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Title:

Neither studying nor working: free time as a solution?

Abstract:

This article analyses the importance of free-time activities in building the identity of Spanish young people who neither study nor work. The initial point is that the situation of unemployment, inactivity and precarious work that affects many young people leads to changes in the construction of their identity. Low employment and job insecurity accentuate the loss of centrality of paid work in their life project, and the use of free time reflects the traits that identify them in a specific context. The relationship between free time and training and/or working time was therefore investigated using a qualitative methodological strategy to analyse the structure, meaning and content of free time according to young people's situation in relation to education and employment, their gender and their region of residence. The results suggest that the symbolic centrality of working time persists alongside changes in the meaning and content of free time.

Keywords: free time, youth, work, training, identity

Introduction

Since the late 1980s, and especially during the 1990s, the consequences of the successive employment crises have been studied using a variety of approaches. Some scholars consider the possibilities and opportunities offered by technological changes (Castells, 1997; Rifkin, 1996). Others focus on the effects of job loss on identity, especially in men (Sennet, 1998). Bauman (2000) and Crompton (1999) show that employment is declining as a shaper of social class, and is being replaced by aspects related to consumption and lifestyle.

Young people are one of the main groups affected by the employment crises. Unemployment and precarious working conditions accentuate the transformation of work as a value among the younger generations (Alonso et al., 2013; Santamaria, 2011). In order to analyse the characteristics and impact of this transformation, youth studies have developed various focuses of interest. Firstly, as Reiter (2003) explains, one set of studies have analysed questions related to life perspectives of the young unemployed (Ahlheit, 1994). Some of the studies introduce the social dimension of time as an analytical category with multiple levels that allows new typologies to be proposed (Cavalli, 1985; Reiter, 2003; Lasén, 2000). Others focus on the social organization of time and everyday life of young adult people (Leccardi, 1999; Gasparini, 2018). Secondly, within the context of a discourse on the end of modernity and the emergence of new values, other studies have focused on how the changes associated with globalization affect youth identities. As Farrugia et al. (2014) argue, on the basis of the theories of social change such as those of Beck (1992) and Bauman (2000), some youth sociologists have described a decline in traditional modes of identity construction in an increasingly globalized world (Ball et al., 2000; McLeod and Yates, 2006). Appadurai (1996) analyse this decline according to a disjunctive relationship between cultural symbols and collective classed identities that introduces other variables such as gender and place. The main discussion is between the influence of individual subjectivism and structural conditions.

Following this debate, Moreno and Crespo and Julià (2012) focused on the importance of employment in building youth identity, arguing that employment is increasingly losing symbolic importance in the identity of young people with certain profiles, and that the subjective value attributed to free-time activities is growing. Reiter (2003) shows that work and social class are still important categories of social life, arguing that the importance of work persists despite the erosion of the norm of an institutionalized life

course that puts education and employment into a certain chronological order. The erosion of this standardized norm has particularly unfortunate consequences for disadvantaged young people.

Finally, other studies focus on identity and free time, in the context of a discourse on the end of modernity and the emergence of new values. The spaces and times of leisure reflect the traits that identify youth in a specific economic and sociopolitical context. Young people do leisure activities as part of broader life projects in a social context in which they can shape their identities (Lazcano et al., 2017). The uses of free time and leisure experiences are the subject of attention for research and policy design because they are one of the scenarios in which everyday life and the socialization of young people take place (Crespo, 2016).

Research on youth has therefore largely focused on the organization and content of leisure time (Lazcano and Madariaga, 2016b), leading to the design and implementation of policies (Moreno and Crespo and Julià, 2012) associated with the free time of youth. These studies have highlighted the opportunities provided by certain activities and the dangers associated with the consumption of drugs and the excessive use of technology (Salvador, 2009; Gradaïlle and Varela and de Valenzuela, 2016; Crespo, 2016).

Focusing on the contemporary Spanish context, this article analyses the role played by free-time activities in shaping the identity of young people, considering the importance that they attribute to leisure time and recognizing the influence of the socio-professional context. In particular, it proposes to investigate the case of young people who have discontinuous trajectories between education and employment, i.e., periods in which they are neither studying nor working.

