawn from the implied thinking in the construction of the story. In particular, how the participants use their own experiences in order to supplement the information about themselves and their life stories (McLean & Pratt, 2006).



## **Methodology**

### *Recruitment and Participants*

Sampling was a specific type of non-probability method, defined as convenience sampling. This method is based on the availability of participants and their interest to take part in the research. This choice, according to literature, makes more flexible the design for collecting data, consistent with the explorative nature of the present research (Burke Johnson & Christensen, 2013).

Participants consisted of 21 Italian students attending the first year of a Social Services degree (Mean age = 20,25 years; Standard Deviation=1,74) and 20 English students attending the first year of a BA Counselling, Coaching and Mentoring degree (Mean age = 25,72 years; Standard Deviation=10,08), for both groups females constituted 90% of the participants. The Italian students were recruited at one of their courses at the university via collaboration with one of their professors. Participation in the study was voluntary, anonymity was guaranteed and the respondents did not receive payment or other kind of compensation/reward for their participation. The group of Italian students was rather homogeneous in terms of age and educational paths. The English students were recruited through one of their course tutors, and participation was also voluntary with anonymity guaranteed. They also did not receive payment or other kind of compensation/reward for their participation. In the English case, all the students attended the first year of the same degree course, but came from two different student cohorts. The group was more heterogeneous in terms of age and experiences. Some in the group had returned to education as “adult returners” after several personal and work experiences. Not all are “school leavers”, as indicated, many are adults returning to learning and others are in their early twenties.

Concerning the research exercise, for both groups the atmosphere was collaborative and relaxed. Especially so for English students despite their heterogeneity for age and personal experiences, because the groups were small in terms of numbers and it is likely that they knew each other better and had established friendship bonds.

### *Procedure and measure*

We used a narrative device that, according to literature (Bruner, 1987, 1990, 1993; McAdams, 1993, 2001; McLean & Thorn, 2003; Meijers & Lengelle, 2012; Lengelle *et al.*, 2013, 2014) facilitates the production of autobiographical segments. The prompt was designed in accordance with the work of Sankey and Young (1996) and has been used in other studies in the Italian context (e.g. Pizzorno, *et al.*, 2014), and implemented in previous research studies (e.g. Sica, Aleni Sestito & Ragozini, 2014; Aleni Sestito, Sica & Di Palma, 2016). Autobiography, as used

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here, is related to personal history and the way in which an individual arranges/plans/designs choices, career projects (Ibarra, 2003; Savickas, 2011), study and work, and how individuals manage turning points and changes.

The narratives were produced by students based on the following written prompt:

*Tell me your life story. Tell me what point of your life story you have reached, and how you have arrived here...Start from wherever you like. In your story, remember the main turning points or changes and explain how you dealt with them. And now, what your plans for the future are.*

The narrative prompt was administered by the same researcher for both the Italian and English participants. The researcher introduced the purpose of the research to which all participants of the study were invited to take part. Moreover, participants completed an information and consent form that explained the study, what they would be expected to do and how the data would be used in compliance with anonymity and privacy.

Those who wanted to take part in the research, after have signed the consent, were invited to take a sheet of paper and, individually, write a narrative based on the prompt shown above. Given the typology of participants, university students, the administration of the written prompt occurred in a classroom. The researcher clarified that they could write as much as they wanted and without limits of time. Even without a limit of time, for both groups the average time of writing was about one hour.

Finally, in order to guarantee anonymity, they were asked not to write their name on the paper, but only their gender and age. At the end of the session, they handed to the researcher their narrative productions.

### *Data Analysis*

We used an approach to analysis inspired by Merrill and West's work (2009) on conducting biographical research. Our rationale for a narrative and interpretive research methodology was to gather the lived experiences of the young people in an unstructured account. We were interested in the unique perspective and narrative of each young person, albeit we expected that location and the perceptions about job opportunities might influence their narratives. The approach advocated by Merrill and West is designed for in-depth research where the participants are interviewed on more than one occasion over time. We were not able to design the research in this way due to time

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limitations, but we wanted to follow the principles outlined in the approach in terms of the analytical process.

