

IS THE SENSE OF BELONGING A STRATEGIC RESOURCE FOR ADOLESCENT IDENTITY?

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Abstract

In the international literature the abstract representation of the adolescent as a product of childhood and pubertal maturation has obscured a deeper reflection on the real generational conditions of contemporary adolescents. The different situations in which adolescents are inserted imply a necessary redefinition of their sense of belonging to depart no more from the usual pre-built schemes but by a practice, become mandatory, which is that to make choices. This implies not only a high reflective capacity of adolescents to redefine the contours of the semantic of their world life but also to combine and distinguish at the same time the virtual reality from the real one. In this paper we show that for the digital natives belonging remains a criterion for defining the personality and the overall identity of the adolescent. In the light of these assumptions a pilot study (qualitative and quantitative) has been carried out among adolescents in three Italian cities with the aim to investigate the nature of the link between the adolescent growth and the sense of belonging, in order to understand if and in which terms this could be a strategic resource for identity.

Keywords: Adolescence, generation, belonging, identity, community

Introduction

The analysis of the correlation between youth phenomenon and generation is important because the prevailing visions (psychosocial, demographic and economic) assume that young people experience a process of transition. This approach has been criticized by recent studies of the sociology of youth that, adopting a generational perspective, show that youth is a condition marked by economic, social and political issues. In agreement with the analysis of Why and Woodman, the radical transformations that took place after 1970 have led to a profound change in the post-1970 generation, strongly influencing subsequent cohorts. In this change of lifestyle, of subjectivity and processes of adaptation it is interesting to analyze how new cohorts, marked by the digital era, are related with the dimension of membership. In the light of these assumptions a pilot study (qualitative and quantitative) has been carried out among adolescents in three Italian cities with the aim to investigate the nature of the link between the adolescent growth and the sense of belonging, in order to understand if and in which terms this could be a strategic resource for identity. The results of the research outline two important considerations. First we note that, together with the prevalence of a symbolic cultural dimension of belonging (Durkheim, 1995, original edition 1912), subjectively felt (Weber, 1922), coexists (but less important) the ascribed dimension (Tonnies, 1988, original edition 1887). The multi-dimensionality also implies a presence of multiple affiliations (Simmel, 1890) where the relational and a-spatial dimension are linked to that symbolic-cultural. Secondly, analyzing the formation of the identity in relation to values, belonging and otherness, it is clear that the cultural belongings and relationships are associated with values of solidarity and universal and of greater tolerance to form an open-

porous identity while, where the ascribed dimension is related to particularist and familistic values, a strong intolerance promotes the formation of closed-localist identities.

The article is structured as follows. The first section describes the theoretical premises about the belonging as a generational factor, in the second paragraph the methodology and techniques of analysis used in the research are described, the third section presents the definition of community and the meaning of the concept of belonging while in the fourth the mechanisms that govern the formation of identity in relation to baseline values, the quality of the sense of belonging and otherness.

Theoretical premises: belonging as a generational factor

The study of the youth cannot be separated from the analysis of radical structural changes that the late modern society has produced. There are widespread highlights how today's society is characterized by the dissolution of shared identities and its related sources of identification (characterized by the ethnic and class belonging and the ideology of progress and religion): everything has to be constantly reinvented by the individual who is the only terminal interested by the mandatory choices in a seemingly neutral and without conditioning context. The youth - more than any other category - is extremely involved within this context marked by the process of individualization. This means that young people are constantly forced to test themselves given that the process of individuation involves "the paradox to create, to design, to stage not only their own biography but also its links and its relationship networks..." (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). We move from a prescriptive to an elective structure characterized not so much by the emergence of the autonomy of the individual but rather by the emergence of an elective biography that is known more as a biography at risk or "do it yourself".