As a consequence of the economic crisis that started in 2008, in the EU as many as 23.5% of people under the age of 25 failed to find a job in 2013. Spain, like Greece, was one of the most alarming cases, with a youth unemployment rate of 55.5%. This employment crisis shows three new traits in the Spanish 16-24 age group in 2017 according to Eurostat figures : the high number of young people who want to work and cannot find a job (38.6% unemployed compared with the European average of 16.8%); the higher unemployment of young men than young women (39.5% of males and 37.4% of females compared with the European average of 17.4% and 16.1%, respectively); and inactivity as an individual response to long-term unemployment and precariousness (an inactivity rate of 66.7% and a temporary employment rate of 73.3% compared with the European rates of 58.3% and 43.9%, respectively). Involuntary part-time work is also traditional specific Spanish trait

of precariousness in this age group: 53.4% fail to find a full-time job compared with the European average of 24.7%¹. Moreover, the number of Spanish young people aged 15 to 24 who are neither in employment nor in education or training is also higher than the European average: 13.3% (13.8% of males and 12.8% of females) and 10.9% (10.7% of males and 11.2% of females), respectively. In early school leaving, Spain also has the highest rates in Europe: 18.3% early leavers from education and training (21.8% of males and 14.5% of females) compared with the European average of 10.5 (12.1% of males and 8.9% of females).

To explain these main factors of the Spanish case from the perspective of the supply side, the literature relates NEET and early leavers with a low education level and education exclusion (Tarabini and Jacovkis and Montes, 2017; Salvà-Mut and Tugores-Ques and Quintana-Murci, 2017). The enormous heterogeneity of the group and the student's and their experiences of the education transition suggest that a variety of factors are at play: the role of teachers; the impact of grouping practices and disciplinary mechanisms; the contrast between mainstream educational institutions and alternative learning arenas; education transitions; and personal and structural factors. From the perspective of the demand side, factors involved include the impact of the economic crisis on a vulnerable labour market and the low investment in active employment policies and dual training (Serracant, 2014; Salvà-Mut and Tugores-Ques and Quintana-Murci, 2017).

The initial question we pose is the extent to which the consequences of the employment crisis (high rates of unemployment, inactivity and precariousness) are reducing the importance of paid work in the life project of Spanish young people in the transition to adult life. We engage with the discussion of changes related to modernity and youth studies in order to analyse the importance of individual subjectivity and structural conditions. This is not a new discussion, but we wish to argue that free time is important in shaping identity and employability, taking into account the variables of social class, gender and place of residence. We propose two initial hypotheses. The first is that leisure time and the activities associated with it are becoming elements of identity that help give meaning to the life project of young people when they are neither studying nor working.

¹ In the 15 years and over group, data show difference according to gender reproducing traditional roles and the sexual division of work. The reasons for involuntary part-time employment are as follows: could not find a job, 60.3% (66.3% male and 57.9% female) compared with the European average of 24.9% (31.4% and 22.5% respectively); looking after children or incapability adults 9.6% (1.7% of males and 12.7% of females) compared with the European average of 20.7% (4.4% of males and 26.5% of females); and other family responsibilities 5.1% (1.3% of males and 7.1% of females) compared with European average of 14.5% (11% of males and 15.7% of females).

The second is that doing these activities allows young people to develop a set of skills and competencies that can have active potential in both training and work.

Literature review

Many of the studies on free time have focused on youth, following several lines of research. The majority have focused on the content of the activities, especially the harmful leisure practices of this population group, including consumption of alcohol and drugs (Giménez and Cortés and Espejo, 2010), which have negative consequences for their personal, family and school life (Lazcano et al., 2017), in addition to accidents and violence (Comas, 2003).

In contrast, other studies argue that the free time of young people is not synonymous with leisure, and focus on activities that can have positive effects such as volunteering and political participation (Crespo, 2016). In this case, free time is designated as an area of integral development of the person and a source of quality of life, and leisure is considered a human right that promotes physical, cognitive, emotional and behavioural development, both individually and socially (Cuenca, 2014; Kleiber and Larson and Csikszentmihalyi, 2014; Lazcano and Madariaga, 2016; Hutchinson and Kleiber, 2005). These studies suggest that free-time activities can improve young people's employability and their motivation to study certain subjects.

Finally, some studies focus on the preferences, interests and meanings attributed to free time. Youth is the phase of life in which leisure capital is constructed by participating in activities, whereas in adulthood leisure time becomes home- and family-centred. Lazcano and Caballo (2016) study the relationship between satisfaction and organizational involvement. Crespo (2016) states that the leisure of young people is influenced not so much by the amount of time they have available as by the values, experiences and meanings that young people attribute to the activities in which they participate voluntarily, individually and/or collectively. Stebbins (2005) considers that free time can be boring as a result of inactivity or as a result of an activity that is neither interesting nor stimulating. He distinguishes "serious leisure", consisting of significant activities for those who conduct them (e.g., the arts, sports, amateur science, charity work and hobbies), and "unserious leisure", consisting of activities that are satisfying and enjoyable and do not require special skills but are not considered to have substantial meaning and do not offer career opportunities (e.g., walking, relaxing, conversation).