As always, the movement from the interaction in the research exercise to the words in the narratives collected and analysed, cannot capture the life of the person – what we have in the representations is a “snap shot” of their thinking at that time.

According to the instruction, participants were free to write as much as they wanted. The average length of narratives was one and a half pages. The analysis of the English data were conducted by the two researchers of the study separately. The analysis of the Italian data (which were written in Italian), began with the phase of coding, followed by highlighting the themes. This was conducted separately by the Italian researcher (and checked with an Italian research colleague). Once translated into English, the results were fully discussed by both researchers of the study. The separate analyses were conducted following the same guidelines and steps inspired by Merrill and West (2009). First, each narrative was read several times in order to go through the individual stories, followed by a process to highlight key paragraphs, sentences and words. Then the individual stories were coded to highlight the emerging themes (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). The coding was not decided before the reading but emerged with the reading process. The process looked for themes in the individual stories and then for what was common across the narratives. Thus, finally, a reading took place across all the stories, in order to check for shared experiences and patterns which connected across the narratives (Merrill & West, 2009).

We have emphasised earlier that the study was designed to be descriptive and illustrative and we are not seeking to make generalisations. The crisis of representation in small-scale qualitative research is understood; according to literature (e.g. Flick, 2011) a small sample is one of the known limits of this kind of research. However, interpretive research methodologies, in general (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), position the meaning-making practices of human actors at the centre of “scientific” exploration and explanation. As such, they use relatively open-ended perspectives in contrast to a pre-determined set of concepts (we were not testing a hypothesis or assigning preordered codes). The approach is to generate “telling” stories from the analysis and make observations about the interplay of the particular and the general. The intention is to find meaning and possibilities in lives, or groups of lives, rather than seeking generalisable laws or probabilities across large populations. The independent initial analysis and the discussion that followed between the two researchers helped to increase the rigour and the trustworthiness of the suggested findings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The initial individual analyses were compared and discussed fully by the two researchers and the discussion helped us to highlight any differences in interpretation, which is likely to occur, although the analysis was analogous.

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The coding was undertaken to ensure that both researchers were identifying and discussing similar themes for each individual and to check that the frequency or importance across groups was not being exaggerated. Although this draws on the principles of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) the analytical approach did not seek to fragment the data, but used biographical method to integrate them in concepts that can be aggregated in the main themes and/or categories useful to read the phenomenon studied.

Along this line, the analysis across the narratives has shown the emergence of the following main themes: 1) vocational choices and career project; 2) turning points especially in negative terms; 3) independence as a theme across younger participants but with differences across the groups; and 4), a common theme that we named “hope for the future”, but which appeared to hold different connotations across the groups.

### Results

#### *Italian students*

Most of the group is in transition from high school and (except for one participant where university choice was the second plan after a previous career attempt failed) these students are continuing on an educational path without a break (in two cases there was no break but a change of faculty). In the Italian educational system, the high school corresponds to the last level of education for students from 14 to 18 years of age (although the earliest a student can leave education is 16). With reference to national data (Miur, 2016), at the end of mandatory schooling only a few Italian young people decide to look for work. Data suggests that the number of high school students that remain in education is more than 270,000 in the last educational year. This choice to stay in education also relates to students that have gained a degree. Recent data shows that about 70% of university students in the last five years have chosen to attend a post-graduate training course, for example a Master’s programme, or courses aimed at professionalization (AlmaLaurea, 2016). The Italian group in the study seems to conform to this trend. In the research exercise, almost all of them started their life stories from their experiences on the Social Services degree course. This degree course aims to develop a professional in the area of social care, called a social assistant. Even if their stories start from their university experiences, for most of them there was a lack of precise decision making in terms of their career project, despite the apparent vocational choice in undertaking a social care degree:

*“My future, instead, is not defined so well yet, the only thing that I know is that I want to complete my study as soon as possible and then to decide what to do about my life”*

In some case, career projects are vague or general in terms of professional realization:

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*“My projects for the future consist of graduating, studying what I like, and in the meantime doing some jobs that allow me to grow, to gain experience and to develop”*

In one case, the hoped for career (child psychologist) is different from the university path chosen (social science).

