

## Il lavoro come esperienza educativa. Un'analisi qualitativa dei percorsi professionali dei laureati italiani.

### Work: an educative experience? A qualitative analysis of Italian graduates' fragmented career paths.

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#### ABSTRACT ITALIANO

Oggi in Italia, così come nella maggior parte dei Paesi europei, i percorsi professionali dei giovani laureati appaiono frammentati, caratterizzati da contratti brevi e numerose transizioni. In questo difficile contesto, il lavoro può rivelarsi un'esperienza genuinamente educativa? L'articolo, a partire dalla teoria dell'esperienza di John Dewey (Esperienza e Educazione, 1938), intende discutere il valore educativo dell'esperienza di lavoro per i giovani laureati italiani, fornendo spunti di riflessione per orientatori professionali ed educatori. Come può un orientatore dare un contributo nel guidare i giovani con elevati livelli di istruzione verso esperienze educative? Proprio in un periodo in cui viene fortemente enfatizzata l'importanza di 'fare esperienza', l'attenzione dovrebbe essere rivolta alla qualità dell'esperienza stessa e ai suoi potenziali effetti sulla crescita intellettuale e morale della persona.

#### ENGLISH ABSTRACT

In Italy today, as in most European countries, young college graduates start their careers facing very fragmented professional paths, often characterised by short contracts and many transitions. Do these conditions lay the foundation for work serving as an educative experience? This article, using Dewey's theory of experience as articulated in his work *Experience and Education* (1938), attempts to assess the educative value of work experience for Italian graduates while providing some reflections for counsellors and educators. How can career counselling contribute to guiding young and highly skilled workers towards educative, rather than mis-educative, work experiences? In a time when the importance of gaining work experience is highly emphasized, attention should be given to the quality of such experience in terms of its effects on the individual and his/her intellectual and moral growth.

#### Introduction

In *Experience and Education* (Dewey, 1938) John Dewey argued that not all experiences are educative and that, in fact, some experiences can be mis-educative:

Any experience is mis-educative that has the effect of arresting or distorting the growth of further experience. An experience may be such as to engender callousness; it may produce lack of sensitivity and of responsiveness. Then the possibilities of having richer experience in the future are restricted [...]. Again, experiences may be so disconnected from one another that, while each is agreeable or even exciting in itself, they are not linked cumulatively to one another. Energy is then dissipated and a person becomes scatter-brained.

Each experience may be lively, vivid, and 'interesting', and yet their disconnectedness may artificially generate dispersive, disintegrated, centrifugal habits. The consequence of formation of such habits is inability to control future experiences [...] (Dewey, 1938, pg. 6).

Today many young Italians, and young Europeans in general, face uncertain employment prospects following graduation from college. Their first professional experience are often defined by short contracts and several fleeting jobs over a brief time period (European Commission, 2014). In this type of context, in which individuals struggle to search for meaning and purpose in a 'puzzle' made up of multiple work and life experiences (Savickas, 2001, 2005, 2006, 2009, 2011, 2015), it has become more and more difficult to understand careers using theories based on the idea of stability rather than mobility. As transitions replace job security and "social institutions no longer provide the normative scripts" with which people used to answer the questions of "How shall I live?" and "How should I design my life to achieve my aspirations?" (Savickas, 2015, p.12), young workers are forced to answer such questions by constructing novel lives and career projects, pointing to "possibilities in a fluid world rather than predictions in a stable society" (Savickas, 2011, p.10). Today, much more so than in traditional societies, individuals' agency is no longer a variable entirely dependent on surrounding institutional rules and resources; yet individuals are still far from being autonomous from these restrictions. In the same way that agency and structure can be considered inextricably intertwined (Giddens, 1979), human identity can be observed in the light of the shift from a given into a task (Beck & Beck-Gemshen, 2002). Modern living seems to be represented by the need to become what one is, putting a sort of compulsory self-determination in the place once occupied by hetero-determination (Bauman, 2002). While the workplace was traditionally a very important source of personal identity, changes in the economy have rendered it far less reliable. The long lasting identities once associated with work have given way to looser and more provisional identities that are subject to constant change and renegotiation (Bauman, 2011). This process can generate anxiety and a sense of uncertainty; young workers in particular struggle to adapt to fluid societies and flexible organisations while attempting to maintain the 'thread' that connects multiple distinct episodes into their unique story (Beck, 2002; Giddens, 1991; Hall, 1996; Batini & Zaccaria, 2000; Batini, 2015). The concept of career adaptability was initially introduced as a theoretical construct to conceptualize how adults deal with or adjust to the challenges of a changing labor market, later referring to the ability to deal with changes and transitions across the life span (Super & Kidd, 1979; Goodman, 1994; Savickas, 1997). Savickas (2005) defined career adaptability as "a psychosocial construct that denotes an individual's readiness and resources for coping with current and imminent vocational development tasks, occupational transitions, and personal traumas" (p. 51). In addition, Rottinghaus, Day, & Borgen defined career adaptability as an individual's perceived "capacity to cope with and capitalize on change in the future, level of comfort with new work responsibilities, and ability to recover when unforeseen events alter career plans" (2005, p. 11).

