

# **Unqualified young people: the injunction and aspiration to become an adult**

## **Composite Report on Category 4- Unqualified Youth**

**Numa Murard - Universite Paris 7**

[NOTE: *Readers who are comparing cases, and wish to follow how the researchers have proceeded, are advised to read the national reports first and this general report second.*]

### **Introduction**

At the level of EU authorities all over Europe, youth is now defined as being a transitional stage, and young people are being urged to become adults as soon as possible. What does being an adult mean? If we look at the most recent EU report on youth (*Youth in the European Union. The ages of transition*, Eurostat, 1997), and at the main components of this statistical, actuarial approach to youth as a social issue, being adult means the following:

- participating in the labour market after education and training are over;
- participating in the wedding market and having children;
- being in good health and avoiding dangerous, self-destructive behaviour;
- sharing the ideas and values of other European adults.

Obviously, not all young people can achieve this easily and quickly enough; indeed, all reports describe how the transition period and its consequences are getting longer:

- participation in the labour market is impeded by high youth unemployment; in all countries, the less qualified one is, the more often one is likely to be unemployed;
- the matrimonial time-schedule has slowed down, and the birth-rate has fallen accordingly;
- there is greater reliance on alcohol and drugs; suicides, road injuries and deaths are also on the increase;
- young people are less interested in international and national politics than adults.

Furthermore, the injunction to become an adult proves to be normative and somewhat hypocritical, especially for unqualified young people, for the following reasons:

- even if they are aware of the changes, parents (and, more generally, adults) see transition to adulthood in terms of their own journey out of youth, which was

then followed by secure employment during adulthood; young people these days, especially those who are unqualified, cannot look forward to such a journey;

- the normative concept of adulthood as participation (in work, in the family, and in private and public life) is challenged by the self-evident fact that individual adults obviously behave differently; the world of competition – the world that the British report describes as ‘life as a race’ – is a more familiar reality for young people in Europe than the concept of participation;
- the idea of adulthood is also challenged by adults themselves; they behave, dress and choose lifestyles inspired by youthful models, they focus on staying young for the rest of their lives and they subscribe to what the French call ‘jeunisme’ (‘youngism’);
- as a form of transition, the concept of youth incorporates the idea of a moratorium period, of time given over to deciphering both oneself and the world before entering the labour market. However, the cost of this moratorium can prove very high for unqualified young people if they miss the chance to enter the labour market in the right place at the right time.

Rather than set out an analysis of lived lives on the basis of a normative concept of adulthood, we shall start from a position of experienced lives in transition.

### The influence of different national contexts

Variations naturally exist between European countries. The greatest variations are shown in the following table (which only refers to countries included in the Sostris research).

*Youth in the European Union. The ages of transition, EU (Eurostat), 1997*

	D	EL	E	F	I	S	UK	EU 15
under 25, unemployed	8,8	27,9	42,5	27,3	33,2	19,4	15,9	21,5
under 25, unemployed / total population under 25	4,6	10,3	17,7	9,7	12,9	9,3	10,4	9,5
never been employed	21,2	75,4	45,3	31,1	75,6	19,9	31,1	46,8
unemployed for 12 months or more	48,7	51,2	54,6	40,2	63,6	16,0	43,6	49
under 25 on temporary jobs	39	23	77	46	18	42	13	35
total population in temporary jobs	10	10	35	12	7	14	7	14
aged 20-24, living in parents' home	55	72	89	52	87	-	47	47
aged 25-29, living in parents' home	21	49	59	17	56	-	17	17

Less than 10 % above average for EU 15



More than 10% above EU 15



More than 50% above EU 15

As always happens with European tables, there are differences between north and south; they are linked, according to one's preferences, to the level of economic wealth, the dominant (religious) culture, or the process of so-called modernisation. However, to understand the lived risk of exclusion among young people, we cannot rely on such large, structural factors such as these. Moreover, national surveys on unqualified young people that appear in the various national reports are by no means comparable. The gap between the injunction to become an adult and the resources available to do so will of course be greater in southern countries and regions; opportunities for vocational training will also be more limited in these countries. The EU report underlines these differences and their dramatic effect on the level of youth unemployment.

