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The life-course transitions of young women in a Maltese context.

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This study analyzed how a cohort of eight young women who underwent certain difficulties whilst at secondary school experienced their transition from secondary school to either work or further education. It explores changes in their perception of events and happenings that they classified as significant to them, and the influence that these changes of perception had on their evolving life-course. While not formally classified as emotionally or behaviorally challenged, all the participants in this study claimed to have had varying depths of difficulty when at secondary school, some alleging that they had been classified as troublesome by their teachers and others claiming to have seen themselves as disruptive in classroom settings. The study was informed by the participants' voices about how they saw their transitions being forged and has a phenomenological focus.

Keywords: emotional education, social care, identity, agency, transition

Introduction

This qualitative study introduces readers to different aspects of Malta's culture and educational set-up, and links the personal and identity challenges faced by young women today with knowledge about 'post compulsory school age' transitions. It traces the aspirations and experiences that a cohort of young women faced when they were between 15 and 20 years of age, and thereby focuses on school to work transitions or on transitions to higher education. It is particularly focused on the social and emotional education, in its broadest sense, of these young women. It shows how their emotional and social capacities develop in the context of different agents of socialization that impact on their lives. These include the school and home, when they are younger; and/or further education and/or the work-place, when they are older. Before we introduce the participants we would like to provide a brief background of the Maltese educational context where this study was situated.

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Compulsory schooling in Malta terminates at the age of 16. Young people who opt to pursue further studies, most commonly, take courses at a state-run sixth form which generally leads on to University. Young people can also attend courses given by Church-run or privately-run sixth forms following the same curriculum as the state-run sixth form. Otherwise, young people can attend the Higher Secondary School which is a post-secondary state school offering a blend of courses covered at secondary and post-secondary school levels to give students who did not obtain the qualifications to enter sixth form a chance to proceed with their studies. Others may also attend courses delivered by private providers, some of which are linked to foreign universities. Others may attend MCAST – the Malta College of Arts, Science and Technology, which is a vocational college. MCAST offers courses from what is called Foundation level (the most basic course) to undergraduate degree level. Between these levels, the courses offered include the First Diploma level, the National Diploma level, and the Higher National Diploma level. MCAST also offers part-time courses in the evening and it is thereby possible that students who attend courses elsewhere, or who are in full-time employment, enroll in these evening courses.

Profile of participants

The participants have been given the fictitious names of Mariana, Merissa, Farah, Eileen, Joanna, Kirsten, Mariella and Phaedra so as to respect their confidentiality. With the exception of Kirsten, Mariella and Phaedra, all of the participants went to college (at MCAST) on completing compulsory education. Merissa, Farah and Eileen joined MCAST at a Foundation level as they did not have sufficient qualifications to do otherwise. Merissa and Farah read for a National Diploma in Health and Social Care, viewing this course as generic enough to offer various job opportunities following their education. Eileen joined the accountant technician course aspiring to find work with an accountancy firm on completing her studies. Marianna wishes to work information technology and is pursuing a course at national diploma level at MCAST. Joanna changed courses, and after starting a course in information technology, decided that she would be better off taking a course in hairdressing, for which she subsequently enrolled. Kirsten had originally applied for the National Diploma in Children's Care, Learning and Development, having fared quite well in her MATSEC exams. However, the places on this course were limited and she was amongst the ones who were not selected. Although she had the option of starting a related course at First Diploma level, she chose not to continue attending MCAST, opting instead for a more academic track at the Higher Secondary School. Mariella aspired to become a hairdresser but inadvertently failed to attend the aptitude test and subsequently was refused entry. She never reapplied for a course at MCAST (or elsewhere) but has worked as a salesperson. She now runs her own fashion outlet as part of a family business and also works as a part-time fashion model. Phaedra has been working at fashion outlets since finishing secondary school. She decided not to further her formal education at a post-secondary school level.

The participants shared a belief that they had chosen their individual career paths 'independently', that is, without experiencing excessive intrusion from their parents. Saying this, they were equally as conscious that they hadn't made an entirely free choice. This was because of constraints that they saw as appearing to them, in Phaedra's words, "to be built in by wider society". They explained that certain courses at MCAST, such as mechanical engineering, were mainly attended by male students. This resulted in their feeling put off when considering mechanical engineering as a career option. From an academic stand-point, in effect, the participants are not saying anything new. The presence of such constraints on career-path choices is well documented in relevant sociological literature (Tanner et al. 1995; Furlong and Cartmel 1997; Willis 1977; Wyn and Dwyer 1999). Furthermore, Roberts et al. (1994), in putting forward a theory of structured individualization, note how people's choices are 'constrained' by "the multiple configurations created by different combinations of family and educational backgrounds, gender, place of residence, and (if any) prior training and employment experience" (p. 51).

