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# Youth Sociology and Comparative Analysis in the European Union Member States

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## Abstract

The central aim of the present article is to reflect on the possible contribution sociological comparative youth research in Europe can offer for a better understanding of youth life in the EU member states. With this purpose it analyses in a first step, the structural conditions under which young Europeans grow up today, in the context of globalisation and Europeanization, asking about the consequences such processes have on young people's insertion in society. The analysis of youth and youth developed here includes further a systematic review of the most relevant theoretical concepts on youth life being discussed by scholars in Europe today, a description of the most important research instruments, data sources and networks already existing in EU-Europe in this field, a short analysis of possible research issues and questions that are considered as relevant for European social politics and a discussion of advantages, limitations and problems of European comparative youth research, arriving finally to some general conclusions that could give orientations for future work in this field.

**Key words:** youth, youth policy, comparative research.

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**Resum.** *Sociologia de la joventut i anàlisi comparativa en els estats membres de la Unió Europea*

L'objectiu principal d'aquest article és reflexionar sobre la possible aportació que la recerca sociològica comparativa sobre la joventut europea pot representar per entendre més bé la vida dels joves en els estats membres de la Unió Europea. Amb aquest propòsit, en una primera fase, s'hi analitzen les condicions estructurals en què creixen els joves europeus d'avui dia, en el context de globalització i europeïtzació, tot preguntant-nos quines conseqüències tenen aquests processos en la inserció dels joves en la societat. L'anàlisi de la joventut que es desenvolupa en aquest article inclou, a més d'un examen sistemàtic dels conceptes teòrics més importants de la vida juvenil que actualment es plantegen els estudiosos a Europa, una descripció dels instruments més importants de recerca, de les fonts de dades i de les xarxes de contactes existents a Europa i a la Unió Europea en aquest àmbit, una breu anàlisi dels possibles temes i qüestions de recerca considerats pertinents per a la política social europea, així com una discussió dels avantatges, les limitacions i els problemes de la recerca comparativa sobre la joventut que es fa actualment a Europa. Finalment, s'arriba a algunes conclusions generals que poden servir d'orientació per a futurs treballs en aquest camp.

**Paraules clau:** joventut, polítiques de joventut, recerca comparada.

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### Summary

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| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Introduction</li> <li>2. Social effects of modernisation and the political relevance and aims of comparative European youth research</li> <li>3. Theoretical discourses and concepts in Youth sociology</li> <li>4. Existing instruments and data bases in European comparative youth research</li> </ol> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5. Actual and future research areas and topics of European comparative youth research</li> <li>6. Problems and limitations of European cross-cultural comparative research</li> <li>7. Summary and conclusions</li> </ol> <p>Literature</p> |
|---|--|

## 1. Introduction

### *The economic and social context of modern Youth in Europe*

Since some decades and especially from the beginning of the 90ties. Europe is going through accelerated processes of economic, technological, political and social change. These processes have been so radical, that some authors (Beck, 1986; Giddens, 1990; Castells, 1997) describe and analyse them using concepts like «post-industrial» or «post-fordist society», «post-modern» and «informational society». Although not all scholars accept this concepts, most of them acknowledge that contemporary societies are quite different from the dominant industrial societies of the post-war period (1950 to 1975).

From a youth sociological perspective, the societies of EU-Europe, in which young people and young adults live today, can be characterised as «modern-modernising» societies with predominant service economies in which accelerated structural and technological changes induce deep social modernisation processes. Obviously, the most radical changes are taking place in the new EU member states of central and eastern Europe where in a relatively short period of time structural transformations from a closed state economy to open modern capitalism have been undertaken. Of course, all these changes have had repercussions on youth conditions. Yet not all scholars agree on the intensity of such changes and the consequences they have had on both, young people and the concept of Youth, considered as a social category.

For young people all over Europe, perhaps the most important of these changes has been the lengthening of school education since the 50ties. This development has had two main consequences: a delay in young peoples' entrance into the labour market and the postponement of family formation and birth of first children. The delay in transition to work has also lengthened the duration of the economic dependence of young people from their parents.

Another dominant feature of social modernisation in Europe are changes within the family. Over the recent decades the dominance of the typical nuclear family has been eroded by post-nuclear families, that is, families formed by divorced or single (usually female) parents. This development goes along with the fact, that post-industrial societies are characterized by a fragmented value

system, in which individuals' rights and freedom of choice, rather than responsibilities toward the community, are the nucleus around which interpersonal relationships are defined. And this is also true for parent/child relationships.

However, despite all these developments and of the increased material dependency on their families of origin, young people today are sexually, culturally and psychologically more independent than in the past. This emancipation is a result of both, changes in educational values and styles inside modern families and the higher mean age of individuals who have yet to complete their transition to full economic and residential emancipation e.g. to «completed adulthood».

Summing up, technological and economic modernisation processes taking place in the context of globalisation and Europeanisation have deep consequences not only for the labour market but also for everyday life and the personal opportunities of European citizens and especially for young people. In accordance to Münchmeier (1992) the process of Europeanization will bring more and better biographical chances for certain groups of young people e.g. for the well qualified while for the less qualified groups, risks of unemployment and labour market exclusion and/or social marginalisation, will probably strongly increase. Corresponding with this hypothesis, the accentuation of already existing economic and social disparities between different European countries and regions will probably generate a stronger accentuation of social inequalities in all European societies and this differentiation, experienced especially by some groups of young people, can undermine social cohesion in Europe (s. Sellin, 1995; Pierret, Sellin, 1995; Hübner-Funk, Du Bois-Reymond, 1995; Walther et al., 1999).

## **2. Social effects of modernisation and the political relevance and aims of comparative European youth research**

The economic and technological changes already mentioned and their consequences on European societies, have engendered different social trends with which most of today's European societies have to cope with.