*“Future projects? Actually, I do not know what I want to do, of course there are dreams but I have some difficulties. I would wish to become a child psychologist, but I know that it is very difficult - but I like the path that I am following.”*

In those narratives where career projects are clear, they seem to be the product of reflections about their own experience since adolescence, especially if they are about work experience:

*“A turning point in my life was when I was at high school. I took part in a project aimed to help children at their school ... I understood that I would like to help others and for this reason I decided to choose this degree course”*

*“Future projects are for sure to graduate in order to continue my path, started previously, so working always with children but in a way it is more conscious”*

In two cases, a designed career project is the result of professional help requested to deal with personal and family problems:

*“Then one day I met a very important person, a psychologist, during my life path who helped and guided me to take the path most suitable to me”*

Remembering their life stories, as suggested by the prompt, most of them described turning points especially related to their school experiences, such as the difficulties they had to face during their studies, and in particular, difficulties met in the process of making a decision for the future at the end of compulsory schooling. They indicated the transition from school to university as a meaningful turning point in their life, often characterized by uncertainty and confusion especially because of the risk of making a wrong decision:

*“I would call this period of my life: “Confusion”, but who is not confused, lost, or scared when faced with a decision that could be wrong - not to become what you really desire for yourself and for your future”*

One of the common themes refers to the motivations for the educational choices made. For example, the motivation for most of the students appeared to be linked to personal attitudes and characteristics translated into the desire to help others, and only in a few cases were these intrinsic motivations linked to personal experiences of difficulties or having received professional help:

*“I have arrived where I am now, with the consciousness and the will of being someone that helps those that in life were not lucky like me”*

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*“I grew up with amazing people, others less so, but thanks to them I knew different realities, I lived moments that have changed my life and that unavoidably have led me to make the choice to dedicate myself to others”*

Almost all seemed to be focused on their present commitments, i.e. their study at university and short-term commitments that appeared to be related to their plans for the future. These tentative plans for the future indicated another common theme, namely, hope for the future. The narratives clarified the specific meaning of hope, as, it seemed, the likely realization that a career plan is linked to circumstances that are out of their control. Yet, their hope is optimistic, in that what they desire in terms of career, can happen, despite the difficulties related to the Italian job market:

*“Few people have the luxury to design their own life, the most of us, common guys of middle class, rely on luck. Here, now, I would call the present: Hope”*

*English students*

In this group, vocational decision-making has taken place at the point of transition into the broadly vocational course, but the motivation and point of transition varies, related to individual age and experiences. Some adult students narrate about previous experiences of work as a consequence of personal or family needs, for example early or single parenthood: others' choices are related to the necessity to rethink career decisions because of redundancy or a long period of temporary jobs. Those in their twenties, by contrast, have changed their original career goals or have made new choices, because of an unsatisfactory first career idea leading them to “drop out” of previous education.

Despite the heterogeneity, it was possible to identify common themes through the stories told. Before moving on, in the English case it seems important to clarify the kind of degree course definable as a vocational degree. The BA (Hons) Degree in Counselling, Coaching and Mentoring is aimed at entry into the “helping professions” such as professional roles in education, human resources, social care and health-related roles.

One of the main themes in common relates to the motivations for this specific vocational choice. Through the stories, it is possible to highlight motivations based on personal experiences such as family trauma (difficult parental relationships, early parenthood and single parenthood), mental issues (internalizing and externalizing problems) and health problems, and in some cases the experience of professional help as a consequence of such kinds of events. Thus, strong intrinsic motivations seemed to be the foundation of their career choices:

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*“...plans for future are to work with young people struggling with similar issues I struggled with because I know how much it can improve their life as a whole”*

Further, the prompt elicited the telling of their life stories via the remembering of their life paths, turning points and changes experienced. In almost all cases, there are challenges and difficulties closely linked to their motivations, indicated as the reasons for their vocational choices:

*“These three events (...) inspired me to take on a career in the future that helps those who can't help themselves”*

Among the adults returning to education, the turning points relate to moments in their lives when the events have made them reconsider their life paths, due to challenging transitions, redundancy and hard personal experiences. For younger students, those that we can name “school leavers” the transition to university coincided with the perception of an advanced step in the process of separation-individuation (Blos, 1967) and thus a move to independence. Indeed, a common theme for many of this age group is moving away from home, both to go to university and to gain some distance from a difficult situation at home:

