The Dual Nature of Opportunity Structures Amid the Global Pandemic

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1. Introduction

We are living at a time of educational expansion in most parts of the world, which creates new opportunity structures for young people. This trend however is not matched with rising employment opportunities for youth in a tight labor market curtailed by financial crises, digital and ecological restructuring of the economy and rising energy prices due to Russia's invasion of Ukraine and wider global risks. The COVID-19 pandemic of 2019–2022 brought many new challenges for youth such as health issues, loneliness, loss of family members, job losses, limited access to training and disruption of educational routines. The future is becoming less predictable and more insecure than ever. It is necessary from both an academic point of view and a policy perspective to explore the current forms of the interplay between structure and agency as experienced by young people on their road to autonomy.

To address this issue, we came together as researchers from two broad fields: youth (transition) studies and education (lifelong learning) policy. The two approaches allowed us to throw light on the transitions of young people from education and training to employment through different angles mobilizing diverse theoretical and methodological lenses. We invited scholars from numerous national and local contexts and received contributions from Western, Northern, Southern and Eastern Europe and North Africa (those from South Africa, Latin America and Asia will publish their work later, while no proposals came from Australia and North America). However, the scope of papers collected in the issue is wider than this geographical scope for two reasons. Firstly, as the research subjects are often immigrants, they bring with them social and cultural capital acquired in their home countries. Secondly, youth are often globally connected through new digital media and their experiences of local educational and labor market opportunities intersect with global processes of social change and continuity [1,2]. The diversity of local, national and local contexts renders significant variations of the interactions between structural opportunities (and constraints) and individual agency in the process of youth transitions. This introduction aims to harmonise these accounts and present trends that arise from the analysis.

The Special Issue focuses on the interface between public policies and the experience of young people in Bulgaria, Finland, Italy, Portugal, Spain, Morocco and the United Kingdom. On the one hand, the articles discuss institutional aspects such as education policies [3–5], regulation of migration [6], or programs that foster international mobility and inclusion of diverse students in higher education institutions [7,8], building upon desk research and statistical and other quantitative analyses. On the other hand, some contributions draw on hermeneutical [9], ethnographical [10], narrative [11], and other qualitative methods to spell out the experiences of these young people in their life transitions. Such interface between policies and biographies is the outcome of previous circumstances that structure opportunities in particular ways. In the vein of a mainstream theoretical approach in sociology, we assume that individuals cannot do much to change these structures on their own. In fact, the predominant narratives of individualized ways of tackling the economic and political realities of present-day societies resonate with mainstream neoliberal policy

discourses. This interpretation is a manifestation of an 'epistemological fallacy' [12] that overlooks the collective practices of young people on the road to adulthood [13].

The editors of the issue assume that the cornerstone of any transition does not lie in a simple adaptation to the structure but on reflective and interactive developments of individual agency. Drawing on Ken Roberts' theory of opportunity structures, as initially designed [14] and then developed in the first paper that was submitted to this Special Issue [3], the contributors account for the dual nature of (and the effects of the global COVID-19 pandemic on) youth transitions in these countries.

2. How Do Structures Constrain Individuals' Agency? How Do Policies Shape Constraints?

In contrast to what was commonly believed in the 1990s, today's young people are not completely different to the adolescents and twenty-somethings of the previous generations. Although the circumstances of transitions from education to work and from parental homes to independent homes dramatically changed in recent decades, people keep elaborating long-term plans regarding the real, external features of the world. Previous studies have shown that young people, even in the most vulnerable situations, benefit from existing learning opportunities in their life transitions while attributing diverse subjective meanings to them [15,16]. Present-day youth can choose between educational programs and jobs that were not available fifty years ago. Often, they deviate from the social norms that established what a proper biography should be at that time. However, both then and now, their life courses are complex consequences of both the external circumstances they find themselves in and certain individual choices that only make sense in particular structural contexts [14] (p. 362).

The expansion of schooling, white-collar and blue-collar jobs, and social security in European countries fashioned certain opportunities in the middle decades of the twentieth century. In the same way, in the third decade of the twenty-first century, an array of more comprehensive arrangements of education and training, the changing job markets of service and knowledge economies, and the prospects of active welfare and active labor market policies are patterning opportunity structures. Individuals become agents amid certain social structures which simultaneously constrain their agency. Thus, 21.7% of Europeans, but 27.3% of European 18 to 24-year-olds are at risk of poverty and social exclusion in 2022. These figures suggest that a significant share of youngsters live in at least one of the following situations: their income amounts less than 60% of the median income, they suffer from severe material deprivation (e.g., are unable to face unexpected payments, cannot afford a nutritious meal every second day, do not have the capacity to keep home adequately, or lack other similar indispensable items), or live in a household with very low work intensity (i.e., adults work less than 20% of their potential work time) [17]. Understandably, such circumstances severely limit their margin of choice and action.