Studies of the social meaning of time in university students show that scheduled time can confine and structure all other times (Liao et al., 2013). Focusing on projected time, i.e., future expectations of precarious young people in Portugal, Carmo et al. (2014) show that the present times of training and employment shape future times.

Other studies reflect the importance of the peer group in the use of free time by young people (Stebbins, 2005); gender differences (Videnovi et al., 2010; Megias and Ballesteros, 2014); the importance of nightlife with friends (Berthet et al., 2016); and the growing importance of digital leisure centred on the use of the internet and social networks, which has gained importance in the process of socialization (Pallarés, 2014), and has been identified as the digital occupation of time (Sádaba and Bringué, 2010). From here, two theoretical approaches are distinguished in relation to the objectives of this article: first, the analysis of the dangers of leisure activities and free time activities, in the understanding that they distance young people from training and employment; and second, the analysis of the role played by free time in the configuration of youth as a stage of the transition to adult life, in which training and employment are central.

Following this second approach, taking into account the work of Cavalli (1985) on the biographical dimension of time, a set of studies analyse the social experiences of time structures, leisure preferences and practices of young adults according to social class, gender and place of residence.

Gasparini (2018) studies the everyday life of young adults who neither study nor work in order to analyse their control over the activities they do. He argues that, in the absence of a heteronormative temporal organization provided by education, training and/or a job, daily control is acquired through the construction of an individualized temporal structure that could focus on job searching, significant others (partner, children or peer groups) or insignificant activities. Reiter (2003) highlights the importance of work and class as a category of social life through the analysis of biographical time structures of disadvantaged young people.

Leccardi (1999) shows the effects of the modification of collective temporal orientations (from the future to the present) on the development of experiences and identities of young people by gender. She argues that young women and young men (although in different frames of meaning) prefer short-range decisions and a strategy of action that transfers the idea of the social governance of time from the medium-distant future to the extended present. With regard to education, Kane (2006) argues that masculinity is more often

constructed by opposition to school culture, whereas femininity reflects adhesion to the instrumental and expressive values of education.

Finally, Farrugia et al. (2014) defend the need to introduce the spatial dimension of young people's identities as a way of understanding the structures, subjectivities and cultures of youth. The spatial contours of young people's subjectivities are constructed from articulations of local resources and global cultural flows. Ravn and Demant (2017) argue that social class and space intersect to produce the parameters within which identities can be performed and styles enacted. The research into young people's everyday experiences of rurality shows a paradoxical duality between feelings of living in a safe area with a good quality of life and feeling isolated and restricted. Tyrrel and Harmer (2015) highlight the diversity and complexity of young people's lives in rural spaces and introduce the importance of gender, but also show that rural locations limit young people's access to facilities and activities. As a consequence, they have more unstructured free time and therefore more time "hanging out" at home and in public spaces. In short, the research that analyse the role played by free time in the configuration of youth identity demonstrates new dimensions of old inequalities according social class, gender and place of residence.

The loss of the subjective importance of work in the life projects of young people has been evidenced in several studies carried out on the Spanish case. Prieto et al. (2015) argue that time away from work plays a central role in people's structuring of daily life and identity. Their study shows that the value assigned to work depends on the value assigned to care and free time. Similarly, Callejo (2015) presents free time as a social reality between work and care, arguing that leisure is a scarce good that is even scarcer among those who have less legitimacy for their leisure. Individuals produce the condition of scarcity with their effort, so in the absence of work the value of free time decreases. Following this theoretical approach, in his analysis of unemployment Briaes (2015) notes that activities do not seem to be anything in themselves if they are not considered in relation to the rest of time. He also considers it fundamental to study free time with respect to working time or its absence.

In a study on employment trajectories, we (Borràs et al., 2012; Torns et al., 2013) present a typology that identifies the "employment trajectories of strong or forced continuum", in which informality is not only a gateway to the labour market but also becomes the norm of employment. We conclude that the discontinuities that hitherto mainly affected the

work trajectories of women are widespread among the younger generations, showing no gender distinction and including the most qualified (Torns et al., 2013). We analyse employment trajectories on the basis of the theoretical corpus of masculinities (Connell, 1995) and point to a change in the symbolic meaning of work among young men. More specifically, we observe that unemployment, inactivity and precariousness make it difficult for low-skilled young men to perceive employment as an element of identity. Rather, they see it as an instrument for obtaining money to enjoy leisure activities. These results show that employment is increasingly based on instrumental rather than expressive value (Watson, 1994).