The influence of such constraints is dependent on whether or not people recognize that they "can react and respond to (these) structural influences, that they can make their own decisions with respect to a number of major as well as minor life experiences, and that they can actively shape some important dimensions of their experiences" (Evans 2002, p. 246). This range of reactions implies that flexible notions of self-identity, self-advancement, self-efficacy and self-evolution need to be considered when describing the participants' actions. Each of these different intrapersonal dispositions is a pertinent aspect of a young person's emotional education and of his/her overall personal and social development, as can be judged by their influence on how agentic he/she is.

Decisions to change course or to stop attending post secondary education in order to start work may come about in the context of a number of other decisions that have to be taken, and, as Warin (2010) notes, these can be striking enough to be classed as incidents or phases in life "when things are wrenched out of joint" (p. 124). Thus, while the participants clearly need self-efficacy to consider and carry through such changes, how far they succeed in making them also depends on how they are balanced against such structural issues as those mentioned above (Spiteri 2007).

Data collection and analysis

This research project was carried out as part of a larger study which had a longitudinal focus. The participants have been interviewed regularly over a five-year period starting when they were in the final stages of secondary schooling (around 15 years old) and then re-interviewed once yearly through their first few years of post-secondary education and/or employment (from 16 to around 20 years old). This study is based on data extrapolated from the final interviews of this five-year period. The interviews were carried out in Maltese by both authors and these were subsequently translated into English for purposes of this study. One

of the authors (KD) had previously conducted all the other interviews and thereby knew the participants well. The other author (DS) co-interviewed the participants for the final interview only.

The interviews followed a semi-structured schedule that outlined the main themes that were to be explored with the participants. The interview schedule used was applied flexibly to give the researchers the option to add questions or to explore ideas that were not anticipated beforehand.

This study uses an extended case method (Burawoy 1998) based on the grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1990). Grounded theory uses different coding approaches that lead on from one another in a somewhat cyclical manner until the all data has been saturated. Primarily, open coding was used. The data was broken down into different categories, and then these were re-arranged into the different sub-categories that clearly emanated from, or were associated with, the categories suggested. The open codes that were nominated were 'engaging fully in different life contexts', 'planning for the future', 'forging an effective career path', 'achieving a desirable work-life balance', 'being authentic and being oneself', 'having an attractive physical appearance' and 'feeling successful in life.' Secondly, axial coding was used. Here, the categories and sub-categories were further examined by the researchers to determine if all the data in hand had been saturated and to ensure that it adequately reflected what the participants were saying in their interviews. Whenever the researchers were not convinced that all the data had been saturated, they restarted the process of categorizing the data, developing further open codes and ensuring that there was no left-out data that was not incorporated in the coding that was being developed.

The authors nominated two axial codes that are presented as sub-titles below. These were 'assigning of meaning to personal choices' and 'the notion of an evolving (and thereby changing and developing) self-perception'. From there, the researchers developed a single core category representing the theoretical apex of this study where change is recognized as an essential and necessary component of the participants' evolving life-course and a precursor to what is being called a 're-conceptualized agency.' The extended case method involves mapping salient findings onto existing theories or concepts or, more specific to this study, to ecosystemic theory (Bronfenbrenner 1974). From this theoretical perspective, it is recognized that the participants subscribe to several interdependent influences such as the family, the school, the labor market, the media and broader cultural influences.

Findings

Theme 1: Assigning meaning to personal choices.

While all the participants state that a major issue in their lives is finding satisfying and adequately paid work, some see attending college or working in short-term jobs as an enjoyable aspect of their lives; although they all say that work or study must not override other commitments in life. They all recognize that, if they are eventually to have children; parenting and attending to their partners would also need to be attributed its own time. This is consistent with findings from studies that indicate that young people can

derive reassurance and self-security, particularly during times of transition, by choosing what gives them satisfaction at different life-stages (Jackson and Warin 2000).

