

Final report category 4 France

Unqualified youth : change into a transition

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This report comes in two parts. The first reviews the literature on the socio-economic situation of unqualified youth, youth policies and transitions from youth to adulthood, and concludes with a definition of the risk; the second analyses our interviewees' strategies.

I. Youth and adulthood

Childhood, youth and adulthood are not natural categories; they are socially constructed, and they are endowed with different meanings in every society and period (Ariès, 1960; Galland, 1997). Moreover, youth is characterised by being situated between childhood and adulthood; it is a transition, a passageway. The step from childhood to adulthood can be almost instantaneous and constitute a ritual lasting no more than a week or a day (Van Gennep, 1969). In French post-war society the ritual goes on for two or three years, except in the cases of the favoured minority of young people engaged in long-term study, and it is marked by three events that are close to one another in time: leaving the parental home (mainly to do military service, in the case of boys), entry into the labour market, and starting a family (Galland, 1997).

The current period is notable for a general extension of the transition period. This uncertainty is empirically visible through the factors such as the extended time spent studying, youth unemployment, and the precarious situation of young people in the labour market. In other words, the shift from childhood to adulthood takes place as part of a wider change occurring in society as a whole. To quote Nicole-Drancourt (1991), 'Society is undergoing a major transition, and the integration of young people into the social fabric is probably the optimal expression of that transition.'

I.1 Socio-economic data on unqualified youth

Generally speaking, unemployment impacts particularly on youth, women and older wage-earners. Unemployment among those in the 15-29 age bracket was 20.3 per cent in 1996 compared with an average of 12 per cent, but this aggregate reality conceals two different phenomena.

a) **Temporary unemployment:** in practice, unemployment decreases with age. In 1996, it stood at 26 per cent among people aged 20-24 and 16 per cent among those aged 25-29. Longitudinal studies show that most young people find a secure job eventually: in Nicole-Drancourt's survey (1991) of a cohort of 22 year olds, all of whom were unemployed, 7 per cent of boys and 9 per cent of girls were still unemployed at the age of 30.

b) **Long-term unemployment:** this particularly affects unqualified youth. Five years after finishing school, 30 per cent of them are still looking for a job. A government survey of unqualified youth (Commissariat du Plan, 1993) describes 60 per cent of them as 'integrated', 22 per cent on the path to 'insertion', 8 per cent in a situation of 'failure', and

10 per cent in 'danger of exclusion'. Long-term unemployment is also associated with family dependency (78 per cent of unemployed workers aged 20-24 live with their parents), failure to start a family (the period between completing one's education and the birth of the first child is twice as long for unqualified youth) and poverty (the number of poor households containing people under 30 has risen from 9 per cent to 18 per cent (INSEE, 1996)). Lastly, discrimination in the labour market against 'non-white' youth has been officially acknowledged by a report in France for the first time (CNCDDH, 1998).

To conclude, exclusion is clearly a selective process. Most young people have to begin their careers on the labour market with unemployment, precariousness and low pay, and a minority never escape. The lack of qualification is a relevant variable in this selection. It is an actuarial risk.

I.2 Youth policies

Since the late 1970s, in an effort to enable 80 per cent of each generation to take the 'baccalauréat', the state has encouraged an extension of the period spent studying; it has also developed youth training and work-access policies. Several million young people have been targeted under these policies: in 1994, for instance, 130,000 young people under 26 were on training courses, and 380,000 had state-assisted jobs.

As the Prime Minister recently remarked, these policies clearly demonstrate that the social state rejects the notion of a welfare society and that, from the state's point of view, work remains an objective for all young people. This is also why under-25s are not entitled to the *revenu minimum d'insertion* (minimum integration income).

All youth policies are organised around the notion of 'integration' (*insertion*). This notion is still extremely fuzzy; in fact, Demazière and Dubar (1997) describe it as a piece of 'conceptual tinkering'. Insertion is the opposite of exclusion, and debate around 'social integration' (as opposed to 'vocational integration') seeks to determine which is influencing the other. This sorry state of affairs provides ammunition for critics of social work, and for advocates of a 'solidaristic economy' (Laville, 1997) that can **not** only integrate the excluded and **but also** offer an alternative to market-based integration.