Lasén (2000) shows that short-term planning and reversible movements are the main strategy in young people's temporal conception in the context of job insecurity. Between the past and the future this strategy focuses on the present without a productive approach. Santamaria (2011) argues that precarious work trajectories emphasize the instrumental dimension of employment and rather than the expressive one. The traditional constitution of identities based on the pride arising from stable, linear employment trajectories is far from the current precarious configurations of identity among young people. Precariousness and labour instability are expressed in a more instrumental relationships with work, as well as in the permanence of certain forms of identification, not so much with their jobs but with the fact of working, which continues to be a core value.

Taking as a theoretical reference the interrelation of social times (Prieto, 2015) and the research line focusing on the values and meanings attributed to free time, we analyse the importance of free-time activities and employment in building the identity of young people when they are neither studying nor working. For this purpose, the article's conceptual reference is the classical identity concept of Erikson (1968), of which some aspects need to be highlighted. First, identity has a dual dimension as an individual creation and as a social and societal being. As Illeris (2003) explains, according to this definition, identity is an individual biographical identity and a societal identity: the individual dimension contains the experience of a coherent individuality and life course, and the societal dimension contains the experience of a certain position in the social community. Erikson (1968) argues that the coexistence of biographical and social time shapes the normal itinerary of the identity. Second, identity is conceived as the result of choice. According to Erikson (1968), choices and identity proceed together: the way towards identity coincides with the need to make new choices. The capacity to choose implies continuity in time and difference from the rest. On this point, this article takes

into account the argument of Leccardi (1999), who questions the normality of the biographical course of young adults and explains that at present (unlike in the 1960s) choices are problematic in this age group.

In order to analyse the importance of free time in the construction of the identity, we focus on the personal side of identity as the individual process of choosing everyday life activities (the content of free-time activities as an element of individual doing with regard to social conditions of class, gender and place of residence) and the social side of identity as the process of social interaction that attributes meaning to free-time activities as an element of the social being.

On the basis of the body of research that has been carried out in this field, in the present article we suggest that, in the context of the employment crisis in Spain, young people—especially men—assign greater centrality to leisure activities in their life projects. The activities they do outside work (if they have a job) or outside training offer them the greatest satisfaction. As these activities give them a greater sense of belonging to the group, they place greater expectations of growth and personal development in them. We analyse how cultural symbols interrelate with labour transitions through the use and meaning attributed to free time, following the discussion between individual subjectivism and structural conditions. It is understood that free-time activities have a high symbolic value, but they can also be a source of skills and abilities that are useful for the employability of young people, according to Stebbins' (2005) typology. We thus aim to analyse, on the basis of Illeris's (2003) and Leccardi's (1999) work, the relation between identity and free time in terms of "individual doing" and "social being" in a moment of the life course when the normal choices regarding employment and training disappear.

Methodology

In order to situate the space occupied by free time in everyday life, and to consider its importance for constructing the social identity of youth, we propose a qualitative methodology based on the research technique of the in-depth interview. This qualitative strategy is based on the following procedure: to establish the criteria for selecting the profiles of the sample; to design and develop the recruitment strategies; and, to conduct the interviews and to perform the analysis. The interviewees were selected according three criteria. First, we considered that the structure and experience of free time will vary

according to whether or not there is an institutionalized activity that gives it value, in line with Stebbins (2005). In this case, we made a distinction between whether the respondents were studying and/or had a job, or neither of the two. Second, we considered gender and region to be fundamental analytical variables for investigating the hypotheses. We selected the regions of Catalonia, Castilla-La Mancha and the Basque Country because of their different productive traditions and structures within Spain: the service sector, the agricultural sector and the industrial sector, respectively. The professional expectations, the strategies in education and the uses of times were directly related to the productive structures of the territories. Third, we included only working-class respondents who had done (or were doing) middle- or higher-level vocational training and had some experience with paid work. This decision was based on the fact that the employment crisis had a greater effect on this group. To ensure this condition, we selected young people whose father and mother did not have a university education. Finally, we selected the 18-24 age group to ensure that the respondents were in an initial phase of their transition to employment.

Taking into account these variables, five typological profiles were constructed on the basis of the absence or presence of institutionalized activities in the everyday life of the respondents.

1. Failure at school: currently neither working nor studying, has had work experience, 18-20 years.
2. Failure and/or dropping out of school: currently has returned to training and is studying, has had work experience, 18-20 years.
3. Failure and/or dropping out of school: currently has returned to training and is studying, has had work experience, 20-24 years
4. Continuous education and labour pathway, has had a period without working or studying, 18-20.
5. Continuous education and labour pathway, has had a period without working or studying, 20-24.