The participants appear to be building an identity capital based on acquiring resources that will help them to become the people they want to be in the future (Warin 2010). From an ecosystemic perspective, it is only through generating a holistic understanding of the influence of all pertinent and related factors on this process that this identity capital can be fully appreciated.

Eileen pointed out that although she was convinced that she was making her own choices, what her family had told her about the importance of studies when she was younger had influenced her considerably in her late teenage years. She explained that, symbolically, she could hear “my father's voice in my head” as she opted to take up hairdressing after not doing well in ICT, rather than dropping her studies completely.

A somewhat similar perspective to the adopting of an identity capital based on earlier childhood experiences was narrated by Mariella. Her parents were business people with a number of retail outlets selling clothes. While her parents did not prevent Mariella from studying, they involved her in the running of the shops from her early adolescent years. She said that this encouraged her to choose work over her studies. She said that she had never been particularly academic oriented, claiming that:

When I was at school I did not know whether I could learn the stuff. There were many much brighter students than me in class. But today I don't have any problems of this sort. ... I can handle it. ... I would now like to concentrate on this shop. I need to be able to handle this business and I always wanted my own shop. (Mariella)

She made a concrete decision to start working when she applied for a course at MCAST and was not accepted as a result of her low grades. At that point, she decided not to apply again, except perhaps for a short or part-time course which would be compatible with her working hours.

Personal changes such as deciding to change course or not to enlist for a course of studies can be readily associated with other “reactive changes” that surface in the life of individuals (Nicholson and West 1988). For instance, prior to applying to join MCAST, both of these participants believed that their life seemed to depend on their performance in the MATSEC examinations on leaving secondary school. Yet, on coming to realize that they could cope in a different course to that to which they originally intended, they became increasingly conscious of the other choices that they faced. Eileen, for example, tried to picture herself in a job in the future and looked at possible options not simply based on examination results. It appears that both participants subscribe to Emirbayr and Mische's (1998) assertion (based on Bourdieu's (1986) notion of habitus) that even though individuals may have a limited range of options, it is sometimes the case that “there may be much ingenuity and resourcefulness to the selection of responses from practical repertoires, even when this contributes to the reproduction of a given structure of social relationships” (p. 980).

It is also possible for this ingenuity and resourcefulness to be used amongst academically promising students. For instance, Phaedra is quite happy with the results she got in her MATSEC examinations. She found the knowledge she gained to be extremely useful in evolving her life-plans. Even though, like Mariella, she has opted to work rather than attend MCAST, she associates further training with career advancement. She said that:

I did well in my MATSEC exams and I got 9 of them. I do not regret having studied for my exams because I would not be here. I work here because I passed my MATSEC exams. Here we work with that standard (of education) and they still ask us for these certificates even though we work in a shop. Art and Computer have helped me here and so have Maths and the languages. Now I must take a course in Italian because I sat for my Italian and did not pass since I am not so good in it. Here, at St. Julian's, I get a lot of Italian clients and I find it difficult to understand them and to deal with them. (Phaedra)

It is clear that Phaedra is building her identity capital around being more competent and qualified in her current job, in line with what she believes to be best for her. She is also considering the importance of speaking and understanding Italian, thereby looking at different training possibilities that could lead on to promotions at work or to acquiring greater job stability. Likewise, Kirsten said that her parents had left it entirely up to her to choose a course. She believes that an academic qualification is more likely to assure her of a steady income in future than a vocational one. This could nevertheless betray a certain level of parental influence - as the University was the only institution that offered higher degree courses until the early 2000s, it is highly probable that her parents would not be aware of the type (and quality) of educational provision offered by MCAST.

In a nutshell, the participants are conscious of the changes that they are making, and seem to make them with thought and fore-planning. They are clearly not leaving the future to chance and are actively striving to make decisions that they see as meaningful. Their thoughts, feelings and attitudes towards both examinations and studies have changed as time has passed and they are now fully concentrated on what outcomes will emerge from their efforts. The agency-centered stance they are taking also is clearly influenced by their own self-efficacy and how much they are conscious of their evolving self-perception. This is elaborated further below.

Theme 2: Evolving (and thereby changing and developing) self-perceptions.

The second theme relates to the participants' innermost thoughts and feelings about themselves in the context of their interaction with other people. Joanna's view of herself as a self-confident person is reflected in the way she speaks about her appearance. She carefully points out that her personal appearance manifests her own style and that her tattoos and earrings externalize what she feels and thinks. Joanna adopted styles that

she encountered through the media and friends, but she then adapted them in a manner that was to her own liking.