The "do it yourself" biography requires a significant daily commitment in individual in order to redefine the criteria of his/her own identity and life orientations. This, as argued by Beck, is a biography at risk or, better, an acrobatic << biography >> because "it is - some openly, some secretly - a state of permanent danger" (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). In this structured reality the adolescent, and young people in general, are committed to building their lives through new routes where the experimental logic sets the pace to that prescriptive. This calls for the need to rethink the studies on young people mainly focused on a conceptualization of their status as a transitional stage or phase of life (Why and Woodman, 2006). The most significant criticisms regard the importance of a universal vision and an a-historical development, thought in linear terms and determined mostly by psychosocial dynamics in which the economic, cultural and social dimensions have an ancillary role and a simple frame (for the transition processes of adolescent or young person in general) (*ibid*: p. 498; Woodman, 2012; 2013). In this article, unlike the psychosocial approach, in line with the recent international literature on youth (*ibid*; Woodman 2012; 2013), we propose to read the status of the adolescent rather as a transitional phase, a generational reality actually located within a specific social, political and economic milieu. It is assumed as interpretive context the generational perspective that has a long sociological tradition and only recently has been taken up and subjected to a renewed interest. This approach, although it has been subject to substantial criticism, "it is still a useful concept to guide the studies about the young people" (Woodman, 2013). Among the aspects considered still fertile in the operation of the renewal of the interpretative paradigm of contemporary youth reality, the concept of generation developed by Mannheim (1997) can be included and mostly the fact that although it expresses a condition of sharing a common historical experience, however not always young people who face a similar set of generational conditions develop similar attitudes and beliefs (Corsten, 1999: 259). This means that within a single generation different generational groups or units can be formed that are related and are measured in a different way compared to the

historical, social, political and economic context in which they are inserted. There is no doubt that the current structural condition, characterized by a strong process of individualization (the crisis of traditional structures, new processes of institutionalization, emergence of an elective biography), the application of the generational unit understood “as a group or category in which different young people can be unequivocally placed seems limited” (Woodman, 2013). While, according to the analysis of Wyn and Woodman (2006), the radical transformations that took place after 1970 led to a profound change in the generation of post-1970 (Andres and Wyn, 2010) strongly influencing the subsequent cohorts, on the other hand the specific structural conditions within which young people live and find the ways of reacting to them lead to a different position of this group - generational unit - either compared to previous cohorts and to the future ones. The current status of adolescents is characterized more and more like a generation that must continually make choices, to reinvent the links, the relationship with the tradition, identity, family and peer group as well as with the agents of socialization (crossed by an orienting crisis). Their sense of generational belonging becomes unstable, reversible, and self-centered on their own ego who must constantly make decisions and weigh contradictory choices in a large spectrum of possibilities. More specifically if on the one hand adolescents are characterized as a generation who makes choices, experimentation and exploration, including new forms such as the web, social networks and internet, on the other hand they are also a generation at risk of disorientation, neo-tribal closures or demotivations and disclaimers. According to this view in the current historical context we need to know not so much the psychosocial perspective that describes adolescents as a transitional phase that follows a linear development at the end of which they take roles defined and structured, as the impact that social elective structures have on their identity and their world views. The approach on the generations moves the focus from the dimension centred on the transition (from adolescence to adulthood, from the familiar world to that of the peers, from a child body to an adult body) to the “placement of young people within the political, economic and cultural processes that give context to the current generation is both body and give meaning and experience to the youth in a distinctive way” (Wyn and Woodman 2006). In line with these considerations it seems clear that the generational approach highlights a strong correlation between the rise and the spread of the process of individualization, as specific aspects of adolescents of the second modernity, and the emergence of new modes of perception and interpretation of reality. The article’s aim is to help clear how the concept of belonging is conceived and valued by adolescents in a process of building identity characterized more and more by an elective and/or “do it yourself” biography deeply focused on the size of an ego that is increasingly devoid of a prescriptive framework which guides and fixes precise and irrevocable selection criteria. The focus of the work is based on the theoretical assumption that the social belonging understood as “the status of being part of something or to be in contact with something” (Pollini, 2005a: 493; Pollini, 2005b; Gubert 2000), although neglected, desecrated by a globalized, individualized and precarious society, remains one of the key assets in differentiating elective biographical paths from those at risk (expressed in many regressive forms). It is assumed that although the adolescent is freed from traditional affiliations (classes, ideologies, religion, tradition) that defined the individual and collective identities, keeps feeling the need to redefine the links and affiliations. Unlike previous cohorts the adolescent of contemporary society is forced to invent his/her sense of belonging no more based on prescriptive inherited factors (which assumed a sacred and static character), but on personal criteria and guidelines worth only in reference to the experiences subjectively carried out. In line with these considerations, it was necessary not only to opt for a subjective dimension of belonging (Weber 1922) (focusing on the personal definition), but also to outline a concept of belonging in multidimensional terms. In this regard it is worth remembering that while the sense of belonging of young people

