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Youth Aspirations Towards the Future: Agency, Strategy and Life Choices in Different Structural Contexts

Valeria Pandolfini, Borislava Petkova,
and Thomas Verlage

4.1 Introduction

Lifelong learning (LLL) policies for young adults figure centre stage in the economic and social policy agendas of the European Union as they simultaneously aim at economic growth and social inclusion. In achieving these common goals, these policies impact young people's life courses

Although the chapter is the result of the collaboration of the three authors, Valeria Pandolfini has written Sects 4.1., 4.2.2., 4.4.; Borislava Petkova has written Sect. 4.2.3; Thomas Verlage has written Sects 4.2., 4.2.1. Sect. 4.3. was written by the three authors.

V. Pandolfini (✉)

Department of Educational Sciences, University of Genoa, Genova, Italy
e-mail: valeria.pandolfini@unige.it

B. Petkova

University of Plovdiv, Plovdiv, Bulgaria

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substantially, in particular during the transition from education to work. They also interact with ongoing changes such as processes of life course de-standardization, which make young adults' life-planning more complex and less predictable than in the past (Shanahan et al., 2016). Against this background, young people's capacity to cope with these challenges and their ability to actively navigate obstacles and proactively search for courses of action are essential for policies to be able to support young people along their life courses.

Through the analysis of three case studies which build on the intersection between three young adults' trajectories and three LLL policies in different contexts, this chapter aims to explore how participation in LLL policies can contribute (or not) to supporting young people's transitions in relation to their agentic capacity and expectations. In doing so, we discuss the ways and the extent to which contextual conditions, institutional settings, and opportunity structures contribute to framing the configuration of possibilities and constraints within which young people unfold their life paths.

A key perspective for the analysis is the notion of youth capabilities (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000; Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2021), which can be thought of as the scope of possibilities that a person can effectively achieve in a given situation and time to develop his/her life courses, considering the structures of opportunities and constraints. The capability approach is considered appropriate for analysing the interrelationship between structure and agency, allowing exploration of "the substantive freedoms to choose the life one has reason to value" (Sen, 1999, p. 74) and how the heterogeneity of the local landscapes in which LLL policies unfold impacts differently on their beneficiaries' biographies.

In this framework, youth aspirations are conceived as "navigational capacities" (Appadurai, 2004, p. 69), that is, a set of socio-emotional (as in not having one's emotional development blighted by fear and anxiety, engaging in various forms of social interaction) and material capabilities

(such as cash, income, assets, training programmes provided via school or the like) required for young people to navigate in their life course, coping with adversities to achieve the best possible outcomes given their environments. Navigational capacities are socially constrained but are influenced by culture and social conditions; everyone aspires to something, but circumstances can enhance or diminish the capacity to navigate from where we are to where we would like to be. This approach is assumed to capture a more nuanced view of the intersection between material and social embeddedness and individual agency. Indeed, the “capacity to aspire” (Appadurai, 2004) is influenced both by opportunity structures and by individual preferences and depends on the existing capability set of a person; it is strongly context-related and, simultaneously, may be nurtured or stunted through relations with others, including peers, societal institutions, family and life experience, shaped by opportunities and networks. Hence, agency becomes central, as the ability to pursue goals that one values requires both agency and possibilities (Moensted, 2020).

Based on these assumptions, the chapter explores how different young adults’ life plans were pursued (also) with participation in LLL policies in Germany, Italy and Bulgaria. For each country, one young adult’s biography is analysed, putting the paths of the young people into relation within the LLL policy they accessed with their previous educational and professional trajectories, as well as with their aspirations, self-representations, and the opportunity structures characterizing their local contexts. Research questions included how, and to what extent, individual resources and motivations, institutional settings and opportunity structures determine one’s degree of freedom of choice in exercising agency, which affects a person’s capability set. This means exploring a few broad questions: In which ways do different youth strategies and agency interact with diverse socio-economic contexts and with varied opportunity structures? What obstacles stand in the way of young adults’ plans? What actual freedom of choice do they have? What real opportunities do LLL measures open up for young adults?

In the sections that follow, we first discuss the criteria for selection of the three biographies of young adults participating in LLL policies in Germany, Italy and Bulgaria and present the main features of the different contexts. This is followed by the presentation of the three cases. Next,

the German, Italian and Bulgarian cases are compared, relying on Bartlett and Vavrus' (2017) comparative case studies approach, using three axes (horizontal, vertical and transversal). The cases are explored and compared, highlighting similarities and differences among the young people's trajectories before and after their participation in the LLL measure they accessed, taking into account individual aspirations and resources as well as structures of opportunities and constraints on developing their life courses. The chapter closes with a discussion of the possibilities of better capturing the complex relationship between structural limits, possibilities and subjective aspirations in shaping individuals' choices and actions within specific opportunity structures.