*“My most recent turning point was moving away from home to here at university. I have found that being away from home and the study, becoming so independent, the most difficult”*

*“I have moved down here to start university. Very scary moving away from home but I have loved the change. Difficult few years between 12-17, mother was emotionally unstable and depressed, separated from my dad, very difficult relationship with mum”*

In addition, most of the narratives of English students, especially adults returning to education, describe the future in terms of hope. Despite the difficulties, previous personal and social events that led to the turning points described, they felt that they are constructing a new phase of their life stories in terms of career and personal projects:

*“My confidence has grown so much over the last year and I am hoping my future in this role is bright and I am employed on a permanent basis”*

*Similarities and differences*

As specified above, the study was not designed to be make generalisations from a comparison of two groups in different countries, but its descriptive nature and illuminative purpose accommodates the identification of common themes across the narratives. In particular, when considering the transitional moment, which we have referred to as a biographical turning point, by

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contrasting the analysis of the narratives of Italian and English groups, we can identify common themes as well as differences (Merrill & West, 2009).

Analysis indicates that for most of the students from both groups their choices are motivated by personal experiences or personal characteristics. Despite the prompt inviting them to remember main turning points in their life story, but not specifying what kind, most of the participants indicated difficult or negative turning points. Groups differ in age profiles because, especially for the English group, there are a number of students returning to education. Moreover, English students indicated more clearly career plans related to their vocational choices. For younger English students a common theme is the desire for independence. This is shown especially in the motivation to move away from home; this kind of independence is less common in the Italian group. Most of the students of both groups spoke about hope for the future, but it is possible to catch from the narrative some differences about what hope for the future means for the two groups.

For both groups when considering their choices, as told, there seemed to be intrinsic motivations, to act because of personal elaborations, passions or gratification/satisfaction, often related to personal experiences or, in other cases, linked to personal characteristics. Often, individual personal experiences act as motivators for choices and appear as main turning points. Although the prompt does not indicate what kind of change or turning points they should describe, both groups chose to tell about negative changes in terms of difficulties or social and personal problems, **albeit that many identify people who have supported them.**

Differences emerged regarding first, as noted, the kind of students and their age. In the case of the English group, students are adults returning to education and young people in their twenties, whereas for the majority of Italian students, university choice is a continuation of their educational path. Again, while for English students returning to education is viewed in positive terms, a new step on a life path after varied personal and job experiences, for a few Italian participants returning to education it is seen as plan B, after a failed choice or a difficult university path. According to Italian research (Aleni Sestito et al., 2013) changing the original choice or changing a career path is viewed in negative terms, as it is seen as a personal failure or an inability to make the right choice. Moreover, this perception can push Italian students to continue on the chosen path despite difficulties and obstacles.

A theme apparently in common, across the groups, is hope for the future. Even if it is a theme present in Italian narratives, in reading the narratives it was possible to discern differences regarding the meaning. In some English narratives, the meaning of hope appears in terms of a new chapter of life, whereas for most of Italian students hope appears less defined, related to the



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perception of not having control of their future and probably related to the difficulties in finding a job.

Again, even if both groups indicated intrinsic motivations for their choices, only from the English students' narratives could we identify that career projects were evident. In other words, the choice of a degree course in a caring profession for the majority of the entire sample is the result of personal experiences, previous work or voluntary experiences, but for the English students this is, it seems, also the first step of a career project.

Finally, even if not identified in the entire sample, the concept of independence is also different. The independence indicated by younger English students refers to material and practical aspects, such as moving away from home in order to study at university or being able to live independently in economic terms (albeit supported by government loans for study in higher education). The majority of Italian students, instead, speak about an independence linked more to their choices; in terms of one of the first times in which they had to think about their choices by themselves, rather, by contrast, than aspects related to material and practical matters. The majority of the Italian group study at their local university in line with the national trend. Moving away from home is not common. Generally, Italian students live with parents for longer periods than their European peers. This trend is not only due to economic reasons, but also because choices to move away to study are not supported socially. The resulting prolonged transition to adulthood results in a delay in achieving adult roles due to the extended time in education.

