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Working precarious careers trajectories: tracing neoliberal discourses in younger workers' narratives

Introduction

This article traces a number of discourses associated with neoliberalism (Harvey 1990, 2007; Neilson 2015; Walkerdine 2011) through which younger workers from a particular region in Italy constitute both their work experiences and imagine their future career trajectories in the contexts of that region and of the post Global Financial Crisis (GFC) of 2008 (Handley 2017; Kelly 2017; Simosi et al. 2015). Against this socio-economic backdrop characterized by fewer and less secure employment opportunities (Armano and Murgia 2013), current and future work experiences are subject to market imperatives which encourage individuals to view themselves as responsible workers. In particular, young people are exhorted to account for themselves as responsible and capable of '*making themselves up*' (Kelly 2017), or to be engaged in what Guichard (2009) refers to as '*se faire soi*': i.e., workers who are capable of continually (re)constructing themselves, their life and career biographies in a never-ending dynamic of transition.

The research explores the working experiences of 10 young people living in the Aosta Valley region aged between 24 and 30 coping with major economic shocks which started with the GFC. Aosta Valley is an autonomous region located in north-eastern Italy and, although part of the Italian Republic, is characterized as having political, institutional and financial autonomy since 1948. In Italy, there are five such autonomous regions: Sicily, Sardinia, Friuli-Venezia Giulia, Trentino-Alto Adige and Aosta Valley. Their autonomy - recognized by the Italian Constitution (art. 116) - is due to manifold reasons: geographical, historical, ethno-linguistic and political. These regions benefit from special Status and have legislative, administrative and

financial autonomy within the boundaries set by the national government. The topography of Aosta Valley is very particular, as it is located in a small inter-mountainous valley (3264 km²) at the intersection of Italy, France and Switzerland and is inhabited by a population of about 130,000 people (Louvin 2016). The autonomy of the Aosta Valley rests on three aspects: 1) cultural autonomy and bilingualism (Italian and French); 2) economic self-sufficiency; 3) political self-government (Luther 1995). In particular, economic self-sufficiency meant that the Valle d'Aosta region has benefitted by occupying a position of strength in terms of organizational and financial autonomy, ostensibly protecting it from the wilder extremes of globalised market logics. This autonomy peaked in the latter decades of the twentieth century (Vesan 2012), at which point the region's financial stability and increased economic resources allowed it to institute strong regional welfare-based infrastructures. In fact, historically the role of regional government has always been essential in regulating the local economy, such as increasing the jobs offered in the public sector through providing commissions to local companies (Léveque 1992; Louvin 2016). However, this situation has changed dramatically in recent years with the region, as an integrated part of the national economy, having to align more closely with an Anglo-European imperative for austerity.

This post-GFC economic reality has dramatically increased the precarity of a labour market already destabilised by the institutionalization of neoliberal policies in Italy (Checchi 1999; Moini 2015). Significantly, in 2014, unemployment among young people (aged 15-34) reached 17%, with a substantial increase (+7%) in the proportion of NEETs (Not in Education, Employment or Training) among this cohort in the Aosta Valley region (Bank of Italy 2016; NUVAL 2015). As such, young people in the region are facing the effects of a rise in local unemployment rates and, in turn, the risks of finding themselves at an impasse with increasingly limited access both to work and to education and training opportunities.

This exploratory study investigated, through semi-structured interviews, the discursive variations of ten young people, when invited to recount their employment trajectories. The study is based on the following premises: firstly, it interprets neoliberalism as a form of (uneven) governmentality (Foucault 1979); secondly, it assumes a poststructuralist perspective and understands subjectivity as being forged through disciplining discourses made available to the subject in particular contemporary contexts; thirdly it is aligned with critiques of neoliberalism that posit more pluralistic and nuanced views about its operation; and finally, the article aligns with a (re)emerging literature that views geographical 'region'/locality, as a key concept in understanding individual's negotiations of lived experiences (Evans 2016; Pedersen and Gram 2018; Ramutsindela 2013).

The article is divided into four key sections. The first introduces the theoretical concepts that inform the study. The second outlines the research methodology including the selection of the ten participants, the gathering of the data and the analysis performed using Discourse Analysis (DA). The third section presents the principal discourses of neoliberalisation which lend form to the participants' narratives of work experiences, as well as an exploration of how region/locality feature in these discourses. Lastly, a summary and discussion of the implications of the findings of the study are offered.

Theoretical framings

Within research focusing on the relation between young people and flexible work experiences, three main strands can be identified.