4.2 Navigating Obstacles and Proactive Searching: Youth Coping Strategies in Different Opportunity Structures

The young people's biographies selected in each country are here understood as a pivotal element for the construction of case studies aimed at contextualizing the intersection between life courses and LLL policies. By analysing the case studies, we explore how different biographical trajectories are shaped by specific LLL measures, their institutional arrangements and the prevailing discourses underlying such policies. These dimensions are put into relation with the macro features of the different contexts and welfare (Esping-Andersen, 1990) and transition regimes (Walther, 2006) characterizing their countries. This means accounting for the embedding of the specific case in its context, within different structural, cultural and policy frameworks.

More specifically, the reasons for the construction of the cases rely on the different discursive and institutional opportunity structures available in each context, in order to show how LLL policies interact with specific economic and socio-cultural arrangements, thereby producing specific impacts on the opportunities and constraints faced by young people when dealing with the difficult task of managing their biographies. In constructing the cases, particular attention was also given to contrasting

features such as different levels of qualification among young people and different subjective meanings attached to the participation in LLL policies, proactively searching for different amounts of resources available for supporting life-planning. Indeed, the three analysed cases are characterized by specific features that could be depicted, continuing the navigational metaphor (Appadurai, 2004) with different labels helping us to introduce them.

The German case study is characterized by a very rigid institutional opportunity structure and a rather productive local labour market that gives young people opportunities but does not allow them to deviate from the paths devised by institutions for unfolding their school-work transitions. In the case of Paul, the protagonist of the story, it means that his qualification as a cook, a profession which he cannot relate to, ends up limiting his scope of action, as it narrows the institutional vision of his profile down to specific skills he does not desire to put into practice. The German case could be labelled as “being on the track though with aspirations to deviate”: the case is about finding strategies to pursue a more fulfilling professional life, thus overcoming the rigidity of the opportunity structure characterizing the context.

The Italian case study shows a very “blurred” institutional opportunity structure: it is characterized by scarcity of opportunities and serious uncertainty. This structurally adverse situation is contradicted by a prevailing rhetoric on youths’ passivity and their unwillingness to take on responsibilities. Young people seem to be free to choose among different paths, especially when they come from families with higher socio-economic status, but, actually, there are very few job opportunities, even for higher-skilled people. The biography of Maria could be labelled as “being in the mist, struggling to find a direction, though well equipped”: she is theoretically well equipped (in terms of educational qualifications and skills) to go through the mist, but still, it is not sufficient for her to find the direction to reach her goal, within a context which is not very productive in terms of opportunities. She tries to “surf” contingencies which are averse to her, to tackle systemic contradictions (like job supply and demand mismatch) with biographical solutions (training and job experiences) in order to pursue her life projects and expectations.

In the Bulgarian case study, the specific discursive and institutional opportunity structures characterizing the local context frame the biography of Katya, a young woman from an ethnic minority: the main issue that she has to cope with is ethnic stigmatization and the challenge of dealing with life alone. In terms of institutional opportunity structures, this means tackling the risk of not being able to stabilize the position in the labour market. The biography of Katya could be labelled as “being in the loop and finding oneself at the starting point, despite having been active”: to be more competitive, she accessed a number of LLL policies as a way to try to improve her skills, to develop her agency, but at some point, she felt trapped in the circle of further education and qualifications, that is, the loop of education-training-work without achieving a fulfilling place in the labour market.

Hereafter, before the three young people’s biographies are presented and discussed, a brief description of the three different landscapes is introduced, referring to the following dimensions: the welfare and transition regimes characterizing the countries; the main socio-economic features at national and local/regional levels, particularly focused on the young adults’ living conditions; the policy related to the cases, presenting the main problem on which the policy aims to act, the means used to solve it and the expected results.

4.2.1 A Case Study in Germany: Being on Track Though with Aspirations to Deviate

Germany can be described as an employment-centred, highly institutionalized transition regime (Walther, 2006). It is characterized by the coupling of a selective school system and a standardized vocational training system. This is accompanied by a split into a core of normal employment relationships and a precarious periphery. Since the early 2000s, Germany has also adopted a more intensive activating approach to labour market policy. The support services of the Job Centre are oriented towards the guiding principle of “encourage and challenge”. Among other things, this means that people who have not paid unemployment insurance for a sufficiently long time, which affects young people in particular, must accept

any “reasonable” employment otherwise their social benefits will be cut; furthermore, especially young people under 25 will have all their social benefits cancelled. In the event of a repeat offence, their rent is even cancelled.¹ For some years now, a shortage of skilled workers has been identified and discussed as a central problem in the German labour market. Therefore, the activation of potential workers is gaining importance. Growing up in a specific region can make it easier to create “successful” life projects or hinder it. Therefore, a look at the local level is necessary. The functional region² Rhein-Main and especially its centre Frankfurt am Main is an economically successful region with a thriving labour market (Schauffler et al., 2017) and a comprehensive and institutionally embedded support system typical for Germany, consisting of education, labour market and social and youth policies that share the overall orientation towards employability and independence through standard employment (Verlage et al., 2017). Overall, the picture that emerges is one of a thoroughly institutionalized structure geared towards a prosperous labour market, access to which is flanked by funding opportunities as long as individuals follow the institutionally prescribed and pre-structured tracks.