Under these trends, the most relevant are: (1) negative demographic developments in most EU-countries and growing disparities between young (grown ups) and older population groups. This disproportion has consequences on the «inter-generational contract» in most EU member states e.g. on the structural relationships between adult and young generations. (2) Further, changes in inter-gender and inter-generational relationship as well as in family structures (the emergence of alternative life styles to the classical nuclear family) almost over all the EU member states, are engendering new and highly individualised socialisation and educational patterns. (3) The already discussed prolongation and differentiation of educational careers and professional training trajectories of young people do not only condition their late entrance into the labour market but generate also in most EU-member states the necessity to up-date educational and training systems in order to make young people fit for the

labour market demands of post-modern e.g. information-societies. (4) Moreover, the precarious situation of certain groups of young people at the different national labour markets inside the EU countries and the high youth unemployment rates in some EU member states seems to be a common tendency, especially in South and Eastern European countries. (5) Also prolonged cohabitation of young people with their parents and the problems originating for both generations in the context of a situation of «clustered nest» families, in which young people continue to live in a dependent and non full adult status is a common problematic issue in Europe as well as the difficulties young adults have while trying to combine their professional career (many times requiring geographical mobility) with family formation. (6) Common to most European societies are also changes in the value orientations of young people in the context of individualisation processes and of a mass media supported consume and trans-nationalisation of youth cultures and life styles. In many countries this seems to go hand in hand with the development of negative attitudes towards traditional forms of social and political participation and towards national and European political institutions. (7) Further negative social effects of modernisation processes in Europe can be seen in the development of regional, gender and ethnic disparities in the economic situation and life conditions of young people as well as new forms of social and cultural inequalities, especially concerning poverty, social exclusion and marginalisation of certain groups of young people, especially the members of ethnic minorities and young people of migrant origin. (8) Finally, increasing forms of unhealthy or risk behaviour (smoking, alcohol and drug abuse, transit accidents, suicide, violent behaviour, etc.) can be observed under certain groups of young people in different European countries.

### *2.1. The political relevance of European comparative youth research*

All these trends and their consequences for social integration and social cohesion in European societies constitute the frame from which the political relevance of European comparative youth research can be deduced. They confront both, the EU member states as well as the European Commission itself with new political challenges and therefore also with the necessity to generate more and better knowledge to understand the new arising questions referred to youth life in Europe today (s. EU Commission, 2001). This considerations leads us to hypothesize, that youth policy and youth sociology in most of the EU countries must be sensitized to develop a scientific interest on the above mentioned European trends and especially with regard to some basic questions that, in my opinion, will be relevant for future Youth research in all EU-member states, so for example:

- How do processes of economic and political trans-nationalisation influence life conditions, educational and labour market opportunities as well as the consciousness of young people in Europe?

- What new social problems and conflicts will emerge out of such processes in the different European societies?
- What new forms of identity formation will arise in such a context and how will such new identity constructions be linked to more traditional, national, regional and local identities?
- What new challenges and impulses for national and European social politics and Youth policies are already coming out of the described trends?
- What will be the future role of national and European political interventions in the youth field, especially then when it comes to the development of different regional economic and social life conditions.
- How can such policies be developed under consideration of the necessary balance between the requirements imposed by globalisation and the respect for local and regional traditions?

These general questions must be understood rather as indicators leading to the identification of specific thematic issues for future European comparative research than as research questions themselves.

## *2.2. Aims and advantages of European comparative studies on youth*

The main concern of international comparative studies in the field of social sciences is that of contrasting the way in which sociologically defined problems and questions appear and are confronted in different societies, cultures or social systems. The central aim of such research is to win more knowledge and deeper understanding of one owns society and culture by taking an «external» reference position and by learning from others through comparisons.

The main advantages hypothesised with regard to cross-cultural/transnational comparative youth research is, that by means of such a methodological approach, critical reviewing of own problem definitions, research questions and interpretations will be possible and that, through such a comparative perspective, also a better evaluation of the deeper meaning, efficiency and effects of one owns solution attempts will be possible as well. Further, cross-cultural and trans-national research projects have the advantage that they allow to overcome national perspectives and to establish general hypothesis about different social and cultural systems and policies, which cannot be grasped by solely focussing the attention on a national or local scale (cf. Müller, 1987; also Niedermayer, 1987).

Nevertheless, experiences of cross-cultural investigations have shown that comparative research has also some particular limitations, some of them being likely to produce information biases, which restrain the validity of results, and therefore must be considered during the whole process of investigation. We will come back to this problems and limitations in a further section of this article. In the following we shall focus on the main discourses and theoretical concepts developed by scholars in the field of youth research.

### 3. Theoretical discourses and concepts in Youth sociology<sup>1</sup>

Traditionally, the political and sociological discussion on Youth and youth life in Europe has pivoted on the question whether youth has to be defined as an age group or a transitional phase, with status-passages to adulthood being the main characteristic, or as a phase in life course featuring characteristics of its own. Discussions on the subject have addressed a lot of factors bearing on the social construction of Youth. One of the central aspects in this discussion is the overlap of (individual) ageing, requirements of transitions into adulthood that societies urge their young people to pass, and (historical) cohort or generation effects<sup>2</sup>. In former times most adolescents after compulsory education would have entered the labour market while today the vast majority either continues schooling, higher education or shifts to vocational training.

The concept of «generation» addresses historical circumstances of being young. As regards autonomy e. g. by leaving the parental home developing own life arrangements, life styles, etc., different generations of young people face different labour market conditions and housing-market supplies determining different opportunities to achieve independent adult life. Of course, different educational, employment, housing or social-welfare policies might support or hinder the autonomisation process. Approaching Youth via age, transitions and generation, thus, provides a sound understanding of what is happening with young people at any stage of social evolution<sup>3</sup>.

Beyond this classical approaches to the youth phenomenon, from a sociological point of view, there are two main dimensions governing the theoretical discussion on youth life and youth transitions to adulthood: (a) Youth as a socially organised life- phase, e.g. the conditions (activity structures; institutions, etc.) offered to young people (with reference to education, health, training, housing, welfare, leisure time provisions, etc.) as well as the legal and political framework regulating this particular phase of life and (b) the use of these conditions made by young people, both individually and as members of social groups. In this perspective «Youth» becomes a social category transcending individuals but being formed by specific policies, structures, institutions and

1. The discourses and theories on «youth» presented in this section have been summarized by the authors of the IARD- report «Study on the State of Young People and Youth Policy in Europe» (2001, vol. 1) produced for the European Commission in the context of the White Book «A new impetus for Youth in Europe». The study was coordinated by Antonio Schizzerotto and Giancarlo Gasperoni. The author of the present article has been a leading member of the research group responsible for the elaboration of the report.
2. Today, an age of, e.g., 25 years has another meaning than 40 or 80 years ago. Whether a 25-year-old is identified as a representative of «Youth» or not would have elicited quite different answers. The same holds true for transitions such as finishing compulsory schooling.
3. For practical purposes, however, and as most studies rely on cross-sectional data, the historical dimension is often omitted at a given point in time. Hence age and transitions are widely used concepts to approach «Youth» and «youth life» without any historical reference.

legal regulations but also by the ways and strategies in which young people cope with the challenges implicit in such structures and institutions in each historical period. In this view, young people, are not thought of as «objects» e.g. determined by «conditions» and «socialisation» but as *actors* managing, or at least strongly influencing, their arrangements of life (Galland, 1990; Hurrelmann & Neubauer, 1986; Mörch, 1993, 1994)<sup>4</sup>.