Welfare and labor market policies are designed to enhance opportunities, but often contribute to these structural constraints. Income redistribution, education and training, and career guidance may significantly alleviate poverty and social exclusion. However, according to the CEDEFOP Skills Activation Index, the capacity of these policies to improve the social conditions of young people varies between 2 and 82 in a standard scale ranging from 0 to 100. Disparate rates of early leaving from education and training, graduate employment, and the activity of young cohorts in the labor force are the main components of this index [18]. In general, since 2013, the European Commission and the European Council have encouraged the member states to guarantee alternatives to all the youth who leave either education or a job. However, this principle of 'youth guarantee' is unevenly implemented across the European Union; moreover, this disproportionate effect was recognized and served as an impetus for the adoption of the Council Recommendation for the reinforced guarantee [19].

The relevant policies are not only public policies enacted by governments. Higher education institutions also fashion opportunities for young people [20]. Many of these

institutions run mobility schemes that facilitate short stays in other countries, which help students broaden their horizons, develop new social contacts, and learn languages. As shown by two contributions in this Special Issue [7,8], for many university students in the EU, programs such as the Erasmus+ have become an inherent feature of their educational trajectory while an increasing number of universities are implementing programs to foster social inclusion and equity by catering to the needs of an inevitably diverse intake.

In the region of North Africa, where young people aged up to 30 constitute more than half of the population, religion, kinship, and gender are among the main institutions structuring the opportunities for youth transitions to adulthood as highlighted in another of the papers in our Special Issue [10]. In those countries the hegemonic neo-liberal economic and social governmental policies are unable to reduce youth unemployment, which is currently at least twice as high as the European average. The normal constraints that the youth face in the labor market are exacerbated by low economic growth, limited political freedoms and restricted migration prospects. The Arabic culture and Islamic norms and strong kinship ties combined with a wide spread of informal employment and high proportions of young women not entering the labor market characterize the specific context for the transition from school to work in the region [21,22].

3. How Did the COVID-19 Emergency Impinge on Youth Transitions?

So far, it is plausible to notice that the closure of educational institutions, travel restrictions, rising unemployment, changes in labor market policies and some specific welfare benefits have impinged on the structural side of the opportunities that the youth find during their transitions to adult life [23].

To start with, the lockdowns and the travel restrictions that were implemented to slow down the spread of the virus eventually aggravated the uncertainty of transitions [24]. Seamless sequences between education and employment cannot be taken for granted anymore, and health (and climate) hazards are likely to add complexity to this transition. Schools, training centers and higher education institutions were almost completely closed for months, even for years in some countries. Finding placements for VET and higher education internships became an intractable problem for some time. Stay-at-home orders severely weakened apprenticeships. Additionally, although VET and higher education bachelor's programs had previously implemented mobility schemes, the generations who had planned to move between 2020 and 2022 saw how these schemes crumbled.

The pandemic also exacerbated health inequalities across the world, with more deprived areas recording higher-than-average death rates. Although the youth did not suffer as high a mortality as older age groups, it is significant that they were not evenly exposed to fatalities in their families and closer circles. The vicious circles that throw many families into episodes of breadwinners' disease and consequent socio-economic deprivation also affected the youth in disparate ways. Those young people who had already entered the labor market were also hit hard as they were often employed in jobs that could not be done from home. These jobs were also unlikely to receive wage support during the pandemic. Many lost their jobs altogether [23–25].

Normally, governments negotiate the education, training, employment, and welfare policies that configure youth transition regimes. Employers and training providers engage with these policies to pursue their own agendas. Young people choose among the resulting options at variable steps of their academic, vocational, and professional itineraries. At each crossroads in the official pathways to adulthood, the options are renegotiated at the local geographical scale of education and training systems and labor markets every year [26]. However, it is noticeable that the emergency triggered policy reactions that discontinued these negotiations insofar as stay-at-home orders, school and workplace closures, and infection tracking halted the multiple movements of individuals who navigate local opportunity structures.