The policy at the core of the German case (DE_P1³) is commissioned by the city of Frankfurt and the Job Centre. The background of this measure is the finding that young people, who depend on social benefits, often have multiple problems simultaneously. The plurality of the problems can prevent them from searching for a job or a VET place which makes it impossible for them to get into the labour market. For this target group, the policy offers an individual tailor-made support. Possible interventions can be individual case work for coping with the everyday life, competence training, guidance, clarification of their life situation, assistance measures, social-pedagogical support at the transition into vocational training, further education or development of personal and professional perspectives.

This is the story of Paul, a young man who has been participating in DE_P1 for over a year at the time of the interview. Paul describes his childhood as dominated by his mother, who took little interest in caring for him. He describes her as destructive and that she deliberately kept him small and stupid. At his mother’s insistence, he began training as a cook, a profession that he has nothing good to say about.

Up to this point, the narrative of his life is marked by negative experiences with people he experiences as authority figures who prevent him from developing freely and use him for their own interests. In the family, at school and at work, he experiences how his opportunities for action are massively restricted. Nevertheless, his great dissatisfaction and desire for change already indicate his potential to aspire.

He moved to Frankfurt with his girlfriend and broke with his family completely. Having no job, he was dependent on the Job Centre. For the Job Centre, he proves to be a difficult client: a cook who doesn't want to be a cook, in an environment where cooks are in demand and any reasonable job must be accepted. Since he is forced to apply as a cook, he develops a variety of strategies to retain his capacity to act and to make the Job Centre's efforts come to nothing, like sending applications late, without a photo or even deliberately poorly written or simply telling the truth in job interviews, that he only applied because the Job Centre would cut off his money—behaviour that led to considerable disputes with the programme office. Here we see Paul as a young man, off the beaten track, in conflict with institutions, trying to overcome his negative past and in search of a career perspective that makes sense to him.

After more than half a year and several caseworkers at the Job Centre, he opened up to a “fully nice” employee, who simply asked him what was wrong, why the jobs were not working out. She recommended the DE_P1 policy to him, where to start, appointments with a psychologist were organized together with him; to follow, tailor-made individual support was implemented. His programme finally looked like this: they met twice a week—one appointment where Paul could ask questions and a second appointment where practical help was given. Asking questions was important to Paul, “because my mother, my family, NEVER used to answer my questions”.

The second appointment in the week was for practical help in life. The contact person explained and practised with him how to use public transport in a big city, how to approach people, how to sell his old car and much more. Basically, Paul especially appreciated the fact that finally someone was there to listen to him. They also worked together on a professional perspective. He had always known that he did not want to be a cook. Through the joint discussions, Paul's own ideas of a satisfying

professional activity could be worked out. He emphasizes that although he cannot yet name the specific goal, he already knows the direction, which is working in the field of social work. Together they have found a school where he can continue on this path. Through the policy, Paul finds his way back to an institutional track that matches his goals.

4.2.2 A Case Study in Italy: Being in the Mist, Struggling to Find a Direction, Though Well Equipped

Italy has the main characteristics of the “conservative-corporatist” welfare state model identified by Esping-Andersen (1990). This is characterized by poor and fragmented social services, a highly unequal social structure and a heavy reliance on the family production of “private” welfare. Recently, Italy has been included in the group of “emerging activation regimes”, in which the weight of passive labour market policies and the role of family services remain significant, notwithstanding the recent reinforcement of activation policies (Heidenreich & Aurich-Berheide, 2014). With regard to the transitions of young people into employment, Italy can be described as a “sub-protective” transition regime (Walther, 2006). As they are not entitled to any kind of social benefits, young adults depend to a large extent on their families who are referred to as “social security cushion” for the socio-political vacuum. Indeed, due to a lack of reliable training pathways into the labour market, transitions often imply a waiting phase until one’s mid-thirties with unequal outcomes, often characterized by several job precariousness experiences.