The first takes a macro level approach in analysing unstable career trajectories for young people. In particular, it sheds light on the effects of global socio-economic processes as well as neoliberalisation policies and practices in terms of lack of contract guarantees, lower wages, decreasing rights and protections afforded by the welfare state (Atkinson 2010; Burrows 2013).

The second strand addresses the relations between job instability and professional identity taking into consideration their effects on life cycle transitions, personal expectations and the ‘structure of feelings’ of young people (Bradley and Devadason 2008; Carmo et al. 2014; MacDonald 2011). This literature, more generally, addresses the construction of self through personal biographical narratives (Guichard 2009; Simosi et al. 2015).

The third strand focuses on the career paths of young adults using a poststructuralist and Foucauldian approach. These studies use the concept of governmentality to highlight how discourses of neoliberalisation *govern* and *constitute* subjectivities through disciplinary mechanisms (Bansel 2007; Kelly 2006; Nairn and Higgins 2007; Rose 1999; Sullivan and Delaney 2016; Walkerdine 2011). Governmentality studies focus on how institutional-level discourses frame and shape the self-knowledge and self-conduct of subjects. Particular attention is placed on how discourses of neoliberalisation act as key reference points within policies addressed at and about young people such as Youth Guarantee and those in Higher Education organizations. For instance, university careers guidance services and employment policies are investigated as discursive constructions of the employable subject. It is argued that these discursive formations foster entrepreneurial mind-sets among young people, particularly in relation to their education-work transitions (Handley 2017; Holdsworth 2018; Oinonen 2018; Serrano Pascual and Martín Martín 2017).

This research is framed in this third strand: it is informed by poststructuralist theory (Britzman 2000; Butler 1997; Fairchild 2017; Foucault 1979; Fournier 1999; Prasad 2012) and extends studies on the experiences of young adult workers in an era of neoliberalisation (Bansel, 2007; Nairn and Higgins 2007; Sullivan and Delaney 2016; Walkerdine 2011). More specifically, the current study aims at investigating the ways in which neoliberalising discourses are extant among younger people’s framings of their own career trajectories in a particular regional context such as the autonomous region of Aosta Valley.

Following Foucault (2007, 2008; Rasmussen 2010; Read 2009; Rose 1999), neoliberalisation is conceptualized not only as a programme of policies or a new ideology (Fotaki and Prasad 2015) with repercussions for the relationship between state, economy and citizen (Sullivan and Delaney 2016), but rather, and above all, as a form of *governmentality*. Thus, neoliberalisation is seen as a way of governing individuals, subjectivities, and their ways of life ‘through the mobilization of discursive strategies’ (Rasmussen 2010, 473; see also Boland 2016). In particular, neoliberal governmentality (Foucault 2000, 2008) is a dominant, though not monolithic nor hegemonic mode of power which operates indirectly: it manipulates culture, inculcating the ethic of enterprise along with the values of competition and ‘human capital’ (Munro 2012), so as to govern and reshape human relations (Kelly 2017). We take seriously here theorisations that unsettle and dispute any consensual understanding of neoliberalism as a singular, monolithic or coherent geopolitical phenomenon (Larner 2003) whilst holding with the idea that, following the GFC, we are far from witnessing an era of postneoliberalism (e.g. Peck et al. 2010). Larner (2003, 509) highlights how neoliberalism must be seen as ‘a complex and multiple set of economic, political, and cultural processes with contradictory consequences’. In terms of these ‘contradictory consequences’ at the level of the local and the individual, she warns against the tendency in discourses of neoliberalisation for conflating ‘the creation of particular subject positions ... [from] that of acting subjects.’ (Larner 2003, 511). In thinking about neoliberalisms or, more appropriately, processes of neoliberalisation in this work, we are drawn to Barnett et al (2008) interrogations of how macro-level contexts are unevenly negotiated at the individual level. Building on the work of Rom Harré (1991) and Ian Hacking (2004) in accounting for the performative construction of a sense of self - without rendering that self as grounded in any foundational identity – Barnett et al (2008, 644) set out to trace how ‘coherent narrative selves are sustained by negotiating various

discursive positionings [that] supplements rather than merely augments top-down perspectives on governmentality'. Barnett et al (2008, 644) refer to these agentic individual negotiations and their concomitant positionings as 'lay normativities', and calls for greater attention to how individuals act and interact in such (re)negotiations of self with/in local contexts and macro-level frames of governmentality.