We carried out ten interviews (five for boys and five for girls) in each region to cover all the characteristics of this typological profile from a gender approach. The respondents were recruit through the employment services of each territory, foundations whose

purpose is to improve the employability of vulnerable social groups and vocational education and training institutes.

The field work was carried out during the first six months of 2017. The data were collected using in-depth interviews. The interviews deal with three areas, training, work and free time. The interrelation between these three areas provided us with the information to check whether free time was replacing other spheres such as education and work in the life project and allowed us to see whether the activities carried out in free time allowed young people to develop a set of skills and competencies that could have active potential in training and work. The depth interviews technique is not a simple record of discourse but rather a communicative construct which takes into account the social and temporal context in which the interview takes place (Wengraf, 2001). The qualitative data were analysed through content analysis in order to collect the context of the respondents' discourses and the symbolic meaning attributed to them, along the lines proposed by Ruiz Olabuénaga (2012). The path followed in the analysis of content began with the structuring of the text on the basis of three semantic fields: training, work and free time. Subsequently, units of analysis were selected according to objective criteria and the subjectivity of the informants (Bardin, 1996; Krippendorff, 1997). To this end, the analysis focused on the structure and content of free time and the meaning that individuals attribute to activities and behaviour. The interpretation was based on a sociological rewriting of the main ideas expressed by the protagonists themselves, on a round trip between the selected units and the theoretical framework (Alonso, 1998; Hatim and Mason, 1995).

Results

The structure of free time in everyday life

The empirical evidence obtained from the interviews shows an interdependence of the times in the structuring of everyday life (Prieto, 2015). Free time is presented, perceived and experienced according to the other social times. The social recognition given to institutionalized activities such as employment and training is what gives individual value to free-time activities. Consequently, free time is not valued positively when there are no other times that are socially valued and recognized, and when the temporal orientation is focused on the extended present, as Leccardi (1999) argues.

“If you’re not working you’d have plenty of free time and in the end you wouldn’t know what to do, so I’d—even if it was 6 hours—I’d work.” (Woman, Basque Country, back in training)²

This pattern of structuring in which free time does not occupy a central role in daily life reveals that employment continues to occupy this role in the life project. This is a generic pattern to the extent that it is observed in all the cases analysed, and particularly in those of people who are neither studying nor working. These people do not assign meaning or value to free time because they have it all the time, and the abundance of free time is inversely proportional to the value attributed to it. Young people who are going, or have gone, through a period without working or studying recognize that the experience has been negative, and that they feel bad about themselves for not doing anything useful for their lives. When all time is free time, a feeling of guilt is observed in the discourse and the respondents find it difficult to counteract this guilt with the activities they do.

“I was... Well, I was seeing a bit of everything, really, I had a lot of free time. But yeah, it was pretty bad, because I knew I shouldn’t be there. I shouldn’t have been there.” (Man, Catalonia, back in training)

During periods of inactivity, paid work remains at the centre of the life project. However, despite the masculine nature of life projects built around employment, no gender differences were observed in the interviews analysed. As Gasparini (2018) shows, the daily control needs an orientation such as job searching.

“It was tough, because I went to companies and industrial estates to leave CVs, to shops and all that, and when you see they don’t call you, you’ve got poor qualifications and all that, it was a bit tough.” (Man, Catalonia, in training)

“Until now I was not studying, and I was bored, feeling bitter, I mean I don’t like to be at home, if you haven’t got anything to do. It’s just not nice to be like that, I mean drifting, no, and I was already wishing the time would come to study, I mean to use my time in something productive.” (Woman, Basque Country, back in training).

² According to the profiles reported in the Methodology section, the profile of the person of each verbatim is described according to their gender (man/woman), region of residence (Castilla-La Mancha, Catalonia or the Basque Country) and situation (in training, back in training, neither training nor working).

For people who have jobs or are doing some type of training, free time still has no daily centrality, but it has a higher value in the discourse:

“Yes, that small margin I have between when I finish doing things in the morning and go to pick up my brothers, that half an hour, which is a time to lie a while on the sofa, [...] what... I’m not doing anything, I don’t want to do anything [...]. And, well, the time I have before falling asleep, [...] you know, I have a little while.” (Man, Catalonia, in training).