On the background of these general theoretical reflections, we will present now some of the most important concepts of youth used by scholars of different EU countries studying this phenomenon. These concepts have been selected not only because of their theoretical relevance but also because most of them already have made their entrance into European comparative research. They obviously express different, but mostly non excluding, visions of youth as a subject of sociological interest. Their contributions to the theoretical construction of youth as a social category have been in part complementary and in part also contradictory between each other, originating thus new interesting questions and theoretical discussions under youth researchers.

### 3.1. «Youth» as an age group

Understanding «Youth» in terms of age comes close to the politically favoured definition of youth. Almost all political programs and measures aiming at the «integration» of young people into society prefer this definition. Current political definitions of «Youth» by European countries and EU institutions comprise age groups of 15 to 25 or, in some cases, of 14 to 30. Age limits differ in line with the field of interest, such as education, work, health, housing, welfare, financial support, etc. Concerning this broad age range which by some youth sociologists has been broken down into «adolescence», «post-adolescence» and «young adulthood», youth policy is not targeted only at *education* or *employment* or *welfare* but at education *and* employment *and* welfare all together. Normally, young people do not make use of them all at the same time, but one policy segment after the other is likely to become important during youth life (Council of Europe, 1998). This argument supports the approach of regarding youth life as a sequence of age strata. It reflects both the extension of youth until the end of the third decade in life and its internal segmentation according to age. The consequences this has for youth related policies will be discussed in a further section<sup>5</sup>.

4. Since young people do so by making use of different biographical, economic, social and cultural resources, we can treat «Youth» as a metaphor covering different realities such as gender differences, urban and rural environments, social classes, cultural traditions, geographical regions and so on.
5. Here we can say, that an early stage, the priority of youth related policy lies on education and training. In principle, young people ought to attend education or training and not enter the labour force prematurely. Educational policy aims at providing equal access to education and preventing any form of exclusion. Equal opportunities for everyone means to

Yet, defining youth by age bears some problems. For instance, youth life shows a lot of variation and therefore becomes also «politically» defined in very different ways within a certain age period. An example are «young adults»: Eurostat data («Youth in the European Union», 1997) indicate varying combinations of educational, working and unemployment status that impact youth life especially in southern Europe, but also in France and Germany. A significant part of young people is statistically and politically defined as: «mainly students, who work»; «mainly employees, who study»; «mainly students»; «only workers» or as «unemployed persons». Hence, not age but «activity combinations» performed by young people within the same age group determine both youth life and youth policies.

### 3.2. *Youth as a problem-group?*

A second approach in the analysis of youth conditions emphasises the risks to which today's young people are allegedly exposed (see, for example, Furlong and Cartmel, 1997). These risks include educational failure, unemployment and homelessness. This deterioration of young people's material well-being engenders a deterioration of their psychological conditions as well. In accordance to this approach today's Youth, runs greater risks of alcoholism, drug dependency and bad mental health (s. Hackauf, Winzen, 2004). Even if these phenomena of severe psychological malaise were not to manifest themselves, it remains true that in Europe increasingly large groups of young people are excluded from the job market and other significant domains of community life. Thus the hypothesis has been advanced that some young people can represent an important component of that which has been called the «underclass». The main argument of the thesis linking certain groups of young people to underclass (Murray, 1990) can be summarised as follows. Several young people in deprived areas help to perpetuate an underclass through a behaviour which is supported by the welfare system. So, for example, some of this young people engage in irresponsible sex and thus produce high rates of teenage pregnancy and fatherless children; such children grow up without a proper male role model and in some cases without any parental control. Hence in these

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release young people's chances from social disparity given by gender, race, social heritage and placement. In a later stage of youth life trajectories spread. Those who have finished secondary schools are still busy with education (university). On the other hand, their peers who take part in or have finished vocational training face employment or unemployment and unemployment benefits. In some countries, there is a contradiction between educational policy and the system of unemployment benefits. Educational policy considers young people with professional qualifications to be adult and well prepared to enter the labour market. Unemployment policy, however, treats them as members of the «youth» age group. Up to the age of 25, young people get only half the unemployment benefits in those countries because they are supposed to live with their parents. This inconsistent treatment of young people prevents them from becoming independent in good time. It also shows, that both researchers and politicians are unclear about the definition of «Youth».

areas there ensue high crime, drug taking, debt, violence and the like. This helps the formation of an underclass which then reproduces itself (s. Dubet, Lapeyronnie, 1992). The actual riots and acts of violence exercised by youngsters in France «Banlieus» seem to support this hypothesis.

Nevertheless, the above thesis has been the object of various critiques. In particular, attention has been called to the fact that, even though some groups of young people may experience anxiety and social exclusion to a greater degree than people born 40 or 50 years ago, today in Europe most of young people do not really risk extreme poverty, hunger or threats to physical survival. Further, it is the same notion of underclass that seems scarcely appropriate for describing the social situation of most European countries. Surveys regarding poverty, social exclusion and unemployment suggest that most of young people falling in such deprived conditions are not necessarily permanently trapped in them. In other words, the experience of social exclusion quite often represents a mere episode in an individual's life history. Against this observation, the experience of young migrants and young people belonging to ethnic minority groups living in different EU-members states seems to support in some degree the «underclass»-hypothesis.

### *3.3. The definition of «Youth» as a stage of transition*

Traditionally, Youth has also been defined as a stage of transition, rather than an age group or a life stage of its own. The concept of transition emphasises the acquisition of capacities and rights associated with adulthood e.g. with the aim of obtaining an adult status.

Speed and form of transitions to adulthood are shaped by policies: Length of compulsory schooling, age brackets during which parents are obliged to provide shelter, and military service. From this point of view, it is hard to see the use of defining Youth life by education *or* work or welfare and not all together, by education, welfare and work.

For classical youth theories becoming an adult has been conceptualised more or less as a linear process in which personal development and «individuation» are seen as processes of status transitions that rely on learning and internalisation of given cultural norms (socialisation). Assuming this norms and the roles attached to them, are prerequisites of becoming, and being recognised as a full member of society<sup>6</sup>. But, as we know, in modern industrial and post-industrial society's transition process to adulthood have become longer and more complicated because of the extension of secondary education, accompanied by diversification and individualisation of social life. In other words, a diversification of pathways into adulthood has taken place. In addition to this, today individuals determine their adult positions through a process of

6. The concept has a conservative bias since it considers socialisation a sort of one-way transaction, with norms and life patterns remaining unchanged.

«negotiation» instead of simply following paths pre-defined by society. Moreover, status passages are no longer *linear* (e.g. education > employment), but also *synchronous* (education + employment) and *reversible*, i.e. yo-yo movements (education <> employment (s. Du Bois-Reymond, 1998, Machado Pais, 1996; Du Bois-Reymond & López Blasco, 2003). Special youth-welfare policies («transition policies») are designed to support these passage groups regardless of the age of the young people involved (s. Gallie & Paugam, 2000; s. Bendit & Stokes, 2003).