The pandemic also impacted on the health of young people in a variety of countries. The lockdowns and the closure of educational institutions unveiled underlying issues of

mental health that had not been previously acknowledged, and certainly aggravated the main factors of distress such as uncertainty and stress [27]. At the same time, it is important to notice that disparities in public health also affect young people unevenly across national and local territories [28].

It is important to keep in mind that opportunity structures are not immobile and fixed forever. It is relatively easy to figure out how some structures have been affected by the recent stresses placed on them, although vague generalisations should be avoided. Public discourses about the transformations of education and employment widely disseminated during the period of emergency; however, individuals enact their own construal of social conditions and their own understanding of public discourses amid the social relations that they establish with other people in their situation, their peer groups, their families and the street-level officers of employment and education services. Opportunity structures are enacted in the interactions between professionals and young adults and the ambitious goals of education, training and lifelong learning policies can be achieved only when they are meaningful for the people involved in their implementation—a common finding of many of the papers included in the Special Issue [3–6].

4. How Do Young People Construe Opportunities?

Previous research has convincingly documented that the youth are active protagonists of their decisions and their performance. Contrary to some widespread stereotypes, young people coming from families with a low socio-economic income are more ambitious than young people coming from more affluent families. As a rule, they aim at reaching social positions that are ranked further than their parents' social positions, but they are also cautious to invest in possible outcomes that are inevitably not so prestigious as the careers of the youth who start their transition from the top of the social hierarchy [3]. At the same time, transition regimes do not instill a particular ethos on the beneficiaries of the main schemes in the areas of education, training, employment, and social welfare in each country. For example, the youth are not equally aware of their advantages in universalistic, Scandinavian regimes, nor they are equally resigned in sub-protective, Mediterranean regimes that downplay their social and economic citizenship [29].

Agency plays an important role in the life course tradition, and as Heinz [30] shows, young people with different socio-economic backgrounds actively pursue individual goals while journeying along their transition pathways. Transitions are not only experienced as normatively prescribed but are reflexively modified, transformed, and resisted in meaningful biographical patterns [16]. Structural frameworks change in social and biographical time and are being interpreted by reflexive subjects [31,32]. The articles included in this Special Issue underpin these findings on the subtlety of agency. As demonstrated by the Finish paper [9], feeling insecure during the pandemic restrictions, young people working in Lapland resorts reflect on past experiences and future life prospects that changed significantly with the pandemic restrictions. Often, young people reflect upon the transforming opportunity structures by comparing their parents' life transitions during the communist regime with the faltering agency in their own education and employment experiences in the context of the market economy.

A contribution to the Special Issue reminds youth and lifelong learning scholars of an important finding of sociological research: socio-economic divides keep shaping the prospects and the projects of teenagers in countries as different as Portugal and the UK. There, 11 to 16-year-olds living in households at risk of food insecurity told the interviewers how they felt about their future. Some were straightforwardly pessimistic. Others still believed that hard work would eventually offer new chances to them. However, many simply did not want to think about it [11].

The big picture should not conceal the specific connections between migration and inequality. Two of the articles in the Special Issue [5,10] observe that in origin countries as different as Bulgaria and Morocco, certain groups of youth imagine what migration could bring to them. Remarkably, besides cultural readings of migration and variable social

bonds with their families, in both cases, the youth elaborate (or at least sketch) migration projects depending on their experience of the social inequalities that affect their families and their own perspectives. At the other extreme of migration networks, in a country that currently receives a significant number of newcomers (many youths among them), a set of socio-economic, educational, and legal constraints has eventually raised true barriers for the youth who want to carry out their educational plans in Catalonia (Spain). The emotional scars of institutional racism become the blockers of life plans that would otherwise reflect the uncertainty but also the potential of the changing global landscape discussed in this Special Issue [6].

Unsurprisingly, the dual nature of youth transitions is becoming more visible and more complex. The arrays of stakeholders are becoming more diverse, the adaptation of young people makes a significant difference in their ulterior opportunities, and the new incidence of health (and natural) hazards raises everybody's awareness of the contingency and the frailty of the prevailing institutional arrangements. Research on youth transitions through the lens of the life course strongly encourages policymakers, employers, VET providers, higher education institutions, and third sector non-profits involved in youth work to elaborate cross-sectoral strategies. The simple fact that people link educational programs (compulsory education, VET and higher education) with employment and "youth guarantee" schemes as well as with certain welfare benefits foregrounds the need to design these policies so that each one generates synergies for the other ones.