### **Discussion**

The study aimed to explore processes of meaning-making and experiences related to transitions, in order to explore aspects of content and process related to vocational choices and career in two different settings. In doing this, from a psychosocial point of view we used a career narrative approach that allowed us, despite the limits of short written narratives, to illuminate aspects of vocational choices as made by the students in the different groups and separate contexts.

The findings, although tentative in terms of the sample size, appear to confirm how the complex process of career development is influenced by, and at the same time, woven into personal and social factors (Kroger, 2007; Savickas, 1985; Vondracek, 1995; Zimmer-Gembeck & Mortimer, 2006). It is possible to highlight in the stories of our participants, the circumstances that led them to take particular paths in terms of career development, even when this is not always linear or clear to the narrator. The narrative approach in this case was used as a research instrument, but at the same time, it created a moment of intervention in the meaning-making that took place. As such, it gave a space for self-reflection and an opportunity, in part, to de-construct in order to re-construct

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the meaning of their own past experiences in the light of their present circumstances (Savickas, 2011).

It is possible to say that for all participants, in both groups, personal experiences had an influence on their choices especially for undertaking vocational degree courses. The difference is the way in which this influence was elaborated, in terms of the level of meaning-making processes (McLean & Pratt, 2006). For example, for adult students the process of meaning-making seems to be more conscious and it is possible to track several steps along the route to the university choice. It is also possible that for those participants who had experience of a previous unsuccessful university path or career experience, the experience led to a deliberate decision to return to education. By contrast, when the choices seem to be a natural continuation of an educational path, which happens especially for most of the Italian students, the development and the improvement of career choices are less obvious and clear.

It would appear that the prolonged education that characterizes the Italian context (Miur, 2016), together with the difficulties in entering the job market (Istat, 2015), can create the belief that a degree is a basic requirement, even if often not sufficient to find a job with a good salary. This belief of the necessity to achieve a degree could influence the choice process and make the imperative to make career choices less relevant: rather than degree choice being the product of a clear career project. From a cultural point of view, it appears that the English students have more support to experiment with early independence both personal, for example moving away from living in the parental home, and, possibly economic, in terms of their perception and experience of the job market – this is a point of difference when contrasted with the Italian students. According to literature (Livi Bacci, 2008), living with parents for a long period is not only a typical aspect of Italian culture, but is also supported by community and families. This is because, on the one hand, it responds to the need to take care of parents, and on the other hand, it is a necessity, especially for economic support, due to the Italian economic situation that does not allow young people to achieve this step in the transition to adulthood (Crocetti, Rabaglietti & Sica, 2012; Sica & Aleni Sestito, 2014).

### **Conclusion**

As described earlier the context for the study is a certain place, in two particular countries, at a specific time; notwithstanding, there are themes that will be recognised in other places where young people are similarly affected by economic decline and insecure job markets. Career development has become more complex due to rapid social and technological changes, economic uncertainty and instability (Giddens, 1991). These changes have affected and characterized many

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countries with specific differences linked to cultural and social aspects in each country. According to Skorikov & Vondracek(2011) and Savickas (2011) these critical aspects can influence the analysis of vocational interests and attitudes in the process of imagining and planning career goals, making it more complicated to develop a career project. In terms of intervention, the current study provides evidence to support psychosocial counselling interventions to help young people in their career development and planning their future in an adaptive way (Aleni Sestito et al., 2015). In the call for more nuanced approaches that provide a space for meaningful stories to be told, this is not to deny the usefulness of established theories derived from psychology, such as those developed by Holland and Super. The identification of personal characteristics is important, as found in the material, but the influence of contextual factors, both cultural and current needs to be emphasised – constructivist approaches, which pay attention to the psychosocial can provide the framework for those telling stories to be told. However, interventions for career development must avoid oversimplification, whether based on constructivist, narrative methodologies or methods that are more “scientific”. Career guidance and counselling, and research into career guidance and counselling, needs more than a single technique – multiple perspectives to encompass complexity in current times are required.

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