It can be seen that the meaning of free time is linked to paid work (Prieto, 2015) or to socially recognized training activities, and conceptions are modulated according to presences and absences. These dynamics were repeated in all the cases analysed, so it seems possible to state that there were no gender differences. However, the influence of social class should be noted, because it is difficult to separate the place given to different social times from the position held by the individual with respect to employment or the possibilities that it offers (Crompton, 1999). It is observed that the social relations that work entails condition the activities carried out in leisure time: it is difficult to understand one without the other. According to Reiter (2003), the network of influence established by social class, leisure and work structures is a discourse in which leisure time as consumption is experienced as a reward for work, whereas work is seen instrumentally as the gateway to consumption:

“The job right now represents maintaining myself, pushing ahead and giving me more opportunities and more... not whims but doing better, not depending so much on my mother or father to survive, to pay for things, saving a little more, feeling more satisfied, buying extra things I fancy for myself, because I deserve them and...”
(Man, Castilla-La Mancha, neither studying nor working)

The meanings of free time

Though the structural importance of free time in everyday life was similar in all the young working-class adults, variations in the meaning and value given to it emerged according to region and gender. Different models of free time were observed according to the perceived social dimension, the possibilities of achievement and the projected expectations.

First, regarding the social dimension of identity (Erikson, 1968; Iller, 2003), in its aspect of time for socialization, for being with others, it was observed that the gregarious and community culture is stronger in the rural environment than in the urban environment,

where there is greater individualization. This difference in the social conception of free time is observed in the meanings but did not correspond to a material reality because, as noted in the literature review (Farrugia et al. 2014; Tyrrel and Harmer, 2015), group leisure activities were predominant in all regions, and communication technology universalizes many activities of individual leisure. Furthermore, some gender differences were observed in relation to the social value attributed to free time, as Leccardi (1999) reported: young women emphasized the importance of shared activities, while young men emphasized the social value of free time when they had paid work. In these cases, free time was not perceived as time empty of content due to the absence of paid work, but it had greater meaning when it was experienced in relation to employment.

[During a period without training or work] “Well, I was very bored really, very, very down. I only lived for the weekends. I was at home all day and because my friends were working or studying and we only saw each other at the weekend, I didn’t have a social life. It was very boring.” (Woman, Catalonia, back in training)

“Because of work time and schedules, I don’t have time to do sport and I’d like to do sport again because I’ve always done sport and things like going to the cinema and going for a walk.” (Man, Catalonia, in training)

Second, it was observed that leisure is conditioned by the socioeconomic structure of each region. In agreement with Farrugia et al. (2014), the notion and the perception of what can be done are strongly marked by the urban/rural axis in which seasonality conditions the possibilities of free time.

“No, not in the village because there’s no movement... There are only a few of us, and we usually go out. [...] The surrounding villages... Now in summer there are more fairs, there are fairs everywhere, we go from fair to fair” (Man, Castilla-La Mancha, neither studying nor working).

According to Tyrrel and Harmer (2015), the rural environment is seen as a limitation in all aspects because it reduces the field of leisure possibilities, especially cultural ones. It is paradoxical that people in urban environments idealize the rural environment, while those who live in it say they are discouraged by the lack of opportunities and the passivity that it leads to. However, the leisure activities were not so different from those of urban youth at the level of individual practices in respondents who combine training, work and leisure.

“Of course, I’m at home, I play songs, I sing them, I investigate a little... I work out songs... all sorts. I try to... to do something new, something cooler, something I haven’t studied.”. (Man, Castilla-La Mancha, back in training).

Third, we propose to adapt Erikson’s concept of identity (1968) in order to analyse the social dimension of identity from the perspective of Stebbins’s (2005) concept of serious leisure. Differences were observed in the projected expectations and choices of the career utility of free-time activities according to the region of residence, and especially between the rural and urban settings. In the Basque Country, the trajectories between education, vocational training and employment were strongly institutionalized, so free time activities were not perceived as having potential for employment, but rather as having an “escape” and recreational value in comparison with daily responsibilities. By contrast, young Catalans did perceive the possibility of professionalizing the skills/knowledge/abilities they acquired in their free time, though, paradoxically, they only did so when they were in paid work and free time had meaning separate from employment. Furthermore, they were reluctant to put into practice this professionalization and to accept any interference in their leisure activities:

“They are for me and to allow me to orient myself to where I want to go in... whether in a job or in everything in life. It helps me develop a personality of my own, my own tastes; to be me, that’s what it’s for.” (Man, Catalonia, back in training)

Finally, in Castilla-La Mancha, certain leisure activities could represent a way into the labour market or back into training, but their potential was not appreciated. Young people in this region only perceived the social value of free time activities and separated them clearly from training, which they considered alien to their everyday lives. Leisure activities that were experienced in a group and felt passionately, with emotion and talent, were those that granted discourse and meaning.