5. Outline of the Special Issue

In the article "Integrating young people into the workforce: England's twenty-first century solutions", Ken Roberts develops his conceptual model of opportunity structures, drawing upon an understanding of youth transitions as a move from childhood origins to adult destinations, discerning typical career routes [3]. Youth transition regimes comprise government education, training and welfare policies and the state of economy and occupational structure and are formed by the interaction between numerous actors: educators, employers, and young people. The regimes are not static but develop in time. The paper examines the change in the national transition regime in the UK in three stages: (1) the formation of the regime of full employment till the 1970s; (2) its breakdown (with deindustrialization and neoliberal policies); and (3) reconstruction into a regime delivering the fastest education to work transitions, characterized with a massive turn to higher education and leading to four classes destinations.

The article "Governing the life course through Lifelong Learning: A multi-level and multidimensional view" by Marcelo Parreira do Amaral and Jenni Tikkanen, offers an analysis of three types of opportunity structures which govern the individual life course: institutional, discursive and relational [4]. The authors set the exploration of educational trajectories amidst the discussions of two broad concepts—those of life course and governance. The combination of the two perspectives enables them to reveal the multidimensional and multilevel challenges faced by young people in modern societies. While policies try to standardize the life courses, there is a process of deconstruction and disorganization in which the responsibility for failure is individualized and young people (and practitioners) have to search for biographical solutions to society's structural problems. No particular social context is mentioned, but the conclusions aim at describing the situation of wider Europe.

The article of Julia Brannen and Rebecca O'Connell, "Thinking about the future: Young people living in low-income families" explores the orientations to the future of youngsters from families living in difficult economic situations who struggle to overcome the prospect of food poverty and its consequences upon their educational opportunities and career aspirations [11]. While most other papers focus on young adults, this one addresses the situation of 11–16-year-old teenagers. It also provides a comparison between two national contexts—the UK and Portugal, where crises are no longer exceptional and temporal but have become an almost permanent feature of the opportunity structure that configures

youth transitions. The authors apply a case-based approach to study young people's perceptions of the future considering structures on the nation state, locality and household levels. One of their main conclusions is that insecurity has firmly rooted young people in the present when coping with everyday concerns.

The set of limited opportunities for youth transitions are the focus of the article by Judith Jacovkis, Alejandro Montes and Xavier Rambla "When Arriving Is Not Enough—Constraints in Access to Education and Employment Opportunities for Migrant Youth" [6]. The authors examine the limitations for access to education, training and employment of young immigrants distinguishing between individual, institutional and structural factors. Structures consist of social norms and resource distributions that enable or constrain individual agency. The target group of this research are young immigrants from North and West Africa, Latin America, Asia and southeast Europe, and the context is regional—Catalonia. This contextualized analysis aims to capture the relevance of time, space and agency. It highlights three significant constraints for the transitions to autonomy of the target group: their migrant status despite the absence of legal barriers, administrative procedures which do not provide adequate guidance, and individualized support and the socio-emotional wounds of the youth on their complicated journey from their home country to Spain. Being without family support in a family-based welfare regime where family bonds are very important is a strong factor for falling into a vulnerable situation. Another interesting research finding is that young people often find themselves in a conflict situation between the contradictory expectations of their teachers in the new context and their parents in the old country, while the youth themselves support a meritocratic vision of success and consider self-improvement as the utmost means for achieving personal success.

In their article "Striding on a Winding Road: Young People's Transitions from Education to Work in Bulgaria" Siyka Kovacheva and Darena Hristozova discuss the opportunity structures that young people in Bulgaria meet on their transition to adulthood [5]. The context is again national—that of a southeast European country—and the authors follow the trends in the systems of education, training and employment and the changes in the relevant policy domains after the communist regime, highlighting how European policy interventions are re-contextualized in local policy regulations. The approach builds upon a combination of quantitative desk research and qualitative biographical methods to enrich the potential of the life-course studies. The authors focus on the internal dynamic of the process of school-to-work transitions and the analysis applies a case study approach to a group of young adults in vulnerable situations to understand the role of individual agency in young people's journeys within the set of structural opportunities and constraints. The article demonstrates the diversity of the challenges facing young people and highlights important institutional "holes" in their support.