These policies cannot be adequately reviewed because no one knows what would have happened if they had not existed. Employers have gone along with the government's measures, but in practice they take young people onto training schemes and then pocket the state funding. These funds currently stand at 200bn francs, the same as is spent on family policy (Dares, 1997). However, the combination of labour market and youth policies still leads to selection, and at the end of the day a number of young people find themselves out of a job. This might explain why youth policies are seldom mentioned in the biographical narratives and interviews that are a frequent feature of research into unqualified youth. It is true that there is mention of training packages and state-aided jobs and courses, but the references are often negative and articulated as the opposite of the norm of a stable job. On the other hand, as Demazière and Dubar (1997) point out, the idea of a vocational project is widely supported by young people conscious of the difficulties they face when entering the labour market.

In all cases, entry into the labour market comes as a shock to unqualified and poorly qualified youth. 'For all these young people, entry into the labour market most pointedly reveals the constraints and violence perpetrated by the empirical, economic world. The time spent working puts an end to naive convictions, and ushers these youngsters into a

completely new era – that of disillusionment.’ (Demazière & Dubar 1997.) For unqualified youth, the issue of the journey to adulthood is therefore clearer: it is a question of using various resources in order to confront labour market reality.

I.3 Social trajectories and adulthood

The normal typologies generate four kinds of trajectory:

- trajectories for finding stability at work;
- trajectories for deliberate mobility (associated with a project of upward mobility);
- trajectories for forced mobility and endured precariousness;
- trajectories for exclusion and isolation, or withdrawal into work.

(Demazière & Dubar, 1997)

Several writers argue, it should be made clear, that work is the biographical horizon of all young people without exception, although the horizon slips back as they grow older; this is true of girls with and without children. As Nicole-Drancourt (1991) shows, women can no longer choose not to work. Inactivity is an empirical fact (30 per cent of Nicole-Drancourt’s cohort), but domestic work and the status of housewife are completely devalued, so although women commit themselves to family life earlier than men, they soon return to employment. If they cannot find a regular job, they need something for the purposes of status – perhaps an occasional job, or some volunteer activity caring for children or a disabled or elderly person. In other words, inactivity can be a strategy for young women, but it is not a solution. If you are just a housewife, you are nothing – and that means being excluded.

Although all young people, men and women alike, have the same horizon, they do not follow the same path, and even when they walk along the same path, they do not walk together because the relationships between family life and work life are not the same. Unemployed women give themselves over to family life at an earlier stage, and then go back to work. By contrast, men commit themselves more gently: some delay starting a family because they are not ready, or not able, to stabilise their professional lives (something they must do if they commit themselves, for example, to marriage or having a child), while others set up homes without having a stable job. Men and women employ different strategies. Women’s ‘hypergamy’ (choosing partners who are older and better off vocationally and educationally) contrasts with that of men, who also have a tendency to choose partners with greater resources than themselves, although this is less commonly found in men’s strategy on the wedding market.

In her study of young people’s trajectories, Nicole-Drancourt challenges the idea that social background condemns categories of people to failure; she also shows that the level of diploma is less important than the standard of education. Young people succeed if they have received a good standard of education: in other words, reflexive and cognitive dimensions are essential because all young people know what they have to do (i.e. become independent), but they also have to find out how to go about it; this implies a moratorium, a time for simultaneously deciphering oneself and society. This apprenticeship is all the more crucial as there is increasing labour market demand, not only for diplomas, but also for other kinds of know-how, like good presentation of self, communicative skills, etc.

Other sociologists, including Roulleau-Berger (1991), also refer to the range of communicative skills needed to succeed. This author concludes that the notion of exclusion must be firmly restricted to cases of young people who fail on the labour

market even when they are motivated to work. This failure, Roulleau-Berger admits, is more frequent in deprived groups. There are two reasons for this: a serious shortage of social and educational resources, and a stigma (e.g. associated with colour, language or culture) that leads to discrimination. This exclusion affects a minority, and flows from a combination of negative biographical events and economic circumstances. It is not due to a lack of opportunities, but to a lack of skill in taking advantage of them.

Research by Demazière and Dubar similarly points to the reflexive and cognitive dimension and challenges the standard analysis of exclusion and insertion. Becoming an adult does not mean the same thing to all young people. Each decoding of oneself and of society (what the authors call the 'identity form') is associated with a specific temporal horizon. To talk about exclusion or inclusion is therefore to label inaccurately. Roulleau-Berger (1991) believes that young people are able to play the roles of both marginalised and integrated persons simultaneously as they are alternatively labelled as one or as the other. We must therefore explore the biographical narratives and interviews to find out what young people say if we want to construct categories that reflect their experiences. The authors ask, 'What would happen if, for the first time in France, a significant proportion of these young people did not want to be vocationally or socially integrated in any way?' In such a scenario, with the cultural and social framework of adulthood utterly destroyed, the interviews would become incomprehensible: young people would be unable to make themselves understood because of a lack of 'words to describe it', and it would also be impossible to develop a typology.