In this scenario, the Italian Youth Guarantee (YG) Implementation Plan launched a reform to foster active labour market policies. Here we will focus on a measure (IT_P1) integrated within the regional YG scheme in the Genoa functional region addressed to young people up to 29 years of age. The main perception of the problem starts from the acknowledgement of the difficulties faced by high qualified young adults in a context characterized by a “static” labour market (Palumbo et al., 2017), significant skills mismatch, mainly due to an excess of higher-educated graduates in relation to job opportunities, and a high level of

youth unemployment. This trend leads to an over-qualification in the working population in Genoa FR (similar to what has happened at the national level). The underlying success criteria consist of smoothening labour market integration for the participants, and the development of soft skills through six-month traineeships with a monthly reimbursement hosted by several third sector organizations, mainly in the educational, cultural and social fields.

Maria is a 28-year-old Italian graduate, living in Genoa. At school, she always had excellent learning outcomes, thanks to her family that stimulated her to learn out of school and to her positive relationship with teachers, so that she had developed the wish to attend university since she was a child. After finishing school, she enrolled in a political science degree course, following the recommendation of a teacher. After completing the three-year degree, she got a master's degree in development cooperation. Before that, she had a very difficult year, due to burnout syndrome; she postponed her master's degree and ended a long relationship. This period allowed her to focus on her life plan and aspirations for the future.

During the master's degree, Maria did an internship as a volunteer at an international humanitarian organization: she wanted to insert practical experiences in her curriculum. At the same time, she was attending a post-graduate course in human rights at the University of Genoa, while doing various precarious jobs to earn some money. After completing her master's, she started as a volunteer at a Civic Service organization in the educational field. The following year, she entered the Youth Guarantee and accessed the IT_P1 measure integrated within its scheme. After a fixed-term contract, she was permanently hired by the organization hosting her traineeship. Her duty was to teach courses on education for active citizenship addressed to pupils at primary schools. She was happy and she was appreciated by teachers, pupils and their families, but she did not feel fully satisfied. Hence, she took a second master's degree in the management of non-profit organizations, which allowed her to acquire many new skills; she asked her employers to take advantage of these new skills, permitting her to change her usual job duties, but they refused. Thus, she resigned: "it wasn't what I wanted to do [...] it wasn't my aspiration". Maria defined herself as being "proud to have resigned from a permanent

job contract”; this confirms her tenacity in reaching her aims, together with a strong awareness of her abilities, given the scarcity of structural opportunities and severe uncertainty in the local context. This structurally adverse situation contrasts with a public discourse permeated by stereotypes on Italian youth as unresponsive to sacrifices and commitment (Cuzzocrea et al., 2020), framing the discursive opportunity structure in the Italian context.

The biography of Maria shows how she tried to get away from the accusation of not being proactive through further investments in her training path, underlying her resourcefulness and how she tries to “surf” contingencies averse to her. Maria clearly showed the will to optimize the skills acquired during long years of studies to carry out the desired professional project and to achieve self-realization in her job. This will is further confirmed by her decision to quit the permanent job contract, which is very unusual in the Italian context, considering the problems related to the widespread precariousness of the local labour market in general and specifically referring to young people. The resources and “protected” relations she can count on must surely have affected this choice, since the important economic and emotional support by her family allowed her to complete university studies and to wait for job opportunities which fit her expectations, as well as to quit an unfulfilling permanent job.

The participation in the IT_P1 measure has represented a chance to broaden her networks in relation to a heretofore unknown context, the third sector, allowing her to strengthen her relational and soft skills, as well as acquiring greater self-acknowledgement of their aspirations and potential.

At the time of the interview, Maria was working with an apprenticeship contract at an association of non-profit social enterprises dealing with social innovation start-ups. She defines herself as “a young woman who is satisfied with herself”.

4.2.3 A Case Study in Bulgaria: Being in the Loop and Finding Oneself at the Starting Point, Despite Having Been Active

Bulgaria is a post-socialist Eastern European country where the liberal or employment-oriented transition structures have entered into specific mixed relationships with the socialist legacy (Walther, 2006). Labour market integration of young people at all educational levels in the past three decades is a huge challenge: there is a lack of fit between the skills and the expectations of the economy, low pay for labour and the emigration of young, qualified people (Milenkova & Kovacheva, 2020). The problem of shortage of skilled young workers has become apparent, the emigration flows to Europe have completely exposed the Bulgarian labour market and youth unemployment and NEET rates are high. These trends are visible in Plovdiv FR and youth unemployment is one of the tangible problems in the formation of the urban economy. Being a young adult from an ethnic minority in Plovdiv means building a life project with fewer resources. Young people from Roma and Turkish ethnic minorities usually faced various forms of stigmatization, high levels of poverty, difficult economic and social living conditions, a large percentage of drop-out of the formal education system and early marriages among Roma girls (12–13 years of age). Due to the lack of education and family support, access to the labour market establishment through the standard channels is extremely difficult and often unattainable for the young people from ethnic minorities.