The article "Managing Student Mobility during the COVID-19 Pandemic: An Immobility Turn in Internationalized Learning?" by David Cairns and Thais França addresses a specific policy issue—the management of international student mobility in Europe from the perspective of the university administrative personnel involved in the policy [7]. The policy objective on the level of the European Union is to overcome social inequalities in youth transitions and allow students to acquire mobility capital while for the universities the value is gaining revenue and international image. For young people, mobility means expanding opportunities for reflexive life project building. The COVID-19 pandemic threatened the achievement of all those objectives imposing immobility on the young and more work and pressure on the university staff while the EU was slow to respond to the new situation. A consequence of COVID-19 has been the growth of virtual mobility, which is more accessible for students from low-income families but also threatens to create a two-tier system of real and virtual travelers. The value of the paper is adding a special dimension of youth transitions and highlighting the inequalities within the group of mobile students, some of whom are in vulnerable positions that are not acknowledged by the university management.

The institutional approach of university authorities to youth transitions is the main lens used in the article by Anna Siri, Cinzia Leone and Rita Benciveng: "Equality, Diversity,

and Inclusion Strategies Adopted in a European University Alliance to Facilitate the Higher Education-to-Work Transition" [8]. This article deals with higher education management like the previous one, but from the perspective of the European Union's policy for encouraging equality, diversity and inclusion. Similarly, it presents the ambitions of academic and administrative staff rather than those of university students. The authors offer analysis of the activities of the ULYSSEUS Alliance (a network of higher education institutions from six countries—Spain, Italy, Austria, France, Finland and Slovakia) in order to promote European values and discuss a plan for gender parity. A significant conclusion of the paper is that the project objectives are achievable when the process is not limited to the increase of the numerical representation of vulnerable groups in the university, but when they also include specific measures to explore and highlight the structures that create injustice and exclusion.

In her article "Hermeneutic-Phenomenological Interpretation of Coronavirus Experiences, Their Meanings, and the Prospects of Young Finns in Education and the Labor Market in Lapland" Helena Helve raises questions about the impact of COVID-19 on young people who are seasonal workers ski resorts in Lapland (Finland) [9]. The author introduces the social context of the study—a thriving tourist place—as an exceptional place mixing global, national, and regional features. Using a hermeneutical/phenomenological approach, the study captures the experiences and meanings attached by young Fins to the effect of Corona virus pandemic on their lives. A key research finding is that the young interviewees acknowledge not only some negative consequences such as feelings of loneliness, insecurity, and lower wages, but also that they managed to take advantage of the lockdowns to elaborate on their own reflexive thoughts about their personal development, to engage in self-discovery and to adjust their life planning according to the new opportunity structure. The author reaches a more general conclusion about the transitions of young people engaged in seasonal part-time work as an intermediate step to adulthood—they value it as allowing freedom and change and building identities based more on leisure activities than on income generating jobs.

The article "Failed Emancipations: Youth Transitions, Migration and the Future in Morocco" authored by Carles Feixa, Jose Sánchez-García, Celia Premat and Nele Hansen takes us to Morocco—a context radically different from the European context, with its history of anti-colonial struggle, recent totalitarian past, and present-day situation of demographic bulge and underdeveloped economy in the orbit of the global South [10]. There, the transitions from education to employment are often ruptured leading to delayed or even failed emancipation. The authors study the experiences, hopes and dreams of young people in very vulnerable situations in terms of lack of housing, access to health care, education and food while acknowledging the limited opportunities for most Moroccan youth. Two hegemonic and contradictory discourses provide a broad frame for young people's life projects—the vision for success of the neoliberal capitalism developing in the country and that of the Islamic authoritarian family norms. Given this opportunity structure of difficult (often impossible) economic autonomy and marriage, young people's life plans include living in the streets or emigrating abroad. Like the young Fins in Lapland, they become aware of their opportunities and employed individual agency mobilizing emotions and future aspirations to manage their transitions to adulthood.

To conclude, the articles in this issue talk to each other to highlight present-day challenges in youth transitions enacted in multilayered social contexts. Together, they broaden our understanding of the impact of opportunity structures on those transitions and the role of young people's agency in overcoming social constraints and advancing existing opportunities in our turbulent times. We would like to express our gratitude to the authors who submitted manuscripts and shared their research findings, the reviewers who helped improve the quality of the texts and the editorial office of the journal who made possible this Special Issue.

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