It appears from the experiment (i.e. in analytical work on the interviews) that a typology of the interviews – i.e. a typology of the 'lived worlds' – is possible. This typology only includes the issue of work and the relationship to work; it distinguishes four lived worlds:

- interviews framed by the project of **doing**, and the objective of becoming one's own boss: **this is the world of skills**;
- interviews framed by the project of **finding** work in order to avoid unemployment: **this is the world of jobs**;
- interviews framed by the project of **climbing** up the social ladder through training: **this is the world of duties**;
- interviews framed by the project of **obtaining** a position through a powerful relative: **this is the world of providence**.

The authors stress that the narratives are framed by a disjunction – that is to say a major opposition between what young people have and what they do not have, between what they have done and what they have not done, between what they are and what they are not, and between what they reject and what they long for. According to the narratives, what they have, what they have done and what they are constitute what they reject and do not want. And again, according to the narratives, what they want and what they long for constitute what they do not have, what they have not done and what they are not. It follows that there is a positive side (a wish to do something else) and a negative side (the fact that the objective has not been attained), but this disjunction is not articulated by all young people in the same way. Certain narratives describe a future based on acquired experience; these reveal a **biographical voluntarism** with the interviewees telling the interviewer the story that they tell themselves, and involving themselves 'in discourses that turn into their own stories' (Ricoeur, 1985). By contrast, other narratives focus on salvation and are based on expectations: these are utopian narratives haunted by the spectre of long-term unemployment and of being on the minimum income; they are also marked by **cultural fatalism** and reveal a completely distinct 'negotiation with oneself' (Strauss).

The idea that all young people can find a job providing they really want one is only found in narratives framed by biographic voluntarism; by contrast, the idea that young people can only find a job if they receive support is only to be found in narratives framed by cultural fatalism. This issue of support (or providence) is also in Jalaudin's studies (1994) which analyse strategies based on 'the intimate conviction of the impending arrival of a providential event'. It is therefore legitimate to follow Nicole-Drancourt and ask oneself if the support is effective, or whether it reinforces dependency: 'For the most deprived, support (from parents or the state) is perceived first and foremost as protective: it is a wall protecting them from work, not a bridge enabling them to reach it... However, the support does not create dependency by itself. Dependency was there all along. The dynamics of commitment are what shape the way in which benefits are received.'

I.4 The risk of exclusion, lying between dependency and disaffiliation

The theory developed by Demazière and Dubar is particularly convincing as it is in turn based on another grounded theory. It allows us to link the strategy of the narrative (i.e. biographical voluntarism versus cultural fatalism) to the biographical strategy (i.e. the world of skills (doing) and the world of duties (climbing) versus the world of jobs (finding) and the almost world of providence (obtaining)). However, this approach fails to incorporate the family dimension. This is as important for adulthood as it is for one's vocational life, and it interacts with it; it also limits exclusion to how it is defined by the interviewees.

We should therefore introduce the family dimension and the social definition of exclusion. The only way to do this is to define inclusion as the current form of autonomy in France (if not in Europe) – that is to say a region lying between two opposite forms of autonomy: radical individualism and full participation. Exclusion is defined as the opposite region, lying between disaffiliation (anomy) and dependency (heteronomy). The positions of the interviewees can be identified from two points of view: the family angle (dependency versus autonomy, and disaffiliation versus autonomy toward the family of origin – and possibly the family of destination) and the vocational angle (dependency versus autonomy, and disaffiliation versus autonomy in employment and the project). The risk of exclusion therefore takes on different forms, as do the strategies to cope with it. Cultural fatalism in employment and the project may, or may not, be associated with cultural fatalism in the field of the family. Biographical voluntarism can also take two forms, and this gives us a strategic space with four positions:

- fatalism in the fields of family and work;
- voluntarism in the fields of family and work;
- fatalism in the field of family and voluntarism in the field of work;
- voluntarism in the field of family and fatalism in the field of work.