In 2007, Bulgaria joined the EU; various European youth employment LLL schemes have gradually emerged, aiming at smoother school-work transition, seeking an activating approach to the young adults. One of the most famous European LLL schemes, centrally controlled and implemented locally, is the Youth Guarantee Programme (YG) with few LLL subprograms. The main goal is activation of potential workers, by encouraging young people to reach their full potential and to seek suitable positions in the labour market.

In Plovdiv FR, the YG programme is provided by the Plovdiv Employment Agencies. The LLL policies' local goal is to overcome the

rejection of young adults up to 29 years of age from different social groups and ethnic minorities by providing work placements up to six months. During this period, the young person works in a real work environment and receives a monthly salary covered by the LLL policies. The expected outcome is that young people will gain the necessary skills and after the end of the programme, they could be employed on a permanent contract with the same employer.

Katya is a 26-year-old woman from one of the Bulgarian minorities who has accessed diverse YG measures. She completed higher education, settled permanently and worked in Plovdiv. She has a bachelor's and two master's degrees. She struggled to establish herself in the labour market, but she was trapped in the LLL policies' loop—between 2013 and 2015, she has participated in three YG subprograms. Instead of the expected positive effect, the constant participation in LLL policies doomed Katya to a series of failures. She emerges more disappointed—having acquired new knowledge and skills, but not able to find a permanent job or being satisfied with the salary. Gradually, the horizon of Katya's aspirations extended and becomes more unattainable.

Katya was born and raised in a small, Muslim, mountain town with religious and traditional views on life. She described her childhood as good in a family of four and had a very strong relation with her twin sister. Their father insisted that higher education was not necessary for girls, but the mother strongly encouraged the twins to continue their education in Plovdiv. Katya was aware that as a representative of an ethnic minority, she had to put a lot of effort, persistent preparation and a serious attitude towards the educational process. Only in this way could she gain the in-depth knowledge and skills she needed for professional and personal establishment in Plovdiv.

During the bachelor's programme, Katya began planning her professional future and she got information about LLL policies integrated in the YG scheme. Her first attempt to get a job through LLL policies was unsuccessful. This led her to serious disappointments and doubts about her own abilities, but she did not give up. She got her first master's degree. Soon after that, Katya got her first job as a junior expert in the Plovdiv Employment Agency under the LLL policy. After the end of the period of the programme,

she returned to the starting position—a young unemployed woman from an ethnic minority, trying to establish herself in the big city.

Soon, Katya applied for another LLL policy, she was approved and worked in an insurance company. At the end of the programme, she got a permanent position in the same company with a permanent salary, and she fulfilled the LLL policy's main goal. Two months later, she left due to verbal aggression and psychological harassment at the office.

Katya made her next attempt to apply in YG scheme. She was selected for the third LLL policy and started in another insurance company. At the end of the programme, she got a permanent position in the company, but her salary was seriously reduced, and she left. The analysis of Katya's life path at that stage shows she felt lost being a "long-lasting LLL client" and it could entail negative effects on the possibilities of getting a suitable professional career.

Then Katya got a job in a private factory. She decided to focus on further qualification and gained a second master's degree and qualifications from two IT courses. Meanwhile she took out a bank loan and bought an apartment. This makes her finally settled and planned her life and career in Plovdiv.

Surprisingly, her university lecturer offered her a job in an NGO. She was convinced that the efforts she showed during the bachelor educational process was the reason he called her. Katya took the job, but she was already burned out as a result of several LLL policies participations, university degrees, courses and job changes. When she rethinks her life so far, she underlines her disappointment as a result of a combination of circumstances: her ethnic origin, the individual experience of adapting to the changing needs of the labour market, the constant need to cope on her own without the daily support of her family and her limited financial resources.

Katya's case reveals many difficulties that young people in Bulgaria have to deal with and illustrates the complicated life paths of young adults from ethnic minorities who usually rely only on their own abilities to build their own life project and to pursue their own aspirations. LLL policies participation does not always lead to the achievement the main goals of the LLL policy. Young people often are trapped in the loop of education-training-work-education-training-work, does not lead them to

a stable outline of the future. In other words, what is initially perceived as an opportunity to emancipate from disadvantage paradoxically turns out as a further constraint.

4.3 Comparative Analysis

In this section, we analyse the stories of Maria, Katya and Paul, highlighting similarities and differences concerning individual aspirations and resources as well as the structures of opportunities and the constraints they meet. In doing so, we adopt Bartlett and Vavrus' (2017) comparative case studies approach that follows the multi-scalar perspective where people, place, space, and time are tightly linked. This approach makes the three-dimension measurement through three types of axes more visible: the horizontal axis that compares how similar policies unfold in distinct locations; the vertical axis that pays attention to and across policies' scales; and the transversal axis that tracks the processes through time. These three axes have different contextual and contrasting features such as the different levels of qualification, the different young people's subjective meanings attached to the participation in LLL policies, and the diverse resources available for supporting life-planning.