It is likely that, on a more in-depth psychological level, Joanna could easily be expressing changes in what she feels by using changes in fashion as an externalization of her feelings. It can be surmised that in Joanna's case, this process of change is being brought about through a conscious or subconscious discovery of the self and through its subsequent expression through body art in the form of tattoos and piercing. Joanna explained how notwithstanding the physical pain associated with the experience of having a tattoo and any form of piercing, these serve to make her conscious that she is courageous and that she is able to face up to pain. She said:

Tattoos and piercing have helped me to develop my own style which is a little bit Goth and a little bit Punk. I am neither one nor the other. I have taken a little bit of both and developed my own style which is a little softer than what is usually attributed to these styles. I want to express myself in this way with tattoos and earrings and my hair. The tattooed stars are cool because I got them done when I was sixteen. I really like them because they are small but at the same time beautiful... It's not that I want to stand out but because each earring and tattoo creates its own experience. It's about me being able to do it and withstand that experience as well. It shows my courage which at times I am not able to show at home or elsewhere. Tattoos and earrings remind me that I have courage and they give me courage. I like to express my feelings in this way. (Joanna)

Whereas Joanna expressed a change in her self-assessment on an emotional level, other participants expressed that the change that they experienced was more on a 'manner of thinking' level. Farah claimed that she experienced the latter type of change when she had contemplated purchasing a car.

I am different because I am learning how to keep back before ending up in awkward situations. Unlike when I was younger, I think things through before actually taking rash decisions – not always but at least I try to. A few weeks ago I was going to make a terrible mistake because I was going to buy a car. So I was going to take a loan to buy a car. What stopped me was my awareness that I cannot afford to take upon this burden. If I went to the bank, I am quite sure in any case, that the manager would have told me that he could not issue a loan for me! The message I gave myself was 'You stay as you are, work and save up. Then go again!' (Farah)

The participants also give importance to changes that they see as being somehow promoted by their studies at MCAST. They said that the discussions that they engaged in during lectures as well as their interactions with the relatively older peer group at MCAST, caused them to think in a more mature manner. Interestingly enough, consonant with an earlier study by the authors (Spiteri and DeGiovanni 2009), they thought that this change was aimed at their rediscovering themselves, finding out what they wanted out of life and being true to their aspirations. This is not particular to this cohort of participants. Warin and Dempster (2007) found out that the male university students that participated in their study generally experienced a

reluctance to act as if they are somebody else and to “put up a front” (p. 897) so as to be more amenable and accessible to their peers.

It is most likely that, in the case of the participants, alongside their peers, other factors, such as personal maturation, interaction with peers who did not attend MCAST, dialogue with family members, and possibly also relationships with boyfriends, complemented their maturation process. Added to this, Merissa, who was reading Social Care at MCAST, said that she had ‘changed’ and become ‘more mature’ as a result of her interaction with vulnerable people. She derived a certain degree of self-confidence from her awareness that she would be working in the field in which she would be qualified:

I changed because I am more aware of what there is in life and I know how to interact with people and to be more patient with children and old people. I am now more aware of how to deal with these people. I also feel confident because on finishing MCAST, I will find a job as a social carer if I want to. (Merissa)

When discussing her experiences of work placements, Merissa points to a further change that she experienced. She refers to the way in which she had preconceived ideas about some client populations and how these were challenged during her work placements. She describes this as follows:

These (homeless) people whom I thought would be tough and aggressive turned out to be really nice. So this experience really changed my mind about these people and I feel that I did well in this placement. I learnt a lot even about my own strengths and weaknesses. Even being OK with them helps them. They had all kinds of problems and I would have thought that I was unable to do anything for them if they had been through such a lot in life! Being there and listening is already a positive thing for these people. ... The problems that I saw in this work placement were bigger than those we dealt with during our First Diploma. During the First Diploma we were placed with old people and people with a disability whereas now we are dealing with bigger problems and they are more challenging. It is more challenging because each and every one of us will be an old person eventually and this is a natural part of life. However, in this placement, and in life not everyone will go through the kinds of problems that I saw. And some circumstances in life put people in peculiar situations. (Merissa)

These soft skills were not only acquired at MCAST, however, and Phaedra mentions that she acquired somewhat similar skills through the labor market. She speaks about the way she ‘changed’ as a result of her interacting with people during her salesperson experience.