seems (certainly in this research) emerge in relational symbolic and cultural terms, rather than territorial and emotional it does not exclude a reference to the more prescriptive or territorial dimension. While it is clear the spread of the meaning of belonging based on relationships subjectively constructed and released by the spatial dimension (as indeed already present in the works of Simmel, 1890), it is also strong the need, within the biographies of adolescents, to read and invent the tradition, culture, values and education in relation to the formation of a biography and identity that needs an anchor, albeit problematic, to a symbolic dimension or a cultural community (Durkheim, 1995). This requirement, as subjectively experienced as precarious and unstable, often represents the only resource that adolescents may have and put in place to prevent the fall in regressive forms of belonging as the anomie (often mistaken for trivial forms of cosmopolitanism) (Beck, 2006), or the identity closure (based on new forms of tribalism and intolerance) (Sennett, 2012; Giardiello, 2014). In conclusion, although the belonging presents a certain dose of ambiguity (belonging determines the opening or closing), it is still clear that it has, despite the many contradictions, a central role in the formation of identity. Far from being disappeared or resized, belonging and especially its experience, is not only an important predictor of discomfort but also an explanatory factor of the social and cultural condition of adolescents.

Research methodology and hypotheses

The aim of the research is to understand how the advent of a complex society and globalization together with new forms of nomadism, virtual communication, growth of cities and entropic loss of sense of place, has questioned the community as a form of co-existence and therefore as a space within which significant experiences growth.

On the basis of these considerations, a pilot study has been carried out. In particular a qualitative and quantitative research has been conducted with pre-teens between 11 and 14, enrolled in a middle school in San Leucio, a rural community in Southern Italy, and in one of the neighbors of Bari, a medium-sized city in Southern Italy, and Rome. In each reality, by using a non probabilistic sampling, a middle school has been identified. The first phase of the research has been characterized by the use of the technique of the focus groups.

The use of focus groups has been twofold: the emergence of the research hypotheses to be verified empirically in the subsequent quantitative survey and the preparation of the questionnaire. The 15 members of each focus group have been selected with the help of an assistant moderator (the school teachers) by considering the criteria of age, sex and residence in the neighbor. The author of the paper has acted as moderator. Parent consent and young adolescent assent have been obtained.

In the second phase the questionnaire has been administered to a sample of preadolescents by randomly selecting a section from each school. A total of 101 questionnaires have been administered in San Leucio, 63 and 47 in Bari and Rome respectively. The different sample sizes does not affect the results since comparative analyses have been carried out only for exploratory and not inferential scopes. The questionnaire has demonstrated good reliability (Cronbach's alpha of 0.88).

Definition of Community and meaning of belonging

In this section the object of analysis concerns the definition of the community and the meaning of the concept of belonging. The first step was to analyze the dominant semantic representation of the concept of community in the adolescent culture. Respondents were asked to define the term “community” choosing, between the items proposed, the two main meanings and sorting them in order of importance. The following three types of community were built based on emotional/affective dimensions, on structural/territorial dimensions and on secondary socialization.

The results indicate that in all the 3 areas considered the emotional/affective dimension has recorded the highest acclaim. For the adolescents of Rome, Bari and San Leucio community is a social reality that is generated especially in family and friendships. On the basis of a common feeling, that identifies the community as a fundamental element of identity and as a matter of pre-structured reality, it is possible to identify two typological variations.

In the community of San Leucio the emotional relational structure has emerged where the community structure territorially defined is identified as the spatial and cultural context in which the primary sociality expresses and manifests. The emotional/relational dimension of secondary sociality comes out especially in the cities where on one hand the concept of community weakens the local reference and on the other it is recovered the idea of community as secondary socialization.

But to which type of community adolescents are more linked? The data shows that adolescents show a link to the territorial realities closer to them: for San Leucio is the village, for Bari is the city while for Rome is the neighborhood. It is clear from the research that the reference to territoriality takes only a potential value of orientation that can become a key resource (psychological, social and cultural) only if it can give meanings of affective/relational and cultural type in the place of belonging.