Aligned with these more pluralist understandings of neoliberalising processes, the current study clearly **locates its aim** in the context of a particular geographical region. In this, we are keen to explore how this particular geographical context plays out in younger people's negotiated understandings of their career trajectories. Moreover, we suggest that this study has additional merit in adding to the growing literature that highlights how ideas of 'locality' are differentially significant in such negotiations by younger people (Evans 2016; Pedersen and Gram 2018; Ramutsindela 2013). In doing so, we are cognisant of a particular resurgence of interest in understanding the role of sub-state **regions** (Riding and Jones 2014) in thinking about the lived qualities of space and place. However we also recognise that the concept of region is not a simple one. For example, Riding and Jones (2017, 4) argue that whilst the concept 'region' conjures boundedness, it fails to provide any 'promise of territorial integrity' given that, in a globalised and globalising world, sub-state regions are also relationally networked with wider state and supra-state structures and institutions. Notwithstanding the complexities inherent in the concept, this study takes seriously how, in the context of Aosta Valley and in respect of young people's negotiations with early career transitions, the idea of region might be 'played out everyday [...] and lived from within' (Riding and Jones 2017, xxviii).

Data collection and analysis

The research data, collected between 2015 and 2016, derive from ten semi-structured interviews with young people aged between 24 and 30. In order to frame the context of the research, we firstly conducted an analysis of policy reports and interviews with key informants: local

political representatives, members of trade unions and local voluntary associations, as well as with employees of local careers guidance services. The ten interviewees whose responses are analysed here were selected from a list of potential participants identified through a network of institutions and voluntary associations from the autonomous region of Aosta Valley. We adopted a theoretical and purposive sampling strategy, choosing individuals who were experiencing transitional situations in terms of their employment and professional trajectories. Interviews lasted for 60 minutes on average and were recorded and transcribed verbatim. All the interviews were conducted in Italian and the extracts in this article were translated by the authors. The participants gave written permission to use their data for research purposes; in order to protect their confidentiality, pseudonyms were used.

TABLE 1. Research participants

All but two of the interviewees possess a Bachelor's or Master's Degree and, at the time of the interviews, found themselves in situations of transition in terms of employment: entry into the world of the work, temporary unemployment, job loss or starting a new job. The interview began with a reconstruction of the interviewee's educational background (up to university studies – when these had been undertaken) before going on to focus on subsequent career choices. Following this, we explored the participants' past and present working experiences; the interviewees were invited to reflect on any difficulties experienced, their achievements, turning points and impasses in their career aspirations and trajectories.

Analysis was performed using Discourse Analysis (DA) and was inspired by the frameworks proposed by both Parker (2005, 2013) and Willig (2008). Specifically, the analysis was organized in five stages. The first stage focused on the ways in which discursive objects are constructed within the interviews. Given our research focus, the discursive objects were the different ways in which the participants relate and constitute their work experiences through language. In doing so, we became sensitized to the words and particular forms of language used

by participants because it is through a common language that the **subjects** of discourse are shaped. In the second stage we examined and compared these different ways of constituting themselves, linking them to wider discourses, which make reference to a repertoire of neoliberalizing discourses, and to local socio-political contexts. In the third stage we concentrated on identifying subject positions available which place the person ‘within a structure of rights and duties for those who use that repertoire’ (Davies and Harrè 1999, 35). In other words, subject positionings place the individual workers within a structure of duties and obligations towards themselves and towards those with whom they were in relation. For example, some of our participants positioned themselves as deficient in terms of skills and thus felt pushed towards **further learning** in order to fill the identified ‘gaps’; others positioned themselves as subjects who were experiencing difficulties in entering the labour market because of personal or educational choices made erroneously in the past. Such positioning begins to map a disciplining system, ‘building simultaneously that system of relations of power between the subject and those other subjects who lend form to the social context in which the subject is located’ (Pizzorno, Benozzo and Carey, 2015, 197). Through an analysis of the subjects' positionings, we were able to speculate on the relations of power inscribed in these positionings.

Identifying the constructions of discursive objects and the relative positionings of the subject, was the basis for our fourth stage. This stage ‘explores the relationships between discourse and subjectivity. Discourses make available certain ways-of-seeing the world and certain ways-of-being in the world’ (Willig 2008, 117) and also certain ways-of-feeling in our life/worlds. For example, research participants who positioned themselves as lacking in relational competencies might develop feelings of self-blame owing to poor educational choices made previously. Lastly, in the fifth stage, our attention focused on how the language through which the discourses are expressed evokes other meanings and discourses (contemporary or past). According to Parker (2005) an examination of these connotative aspects of language use

allows the researcher to highlight the ways in which the language used operates ideologically, mobilising structures of power and thus defining what/who is legitimate, who assumes appropriate behaviours, and who, especially in our case, is a good young worker.