II Interviewees' strategies

II.1 Main case: Karim. The strategy of adjustment

Karim was born in Algeria in June 1976. A month later, his mother took him to France where his father had been working since 1967. The father was training and working as a builder/painter/electrician, an above-average job for an Algerian migrant. They lived in the centre of Paris, and remained there despite poor housing: Karim later caught asthma as a result of these poor living conditions. Many migrant workers who settled in Paris in

the 1950s and 1960s were forced into social housing outside Paris, but Karim's family remained in Paris and indeed still live in Belleville, a popular district with migrants from many countries. Karim is the eldest child; a sister was born in 1978, followed by a brother in 1982 and another sister in 1987. The parents got divorced in 1989; Karim was 16 and still living with his mother and siblings. Karim's parents' marriage was traditional in that it was arranged by their families. Karim criticises this way of going about things. Karim's school career was average for a person with his background. He passed the CAP (Certificat d'aptitude professionnelle, the lowest vocational qualification) in electronics, but failed the BEP (Brevet d'Études professionnelles, the higher level); both of them well below the level of the 'baccalauréat'. Karim was 19 at the time, and his father had left home but, as the eldest, he had to support his mother and siblings. In the terminology used by Demazière and Dubar, Karim's lived world as far as employment is concerned is 'the world of jobs' framed by the idea of 'finding' a job. Karim is clearly facing exclusion from the labour market in the sense that he is ready to work and has some skills, but continues to be rejected. Even while he was studying for the CAP, he worked illegally as a street vendor selling magazines and books. He had by then learned how to 'charm people into buying things', and wanted to be employed on an official basis, but his boss refused. Karim started looking for a regular job, but discovered that he had not learned at school how to deal with competition in the labour market. To be chosen from the short-list, you need to demonstrate not only your qualification and the fact that you know what to do, but also the fact that you know how to be – how to show your motivation, and how to show that you have a plan for a professional career, that you are able to write a perfect curriculum vitae, and that you are ready to fawn to the boss and accept exploitation. Karim then tried for a job as a security guard, but he was turned down because of his foreign nationality. He was finding out that being a migrant is a handicap.

This initiation came as a shock to Karim, and he was angry with the school system which, he believes, failed him and did not properly educate him. Excluded from the labour market, Karim then entered a two-year moratorium period during which he simultaneously tried to obtain assistance from the state and engage in illegal small business. None of these solutions proved satisfactory: he made very little money in the illegal business and was not able to support his mother, and he recalls her leaving home early in the morning to go to her job as a cleaning lady while he stayed at home consumed with guilt. The official, state-funded, training scheme provided him with short courses designed to help young people like him enter the labour market. He had ambivalent views about this policy: on the one hand, like most young people, Karim criticised the fact that the courses did not meet his needs (i.e. to find a job) and were unrealistic (he went on a four-day course on 'finding out who you are'); on the other hand, he admits these sessions were useful in that they showed him he did not have as many problems (e.g. disability, mental illness and a low level of qualification or experience) as a lot of other young people. He rejected the stigma of being grouped together with these highly excluded young people, seeing himself as somebody endowed with vocational and biographical resources.

One important resource was his mother's support. She continued to believe in him, and he says it is thanks to her support that he put a stop to his illegal activity; this was a strongly lived risk in his own experience as well as in that of all his friends. The other support came from a newly-created association in his area, Belleville, that involved local residents in a campaign against an urban project to pull down old estates and send people living in social housing out of Paris. Karim became a member, and later leader, of the youth group and shared responsibility for the youth club. Karim extended the club's network, and became somebody young people could trust – the one who was sent off to

speak to politicians and the state on their behalf. He also took part in making a film about Belleville, and met Daniel Pennac, a famous writer involved in a European-funded project (Commission européenne de la jeunesse). In his interview, Karim spoke as much about other people, the social and political history of his neighbourhood and migration as about himself. This dual register (my history/the general history of neighbourhood, the community and France) enabled him to publicise the information he wanted known, and conceal the information he wanted to keep for himself (mainly about his family). However, the sources of support (i.e. his mother and the association) explain why Karim has this biographical voluntarism and hope – the idea that things will eventually get easier and that you can overcome difficulties if you are prepared to suffer and be exploited.