In this context, community and membership are two concepts similar but also different. For the respondents on one hand, community and membership are actually going to occupy the space of the deep meanings of the personality of an individual, on the other hand the concept of belonging takes on a complex meaning since it can contemplate the concept of local community, but it can mean a variety of aspects that are not always and necessarily associated with specific territories.

In the data analysis, as far as it regards the sense and meaning of belonging, we proceeded to identify the higher frequencies expressed with respect to a set of items designed to outline the possible definitions of belonging. According to the first ranking of the respondents we noted that the 26.09% in Bari, the 24.75% in Rome and the 23.40% in San Leucio attached to belonging the following meaning: to share the same interests regardless of where you live. The prevalence of the meaning of the sense of belonging in relational terms without proximity is also confirmed on the basis of the results from the second list in which the sense of belonging is defined more on the quality of the relationships that develop among adolescents based on the sharing of common interests than by reason of a spatial contiguity. This does not mean that the concept expressed by adolescents does not consider very relevant the cultural (shared culture and tradition) or affective dimension (feeling affection towards the people who are part of that community). The data show that the respondents (27.54% in Bari, 17,82% in San Leucio and 14.89% in Rome) have expressed a concept of belonging significantly characterized by cultural dimensions. Equally important is the emotional dimension that showed significant percentages: the 18.84% in Bari, the 23.76% in San Leucio, the 17.02% in Rome.

The second analytical mode involves a type of interpretation based on the formation of different types of membership constructed by summing similar items. The construction of these typologies allows to analyze the role of this dimension in the formation of identity. Specifically the typologies are the following: affective, cosmopolitan, cultural and localist/spatial. This analysis shows that the sense of belonging based on the sharing of culture (the same language, education, culture and tradition) prevails over the cosmopolitan (share the same interests regardless of where you live). Furthermore it should be noted as the weight of cultural belonging grows to a greater extent where it is higher the significance of a cosmopolitan belonging (eg in Bari). In this context, we must add that the affective dimension, despite not having registered a high consensus as that obtained from the previous

two dimensions, remains a significant background in the construction of belonging while the territorial and ascribed typology scored the lowest consent. The results show that the more adolescents express a cosmopolitan sense of belonging the more they need to attach to a substrate culture. This comes out through the comparative analysis between the three contexts in which Bari expressed to a greater extent this trend. It also emerges as the place itself does not produce identification and belonging. It's obvious that for the adolescents "feeling part" of a place occurs through a process of signification that is generated only when a change occurs that leads to perceive the places from << in itself >> to << for itself>>.

The identity formation

If the previous pages have made it possible to reconstruct the problematic meaning of membership, the structure of values and attitudes towards diversity, the purpose of this section is to explore the mechanisms of identity formation. The multiple correspondences analysis has been applied in order to identify the structure of the associations between the views expressed on membership, on the map of the values and on the judgment expressed on diversity.

Figure 1a shows that among the respondents of Bari the maximum level of tolerance is generated by the presence of solidarity/self-realization values, a sense of belonging formed by a cosmopolitan conception and by a need for cultural and affective roots (affection towards the people of the community). The area of intolerance is characterized by individualistic/competitive values and by a localist sense of belonging. It is a type of membership dominated by the spatial and ascribed dimensions but devoid of any cultural identification.

It's interesting to note that the two paths outlined produce the formation of an integrated porous identity (on the left of the figure) and of a closed identity on the right. The first is developed when the subject is able to recover the cultural identity without excluding from her/his own worldview other forms of belonging centered on shared interests that develop beyond the place where s/he live. Moreover, it is worth noting how this process expresses an identity that represents a merger between the values of solidarity and high levels of acceptance of diversity. The second identity emerges when there is no integration between a cosmopolitan sense of belonging, cultural dimensions and civic/solidarity values.