Notwithstanding the analytical stages enumerated above, it is important to note that DA does not consist of a rigid and mechanical succession of stages (Parker 2005). Moreover, in keeping with our inductive, qualitative approach (Denzin and Lincoln 2017) we hold that our analysis represents just one of the possible readings of the interview data; it is a matter of interpretation and makes no claim to uniqueness and/or incontrovertibility, but instead, leaves the field open to further and alternative readings.

Analysis and discussion

The data analysis has allowed us to trace three discourses that are redolent of and relevant to neoliberalising contexts. These include: 1) the discourse of the entrepreneurial self; 2) the employability discourse; and 3) the discourse of the responsabilization of the self. These discourses are not discrete: they blend and are entwined in an overall expression of the neoliberalising milieu in which they are practiced and shaped. In addition, we focused on how these discourses of neoliberalisation are negotiated and emplaced through addressing the relation between the participants and their constructions of the regional context.

The discourse of the entrepreneurial self

The discourse of the entrepreneurial self (Peters 2001; Kelly 2006, 2013; Oinonen 2018; Holdsworth 2018) was a common frame of reference across the research participants and is exemplified by four of them: Piero, Silvia, Mirco and Diego.

This discourse aligns with performative conceptualisations of self, i.e. ‘as an ongoing, never ending enterprise’ (Kelly 2017, 65) engaged in processes of configuring the individual ‘as a shape-shifting entrepreneur of the self’ (Boland 2016, 335). By this logic, the self becomes a

commodity in the 'business of life' (Kelly 2006, 18), much like all those other material or service commodities that come to have value as a function of their tradability.

This is most manifestly exemplified by Piero, a freelance geologist who worked occasionally as a salesperson, who said: 'whether I'm selling materials for third parties, or [in the case of] my professional competencies as a geologist... I always have to sell something'. However, the dynamic of selling oneself is not so straightforward; it is entangled with other ideologies attaching to how the self must be managed in its relation to the labour market. Piero expanded on this explicit form of self-selling in the following way:

I decided to develop a career in geology. [...] I decided to give it a go as a freelance [geologist], and logically work isn't falling from the sky, though I have striven to search constantly, but there are just periods when there is nothing happening. And so I say to myself: but hell, did I choose the right studies? Have I chosen the right profession? It is a constant questioning of oneself over past choices, isn't it? (Piero)

Again, Piero, who chose 'enterprise' (in the form of 'freelancing'), evoked the discourse of the entrepreneurial self as he positioned himself as a subject who decided and took the risk of following his passion. Here the (neoliberal) subject sets up in business, with their own skills-base as the primary commodity in entering a capricious labour market. One entailment of such a discourse is that of the entrepreneur who takes personal risk, and who, in moments of difficulty, subsequently questions the choices previously made ('did I choose the right studies?'). Further, it highlights how the discourse of the entrepreneurial implicates the individual in bearing sole responsibility for the risks arising out of those choices made in the past i.e. any current or future failures to be in full employment are attributable to the individual rather than to the vagaries of the labour market (Evans, 2016; Nairn and Higgins, 2007).

Silvia, for her part, told us another, related story. Having gained her Master's Degree in Development, the Environment and International Cooperation and, after having alternated experiences of job insecurity in the world of academia, she currently had a fixed-term contract in a private company. The switch from her previously imagined employment trajectory seems

to be a complex moment as she originally aspired to work in Africa, in a medical capacity in international co-operation: ‘I was naive... my objective was to go and work in Africa. And it was always quite clear, in my mind’. Prompted to relate how she would face possible periods of unemployment in the future, Silvia imagined that she would respond to such moments (which, are almost fated to come, ‘sooner or later they will arrive’) by managing to: ‘reinvent myself into something else and be ready at all times to do anything with a bit more positivity, without letting events get me down’. Here, Silvia went a step further than Piero; she seemed to espouse a logic of the entrepreneurial self which positions the subject as one which needs to continually reinvent oneself.