However, the injunction itself will vary from country to country, from region to region, and within a given country or a region according to factors such as culture and social class. For instance, in a given milieu in a given place, it is vital to participate in the labour market before one leaves the parental home; in another milieu and another place, demand will be restricted to men, or else young people will have a partner and children despite being unemployed; in one place, unemployment will be associated with deviance, and in another with the informal economy. In other words, the application to become an adult is more normative when defined at a European level than it is when defined at a micro-local level.

Let us try and flesh out these various contexts in more detail, taking each country in the same order as in the table. For the German team working in what used to be East Germany, the question of unqualified youth has to be located in the specific context of transition into a new system where schooling and employment have become highly selective, despite the fact that young people – and furthermore their parents – have not been raised in this culture of emulation and competition. Even if young people are not more affected by unemployment than adults in quantitative terms, the unqualified are in a weak position on the labour market to confront competition from the qualified and, in a broader sense, from a new society whose values and norms have been imported from the west. Exclusion and inclusion are therefore the outcomes of adapting to a new order. Given the high level of unemployment, it is pointless to try and foster the work ethic among unqualified young people.

For the Greek team working in the Athens area, the context consists of a dual system: on the one hand, there is a formal economy with stable jobs that are usually linked to the state, destined to be performed by qualified people and associated with modernity; on the other hand, there is an informal economy characterised by unstable jobs that are often unqualified, and associated with old-fashioned, self-perpetuating poverty. The unqualified are unemployed less

than the qualified, but the jobs they are offered are precarious and low paid. To put it in another way, the process of exclusion is not one of being excluded from a place (in modern society), but of not being able to enter it, and of being trapped in traditional poverty. In the event, basic education (i.e. compulsory schooling) is useful, even for work in the informal sector. Those most exposed to unemployment are unqualified people without a basic education.

For the Spanish team working in the Barcelona area, the context is the one of political transition, the young people being the ‘democracy babies’. The transition affects the traditional model of family and community, and education is the escape route from tradition, but it is nonetheless illusory for many young people from working-class backgrounds. For unqualified people trapped in traditional poverty, no moratorium can be allowed between childhood and adulthood: they have to become adults while actually working in the labour market.

For the French team working in the Paris area, the context is one of a lengthening transition. Autonomy is an illusion for many unqualified people because of the high level of unemployment among unqualified youth. The selective process of exclusion affects those who are not ready for the labour market at the right time. For the unqualified, work is still an ambition; however, it becomes a request not only for a job or for money, but also for status in society.

For the Italian team working in the Naples area, the context consists of a dual economy. A general demand for work emanates from young people as soon as they leave school; the informal sector provides job opportunities, but the real aim is to find a stable, legal job. Employment in both the informal and illegal economies exercises the function of a moratorium period for unqualified young people, but the cost of this moratorium is very high for those who have not found a stable job by the age of 18 as they will be unemployed – and somehow retired before they reach adulthood – because they are too old for the informal sector. The lack of vocational training reinforces the guilt and boredom of all of these unemployed young adults.

For the Swedish team working in the centre of Sweden, youth is the key problem marking the transition between, on the one hand, the ancient welfare model and, on the other, the new ‘pluralist’ model in which society accepts the idea of a large minority that is excluded and lives precariously. There is an emphasis on the role of family, with social control as well as solidarity being provided by parents. The problems of unqualified young people come under a variety of headings: a sub-culture of welfare and the informal or illegal economy, even in small cities; addiction to alcohol and drugs, mainly among young men, and mental disorders among young women; a general sense of ‘no future’ associated with a feeling of ‘nausea’ caused by a dual, hypocritical system whereby the old Swedish model

continues to flourish in city centres and in society as a whole, but is disparaged elsewhere, mainly among young people, because of an increase in precarious lifestyles.

For the British team working in the London area, unqualified youth trajectories are partly shaped by the context of migrations, and partly by the context of a white working class in the process of being destroyed by transition in the economy and the labour market. A moratorium period for working-class youth is different from the moratorium period experienced by qualified youngsters. The role of this moratorium is to delay entry onto the labour market, and this means that unqualified young people do not have to deal with unemployment until they are ready to work.