The main factors shaping the three young people's professional paths refer, on the one hand, to the social, economic and political condition of their contexts; on the other hand, young people's decisions are often influenced by "significant others", social and symbolic capital in family context and formal education. What they have in common is that they are young people who seek their fulfilment both personally and professionally, applying the participation to LLL policies as a support to their "biographical work" (Chamberlayne et al., 2000), although with different approaches.

The horizontal axis of comparison highlights the differences in the local labour market in the three countries and the way it accepts (or segregates) educated young people. Paul deals with a flourishing labour market in the Rhein-Main FR in Germany, where the assumed shortage of skilled workers orients labour policies mostly towards the activation of unused workforce, like young people with low or no educational

qualifications. Maria faces a labour market in Genoa FR that is unable to absorb many highly qualified young people and where the most resourceful ones often try to deal with this structural problem through further individual training. These trends characterize generally the Italian context, but some of them are even more evident at the local level in Genoa, given the higher local youth unemployment rate and the higher average age of workers occupying relevant job positions. And a labour market often segregated along ethnic and class lines with low wage levels is approached by Katya in Bulgaria. It is particularly true for Plovdiv FR, where youth unemployment is one of the main problems, particularly for youths from ethnic minorities, who have to deal with stigmatization and difficult economic and social living conditions.

Different social and economic contexts gave rise to different ways of going through the planning of life stages, including the educational process. The three young adults' starting conditions differed greatly. Maria was supported by her family from the beginning, and she was a very good student. Katya belonged to an ethnic minority, and she had to assert her wishes against those of her family and ethnic stereotypes. Paul grew up in a negative, almost hostile family and school environment that he experienced as destructive. Not determined but influenced by these initial conditions, different opportunity structures and aspirations emerged for the three young people, affecting their coping strategies.

Maria and Katya strove very consistently for higher education and the life opportunities that were expected to come with it. While for Maria this went hand in hand with the motive of self-realization through work, for Katya this path seemed to be the only way to realize social advancement. Paul, on the other hand, saw himself massively restricted by his (especially familiar) environment and could not initially establish a perspective outside of it. Due to his sufficient school leaving qualification, the high demand on the labour market and the pressure from his mother, he completed vocational training despite his reluctance.

The common aim of the three LLL policies accessed by the three young people is to enable young adults to get specific practical training to be able to later find their place in the labour market. Following the vertical axis of comparison, we see how this overall aim is pursued by the same model, as in the three cases it is understood as passing various levels of

education, training and participating in various LLL policies, namely following the local institutional opportunity structures. However, is this enough for establishing oneself in the local labour market?

Katya and Maria have several university degrees. They both refuted the dominant public discourses in their countries. The Italian one stresses the unwillingness of the youth to grow up, painting them as inactive and unresponsive. The dominant social and cultural stereotypes in Bulgaria focus on young ethnic minority women as likely early school leavers. However, structural factors beyond their control, such as the local labour market negative features, impacted on the actual opportunities for realization. Indeed, despite their high level of education, both faced several obstacles in the transition to the labour market: Maria faced problems related to the inflation of skilled profiles within the “static” local labour market; Katya kept on participating in various LLL policies to be employed and to earn income. Paul’s transition to work can be defined as “theoretically successful” because of his training in a sector where employees are needed. Due to his personal experiences, however, Paul lived this exclusively negatively. In all three cases, it was the needs of the local labour market that required the young people to adapt: their own life plans were somehow negotiated on the basis of their different fit with the needs of the market.

The transversal comparison brings to the fore the personal motivation and the differences in terms of access to LLL policies as well as how the unfolding of individual trajectories was shaped by the participation in LLL measures, showing the relational dimension as pivotal in modelling their trajectories. Katya and Maria actively sought to participate in LLL policies. Institutional opportunities came up and both women took them because they associate them with opportunities to get closer to their goals. Katya associated further education and first experiences on the labour market with participation in the policy, even though she feared being labelled as someone who cannot make it on her own and has needed a variety of support measures. Maria also saw the possibility for further training and otherwise associated the measure primarily with extending her network of professional relations. This shows their ability to navigate very consciously in given structures. On the contrary, Paul did not want

to work as a cook, but he was forced to follow the instructions of office workers to receive funding from social welfare.