The responses of Piero and Silvia suggest that subjects are constituted as active, and who, in periods of unemployment, are always ready to *change, and who, concomitantly, need to adapt their previously held professional aspirations*. Diego and Mirco provided support for this contention: faced with difficulties in gaining employment, they constituted themselves as subjects who had to *launch themselves* into activity and *search*, in the hope of coming out on top in the battle to find a job. Diego stated: ‘I started actively first to try to create a job for myself and then to search [...] always searching, but keeping an ear out’. And Mirco continued: ‘there have been relatively brief periods of unemployment. In those moments, the strategy was to look for new stimuli. To do something ... throw oneself into some activity’. The discourse of the entrepreneurial self presupposes an attendant labour market which is configured as a *chaotic competition lacking any clear rules or regulation*. As such, the subject keeps an ‘ear out’ for any opportunity that the market might provide.

The employability discourse

The second discourse traced in the data is that of employability (Boden and Nedeva 2010; Handley 2017; Keune and Serrano 2014; Serrano Pascual and Martín Martín 2017), which was evoked by the interviewees when they reflected on how they might (re)enter the labour market.

This discourse unfolded, in the main, as an expression of honing competencies as a life-long project.

The first trace of the employability discourse unfolded in Mirco's words. Working as a freelance journalist on a national newspaper and having garnered some experience from a number of collaborations and short-term contracts in this field, Mirco expressed a long-standing passion for, and investment in, this occupation, but was then considering abandoning it in order to follow other paths:

I have a good knowledge of the economic and social questions. I have good communication and relational competencies ... also in drafting texts and articles. So those, then, are my competencies ... what I know how to do represents a potential, because, in any event, I see that my CV is beginning to be sufficient, still a bit vague, perhaps, but it's beginning to display strengths ... on which I intend to bet. My weakness is [that] of someone who studies and works in humanities areas and the like. (Mirco)

The employability discourse unfolded in Mirco's emphasis on the importance of competencies as factors of potential and personal marketability (Sandberg and Pinnington 2009; Vallas and Cummins 2015). Mirco positioned himself as a person who possessed some competencies that can be objectified in the form of a CV. Significantly, one's weaknesses - and the requirement of subsequent refinement - are also a key aspect of this process of objectification. Possessing competencies and refining them becomes a credo to succeed in manoeuvring within the logic of labour market competition. Competencies as strengths on which to bet - see also entrepreneurial self - revealed the logic of the wager: the subject *speculates* on their own competencies in the *challenge* of finding a job.

Here, talk about 'competence' evoked an individualising (what is referred to as an 'entity-based') approach in which competencies are viewed as 'individual resources that include motives, traits, skills, bodies of knowledge that are applied during work and that lead [the individual] to performing better or worse' (Gherardi and Strati 2017, 106). However, this view has been widely criticized (Dall'Alba and Sandberg 2006) by approaches that adopt a more

relational and practice-based focus in examining competence. These latter approaches resist conceiving individuals and work contexts as separate entities and, instead, underline the significance of the historical, relational, and contextual nature of competencies. Moreover, and perhaps even more significantly in terms of discourse, the entity-based approach, mentioned above, which conceptualises potential and weaknesses, strictly as a function of the individual, has the propensity to trap the (young) worker in an interminable double-bind: to align with ever-shifting employment contexts, young workers are exhorted to transform/update themselves, and at the same time, see themselves as somehow inadequate or, at least, in deficit.

The discourse of employability is entangled with the idea of lifelong learning. In particular, possessing practical skills seems to be crucial during the study-work transition. Here is how Maria described how she lived this phase of her life:

I realized that I had to change the way I thought. You have to be able to do something concrete. [...] My university studies, from a practical point of view, gave me very few skills. Or rather, none at all. (Maria)

Learning in previous life stages is no longer sufficient and instead becomes a never-ending investment to boost one's chances of finding a job. Lifelong learning connects the economic system and the continual education of the adult subject following initial education (Fleming 2010). Lifelong learning constructs an ideal whereby the acquisition and continual honing of skills is what guarantees the subject greater opportunities of finding employment and, subsequently, allows them to win the fight for the job.

Roberto had worked for five years as a 'handyman' in a youth cultural association, and had achieved a high-school diploma in electronics. He went one step further than Mirco and Maria in talking about the value of learning beyond school:

I know I have come a long way, in one field [electronics], at least. And I know too that, if I were to continue in this field, I would already have a good grounding. Obviously, I wouldn't mind continuing with my development, we might say ... so far ... it has been a challenge and it has worked well too, so I know I could continue this way and get some profit, both economically and at a personal level. (Roberto)

Despite having a ‘good grounding’, competencies (almost solidified, almost materialized) become something that one must never tire of cultivating as a way to ‘get some profit’. Interestingly, for Roberto the economic logic of profit referred not only to the strictly monetary domain, but also to the personal one. Moreover, in this variation of the employability discourse, lifelong learning and training are conceived as investments and bargaining tools within the labour market; somehow, for the subject they mean building endless possibilities (Bansel 2007).