A further contribution to the conceptualisation of Youth as a transition process in post-industrial societies, in which the labour market has been flexibilized, jobs are scarce and precarious and the entrance into the labour market as well as residential and family autonomy become more difficult, has been delivered by Casal (1996) and the research group GRET (Grup de Recerca Educació i Treball) at the Autonomous University of Barcelona (ICE-UAB). In accordance to this authors, the traditional<sup>7</sup> transition modalities —the so called «early exit trajectories» and the «workers trajectories»—, which were typical for classical industrial societies of the post-war period until the structural crisis of European labour markets in the 70ies., are since then losing their dominance in favour of new transition strategies emerged in the last decades. In Casals opinion, modern and «flexibilized» capitalism engenders three new forms or types of transitions defined by him and his group as: «successive approximation trajectories»; «de-structured trajectories» and «trajectories in precariousness»(Casal, 1996).

*Successive approximation strategies* are mainly oriented to the realisation of rather high and complex expectancies of professional development and social positioning. This transitional type is characterised by longer periods of vocational or professional training and by diverse attempts of entrance into the labour market in a modality of trial and error in which the individual is using specific but occasional opportunities, contacts and references to achieve this aim. By means of successive approximation to the labour market, some young people make progress in the process of developing a more or less coherent professional profile, independently of short time regresses, which are ineluctable in a context of precarious labour market situations. Through the performance of successive temporary jobs, more or less related with each other, the young person obtains step by step a coherent «curriculum» that will make it easier for him to succeed in a further normalised insertion into the labour market.

Other as in the case of successive approximation trajectories, the two remaining «emerging» transition types can be considered as a result of a lack of qual-

7. «Traditional» because they are characterized basically by the linearity of the transition process to adulthood that was possible in a context of full employment and working place stability. Based on this situation the concept of youth was that of a short period of life existing before the definitive integration of a young person into the labour market, without big delays and in which the single persons were able to adjust rather quickly their own skills and work expectancies to the requirements of the offered jobs.

ifications (especially with reference to professional areas in which there is a strong labour market demand), as well as of specific problematic personal situations linked to the absence of opportunities and social, cultural and economic resources (Casal, op. cit.). In this context, *de-structured transition trajectories* correspond mostly to those adopted by young people coming from families with limited resources and having more or less low expectancies of social positioning and a bad or erratic formal education. Due to their low or non existing formal qualifications and the marginal social situation in which they live, their insertion trajectories are mostly characterized by systematic and continuous hindrances of their entrance into the normal labour market. This situation might be interrupted by occasional job opportunities in the second labour market or into the submerged economy.

In former times, this persons were more or less protected by social policies or by a labour market guaranteeing full employment while today, in the context of neo-liberal economies, they become more vulnerable as a result of labour market flexibilisation and social under-protection (Offe, 1997). Nevertheless, this trajectories, like the first ones, maintain a certain degree of linearity, obviously in an opposite direction as that of successive approximation trajectories<sup>8</sup>.

In accordance to Casal, the most significant changes observed in modern transitions correspond to those trajectories developed in *precariousness*. Here, we state a real disruption of the linearity observed in the other two transition types. In this modality, labour market integration is characterized by permanent rotation of working places, under-employment and general instability of young persons in the labour market. Individuals in this precarious situation do not achieve to transform their successive entrances and exits of the labour market in a clear orientation in order to implement their professional (higher or lower) expectancies. Their insecurity and instability is such, that they have enormous difficulties to develop a more or less coherent professional profile. Although in many cases, this young people have attended very specialized institutions of higher education or technical/professional training, their qualifications seem not to be a sufficient condition for a normal entrance into the regular labour market since their professional opportunities in the sphere in which they have been trained are to scarce. This situation forces young persons with such a high educational background to accept jobs or to perform tasks with little or none relation with the qualifications they have obtained<sup>9</sup>.

8. Casal describes the complexity of forms in which such trajectories are being constructed. They have their starting point in both, the growing disorganisation of the individuals temporal categories and in the growing hopelessness engendered by the precarious situation in which the person lives. This affects not only his own employment expectancies but also other existential aspects of his life. In extreme cases, individuals in this social situation experience social exclusion or develop deviant behaviours with the corresponding partial or total loss of abilities and attitudes necessary for a regular labour market integration.
9. Figuera and other authors think, that the expansion of education and of the educational systems has engendered an extreme high offer of persons with higher (university) education or technical qualification that do not find allocation because of a restricted demand

Even if the new trajectories described by Casal and his group have been constructed upon data referring mainly to the situation in Spain<sup>10</sup>, we can conclude that this transition modalities are not only specific to that context. In general terms, today they seem to be typical for many young persons searching employment in the EU member states.

Summing up, the fact that transition pathways to adulthood have become diversified and that in the last decade some new modalities of trajectories have emerged does not mean, however, that social constraints and origin no longer matter. On the one hand, modern societies provide more qualification options to choose from, on the other hand, young people today are forced to reflect on the available options offered to them and take and justify their right or wrong decisions by themselves (Du Bois-Reymond, 1998). Young people, hence, must choose and choose correctly, running the risk of taking the wrong choice and becoming socially excluded.

Furthermore, the individual's capacity to negotiate his/her transition successfully still depends strongly on cultural capital; support provided by his/her family, and opportunities and constraints of gender and region<sup>11</sup>. Under the described conditions it is not surprising, that also family emancipation of young people will be delayed, even if in some cases, it can be enhanced by a certain economic stability offered by employment options not corresponding to the expectancies of the individuals.

Some criticism has been developed in the last decade with regard to the concept of youth as a transition process. Some authors argue that defining Youth by transition is to move from what is inherent to what is set up. Authors like Mörch (1998) consider, that in post-modern societies it is wrong and misleading to define «youth» as a transition phenomenon since it induces to think about youth in terms of a homogeneous category which in post-modern societies and in the context of individualisation processes does not exist anymore. Even if young people at this stage generally have limited or no possibilities of earning their own incomes and running their own households they can not be considered as none «full adults» being in transition to «adulthood».

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at the labour market. Therefore, the insertion of young people in activities and tasks not related to their professional qualification generates professional trajectories «characterized by instability, continuous changes of tasks and by a lack of qualification perspectives, allowing the accumulation of a specialized work experience and so with, to initiate a coherent professional career» (Figuera, 1996).

10. In Casals opinion, the three emergent trajectories described above, differ from each other mainly with regard to the quality and quantity of the education and training obtained by the individuals. This factors would not only explain the different decisions they take in front of in a given moment existing professional options but also a certain congruence observed between this trajectories e.g. their configuration upon a basis of temporary, instable labour market insertion.
11. We can observe that diversification and individualisation produced by social change is not only reflected in the ways young people cope with the home-leaving process but also in their housing demands (Bendit et al., 1999; Bendit, Hein, 2003).