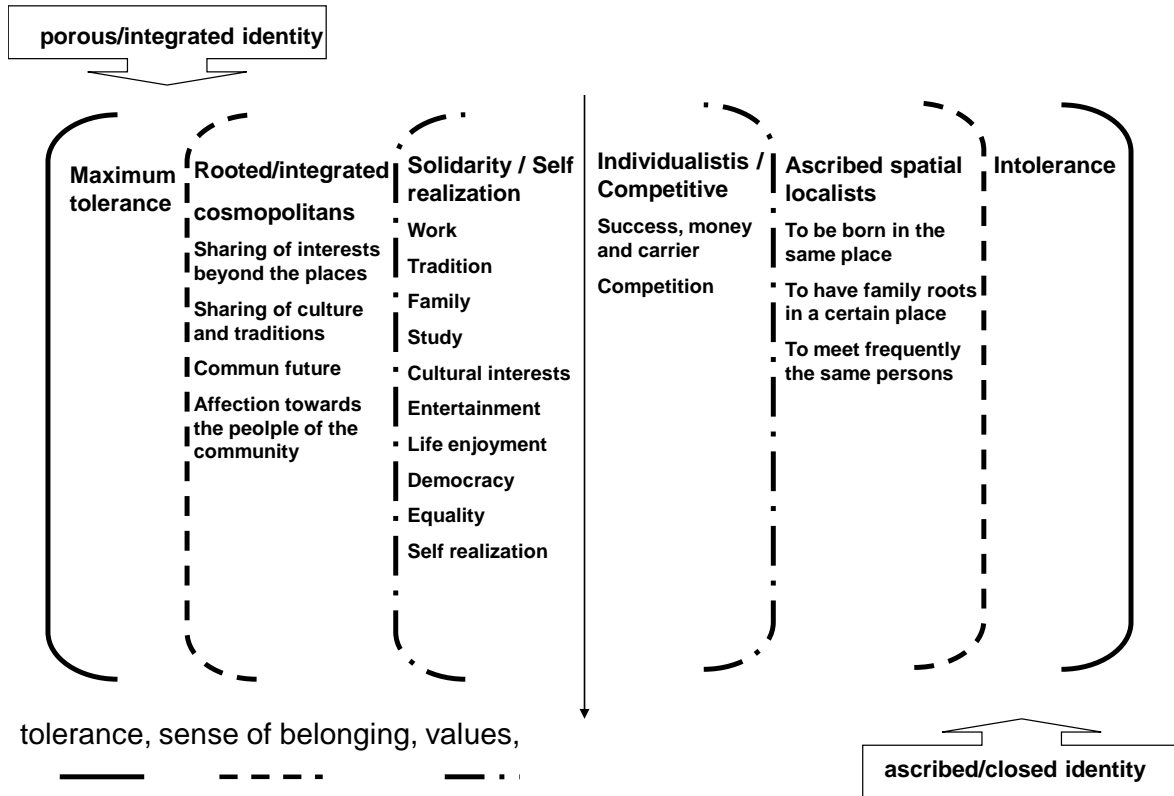


Fig. 1a. – Path of identity formation - Bari

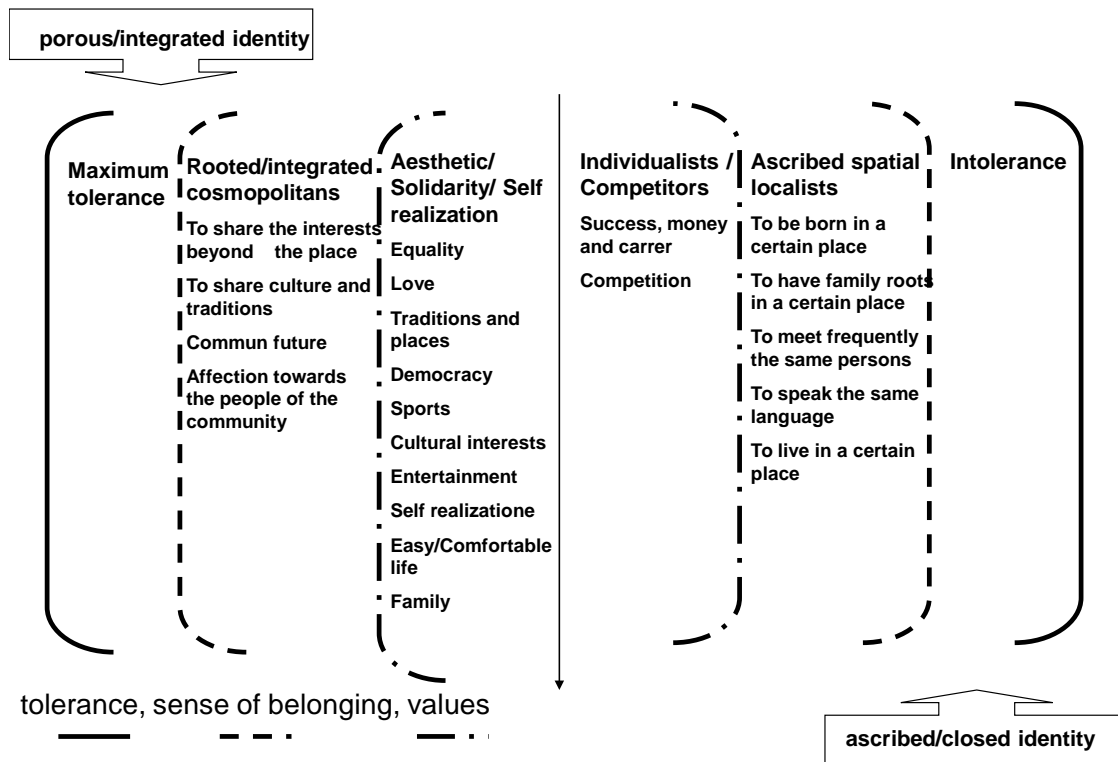


Fig. 1b. – Path of identity formation – Roma

Figure 1b, relative to Rome, outlines an association between the variables considered largely similar to that shown in the previous chart. What differentiates the two territories is the presence of markedly aesthetic values, such as the easy/comfortable life and sport activities, and the composition of a concept of localist/ascribed belonging characterized by the item “to speak the same language”. By comparing the two areas it is confirmed the weight and importance of the spatial and cultural variables, as well as the values and the opening/closing attitudes respect to the diversity able to draw different identity profiles.

As far as it regards S. Leucio, Figure 1c paradoxically describes a much more complex reality of the previous two. Four types of different identities can be detected. Looking at the dial on the left top we observe a closed/culture localist identity that is the result of the association of self-realization/instrumental values, a localist cultural sense of belonging and a strong level of intolerance. Continuing counterclockwise, in the left lower quadrant a localist closed/spatial identity is observed, determined by the presence of common self-realization/traditional values, a localist/spatial sense of belonging and a weak index of intolerance. Continuing to analyze the graph, in the right bottom corner, it is possible to observe the formation of a localist/open identity generated by a path consisting of familist/hedonist values and a concept of localist cultural/affective belonging as well as a rate of weak tolerance. In the upper right, finally, there is the presence of a fluid identity made up of solidarity/traditional values, cosmopolitan/familist belonging and a high level of tolerance. It should also be emphasized as on one hand the localistic accentuation of membership (both in the cultural and spatial version) and the absence of universalistic and collective values determine processes of intolerance and closed identities, on the other hand a fluid identity without cultural roots produces a “banal cosmopolitanism” unable to determine the processes of social and collective change. On the basis of the findings it is easy to see in this small community the presence of a new form of inequality. It is expressed primarily on the cognitive behaviors resulting in closure, intolerance, with localist identities, unable to initiate reflective processes and the evaluation of the own culture and tradition. Also there is a dramatic split between two social groups in which on one side it is outlined the formation of an elite without any feeling of belonging and on the other the formation of social sectors that live belonging in unthinking and crystallized terms.