Such commodification of competencies is consistent with a view of human labour as a form of capital to be traded: ‘a person’s potential to learn things becomes something measurable in terms of returns on investment, and someone’s labour a quantifiable thing that can be priced, bought on the labour market’ (Holborow 2012, 101). This concept of human capital is what ties together knowledge and experience: both become economic categories which are legible in that they are quantifiable and thus capable of being functional within the market by increasing productivity (Perelman 2011).

The discourse of the responsabilization of the self

The third discourse associated with neoliberalism is that of the responsabilization of the self. It reflects the growing psychologization of the employment situation which assumes that employment precarity and/or un(der)employment can be read as a result of personal deficits (Serrano Pascual and Martin Martin 2017).

Within the scope of the current analysis one of the most significant and potential consequences of this discourse is self-blame (Walkerdine 2006) whereby the individual is made to feel culpable for any lack of success in achieving an expected and acceptable work trajectory through a critical examination of their previous educational and career choices (Bansel 2007). Within this discourse, one’s professional path is something which must be ‘created’; it is often

hard to discern, is not supplied a priori, and, as such, is something that the subject must constantly strive to divine and actively seek, exclusively through their own effort.

The transition from the welfare state to the enabling state (Walkerdine and Bansel 2009) leads individuals to assume responsibility for making themselves employable and for identifying opportunities for their own development and success in securing employment. Giorgio related that: ‘...work, as I see it, is fundamental and if you can't get a job it is because you haven't looked hard enough for it’. Should the individual not find employment, then responsibility for that lack is directly and singularly attributable to their own efforts. This failure to succeed applies not only to the pursuit of employment but is also at play in retrospectively reflecting on previous academic choices. Maria described her university experience thus:

Once I had graduated from Ca' Foscari in Venice, I was very disoriented. So then I made another bad choice [emphasizes]. At that point I said to myself: well, ‘this Ca' Foscari, it's got a great reputation and all’... I spoke with people enthusiastic at the idea: yes, go, it's great, they teach you well and everything... I said: all right, let's give it a go. I went: but, in the end, even there, things had changed [for the worse because of institutional cuts], ... I could have seen it before. (Maria)

Maria blamed herself (‘I made another bad choice ... I could have seen it before’). The mistake, although rationalised through a logic of institutional cuts, is attributed also to her. In addition, she ascribed her feeling of disorientation to her own ‘bad’ choices: she claimed that she ought to have been able to better predict whether and how her University experience would have prepared her for employment. And, if there are no employment prospects on the horizon following academic study, the risk is that of feeling bewildered as described by Silvia:

Prospects, I couldn't see any, that is, I couldn't find any, and it wasn't a pleasant time. I just felt psychologically despondent ... because, apart from the weight you may represent for your family, it's a weight on you too, you don't feel satisfied. (Silvia)

The ‘weight’ felt due to the dependency on family is also described as a personal frustration. Perhaps, here the frustration arises because the (neoliberal) subject is required to re-evaluate choices from the past which, although made in good faith then, are now made to seem

regrettable as they no longer fit with the current demands of the labour market. Simultaneously, this same subject is exhorted to rise above such dissonances and set out anew. This dynamic of subjectification seems strikingly similar to that which occurs in the guilt-sin/atonement-redemption dialectic. For Gianni, the central issue is that such dependency generated feelings of inferiority: ‘... so always indebted; always feeling indebted to someone’.

The risk inherent in these discursive formations and practices is that they position the un(der)employed subject as a failure. Doing nothing becomes a nightmare, which translates into constant activity in the attempt to invent new work opportunities for oneself and thus to legitimize a sense of being. [Failing to engage in such constant activity is to increase the risk of becoming a non-subject.](#) According to Walkerdine (2006, 16), ‘neoliberal work practices demand a constant reworking of oneself and ... this means the continual crossing and re-crossing of an anxious border’. A possible outcome of un(der)employment then, is an abandoning of oneself to inaction and inactivity and this, in turn, becomes ‘a nightmare’ that demands constant vigilance and management:

Being an unemployed person is a nightmare. In fact, unlike other people rather than staying at home without doing anything and all that, I am prepared to do jobs ... which, perhaps, have nothing to do with my educational background. I don't know, just to get out of that state of apathy and inertia. [...] Then you find yourself inventing jobs a bit ... to break out of the inertia. That's the problem really. It's terrible. (Maria)