I am now more mature and I know how to save money. But even with people I have changed. In the beginning I used to ask them a lot of questions at one go. Now I am calmer and I have changed. (Phaedra)

All these accounts indicate changes in self-perception. Joanna externalizes her feelings in employing tattooing and body piercing as a medium to this end. Merissa has reflected on the way in which the course she is attending at MCAST has taught her about behavior in her life. Phaedra has also become more sensitive in her interactions with her customers. This aspect of her socialization is not totally unrelated to that of Farah who attributed the acquisition of more adept social skills to the positive influence that her friends have upon her. The experience of change could nonetheless not come about if the participants had not exercised agency in some way in order to make the choices they desired making.

Core Theme: Re-conceptualized agency

Throughout this study, an idea that has been raised recurrently relates to how the participants engage in carrying out agency in order to both forge and reach desired destinations. While the notions of structured individualization and bounded agency, as illustrated in these pages, provide important insights contributing to an understanding of the participants' behavior, this study also lays emphasis on the personal meanings that the participants ascribe to their actions. Thus, this study is innovative in that it does not only contest the existence of a dualism between the operation of structure and agency in the life-course of the participants, as the two are seen as operating systemically and collaboratively; but also probes what motivation the participants have for beating the odds when faced with confining factors that can be possibly traced to structural constraints.

From an ecosystemic perspective, it remains to be stated that the influence these constraining factors had on the manner in which the participants exercised agency, was somewhat limited when they used self-determination in order to achieve their goals. A case in point was when the participants were not successful in their MATSEC examinations. In response to this, they found out about different career routes; and they located their exams alongside other events and happenings in their lives than when they gave them a more centralized significance. Through taking this proactive stance, they were able to navigate away from helplessness or self-pity which are incompatible with the self-advancement toward which they are all striving for.

This study proposes that the participants employed 're-conceptualized agency', which is agency backed up by appropriate knowledge, data and resources relating to the wider field of influence, including the labor market. In terms of emotional education, the study shows that the participants' inclination to forge their own goals purposefully is equated with their greater ability to cope with the stresses of life.

Conclusion

From a life-span perspective, it is widely accepted that transitions occur mainly because of temporal issues and also as they are expected to occur. However, this paper highlighted that particularly in the case of young people who have started their college education or who have entered into the world of work, there is no

normal linear transition as that which might be possibly evidenced with students starting university on leaving school.

This study has shown that the manner in which transitions are approached and the particular transitions that the participants engage in, are influenced by a multitude of factors. One such factor is resilience. Chetcuti (2001) points out that the MATSEC examination system serves as a powerful measure of self-worth, resulting in the empowerment of those who are successful in these examinations. He notes that those who fail these exams are seen as low achievers or failures. Some of the participants pointed out that they felt frustrated that they were given inadequate career guidance at secondary school level about possible vocational pathways, such as those offered at MCAST. They still used, their resources, however, to define their career pathways.

A further finding that has emerged from this study is that although all the participants were actively involved in deciding how they wanted their life-course to evolve, they were still heavily influenced by the messages from their parents, teachers, peers, and other significant others. This shows the powerful influence that different agents of socialization have on the manner in which young people forge their respective life-courses. Accompanying this, the underlying ecosystemic macro-level tenets, including their perceived position in the labor market on graduating from MCAST, was also given weight when they decided whether or not to join MCAST. They considered the structures that were in place as well as and the reality of the current labor market.

The participants seem to consider their own intrinsic satisfaction to be at the heart of both their educational choices and their transition to work. All seem to believe that they can learn, even if, when they were younger, they felt discouraged. They do not see themselves as 'inexperienced choosers' (Lumby and Foskett 2005, p. 172-3). Rather, in the research presented here, the participants' interest focused upon how the change they experienced correlated to their being equipped to make informed decisions that had implications for their life-careers, thereby employing informed agency in the process. This implies that they were able to discern how what they have already done will impact on their probable futures and, in doing this, they were using resourcefulness to pave out for themselves the brightest future in their given circumstances.

To be able to engage in this process of discernment meaningfully and profitably, this study has shown that the participants experienced a need to maintain an appropriate level of independence in thinking and behavior, particularly if they were to be empowered to make their own choices in the face of various influences. This brings home the relevance of social and emotional socialization and education to the life-chances of young people who are actively considering different possible futures and making decisions about how best to unfold them.

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