“With some mates, with mates I got them into... well, they got me into music in Madrid and that. I started with rap... So I combined several rhythms. I didn’t play and record them, because I don’t know how to play instruments, but with computer mixes and that... it was a great passion of mine and [...] and it probably still is because I believe you shouldn’t let talents go. It’s quite important. It’s something that drives you, and on top of that a talent comes out when you really like something, so maybe...” (Man, Castilla-La Mancha, back in training)

Tradition and gender fluidity in the content of the activities

Free time was configured as a space in which traditional gender patterns persist alongside some changes that point to a certain fluidity in the content of the activities and the means used. Young men and women tended to identify the dual dimension of free time that helped construct their identity. In all three regions they considered leisure time as a relational environment linked to the group activities carried out in public spaces that is analysed in terms of the “social being”. In addition, free time also contributed to “individual doing”, as this young woman explained:

“I think there’s a time for everything and also moments for yourself. For you too, reading or relaxing in your room watching a film, or, you know, you feel like going shopping and that’s great, and now you do enjoy it, but also often being alone... For example, personally, when I don’t feel very well or I’ve had a fight with someone and that value..., I have to be alone. Normally I don’t like being alone, but when I’m alone, it’s because of something like that.” (Woman, Castilla-La Mancha, neither studying nor working).

The content of free time is modulated according to the temporal distribution, gender stereotypes, and the use of information technology. The first important finding was that the content of young people’s free time is conditioned both by the rest of their social times and by the social times of their peer groups. This fact became clear in the distribution of activities throughout the week, with group activities concentrated at weekends and in the evenings, when the peer group was available. The respondents adjusted their time weekly according to this availability, doing group activities when the majority of the peer group had enough time to do them.

“What I like most is being with my friends in the evening to catch up with them, because now our timetables don’t coincide during the week, or even at the weekend...” (Woman, Catalonia, back in training).

Interesting differences of gender and region were observed in the content of free time, as also reported by Leccardi (1999) and Tyrrel and Harmer (2015). Young men tended to have traditionally male hobbies, especially in rural areas. In these cases, shared leisure tended to involve team sports, drinking in bars, and video games involving football and motor sport. Individual leisure did not differ much in content, consisting mainly of going to the gym and playing video games. In all cases, this was masculine leisure, leisure as a

rest, as an escape, as a social vehicle, in groups or seeking groups, and sport played a major role in it.

“Phew! I have to de-stress from all this change, and sport is quite important for that and quite de-stressing and quite a leisure activity, you know? I’ve met a lot of people through sport too... You know, in the gym, then hanging out with people from the gym or, for example, by setting up a sports contact group...” (Man, Catalonia, in training)

The second important finding was that young women, especially those who lived in urban areas, tend to do activities that cross gender stereotypes more. They dedicated time to music, drawing and TV series, and some also had masculinized hobbies such as video games or cars. However, they did not give up feminized activities such as personal care or going shopping and gave less importance than men to group sports, preferring more individual sports such as swimming, going to the gym or hiking. Young men also tended to visit shopping centres and shops, not always to buy something but sometimes just to have a drink there. However, they did not attach so much importance to these activities with friends as did young women, for whom meeting their peer groups was usually one of the most valued leisure activities.

Unlike young men, most young women said that they performed domestic or care tasks during their free time, either obliged by their parents or because they took responsibility for this type of work.

I like to clean because it takes work off my mum. I don’t like it, but if I don’t do it, she’ll have to and I prefer to do it myself, or for my father to do it, but that’s impossible.” (Woman, Catalonia, back in training)

The third important finding was that the content of free time was related to the means used for the activities. This question is key for understanding the role of information and communications technology. The young people were aware of the space occupied by mobile phones in their lives, but they valued the versatility and individuality that they offered, which allowed them to be alone but in groups:

“I spend a lot of time with my mobile phone. Often you’re hooked on the phone, and I spend a lot of time with the phone... In fact, if I could leave it aside for a time... I said that to a group: We ought to spend some time without a mobile phone.” (Man, Castilla-La Mancha, back in training)

With regard to the use of new technologies in free time, the pattern of young men and women was similar, though the content of the activities continued to be gendered, as can be seen in the use of the internet and the image they wished to give of themselves:

“Yes, I’ve already thought about making videos of painting, to upload of course, because I like to paint and do crafts, doing things that come out and uploading them, so other people can be aware. As I’ve seen, if they search for videos, maybe it will help them.” (Woman, Basque Country, back in training).

However, the use of technology was two-sided. In young men, it contributed to gender fluidity by offering a platform for activities that are traditionally considered feminine:

“Yes, now with mobile phones you’re, like I say, nattering, you’re gossiping about one person and the other... with the TV on in the background.” (Man, Castilla-La Mancha, neither studying nor working).