Un(der)employment is not merely a temporary working condition, it is also imbricated in how the individual sees both themselves and others. When Maria used the expression ‘being an unemployed person’, she identified herself in opposition to those others who might remain unproductive and incapable of doing anything ‘in practical terms’, and thus live in a state of apathy and inertia. In effect, she reified and reinforced the position of being unemployed as a position of (non) being, one that is labelled [as the product of having scant personal abilities, and/or of having insufficient commitment and willingness to succeed \(Walkerdine, 2006\).](#) For Maria, the ultimate threat, i.e. the nightmare of not working, led her to abandon those

aspirations in which she invested her efforts during her education. Here, the subject seemed to assert that it is better to sacrifice one's professional aspirations, to do something, anything, so as not to succumb to the status of non-being inherent in un(der)employment.

Putting discourses of neoliberalisation in their place: the relation between young people and the regional context

In this section we show how the three discourses of neoliberalisation traced in this data-set and set out above do not represent the whole story; that, for these younger workers, an awareness of such neoliberalising forces are entangled with and negotiated from within the regional context. In particular, the section illustrates the relation between the participants and the locality which they inhabit and emphasises how they negotiate their professional trajectories and career aspirations in the specific context of the Valley. In fact, the Valley seems to have particular meanings for young people and plays an important role in constructions of their work-based experiences and future career imaginings. Here, identifications with the Valley are played out in two intertwined dialectics: [temporality and spatiality](#).

The first is a dialectic between 'before' and 'after': in several participant's narratives, Aosta Valley is depicted as being no longer a 'happy island' like it had been previously.

I think that - until a few years ago - [the Aosta Valley] was a positive reality, I mean even from the point of view of the wage rates...let's say that I have always found well-paid jobs. ... So, really, the Aosta Valley is no longer a happy island. ... For example, if in the past, some university colleagues who worked in Turin used to say: 'well, I have to return to the Valley, because at least it is possible to find a job there'. Now I know people saying that there is nothing in Aosta and that it is necessary to go to Milan or to Turin, because they are bigger cities and there are more opportunities. (Maria)

In the recent past, job opportunities and wage rates were higher in the Valley than in other Italian regions. This was due both to the better global economic situation and was augmented by the better economic and financial conditions provided by the Region's autonomy (Vesan 2012). For several participants, a general sense of crisis for the region was perceived and

expressed as an outcome of the blend of GFC effects and several pre-existent structural problems inherent to the region. [Here, the economic dimension of the crisis is foregrounded:](#)

In the Aosta Valley, graduate people do not have a lot of expectations. ... The job offer is very low. There are no opportunities for people with a Degree. Maybe this is the reason why a few people get a degree in the region. This is the idea: an economy in complete crisis with a very high rate of unemployment, that historically has never been that high. Some occupational bedrocks are falling down. ... Investments have not been made in order to support the local economy. I mean, having a lot of resources has been a good thing because the local welfare has always been ahead of the others. ... But there has not been a proper industrial policy in the Aosta Valley. (Mirco)

This sense of local crisis seems to blend with endemic critical attitudes towards the local economy of the region, such as the poor job offer for graduates and the low propensity to invest. [The GFC has also had socio-economic impact at the regional level.](#) In fact, the ‘happy island’ of the past seemed to be related with the protection provided by the stronger welfare state infrastructure as part of the region’s autonomy:

It seems to me that the Aosta Valley is having more difficulties now than four years ago. Because of the crisis or because of the fact that the Region is not able anymore to protect its inhabitants as in the past. A few years ago, the Region was more protective: from an economic point of view, there were great possibilities for the inhabitants of the Valley to be less worried [about their job] in comparison to other people living in other Italian regions. (Giorgio)

The second dialectic is related to space: the ‘inside/outside’ dialectic. Consistent with the idea of place identity (Dixon and Durrheim 2004; Prince 2014), being part of Aosta Valley entails a particular sense of ‘insiderness’ and an affective relationship with the locality (Evans 2016; Pedersen and Gram 2018). The context outside the region is seen as the place of market struggle, governed by harsh competition in order to find high-skilled jobs. On the other hand, Aosta Valley (the ‘inside’) is seen as a protected space, closed but capable somehow of ‘buffering’ global market forces both at the macro, socio-economic level, and at the individual level of personal identity:

I have always lived Aosta as a claustrophobic reality, like you wither if you keep living here. I lived outside and I enjoyed these experiences; but, I missed the Valley whenever I was outside. And I wanted to go back. (Maria)

Do not touch the Patois [a local dialect], do not touch my traditions such as the Carnival or others [she laughs]. To be sincere, lately I have been thinking ... well, it is like I would like to go outside, but I am not brave enough. It is weird. (Lucia).