There is no doubt that in all the three cases “significant others” emerged as crucial in shaping their biographies, shedding light on the importance of focusing on the micro-sociological processes through which individual trajectories unfold in light of the power relations in which individuals are engaged, which may change over time depending on opportunities (Baillergeau & Duyvendak, 2019). Looking at the availability of different forms of interactions and how they were navigated by individuals, in the case of Katya we reveal social interactions that undermine the development of the “capacity to aspire” (Appadurai, 2004), which emerged from her strained relationship with her father and then her employers. In Maria’s biography we can identify “interactions that inspire” (with her mother and teachers), that is, by providing ideas about desirable futures through the “cultivation of imagination” (Nussbaum, 2016), based on critical reflection of what is problematic in her life. In Paul’s biography, this happened just after his participation in the policy measure, when the Job Centre employee succeeded in getting him to talk about his problems, helping ideas to mature, by translating them into plans.

Lastly, in relation to the different meanings attributed to participation in LLL policies, Katya’s biography showed that participation in LLL policies is often recognized as a way of overcoming ethnic, cultural and institutional constraints faced by young people from minorities in Bulgaria. On the other hand, in her case she ended up in a “trap” of a permanent cycle of further education, training and work experiences. In Katya’s case, the accumulation of diplomas and certificates did not lead her either to a sustainable accumulation of skills or to a stable professional establishment. Despite the acquired qualifications, she remained in the same place, with no prospects for successful development in the near future. At only 26 years of age, Katya has experienced a lot of disappointments and losses in personal and professional terms. Although her last job position satisfied her, she did not perceive it as a dream job but as something from which she received a salary to cover her living expenses in the big city.

Paul’s biography showed that participation in LLL policies can contribute to reducing the influence of institutional demands (work in the learned profession and the acceptance of any reasonable work), and that

alternative biographical and professional trajectories can be developed. The prerequisite for this is sustainable working alliances between professionals and young people which can compensate for the lack of social support, impacting on the opportunity structures they deal with. Both Katya and Paul cannot set specific goals to pursue; neither knows what the future holds for them professionally, but they both have a clear perspective that they need to make changes to develop their professional life. The difference is that Paul found support in the LLL policy, while Katya's experiences with the outcome of the LLL policy were negative.

Maria seemed to be able to cope with the challenges of life and feels satisfied with what she has achieved so far, even if this implied sacrifices and personal challenges, such as quitting a poorly fulfilling permanent job. Trying to counter the dominant local rhetoric about young people's inactivity with a strong investment in training and job experiences was still not enough to fully support her personal aspirations. Indeed, the possibility of drawing on personal resources (namely "outside" the provided institutional opportunity structures) was crucial in her story. She is still living in her parents' home, consistently with the Italian family welfare state context. This is a point in which both cultural aspects of the transition and more structural ones converge in determining what is referred to as "the delay of the transition" (Pastore, 2017). The main differences with regard to the other cases are the broader resources at her disposal. Relying on a good amount of economic, cultural and social capital, and constant family support, Maria succeeded in using the LLL policies to accumulate further social contacts. This expanded her opportunities for finding fulfilling employment in the future.

4.4 Concluding Remarks

The chapter has explored different processes for life plan making applied by three young adults who interact with different contexts, via analysis of three case studies. We explored how young people's capacity to cope with challenges and their ability to actively navigate obstacles are influenced by the wider discursive and institutional opportunity structures in which they unfold their life paths. The heterogeneity of individuals' experiences

in relation to the nexus between schooling, learning and labour market outcomes emerged, showing the social, cultural and economic factors at play in exercising their navigational capacities. The three axes of comparison (horizontal, vertical, transversal, Bartlett & Vavrus, 2017) used to analyse our cases showed how context should not be defined as place or location, but rather be conceptualized as something spatial and relational.

Referring to the theoretical perspectives adopted to analyse our cases, we can focus on some emerging issues. Following the capability approach (Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2000; Boyadjieva & Ilieva-Trichkova, 2021), two complementary dimensions emerged: the provision of adequate means—resources (cash or in-kind benefits), qualifications or education (training programmes provided via school or the like)—and context on the one hand; freedom to choose the life one has reason to value on the other hand (Bonvin & Moachon, 2008). The two dimensions are interdependent insofar as their disjunction leads either to paternalism (providing means to promote youth capacity to act, but not granting freedom to them to exercise this capacity) or to purely formal freedom (the importance of young people's life choices is promoted, but young people are not provided with the means—resources, opportunities—to implement them, Otto et al., 2017). If young people are deprived of such resources and if they are trapped in an unfriendly environment, that does not entitle them to lead a life they have reason to value, then the enhancement of their capabilities is missed.