The effect of different national contexts shapes not only the transition from childhood to adulthood (i.e. the issue of youth) but the inclusion/exclusion process as well. In all countries, as the Spanish report makes clear, transition to adulthood is a transition from primary to secondary social ties; it is an inclusive process of socialisation. In that sense, being excluded does not mean the same thing for young people as it does for the other groups: it means not being included, and being in a situation of 'no inclusion'. However, societies themselves are in transition, and not being included therefore means remaining in this 'non-modern' part of society, in that part of society that does not fit in with the 'modernisation' process. Depending on how much 'modernisation' there has been in each country, this social area of exclusion can be described and interpreted as 'old poverty' (e.g. in Spain, Italy and Greece) or as 'new poverty' (e.g. in the UK, France and Sweden). However, in either case, the process of including or not including unqualified young people involves, on the one hand, economic change and, on the other, the fate that is reserved for a labour force that has served its purpose and became 'unuseful', irrespective of what this labour force might previously have been employed to do – that is to say wherever the parents of unqualified young people might previously have been employed (e.g. in agriculture, unskilled industrial labour or unskilled clerical work).

### **The main outcomes: family and work**

Despite the influence exerted by these national contexts, the main outcomes of the biographic data can be summarised within a general overview. The issue of unqualified youth may be interpreted as an interactive process of socialisation between family, school and community (in this respect, we follow the Spanish report). It is a mistake to focus on the labour market because what happens in the labour market is either the final outcome of this interactive process, or a temporary stage and part of it. The British report contains a clear example of this in the case of Paul. In fact, the labour market becomes the bridge to adulthood, or

the wall preventing one from entering it, when (and only when) the interactive process has come to an end – that is to say when a young person wants to work and is ready for it. At that point, he (or she) may face unemployment – not because he/she is not right for the job, but because there is a shortage of jobs.

If we look at the total sample of 42 young people aged 15-27, we may conclude that work (i.e. being in employment and having a job) is the main issue for approximately half the young people interviewed. They are ready to work, and some of them are already working in precarious conditions or on a temporary basis, attending vocational training schemes, or making more or less desperate searches for work. If we look at resources, we see that family and community background are most problematic for young people who do not have a job or are not attending a training scheme. In other words, the selective process of inclusion does not reject all unqualified young people; among those ready to work it targets those who have fewest resources and/or bear a stigma (e.g. race or gender) that exposes them to discrimination. By contrast, young people who have found a job or are close to finding one are the ones that benefit from the best family and community support. Of course, this selective process operates differently in different national contexts. Readers of the national reports will find insights into the low levels of support that young people enjoy in the various national contexts. These insights conform with data already known at a European level.

Family and community are handicaps for some young people ready to work and currently seeking to enter the labour market; they are also the main issues for the other interviewees whose most serious problem is little to do with unemployment even if they are registered as out of work. What kinds of family and community problems do these young people have to deal with? The following are the most frequently cited:

- an ambition emanating from parents and imposed on children who cannot cope;
- conflict in the family between the parents or with one of the parents;
- a lack of love; alternatively, neglect, abuse or mental or physical violence perpetrated by one or both parents or a step-parent;
- parental unemployment and poverty;
- permanent, self-perpetuating poverty in the community;
- alcoholism affecting one or both parents;
- discrimination and violence practised in the community and by peers;
- discrimination and violence practised against the community and peers.

A wide range of negative experiences are linked to these problems, they include:

- alcoholism and drug addiction;
- periods of time spent on the street, and running away from home;

- periods of foster-care that are experienced as more or less traumatic;
- physical or mental illness;
- deviance and delinquency, trouble with the police and imprisonment;
- boredom, insecurity, fear and nausea.

In other words, work was not the main issue for most of the interviewees because they are still in the process of trying to cope with the very problems that have brought about their lack of qualification or failure at school. This failure is largely associated with guilt, and its effects are long-lasting. It follows that the issue of adulthood is by no means clear to the young people concerned. What is becoming an adult all about? There are many answers to this question. Here is a summary of them:

- waiting for the parents to explain adulthood and ‘present’ it to them (e.g. by giving them a job);
- being able to support others (e.g. children, for those who already have some; brothers, sisters, parents, for everyone else);
- getting married and bringing up children;
- bringing up children on one’s own;
- getting married, bringing up children, and having a job;
- escaping from poverty, joining the ‘modern’ world, and joining in the competition;
- being successful in the eyes of parents and the community; having a stable job in one’s chosen sector; being recognised by one’s father; being like one’s father;
- not repeating one’s mother’s or father’s life;
- being able to make a choice between two possible fates;
- going away to avoid choices, becoming independent, getting away from all other human beings, emigrating;
- inventing a precarious lifestyle;
- escaping from deviance, leading an honest life;
- finding a relationship with one’s father without destroying the relationship with one’s mother (or vice versa);
- repairing the failures of childhood; understanding and reconstructing the past.