On the one hand, interviewees felt a sense of closure and ‘claustrophobia’; on the other, they felt protected within the Valley. An ambivalence seemed to exist: going out scares, but it is, at the same time, considered exciting and challenging. The ‘inside’ was seen as a comfortable reality, capable of providing protection. On the ‘outside’, the market is wilder but stimulating; the inside is protected but claustrophobic. As a result, these young people appeared to feel both excited and scared.

We suggest that these dialectics, as part of the younger workers’ narratives, are set in dialogue with discourses of neoliberalisation in this particular region. Further, we suggest that such dialogue mediates the ways by which global socio-economic and cultural dynamics [challenge the boundedness of the Valley for the young people living inside](#).

Interestingly, some participants seemed to be worried by the ‘outside’ and they felt they were not prepared and skilled enough to face it:

If you go outside the Valley d’Aosta there's much more competition, so the labour market is much more aggressive. You have to be a bit [smiles] ... to leap in and be able to sell yourself to employers. In the sense that outside, the situations in, I don't know, in Milan, Turin, the big cities it's a fight [of] each against the other. Outside there are competencies superior than ours. ... I would like to go outside the Valley, but I am aware of the fact that I do not have the suitable competencies. (Gianni)

So, the labour market in the Valley is considered less aggressive in part because, in the search for employment, the local individual could take advantage of their social capital (families, friends, acquaintances and so on). Concomitantly, the lower level of competition reduced the importance of competencies, as key in finding a job. In a ‘truly’ competitive market, like that

of a large city, it was necessary to be better qualified, have greater competencies in order to come out on top. In conclusion, young people used a double dialectic to narrate their relation with the Aosta Valley: before/after and inside/outside. Before and inside somehow represented (decreasing) protection by the autonomous Region, whereas after and outside somehow represented the encroachment of global market forces.

Conclusions

Drawing from a Foucauldian approach, this study traces the discursive variations of young people living in the autonomous region of Aosta Valley through investigating narratives of their employment trajectories' in the context of post GFC. On the one hand, it seems that three discourses of neoliberalisation – the discourses of the entrepreneurial self, employability and self-responsibilization - act on and dictate to young people the sort of workers they should be in order to live in a precarious neoliberalised labour market. On the other hand, we also trace how these younger workers negotiate their positionings with recourse to a sense of their regional locality. This localisation of neo-liberalisation is consonant with the idea that 'applications and interpretations of neoliberal principles can take different forms' even within national boundaries (MacLeavy 2014). These readings highlight the idea that neoliberalism is far from the monolithic principle more usually and uncritically represented in the literature (Larner 2003); rather, processes of neoliberalisation are manifold and negotiated in ways that do not necessarily conform to top-down imperatives (Barnett et al., 2008).

The study contributes to the existing literature by providing a possible understanding of how younger people's narratives rely on complex negotiations between global issues and local identities: the broader socio-economic dimensions and the local dimensions seem to entangle, giving birth to different subjects' positioning in a particular area such as Aosta Valley. Our analysis supports the idea that locality and [one's relation with the territory in which one lives makes more complex the younger people's negotiations of their subjectivity](#) vis-à-vis the wider

socio-economic condition. In fact, the local setting plays a pivotal role in framing young people's future professional aspirations (Evans 2016): this is consistent with the idea of place as having an active role in people's everyday social world (Pedersen and Gram 2018). As such, place is crucial in the process of identity construction and it is linked to young people's sociocultural and career expectations.

The discursive variations we traced seem consistent with a growing awareness that region is inevitably networked in a globalised world, as it is to some extent open to external influence and ideas. However, these dimensions are lived 'from within' (Riding and Jones 2017) and young people strive to somehow 'craft' these influences in creating their discourses and repertoires (Nairn and Higgins 2007).

In the end, these people do not act in a sort of social vacuum: their affective relations (Evans 2016) with the Valley, along with its political, economic and socio-cultural features, affects their attempts at negotiating their aspirations and in building a professional career. Thus, young people actively try to negotiate their career aspirations and to 'craft' themselves within the boundaries of this entanglement of global and local issues. Although the current study focusses on this particular region, we argue that, in line with a growing literature paying attention to the role of place in how young workers view and construct their career trajectories, these findings have direct relevance for understanding how young people are emplaced when negotiating what seem like didactic, top-down imperatives related to becoming the ideal worker.

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