Karim tackled the labour market once again and found casual jobs, first in a restaurant (where he found out how much exploitation unauthorised immigrants will tolerate) and then three months in the post office. Eventually, after going through these experiences and learning exactly what employers wanted to hear, Karim answered a job advertisement in a newspaper, went to the meeting and found out exactly what words had to be used if one wanted to be selected. He responded successfully to the challenge, and the contract enabled him to go on a government in-service training programme that qualified him for a good position. At the end of the contract, the employer offered Karim a stable job.

Through this job, Karim acquired a social as well as a professional status. He was no longer financially dependent on the family; indeed, he now supported both his mother and siblings. He has not yet started a family, and it is difficult to say what his life will be like because, for the time being, he criticises his parents' traditional marriage but, given his background, his way of thinking and his membership of the Algerian community, he is also not completely attracted by the modern, urban family model.

To conclude, if autonomy (in the form of participation) is self-evident in Karim's case, it is less clear at a family level because he is still living at home with his mother and siblings. Discrimination and racism continue to be permanent features of his life. Karim recalls an event on the underground when he was going out with his girlfriend and, solely because of his Maghreb appearance, was approached by a young man asking for 'dope'. Karim is very angry about this incident. He now has enough inner strength to cope with discrimination, but he describes how incidents of this kind can have a dramatic effect on people who lack inner strength, and even be a turning-point on the road to further exclusion. As Karim says, when he thinks back to the time when he was involved in illegal activities, 'I have been very close to going mad ... violent.' This can easily happen, and it happens to many young people who lack the 'reflexivity' that Karim shows when he explains that if you cannot cope with life's big challenges, you lose interest in the world around you.

II.2 Other cases

Abdel: double dependency

Abdel is an example of someone marked by a complete lack of autonomy. This 23 year old Moroccan has seven siblings and lives in a working-class district. He does not even have the lowest level of qualification: like Karim, he failed the BEP, but unlike him, he also failed the CAP. This academic failure was probably the result of his parents' failed strategy of integration: Abdel was sent to a private (Catholic) school where, as a Muslim,

he suffered religious discrimination. The actuarial risk of exclusion was obvious and, in the five years since he left school, he has been employed for only four months, each time on a state-funded programme.

Abdel's strategy is to rely on others so as to avoid what he is most afraid of, that is to say deviance and – more to the point – drug addiction. He has relied on his family, mainly his mother, in the past and he still does: it was his parents who saved him from falling into deviance. Since he left school, he has also relied – and continues to rely – on state-funded training programmes: he attends innumerable courses to get qualified for various jobs, but he cannot find a job. The lived world of work is clearly of the providential type. His social worker will find him appropriate training, a suitable job and a reasonable position.

This strategy has not proved successful, but it seems that Abdel can do nothing about it. He has concentrated on remaining 'mentally strong' in order to avoid deviance. He maintains that he wants to 'go straight' and earn an honest living by working hard, and he is aware that long-term unemployment has 'wounded his dignity'. However, he also says he is not prepared to work in the building sector – it is probably the only sector he could get into at the moment, and for which he has some informal qualification – because the pay is not good enough. It is easier to track this ambivalence towards work in the wider narrative: Abdel suffers discrimination in his daily life and in places like restaurants and night-clubs, he oscillates between rebellion and resignation, and he does not think the situation will change; he has a French girlfriend, but he wants to give his children a traditional Muslim education; he rejects the idea of being on welfare, but wants the state to give him a job; when he talks about his ambitions, he first claims that having a family is priority, followed by a job, and then says that a stable job is the first step in starting a family. Because of his age, his lack of resources and reflexivity, Abdel is now in a state of double dependency at family and vocational level; he is therefore at risk of exclusion. He describes it as a risk of deviance and/or of welfare dependency. At this stage, Abdel's only realistic ambition is to have driving lessons.

Elisabeth and Fessal: family autonomy and welfare dependency

Fessal is 24 and has never been happy. When his father decided to get divorced, Fessal was rejected by his mother and had to go and live with his father (who beat him) and his new wife (who disliked him). To avoid this domestic violence, Abdel moved in with his girl-friend, and they now have a six month old baby. Abdel was happy for the first time in his life because there was nobody telling him what to do; however, although he had no qualification, he had a wife, a child, and another baby on the way. Since Fessal left school, his life has been precariously distributed between work, unemployment and training courses, none of which have led to stable employment. Since the child was born, Fessal has been living on unemployment benefit and, when that was cut back, on financial help from various social services departments.