Nevertheless, as Mörch (1999) puts it: youth life has not vanished because its «transition status» has changed.

### 3.4. *The modernisation of youth and the new emerging sociological categories: «post-adolescence» and «young adulthood»?*

The modernisation of youth life in post-industrial societies has induced some youth sociologists to complete the analysis of the characteristics assumed by youth under the new societal conditions by means of two new social categories: «post-adolescence» and «young adulthood». These categories, of course, have been developed on the basis of different theoretical assumptions.

#### 3.4.1. *«Post-adolescence»: a new stage inside the transition process?*

Authors who believe in the homogeneity of contemporary youth's life conditions hypothesize, that the longer duration of the transition to adulthood has engendered a new social category inside youth, defined by them as «post-adolescence». Three major hypotheses underpin this approach to youth conditions.

- Firstly, in post-modern societies there is an extension of the period of time in which young people continue to live in a none full adult status and there is no clear definition of the demographic and social boundaries of youth. Under these conditions a new category of young people arises: post-adolescence. In social terms, it involves the set of individuals who are no longer completely dependent from their families of origin but who have yet to establish a family of their own. In terms of age, it theoretically comprises young people from 18 o 29.
- Secondly, the extension of educational processes creates a heightening of expectations towards one's working career and life. These expectations, however, are not satisfied by economic and social reality due to the inflation of educational degrees, flexibilisation of the labour market and high levels of unemployment.
- Finally, the gap between educational levels and job and social integration opportunities obliges individuals to experience a longer waiting period before they can assume all the responsibilities entailed by adulthood, in order to re-define their personal system of expectations. The opportunities of enjoying this waiting period are increasing, in that today parents are more willing to grant their children ample autonomy, even if they are not economically independent.

In accordance to this three main hypothesis, life courses are thus enhanced by anew age —post-adolescence— during which contemporary youth may experience a plurality of jobs, living arrangements, couple relationships, and so on, and thus build adult destinations which are less definite than they used to be in the past (Galland, 1990; Cavalli and Galland, 1995).

Empirical indicators of the existence of this allegedly new stage of life are represented essentially by the plurality of short-term job experiences and participation in intermediate living arrangements (singles, unwed couples, friends living together), midway between living with one's parents and living as a spouse/parent in a new household.

The theory of post-adolescence as a new period of life, as much as the theory of individualistic fragmentation of transitions to adulthood, presents both elements of strength and weakness. There can be no doubt, for instance, that the condition of individuals no longer living with their parents even though they have not established a new family is more widespread today than it was in the past. This condition, however, is the result of numerous causes. In part, it is quite simply the effect of the increase in the incidence of university students among young people: many students move from their cities of residence in order to continue their studies. Nevertheless, this fact means that these individuals enjoy greater freedom from their families of origin and effectively delay initiation of married life proper. But in this case the opportunity to experience new forms of living arrangements depends on parents' economic resources or having a job. Participation in intermediate living arrangements is not, as a result, an experience shared by all post-adolescents (s. Bendit, Hein, 2003, 2004). As far as the plurality of job experiences at the beginning of working careers is concerned, one should consider whether such experiences are voluntary or whether they reflect the fact that the labour market has become less regulated and more flexible. Finally, we must emphasise that the duration of post-adolescence varies according to country. The median age at first cohabitation or marriage is about 24 or 25 in the United Kingdom and in Scandinavia, whereas in the Mediterranean countries it is 29. It would seem, therefore, that «post-adolescence», even though it is a new phenomenon, manifests itself more intensely in countries in which modernisation is less advanced<sup>12</sup>. It remains to be seen whether post-adolescence represents an authentically new stage of life or, more simply, a temporal drawing out of youth.

#### 3.4.2. «Young Adulthood» as a new social category?

Today, the extension of educational pathways leads young people to create higher expectations towards their professional careers. However, at the same time, those expectations cannot always be satisfied due to economic and social changes related not only to the flexibilisation of labour market and high levels of unemployment but also due to the general heightening of educational qualifications of the population that creates an inflation of educational careers.

12. This is not completely true, of course, as young people in Nordic countries are much more independent from their parents than their Mediterranean counterparts. Yet, the above data stress the fact that is rather difficult to detect the boundaries of post-adolescence and hence to define the latter in a sound way. It also seems reasonable to believe that in that period subcultures may establish themselves and emphasise the differences which set off post-adolescents from the rest of society.

For a young person this means that there is a strong probability of having to experience a long waiting period before he or she can assume all the responsibilities attached to adulthood. The existence of this period of time in the life course of young people underpins the idea of the emergence of a new stage in life called *young adulthood*. Under young adulthood scholars understand a phase in the individual's biography in which the young person may experience different jobs, living arrangements, have different partners, etc. In other words, young adults are young people who may be independent in some aspects of their life while in other aspects they may still not have achieved an adult status. For example, they may be living on their own, but still be on education or have a job while still living at their parents' home. As in the case of the concept of «post-adolescence», in terms of age, it also comprises young people aged between 20 and 29 years.

### 3.4.3. *Youth as a stage of its own*

Against the definition of youth as an age group or as a period of transition towards adulthood, the concepts of «post-adolescence» and «young adulthood» leads to the idea that the effects of economic and technological modernisation and especially their consequences on prolonged education and upgraded professional qualifications on young people (Giddens, 1991) engenders a new phase of life. In other words, youth life turns into a prolonged stage of its own within the life cycle. For authors like Bendit and Münchmeier (1993), the «youth phase» (a functional equivalent of the concept of «youth life») has become in post-industrial societies an important sociological, practical and political category. In the context of economic and social modernisation, youth is now considered as the decisive life phase during which young people have to obtain those qualifications and orientations and have to take those decisions that will have a central impact for the rest of their lives. Failing during this phase, means that important prerequisites for successful professional career and biographical trajectories are at stake. Mised trajectories loom in the future.

From a critical point of view, it could be argued, that the developmental perspective implicit in this theory of youth life, can still be subsumed under the classical transition concept of youth since the tasks to be accomplished during this period are mainly a preparation for future «adult» life to. What eventually transcends the traditional transition concept is the implicit idea that youth (including here the concepts of «post-adolescence» and «young adulthood») is not only a decisive life phase in which key qualifications are obtained, but also a prolonged phase of life in which young people develop autonomous cultural patterns and life styles. In this perspective socialisation can no longer be considered as one-way transactions that leave existing norms and life patterns unchanged. During this phase of the life cycle a young people will not only learn the skills and competencies that will be relevant for their future personal and professional life. They also will develop own values, social and cultural norms and competences that makes them to prime agents of social change.