In terms of temporal horizons, the analysis of young adults' expectations for the future showed how young people make their life choices according to their "capacity to aspire" (Appadurai, 2004) and (potentially) applying the LLL policies as a "tool" for compensating for inequalities. This could be stated in terms of both the structural constraints they struggle with, and the cultural stigmatization they often face. The inequalities could be contextualized in terms of capacity to aspire to the specific realm of inclusion and exclusion in the labour market and educational system. Being able (or not) to define a life plan thus potentially constitutes a "new" factor of inequality (Benasso, 2013). The existing capability set of a person restricts the capacity to aspire, even if it does not determine it. Indeed, the position of a person as a producer and income earner, their social contacts, their access to resources and control over

income and their knowledge all influence and limit their “capacity to aspire”. In this sense, this capacity is conceived as both a “cultural capacity” and a “navigational capacity”, which explores the “possibilities” and “probabilities” around one’s social environment, nurtured by continuous interaction (Appadurai, 2004, p. 68). In the perspective proposed by Sen, this may be cast in terms of capabilities, including both states of well-being and other, more complex capabilities like agency or the ability to decide and act, within externally set constraints.

In this chapter, we spotlighted the structure of interactions whereby young adults negotiated the meaning of the LLL policies they entered. Analysis of the case studies revealed that the capability to participate in LLL policies and its impact on that person’s biography are strongly influenced not only by his/her agency, but also by wider socio-economic, institutional and cultural influences, as well as by other actors’ actions. The chapter argued that focusing on the relations that contribute to shaping young adults’ aspirations is helpful to capture both the limits placed on their aspirations by their “horizons for action” and the importance of nurturing their aspirations (Moensted, 2020). Through their interactions with parents, teachers, employers and peers, young people become able to contemplate a wider set of options for the future (as happened in the life story of Maria). However, as the story of Paul has shown, these interactions may not provide such opportunities, or at least opportunities that can be seized. The life courses of these three young adults showed how face-to-face encounters with successful professionals can contribute to blurring the frontier between the so-called “hot” and “cold” knowledge about future possibilities (Smith, 2011): cold knowledge being formal knowledge provided by educational institutions and hot knowledge being “word-of-mouth” information gained from one’s social and professional network (Baillergeau & Duyvendak, 2019). Indeed, the capacity to navigate young people’s options results from structural differences in individual “archives of experience” (Gale, 2015); it consists of a dense combination of nodes and pathways, within which the interaction with “significant others” plays a key influence in setting the realm of opportunities to practise the use of navigational capacity, therefore shaping young peoples’ choices and actions within systems of opportunity structures.

The three axes used to compare our cases allowed better contextualization of the intersection between the three young people's life projects and the LLL policies they accessed, clarifying the aforementioned different labels describing our cases and revealing the complex interplay between context, structure, policy and young people's navigation capacities:

- “being on track though with aspirations to deviate” for the German case: Paul formally met the requirements of the labour market. He was on his way, although it was a direction he could not relate to. Also pushed by the will to overcome his negative relation with his family, he abandoned the way provided by institutions and came into conflict with the activating welfare regime that wanted to keep him on the track. Only through a trusting working alliance and a low-threshold, tailor-made policy did he find an alternative way on a new track;
- “being in the mist, struggling to find a direction, though well equipped” for the Italian case: Maria was an excellent student and received great support from her family. However, since her qualifications were not in demand in the local labour market, she had to experience an odyssey through an opaque landscape that made it more difficult to identify proper directions, as she will pursue the aim of sustainable and personally fulfilling employment;
- “being in the loop and finding oneself at the starting point, despite having been active” for the Bulgarian case: Katya was trying very hard to make something of herself and to achieve social advancement from her original circumstances, despite a local labour market which was generally unable to stabilize the young workforce. However, she seemed to be caught in a loop, as in planning her professional trajectory she mostly depended on the possibilities provided by the support services (above all LLL policies), that proposed chances for training. This affected her self-perception too, as she felt “trapped” in “waiting loops” with no clear directions to unfold her professional and educational trajectory in a more linear way.

The case study analysis confirms the understanding of youth transitions as embedded within, shaped and influenced by a complex network

of relationships as well as of social and economic structures that constrain or enable young people's opportunities.

Notes

1. In November 2019, Germany's highest court declared the full benefit cut unconstitutional. A 30% reduction in benefits remains permitted.
2. For the concept of functional regions see Parreira do Amaral et al. (2020, pp. 21–29).
3. To safeguard the privacy of the interviewees, the official names of the policies and measures at the core of the case studies analysed in this chapter have been replaced by codes. Specifically, the codes report the abbreviation of the country name followed by "P" ("Policy") and a sequence number on the basis of the order of appearance of the policies in the book. The only exception is constituted by Youth Guarantee as it represents a broad international policy integrating different sub-measures at the core of the case studies located in Italy and Bulgaria.

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