Fessal knows everything there is to know about casual work, exploitation, discrimination and low pay. His lived world of work is the world of 'finding' a job. It is 'the world of jobs': like Karim, he needs work to support his family, but unlike Karim, he does not have the wherewithal to find a stable job. He rebels. For him, work means money, not self-realisation. His only vocational ambition was to become a mechanic and he once had a chance to get some training, but he did not fancy supporting a family at the time. He had an argument with a colleague on the course, got the blame and left. Fessal walks out on jobs and courses; he is now fatalistic and thinks it is too late and that he will never be able to do anything other than odd jobs.

Fessal has therefore been happy on welfare since the child was born. He is trying to stay on welfare, and hopes that a second child will entitle him to more welfare assistance and enable him to finish furnishing the home (the flat is half-empty). The lived risk for Fessal is the risk of poverty and, behind that, the risk of being abandoned by his wife. Fessal knows she could be better off or, if she was alone, at least survive somehow on the higher welfare payments that lone-parent families receive. He can also see that she is not happy with her incompetent bread-winner who stays at home and never goes out to work. She wants money to buy things for the flat, for the baby and for herself – he is already having arguments with her about that – but Fessal is not sure about accepting a job if it means leaving the city. In fact, he is trying to live on welfare and is not prepared to work if it can be avoided. He justifies this by blaming employers and pointing out that welfare is better than deviance. The future of the welfare system is therefore decisive for Fessal's future. Whether he breaks the family up or keeps it together by alternating between odd jobs and unemployment benefit, Fessal is now stuck with a risky, marginalised life in the wake of the family's risky start.

Elisabeth is now 19. She was taken away from her mother when she was 13, and handed over to her father whom she had not previously known. She lived in her father's home and worked as a cleaning lady and nurse for her father's young child; she was disliked by the new wife, and received no support in daily life and at school. She then met a man, left her father's home and followed her new partner to Paris, where they soon separated. Soon she was on the street, but was looked after by a private, state-funded organisation and put up in a hotel. She began to comprehend her exclusion when she was on her own in the hotel on her birthday and Christmas day, and hungrily standing outside a restaurant with no money in her pocket. She has never had a job. The social worker has threatened her with going back to the streets within a couple of months if she has not found a job, but she finds no openings in the labour market even though she looks every morning. She is qualified (at the lowest level) to do hairdressing, a sector with a very high rate of unemployment, and dreams of becoming a youth worker. Elisabeth is proud of having walked out of her father's home and of achieving effective autonomy, but her lack of social relationships is a heavy burden and she cannot face the prospect of going back to her father.

She is afraid that returning to the streets might mean prostitution, as the experience of a girl friend has demonstrated. If she does not become a prostitute, Elisabeth dreams of having a baby so that she will be entitled to welfare, but that would mean a re-run of her mother's life-story, and she wants to avoid that. She is also thinking about selling drugs, an acceptable solution because 'nobody gives her a chance to show how useful she is.' However, she fears stigmatisation. Behind these somehow provocative ideas – it is a little like Abdel explaining the need of support in order to avoid deviance – lies the idea of resuming the affair with the partner she followed to Paris (they have kept in touch). So although Elisabeth has achieved autonomy from her family, she is obviously at risk of exclusion, and living a life of deviance which, depending on the strategy adopted by her welfare worker, may be combined with welfare.

Isabelle: a family strategy

Isabelle is 19 and lives with her parents and her two brothers. The mother is unemployed, as is the elder brother. Isabelle left school without any qualification and has been unemployed ever since. She has never worked, not even in casual jobs. She was trained at school to be a shop-assistant, but her ambition is to look after children; sadly, to train for

childcare, she needs to go to a larger town but she is not ready for that. She stays at home in the town where her parents live, and looks for jobs that do not exist for a person of her age and qualification. In fact, she is not yet ready to make do without the support of her parents and boyfriend. Her vocational ambition (the lived world of 'positions' and 'climbing') is not very secure (she says she would also accept work as a shop-assistant), and her simple ambition to have a job is not so secure either: she would gladly have a baby if her boyfriend's job were stable rather than casual. She does not want to be at risk. In other words, she is not yet really facing up to the duty of becoming an adult, even though she objectively abandoned childhood when she left school. For Isabelle, the risk of exclusion might be defined, not as a risk of disaffiliation but as one of family dependency; the former is closely related to the latter. Indeed, if her parents insist on Elisabeth being financially independent and if her boyfriend's situation remains precarious, the danger will be disaffiliation. Elisabeth will have to downsize her ambitions if, after some training, she wants to enter the labour market at a level adjusted for her lack of qualification. As time goes by, the risk (of leaving the town) that is necessary to achieve the job she wants will be marked by further problems and greater urgency.