### *3.5. The concept of individualisation of life courses and Youth's limited social visibility*

Another group of theories on youth conditions in contemporary society underscores the assumption that there are no longer «normal» biographies, i.e. typical sequences of transition to adulthood. Indeed, perhaps it no longer makes sense to distinguish between youth and adulthood. Most life choices are now reversible, and most people can autonomously decide how to shape their own destination. In short, life courses are increasingly individualised and fragmented.

The early stages of an active life none longer need to coincide with the end of all contacts with the educational and training system. At almost any moment an individual may decide to interrupt his/her working career and return to being a full-time student. At the very least, he/she can decide to work and study at the same time. What is more, there is no longer such a thing as a life-time job. In the same way, couple relationships are increasingly unstable and no longer necessarily imply having children. Indeed, people increasingly decide to have children even if they have no stable relationship, and having a job is no longer a necessary prerequisite for establishing a new family. In sum, the ties that used to bind the various stages of life courses are increasingly weak, nor are specific life events associated to specific ages (Beck, 1986; Giddens, 1990; Castells, 1997). For these reasons, social scientists who subscribe to the theory of the individualisation of life courses feel that «post-modern» society, is causing the disappearance of youth as a socially visible category.

These authors do not assert that greater freedom of choice in determining one's life course is only a source of advantages. The retreat of the welfare system and the flexibilisation of the labour market have introduced strong elements of uncertainty in individuals' lives. In sum, young people no longer comprise a social category, which used to be the beneficiary of specific social policies, and have become a mere statistical category (Wallace and Kovatceva, 1998). The members of this statistical category are more free than in the past, but also more unsure about their social and occupational destinations and less socially relevant.

Although it is perhaps more persuasive than the youth-as-underclass hypothesis, the theory of life-course individualisation and de-structuration of Youth as a social category has its problems. In the first place, recent availability of longitudinal data drawn from large sample surveys<sup>13</sup> permits the study of inter-cohort variations of life courses (in that these surveys contain waves which reconstruct retrospective data, i.e., past episodes, spells and events). In general, such analyses show no sign of there having been an individualistic transformation of the traditional sequences of transition to adulthood<sup>14</sup>. Empirical

13. British Household Panel Survey, European Community Household Panel, German Socio-Economic Panel, Italian Household Longitudinal Study.

14. Most subjects born from the second half of the Sixties onwards continue to complete schooling before they start looking for a job, start working before they leave their parents' home

evidence seems to support Karl Mannheim's generation's theory rather than the theory of life-course individualisation<sup>15</sup>.

### 3.6. *The political approach to the concept of Youth*

In political perspective, the concept of Youth is the result of national and historical traditions. Hence, definitions of youth differ across the European Union in accordance with the national context of youth policies. In this regard, one important dimension of analysis of the political concepts of youth is the perception of young people as a resource or as a problem. The image of youth as a resource emphasises the positive aspects of youth as representing the future of society. Therefore, young people have to be given the best opportunities for their appropriate development. On the contrary, the perception of youth as a problem leads to view young people as vulnerable individuals who are in need of protective measures. Regarding youth as a resource or as a problem will influence key concepts and the formulation of aims of national youth policies. Thus, when youth is viewed as a resource, the focus of youth policy will tend to lie on the empowerment of youth, on their development and growth. In contrast, the image of Youth as a potential problem will put social integration, the struggling against discrimination and prevention of social deviance and problems at the top of the priorities list.

Both conceptualisations of Youth can be found in current youth policies across the European Union, even within one and the same country. However, the emphasis and the priority given to the more positive or more negative picture of youth varies from time to time and from country to country. Typically, the perception of young people as a resource can be found in times of stability and economic growth. Whilst regarding young people as a problem can be a dominant point of view in periods of crisis, political instability, etc. On the other hand, the age demarcation of youth within the political discussion also

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or commence their first couple relationship, and have their first child only after having formed a couple. It is true, on the other hand, that the younger cohorts complete these transitions at a later age compared to people who were born from the early Forties to the early Sixties. But this delay is not without precedent. People born during the first three decades of the 20th century also tended to get married and have their first child at ages which are similar, and sometimes even greater, than that of today's youth. Of course, the causes of these deferred transitions to adulthood have changed. Similar results have been obtained recently by Bendit/Hein (2003) in the context of the European comparative project «Families and Transitions in Europe» (FATE).

15. According to the generations theory, the opportunities and constraints issuing from the economic situation and the institutional arrangements of a country in a specific period, along with individuals' socio-economic characteristics, influence the duration and the sequence of transitions to adulthood. There exists, therefore, no irreversible, long-term historical tendency towards less structured life courses and slower transitions to adulthood. The economic situation and the institutional arrangements of contemporary European societies are such that they strongly penalise younger generations and make it extremely difficult to forecast and plan individual destinations.

seems to have an influence on the prevailing image of Youth. In this sense, one can speak of a narrow or wide concept of youth in the context of youth policies (s. IARD, 2001).

Concluding this general discussion on «youth» and «youth life», it can be said, that this concepts can be considered as polisemic constructs, containing such different meanings like, being a «generation» phenomenon, a «way of feeling», an «age category», a «problem group», a «transition phase», a «stage of its own» or a new phase in the life cycle. Finally, Youth is seen also a social situation being experienced in a common or different way by individuals living under similar or different conditions. The discussion of this different interpretations of youth life has shown mainly, that youth, as a social category, is more than an age group but by large not a homogeneous social group in the sense of a «class». In this frame, youth can be considered both, as a life condition organized by society and as a socio-cultural construction e.g. as a symbolic representation created by different social groups, including young persons themselves, with the aim of giving meaning to certain behaviours and attitudes attributed to them or to those feeling «young».

#### 4. Existing instruments and data bases in European comparative youth research

As has been stated by Wallace (2003), globalisation and European integration processes have determined similar social trends and problems across different European societies. This, on its side, has generated the creation of transnational political frameworks in order to cope with these developments. On their turn, such political frameworks are increasingly demanding reliable and comparable information on the social life conditions and value orientations of the European population, including young people. In other words, the modernisation process of European societies, has been progressively increasing the political relevance and demand of harmonized e.g. comparable statistical data and of international comparative research (s. Bendit, 2004; cf. Berg-Schlosser & Müller-Rommel, 1987). This situation is leading to the further development of new research instruments, data bases and research networks.

##### *European statistical and empirical data bases*

Since the beginning of the 1990s, we can appreciate a considerable improvement of quantitative instruments concerning not only the harmonisation of social indicators and variables but also the quantity, quality and availability of statistical data at European level, enhancing thus the quality of the information obtained (Bendit, 2004). Different EUROSTAT initiatives in this direction lead both, to a significant improvement of comparative European social statistics in different areas in which Youth plays an important role (like

education, employment, housing, health, etc.) and in the development and quality of surveys, focusing directly or indirectly on the life conditions of young people in the EU. Under this survey we can mention:

- The «European Community Household Panel Survey».
- The «European Labour Force Survey».
- The «European Social Survey».
- The «Eurobarometer 47.2: the Young Europeans».
- The «European Value Survey».