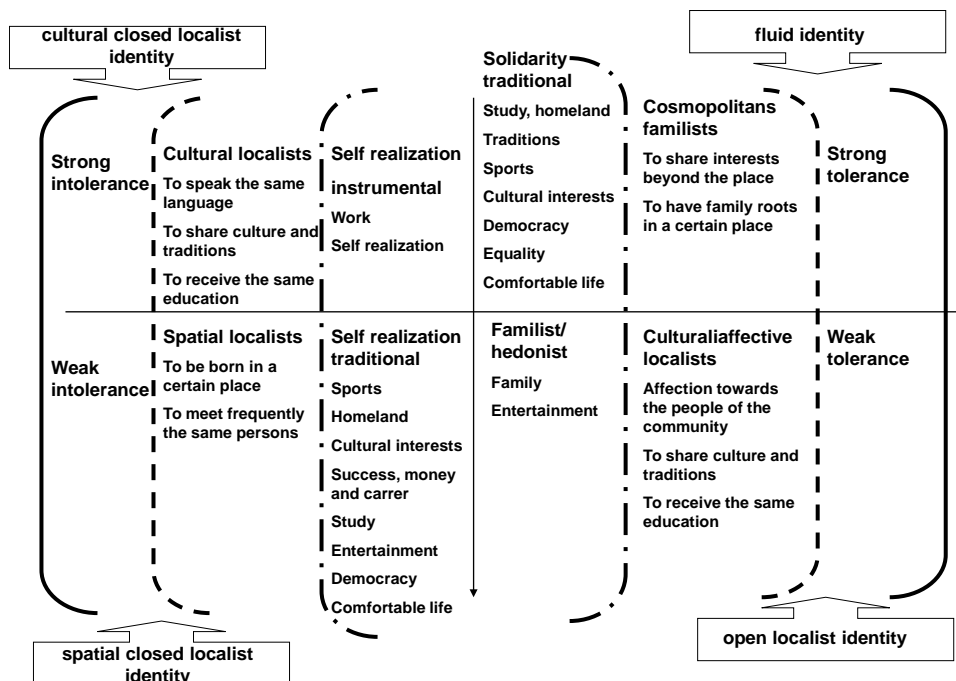


Fig. 1c. – Path of identity formation – San Leucio

Conclusion

Recently, the international literature places more and more evidence that the representation of adolescent understood as an abstract product of infantile and pubertal maturation, as a standard model in transition, has obscured a deeper reflection on the real generational conditions of contemporary adolescents. It is obvious that the various situations in which adolescents are included as school, peer groups, social networks, imply a necessary redefinition of their sense of belonging starting no more from solid, pre-built patterns but from a practice, become mandatory, to make choices. This implies not only a high reflective capacity, almost hermeneutic, of adolescents to redefine the contours of the semantic of their life-world but also to combine and separate at the same time virtual reality (in which adolescents are deeply involved) from the real one. In general, research has shown that the sense of belonging of the digital natives despite assumes contours more electives and less tied to inherited prescriptive factors, remains a defining criterion of the personality and identity of the adolescent. If adolescents retreat into a familiar, emotional community almost dominated by the tyranny of intimacy (Sennett, 1976), do not give up to choose, to reflect and to experience the roads, the biographical paths aimed to reconstruct a semantic framework fragmented and precarious, that gives meaning and strength, though not definitive, at their existence. Undoubtedly, the research shows that in the society of flows, of digital age, a sense of social belonging understood as being part of a group or something is not deleted rather transforms itself radically changing its nature. More specifically, what happens is a blend of symbolic elements and relationships supported by a research of an identification subjectively felt respect to a cultural milieu although devoid or poorly anchored to a defined spatial dimension. Although this does not happen and it occurs an a-critical and irreflexive adherence to the spatial reality or to a process of undocking respect to the symbolic and cultural dimensions of their own communities, adolescents experience an acrobatic bibliography whose fall implies a collapse actually regressive on the plane of the identity construction. In this case, we have the formation of a double regressive mechanism which has a strong impact on the construction of identity: one is the formation of a banal cosmopolitanism centered on a narcissistic ego that is considered part of the world from the sharing of a culture of consumption and media mainly lived in a non-reflective way, and the other a return, with no symbolic and reflective mediation, to prescriptive structures that provide identity security. It is a reaction to the difficulties to choose and design his/her biography from himself/herself, from which it is possible to escape through an encapsulation into new tribal identities based on the logic in-group / out-group. It is clear that the quality of the experience and perception of belonging plays a central role in building the lives of adolescents determining, in a decisive way, relationships, links and life practices that adolescents generate and develop towards their life-worlds. If the international literature has shown that, for example, to establish a sense of belonging in the period of early rehabilitation is essential for the well-being of young people and adolescents with a history of Refugees (Correa-Velez, 2010), it is equally important to reflect on the reflective processes that lead to revise and reconstruct the concept of belonging in a highly individualized society. It is just starting from the specific condition of adolescence as digital and biographical generation that the sociological research, and the social sciences in general, should investigate areas and contexts too often analyzed only according to a psychosocial or psychological approach.

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