General conclusion

A study of unqualified young people is a good chance to reconsider the category of young unemployed graduates. There, biographical analysis shows that the risk of exclusion might be defined as the risk of not finding a job in the labour market that is appropriate for people with degrees: this risk could be linked to social and family origins if network resources are not enough to open the door of the labour market. Alternatively, and particularly in more affluent families, it could be linked to family losses if individual factors are not enough to give access to the labour market. In both scenarios, the orientation towards the future depends on reflexivity, and on the need to adjust means and ambitions by downsizing those ambitions and/or upsizing the means.

Unqualified young people are included in this category to an extent. This is obvious in the cases of Karim and Isabelle, with Karim being the one who has already succeeded and Isabelle (she is only 19) the one who has yet to do it. However, the risk of exclusion is much greater in this category of unqualified people because of the low level of resources. Moreover, hopes for self-realisation at work are much more slender because people find themselves while performing these jobs. It is therefore remarkable that, despite their lack of qualification, our interviewees have such high hopes of getting a job. Fessal is the only one who is obviously – and mainly – interested in money, and in work as a way of earning money for its own sake rather than for its status. However, even in his case, work is seen as a desired position so that he can maintain his independence from his family of origin. In this sense, Nicole-Drancourt (see above) is right. The path from childhood to adulthood is also one that leads from one society to another. Among unqualified young people in the 1960s, the issue of work was not a matter of status, but one of money – a 'natural' constraint rather than a social aspiration. Fessal's position would then have been standard. If work as status has become the crucial point of adulthood, it means we belong to a society that is becoming extremely threatening for young people, in the sense that it offers more than a million of them no jobs at all, and at the same time insists that all of them are in work or else they are excluded. This is why, in the case of unqualified young people, the issue of work is much more a matter of life – of being or not being – than of having or not having; for young people with an academic degree, it is still a matter of ambition and resources.

This is not to say that family plays a minor role in the path to adulthood. The paucity of cases prevents us from painting the situation of unqualified young people with stable jobs and experiencing disaffiliation, loneliness, and effective dependency on their parents or a partner. It could become Karim's situation, and it could also be the situation of Elisabeth or Isabelle even if they had a job. In other words, family, kinship and marriage can be a trap as well as a resource, and that is why it is difficult to delineate the frontiers of risk with any accuracy. This feature is located in the area of autonomy and, at another time or in other circumstances, could well be located in the area of exclusion. Karim's accession to the role of breadwinner can now (or later) be interpreted as suggesting he cannot engage in family life; this would be a repetition of a traditional, subservient way of living, despite the fact that it is commonly found among young Algerian migrants (Triballat, 1995). Abdel's reliance on training services might work one day if, once he has been adopted by social workers, he becomes their favourite and receives training to be a social worker. Fessal's move to start a family might be only an escape from his domestic violence scenario in which he will replicate for his children what happened to him; similarly, although she is aware of the risk, Elisabeth's escape is a repeat of the path taken by her mother. Why should Elisabeth not be allowed to marry, have several children, look after children and be happy – instead of spending her life recalling vanished hopes? The biographical work and analysis give more than an impression of the lived life. It is a valuable assessment of what it all means at a given moment, but from that moment onwards the pathway to autonomy or exclusion remains shadowy. In other words, and to conclude, autonomy can be defined as lying somewhere between radical individualism and participation, and exclusion somewhere between deviance and disaffiliation (radical individualism and disaffiliation are less frequently found among the unqualified than among those with university degrees and vice-versa). However, this map is incomplete. It is also a moving map in the sense that biographical paths use short-cuts, footbridges and underground passageways; deviance is not far from participation, and disaffiliation is no further from radical individualism. Biographies of older people are much clearer than those of young people, and the latter continue to live in hazardous conditions. The best criterion for autonomy might be the ability to turn an opening into a resource (in that way, Karim would be well equipped in terms of adulthood) or, by contrast, to turn support into a handicap (in which case Isabelle would be equipped in terms of childhood). However, Karim is 23 and Isabelle is 19, and that is why Fessal, Elisabeth and Abdel are probably in the most risky situations. At this time of life, years take longer and count for more.

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