### **Comparing cases at a European level**

Each of the definitions is related to a life story (why) and a strategy (how); they appear clearly in the various national reports. What is clear at a general level is the ambivalence of adulthood – it stands somewhere between full participation and radical individualism. For young people, to be included is a dynamic process that ends somewhere in adulthood (sometimes beyond the age of 30), and in a position between these two poles. In the dynamic process of exclusion, the opposing pole

of participation is that of ‘disaffiliation’ but, if it is true that ‘life is a race’, we should not forget the opposite pole of radical individualism, that is to say the pole of dependency and heteronomy. The losers in the race and the ‘disaffiliated’ are dealt with in different ways by families, social networks and private and public agencies; they, too, find themselves somewhere between these two poles. In fact, exclusion is just as ambivalent as inclusion.

Let us take another look at the whole sample, and try to locate cases according to the main characteristic that marks the definition and strategy of each individual adulthood. It is surprising how few cases can be located at the pole of disaffiliation, that is to say in a position where both secondary and primary forms of socialisation appear to be destroyed or vulnerable. It is a situation in which the ‘self’ is in danger, and is forced to retreat into illusion and fantasy, with or without the help of alcohol or drugs. Much more common are situations of heteronomy, and of dependency on family and welfare, or on welfare agencies. Many of our interviewees have a long way to go before they become adults; they are also a long way from the labour market either because they are trying to solve a problem in a family, kinship or community configuration, or because they are already being looked after by an agency. Quite often, the heteronomic situation is also a combination of welfare and family. In the process of inclusion, individualism and participation are evenly balanced. Given that such a location is somehow subjective and is open to criticism, the table below provides a brief description of why each case has been located in a given category.

<b>Heteronomy</b>	<b>Individualism</b>
(UK) Jessy (in religion, because of lack of love)	(UK) Paul (life as a race)
(UK) Mikey (being looked after by agencies)	(E) Julio (to play the role of a good worker and a good son)
(E) Victor (in therapy as a therapist)	(E) Trini (to bring up children on her own and work)
(E) Eva (being looked after by her family)	(I) Sasà (to carry on working in the shop, and wait for something that will not happen)
(I) Michele (waiting for a job to be given to him by his father or grandmother)	(S) Alexandra (to be independent and not to have others around, to look after animals)
(I) Ginetto (waiting for her mother to repay her love)	(S) Patricia (to emigrate)
(I) Mimmo (between father and mother)	(S) Lawrence (to choose for himself)
(I) Giovanna (being looked after by her hated mother)	(S) Victor (to invent a precarious lifestyle)
(D) Olaf (between agencies and his hated father)	(S) Sam (to make his own choices)
(D) Heinz (being looked after by agencies)	(EL) Lili (to escape from poverty)
(D) Maik (ditto)	
(EL) Kyriakos (between mother and welfare)	
(F) Abdel (between family and welfare)	
(F) Fessal (between girlfriend and welfare)	
(F) Elisabeth (between boyfriend and welfare)	
(F) Isabelle (between boyfriend and family)	



<b>Disaffiliation</b>	<b>Participation</b>
(UK) Chris (in the street, in a world of fantasy)	(UK) Pete (to be a father and have a job)
(UK) Rick (into alcohol and smoking)	(E) Esteban (to be the breadwinner and help others, even if he is trapped in the family)
(E) Estella (not in touch with her surroundings)	(D) Bille (to have a family and be a housewife)
(S) Alice (not in touch with her surroundings)	(D) Andra (to look after his children)
	(EL) Roula (to work and look after the family)
	(EL) Olympia (to work and marry within the community)
	(EL) Sophia (to work and marry in the modern world)
	(EL) Marina (ditto)
	(EL) Rosa (ditto)
	(F) Karim (ditto)

Obviously this table is very approximate. If we look more carefully at each team's 'main case' (Paul (UK), Julio (E), Sasà (I), Sam (S), Roula (EL), Karim (F) and Olaf (D)), we find four (Paul, Julio, Sasà and Sam) at the individualist pole, two (Roula and Karim) at the participative pole, and one (Olaf) at the heteronomic pole.