Technology also created spaces of masculine leisure such as that of video games, which allowed them to combine individual leisure with group leisure. These games were experienced as a generational activity that provided shared male references: a socialization activity during the weekends and an individual one during the week.

Discussion and conclusions

This article considers the extent to which the situation of unemployment, inactivity and precarious employment experienced by young people reduces the importance of working time and gives greater centrality to free time in the identity of young people. To this end, it has analysed how free time and the activities associated with it operate in periods without study or work in comparison with periods of training and work, considering the structure, meaning and content of free time and taking into account the educational level, employment status, gender and region of residence of the respondents. The paper engages with the discussion of changes related to social changes and youth studies in order to analyse the importance of individual subjectivity and structural conditions using two hypotheses: the first is that leisure time and the activities associated with it are becoming elements of identity that help give meaning to the life project of young people when they are neither studying nor working; the second is that doing these activities allows young people to develop a set of skills and competencies that can have active potential in both training and work. The interviews confirm the interrelation of social times (Prieto et al.,

2015) so, disproving the first hypothesis, free time alone does not give young people identity when they are neither studying nor working. That is, the experience and configuration of free time have meaning and confer identity in relation to other socially recognized times such as training and working time (Reiter, 2003; Gasparini, 2018). It can thus be stated that the symbolic centrality of working time persists even without work, and that free time acquires meaning in relation to occupied time. However, this trend may be due to the working class condition of the young people studied and their material need for employment.

In addition to the perception of the availability of free time, the meaning and content of the activities have been analysed regarding the individual and social dimension of identity (Erikson, 1968; Leccardi, 1999; Iller, 2003). The interviews show that free time is perceived as both a time for rest and a time of freedom and reaffirmation of the peer group. As in Lazcano (2017), it was observed that the activities that are most successful among young Spaniards are those that do not require a permanent commitment and those that have been organized, created and managed without parents' involvement. Young people show more satisfaction and give greater significance to the spaces and types of practices in which they acquire greater autonomy and opportunities for self-management along with their peer group.

However, it was observed differences in the content of free time according to gender and region. First, there was a certain fluidity of gender patterns, in which young women in particular show an interest in activities that have traditionally been considered masculine. The use of technologies leads to a greater permeability of activities between young men and women, though the traditional gender roles also persist. The concept of "doing gender" (West and Zimmerman, 1987) is appropriate for understanding this fluid trend: the content of free time continues to reproduce gender stereotypes, although young women are beginning to carry out activities traditionally associated with men, especially in urban environments.

Second, it was observed that in the Basque Country, where employment possibilities are greater and educational and work transitions are more institutionalized, the discourse on the capacity and potential of free time was less prominent. It was considered a time of rest, and the respondents were more resistant to thinking that what they learned in this time could turn into a job. This possibility is valued more when educational and work transitions are less institutionalized (Leccardi, 1999). While it is true that the region significantly conditions the aspirations to professionalize the skills acquired by young

people in their free time, these aspirations are in contradiction with their material conditions of existence, and young people adapt their life expectations and preferences to the perceived possibilities.

For this reason, in relation to the second hypothesis, in all the regions there was resistance to professionalize the activities carried out during leisure time, those Stebbins (2005) describes as “serious leisure”, and to preserve them as an element of freedom and autonomy. Although no possibilities of employability were detected in the activities carried out during leisure time, the perception of this possibility as an intrusion was significant in terms of capability to choose and identity. This finding shows the importance of free time in the construction of the identity of young people to the detriment of work.

Thus, the analysis of the structure, content and meaning that young people attribute to free time when they are neither studying nor working reveals that they do not see free-time activities as the solution for improving their employability. The social norm of free time acquires value with work: it is not a functional source of professional skills and abilities.

In summary, the results suggest that the symbolic centrality of working time in the identity of young adults persists, although there have been changes in the meaning and content of leisure time. . Despite the changes in meaning and content, young people still perceive the value and social importance of free time in relation to training and, above all, employment. Nevertheless, with the erosion of the institutionalized life course around education and employment, the everyday experience of free time is also related to identity in terms of “individual doing” (the capability to choose) and “social being” (peer group activities). The resistance to professionalize the activities carried out during free time could indicate new spaces for the construction of identity related to the capability to choose when the life pattern norm is broken.

The findings open new lines of research that take into account the heterogeneity, voice and subjective experience of young people in order to identify temporal conceptions and transition to employment from a gender perspective which will be useful for designing public policies to guarantee equal opportunities.

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