This specific EU information and data sources are being complemented by other, not specific European surveys, like the «International Social Survey Programme» and the «World Value Survey» (s. Wallace, 2003). To these improvements we must add those other quantitative and qualitative approaches, data and research results obtained by several European comparative investigations implemented in the context of the EU Commissions programmes, particularly in the context of the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Framework Programmes (s. CORDIS, 2004)<sup>16</sup>. By means of such quantitative and qualitative comparative data, knowledge on Youth in the EU member states has significantly been improved, deepened and spread.

### *Research Networks*

Beneath improvements in the development of standardised quantitative research instruments and data bases, we can observe also a growing tendency in Europe to more networking in the field of youth research. expressed e.g. in the constitution of formal and informal networks or in consortia grouped around specific thematic issues and research projects, mostly funded by the EU-Commission or by the European Science Foundation. As exemplary cases of such research networks in the youth field we can mention: the European Group for Integrated Research (EGRIS): (<http://www.iris-egris.de/egris>); the European Research Network on Transitions in Youth: (<http://www.ed.ac.uk/ces/tiy/summary.html>); the IARD network «Task Force for European Youth Research (TREU)»: (<http://www.IARD.it>) and some others.

Additionally to this exemplary cases of European youth research networks, we can mention those conceived as information and co-operation networks focusing on the documentation of data on Youth, youth policies and good practices like the Nordic Youth Research Information Network (NYRI) (<http://www.alli.fi/nyri/>), whose activities are being sponsored by the Nordic

16. Social scientists not only from Europe but also from other world regions can have access to the data sets originated in the context of the above mentioned surveys stored in different sociological archives like for example those of EUROSTAT; the Central Archive of Cologne; Data bases of the University of Essex; Sociological Data Archives of the University of Mannheim; Databases of the German Youth Institute (DJI).

Council of Ministers and the Nordic Youth Council<sup>17</sup> as well as the «Experts on Youth Research and Information» network, sponsored and coordinated by the Directory of Youth and Sport at the Council of Europe (<http://www.coe.int/youth>)<sup>18</sup>. Other interesting initiatives in this field are the «European Youth Observatory» network: (<http://www.diba.es/eyo/presentation.htm>); the «Youth and Generation» network: (<http://www.valt.helsinki.fi/esa/youth.htm>) and the «Virtual Community of Young Researchers YOU@ETV» network (<http://communities.trainingvillage.gr/youth>). There is no possibility in the frame of this article to describe and discuss in detail the work performed by these and other networks, they only are meant as examples of the progressive establishment of a European youth research scenery.

### 5. Actual and future research areas and topics of European comparative youth research

The definition of relevant research areas and issues of present and future European comparative youth research is possible, firstly, by taking into consideration some strategic documents of the European Commission, like for example the European Commissions' White Book on Youth Policy: «A New Impetus for European Youth» (2001), in which youth policy specific issues like «participation»; «information of young people»; «civil engagement/voluntary work» and «more information on Youth», together with other, youth related issues, like «education»; «employment»; «housing» and «health», have been defined as priority action areas for future youth policies in the EU member states. Another important source for the identification of relevant research issues focusing on Youth in Europe are the European Commission sponsored programmes (especially the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> Framework Programmes). By considering the political and research priorities fixed in this programmes and linking them with other, more general, but also relevant European social issues, like e.g. «social cohesion»; «migration»; «education and the knowledge society»; «education and long life learning»; «the role of welfare regimes and social policies», etc. (s. e.g. European Commission, 2004), we can conclude, that the following topics will be the most relevant for future comparative youth research in Europe:

— Factors leading to solidarity or to tensions in intergenerational relations, for example, those concerning social safeguards, gender roles, family structures, lifestyles and transmission of knowledge between generations

17. Some 1700 researchers, documentalists, users of research knowledge etc. are linked through this network. The development of this cooperation started 1985, and within the present framework NYRI has appeared since 1992. The NYRI secretariat is the coordinator, producer and organizer of a variety of activities.

18. This network is constituted by «national correspondents» nominated by the different governments to support and coordinate youth research in Europe. They are nowadays focusing their work on the construction of a European Data Base on Youth and Youth Politics in Europe (s. Council of Europe, 2003).

- The knowledge society and the role of information, communication and long life learning in modern Youth life.
- Education in the knowledge society and strategies for inclusion and integration of young people of different social and ethnic origin.
- The changing forms of social capital and political, social and economic participation of young people in Europe.
- The modernization of economic structures and new forms of employment/unemployment and social inequality. Consequences for young man and woman in Europe.
- Autonomous life and societal factors promoting/inhibiting the emancipation process of young people.
- The consequences of globalisation and Europeanization on young people's identity constructions.
- The economic and societal effects of young man and woman's delayed entrance into the labour market and the impacts this has, especially on family formation and fertility rates.
- Risk behaviours and the state of young people's health in Europe. Prevention policies and good practices.
- The comparison of different youth policies and of policies targeted to the management of intergenerational relations at national and European levels, including also the assessment of «good practices» (s. European Commission, 2004).

In the frame of this article, it is obviously not possible to discuss the particular contents and meanings of each of this areas and thematic issues, from which research questions for future European comparative research could be deducted. A certain degree of concretisation of this issues and questions can be found in the 6th. Framework Programme of the European Commission<sup>19</sup>.

To complete this presentation, it will be useful now, to discuss some of the main advantages, problems and limitations, with which European comparative research projects are confronted today.

## 6. Problems and limitations of European cross-culturalcomparative research

As has already been said in a former section, comparative research shows also some important methodological problems and particular limitations. First of all, experiences have shown that reducing an investigation to simply compar-

19. Cf. Commission of the European Communities: Specific Programme: «Integrating and Strengthening the European Research Area». Priority Area 7: «Citizens and Governance in a knowledge based society». Work Programme 2004-2006. Under other aspects, this programme focuses also on issues affecting intergenerational relations as well as on attitudes, lifestyles and participation forms of young people and their consequences for European society and economy.

ing mean values of different Member States has not really contributed to any further relevant knowledge<sup>20</sup>.

It is important to acknowledge also that comparative research does not mean to use the same questions in each country but to use *functionally equivalent* stimuli in each social and cultural context<sup>21</sup>. Hence, functional equivalence of indicators does not mean that these will be identical in each specific context but that they point out to the same variable. Only in this way, it is possible to ensure the comparability of cross-national data (Kolb & Wirth, 2001). In this sense, it is important to adapt interview guidelines to specific national requirements to enable functional equivalence and comparability of interviews in each social context.