Olaf	Paul Julio Sasà Sam
	Roula Karim

However, these categories have different meanings in different contexts and, although it tries to take the various contexts into account, the task of categorisation is always threatened by a normative tendency to squeeze cases into boxes that are too small for them, or else too large for them to be defined with any accuracy. Paul's individualism (life as a race) can be seen as a way of fitting into the socio-economic context of the UK, and might therefore be categorised as a form of participation in this society. Julio's case (to be a good son, a good worker and a good peer, although neither satisfied with it nor involved in it) can also be described as a 'modern' form of participation in Spanish-Catalonian urban society, although this gap between ambitions and lived life is likely to lead to more individualism in the sense understood by Norbert Elias. Sasà's fate (carrying out his illegal and poorly paid job of shop-owner) is entirely aimed at social success, and he might well end up at the disaffiliation pole because he has no hope, no resources and no strategy for achieving his aims; this is the general fate imposed by the informal and illegal economy of southern Italy. Sam's case (between two risks) is individualistic in the sense that the kernel of the case is his father's

life-story; however, it can be said to be very participative in its strategy because it merges so well into Swedish transition. It is legitimate to locate Roula's case with participation because of her involvement in work and family care; however, outside a Greek setting, she might well come across as deeply excluded (in a way she is, even in this context) because she has no chance of entering 'modern' Greek society. Karim's case (to be the family breadwinner, and not to mind being exploited at work) can be said to be participative because of his emergence from deviance, but this sort of participation will soon be seen as unsatisfactory. Olaf's case (to have nothing to do with violence) is clearly dominated by welfare and social control agencies but, as the report says, that could change. In other words, life stories are captured at a given moment in their evolution but, more than for other categories, this moment of transition changes continuously and quickly. It follows that the map of transition is outdated as soon as it is drawn.

## **Conclusion**

There is clearly as much normative content in this assessment as there is in the EU report on youth. This is hardly surprising given my age and position. The other approach appears in the German report with the concept of 'biographical incrementalism'. The idea is that the interactive process between family, community and schooling is itself the outcome of a more day-to-day, concrete action aimed at solving immediate problems and addressing immediate situations such as how to react during and after an argument with parents, peers or teachers. The reader can see from the various case stories how a strategy is built up, even if this strategy involves remaining in transition, reinforcing problematic issues and feeding traumatic memories – possibly for years on end. However, by definition incrementalist biographies cannot be generalised, and they do not help to identify the objective and subjective constraints limiting the strategies: the less reflexive the subjects, the more hidden their constraints. Unqualified young people are not the sociologists of their societies. On the contrary, as the Spanish and Italian reports point out, the more oppressed and victim-like they are, the more guilty and resigned they are going to be. What is true sociologically is just as true politically. It should be emphasised here that the political context of transition in both Spain and in former East Germany is almost totally absent from recounted life. When it is present, it is identified as something already very old and out-of-date, and is also something irrelevant or insignificant except, as the Spanish report states, for the significant fact that it shows how far the parents' generation is from young people's reality.

It may be that the general lack of reflexivity, as described in several reports, is partly an effect of youth and shallow experience. But surely it is also a problem for adults. Several reports influenced by Arendt analyse the parents' generation lack of authority. It is no coincidence, Arendt would say, that parental authority is

such a great problem in countries where authoritarian regimes have been in place for so much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In that sense, the normative concept of adulthood, as well as our attempt to give it some consistency through biographies, is just further evidence of adults' inability to bring children up effectively. If, as we have tried to show, the labour market is a misleading reflection of the problems of unqualified youth, these problems are certainly a faithful reflection of the problems facing 'unqualified' adults. In conclusion, it may be said that being and becoming an adult is partly about realising how unqualified adults are, and partly being able to absorb the shock of this extraordinary irresponsibility. Reproduce it or change it? To everyone according to his (or her) means.