Other kinds of equivalence that are significant within the frame of international comparative research refer to the equivalence of each national sample, the lexical equivalence of stimuli and the quality of field work. Lexical equivalence refers to the necessary efforts that must be undertaken in order to reduce the effect of an eventual mistranslation of interview or survey items. Nevertheless, we have to take into account that an accurate translation of contents does not necessarily lead to a functional equivalence of items or interview questions. Again, we have to consider the structure of meaning of each social context and the fact that the same expression may lead to different interpretations from one country to another. Moreover, the way in which interview questions or items are presented to the respondents, the place and time of the interview and other relevant factors as gender of the respondent and the researcher or the presence of other persons during the questioning may also affect the outcome of the investigation. Therefore, all these aspects have to be considered during the research process (Niedermayer, 1987).

Moreover, recruiting people for the sample and applying the survey are likely to be carried out under diverse circumstances e.g. different personal and material resources, country-specific restrictions, etc., which may also influence the outcomes of the investigation. In this sense, only a careful preparation of the field work and recruitment, instruction and supervision of field workers are able to ensure the validity, confidence and reliability of the investigation

20. In fact, it has proven to be more significant to develop specific research questions, which refer to concrete problems in particular social and cultural contexts, and are formulated and carried out by international teams who are familiar with the topic of the study as well as with the specific context of investigation. Thereby, it seems to be recommendable to avoid complicate and ambitious research questions and rather focus on the description and analysis of specific problem situations in different cultural contexts (Bendit, 2004).
21. From a methodological point of view, European comparative investigations show, that by constructing standardised questions, one has to consider that each social and cultural context has its own structure of meaning. Thus, the same question might be considered as relevant in one country but not in another. Similarly, indicators of variables might differ from one social and cultural context to another. This means that the information that has to be gathered with respect to one and the same variable is likely to be different in accordance with each national situation (cf. Corijin & Klijzing, 2001; Niedermayer, 1987).

(Niedermayer, 1987). But even disregarding the previous mentioned difficulties, there still is the necessity of considering social and cultural differences with respect to the interpretation of results. If researchers do not have the context-specific knowledge, which is essential to an accurate interpretation of the data, the outcomes of investigation will be likely to be misleading.

The types of equivalence mentioned until now, have been mostly related to which Johnson (1998) called the *procedural equivalence*, that is, the equivalence concerned with the measurement and procedures used to make cross-cultural comparisons (cf. Zucha, 2002; EUYOUPART, 2004; Van de Vijver & Fons, 1998). There is another form of equivalence that is particularly important with respect to qualitative comparative research, which is called the *interpretative equivalence* (Johnson, 1998; Zucha, 2002; EUYOUPART, 2004; Van de Vijver & Fons, 1998). Interpretative equivalence refers to all equivalent forms of subjective meaning, that is, conceptual equivalence, equivalence of meaning, similarities in how abstract or latent concepts are interpreted across different cultures. Qualitative comparisons that have been carried out so far at the European level have highlighted the importance of having access to context specific information relevant for the interpretation of the qualitative interview material (European Commission, 2004; EUYOUPART, 2004).

However, qualitative comparative investigation methods based on the principle of interpretative equivalence are not exempt of difficulties related to the fact that researchers and respondents are embedded in specific contexts of meaning, which makes it imperative to first establish a common basis of theoretical concepts. This common frame of reference should not only be significant to all participants but also allow them to overcome their own context-related conceptual frameworks. By doing this, it is important to maintain a certain level of complexity of concepts but, at the same time, be careful that concepts do not become too simple and thus useless to interpret a given situation.

## 7. Summary and conclusions

As we showed in the course of this paper, contemporary societies are characterised by processes of accelerated economic and social change. This changes have their most visible manifestations in different phenomena affecting young people as for example, the extension over time of the permanence of people in the youth condition, that is to say in a condition in which biological and intellectual adulthood is not matched with social adulthood. This makes it difficult to determine with certainty the individual life span during which a man or women can be considered as «young».

Although the modernisation process has a strong impact on the life of young people it does not equalise young people all over Europe. As pointed out earlier, the modernisation process is a source of diversification and individualisation of social life in itself. In this sense, even if structural live conditions of Youth in Europe, have been less frequently investigated from a comparative perspective than other social issues, statistical data and existing empirical

comparative research has shown, that the structural aspects of youth conditions currently vary significantly within the European Union and of course with the situation of young people in European countries not belonging to the EU. In a certain sense the latter applies also to the cultural aspects of Youth conditions as well.

As also demonstrated in this article, there is still no convincing and widely held theory of «Youth» or youth life conditions in contemporary society. The variation over time and space of the constituent elements of youth remains differently defined. For this reason we have preferred not to present a general conceptual framework useful for European comparative research but different plausible theories and hypothesis that can be operationalized in different forms to investigate the social position, subjective representations and value orientations of 15/30-year-olds, who traditionally make up the «Youth» and «Young adults» component of the «young peoples» population, in selected important spheres of community life in the EU- member states.

We have shown in this article also, that since 1990s, European comparative research has made important progress, even if it has mainly been focussed on the development of quantitative surveys providing standardised statistical information at European level. We have seen further, that during the last years, the European Commission has been strongly interested in supporting this developments, by integrating and strengthening of a European research community, also in the field of youth research. With this aim, research programmes and researcher networks interested in cross-cultural/trans-national youth investigations have been established and funded by the European Commission and other European institutions.

However, experiences of cross-cultural investigations have also shown, that comparative research has some particular limitations that are likely to produce information biases, which restrain the validity of results, and therefore must be considered during the whole process of investigation.

*Comparability* and *equivalence* are key concepts regarding cross-cultural comparative research. Of course, the level of comparability and equivalence depend on the type and purpose of the respective study. As we have seen before, all phases of comparative investigation can be affected by methodological problems and endanger comparability. Most of the times, it is assumed that there are high levels of comparability between different social and cultural contexts. However, equivalence and comparability is something that has to be established and cannot be simply assumed. Comparisons, which are made with insufficient levels of equivalence, may lead to biases and distorted conclusions (EUYOUPART, 2004).

A problematic aspect in the context of this developments is the fact, that qualitative methods have been evidently overlooked within the frame of international comparative investigation. Since qualitative comparative methods are likely to compensate some deficits of quantitative research methods, which are linked to insufficient social and cultural contextualisation of quantitative standardised results, and since open methods of investigation have proven to

be valuable investigation instruments, which guarantee the significance and context-relatedness of research outcomes (cf. European Commission, 2002), it would be important to overcome this gap in comparative research by funding more projects of this type and (cf. Bendit, 2004).

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