Do these conditions lay a foundation that allows work to become an educative experience? An educative experience, in a Deweyan sense, is one that has a positive

influence upon later experiences, that is conducive to growth, or “growing as developing” (Dewey, 1938, p.11), not only physically but also intellectually and morally. It is a form of growth able to create conditions for further and continuing growth.

How can career counselling contribute to guiding young workers towards educative, rather than mis-educative, work experiences?

These are crucial issues in contemporary European societies, characterised by increasing labour market flexibility, especially for the young (European Commission, 2014). In a time when the importance of gaining work experience is highly emphasised (European Commission, 2014), attention should be paid to its effects on the individual and his or her intellectual and moral growth because “every experience is a moving force” whose “value can be judged only on the ground of what it moves toward and into” (Dewey, 1938, p.13).

The purpose of this study was to analyse the condition of young, highly skilled individuals in the Italian labor market, shedding light on some specific aspects of the local socio-economic context and their impact on the educational value of work experience. Specifically, the goals of the project were:

- to describe how Italian young graduates navigate the labor market, which strategies they adopt to cope with structural constraints;
- to analyse young graduate’s work experience referring to the Deweyan theory of experience and its categories of continuity, growth and interaction, therefore assessing the educational value of the experience itself;
- to discuss if and how it is possible for counselors and educators to support young graduates in their difficult transition from university studies to professional life, guiding them towards work experiences, or simply towards an ‘approach to work experiences’ that can positively impact on their personal and professional growth.

It is important to underline that Italy has one of the highest rates of youth unemployment in Europe: if we refer to 15-39 years old, unemployment was up to 17.9% in August 2016, against an EU28 average of 11.1% (EUROSTAT, 2016). Italy also spends very little on public policies aimed at first-time job seekers relative to the rest of Europe, and is among the least generous in providing unemployment benefits. The dualistic nature of the Italian labour market results in high job and income security for the labour market ‘insiders’ and residual forms of welfare for the ‘outsiders’, such as new entrants or other disadvantaged categories (Barabasch, Merrill, & Zanazzi, 2014). Among European countries, Italy is characterised by a comparatively high frequency of temporary contracts and a low turnover rate into permanent jobs: contractual stability and its corollaries of rights and protection are, nowadays, rare for Italian workers. Moreover, Italian workers face an extremely unfavorable ‘mismatch’: a discrepancy between the qualifications and skills that individuals possess and those that are needed in the labour market (European Commission, 2014). In this context, the risk of squandering young workers’ potential appears significantly high.

As far as university graduates are concerned, Almalaurea (2016) points out that currently 73.3% of them work, while about 17.3% are unemployed (1). In comparison with the previous year, the trend is slightly positive, but if we observe it on a longer time frame we notice that both indicators have changed for the worse (for graduates in 2007, the

employment rate was 75.4% and the unemployed were 12.9%). In fact, the 2009 economic crisis has hit the young work force very hard, including those with high educational attainment. However it is important to point out that in Italy, as in most European countries, education works as a 'shock absorber': in 2015, 46% of the young people (15-24 years old) with a lower secondary degree were unemployed, against 28.3% of the young (18-29 years old) with an upper secondary degree and 16.2% of those (25-34 years old) with a tertiary level degree (ISTAT, 2016). Another important element to consider, specifically for the target of this research project, is that in Italy the return on investment in tertiary education, in terms of employment outcomes, earnings and stability, becomes more evident between three and five years after obtaining the degree (Almalaurea, 2016). This means that the graduates interviewed for our research project, having three to four years of work experience, are going through a crucial phase in their professional development, one in which their choices might impact heavily on future professional outcomes and satisfaction.

Our research hypothesis states that, given the structural conditions of the labour market described above, work can rarely be an educative experience, in a Deweyan sense. Expert counselling becomes fundamental to guide young workforce towards behaviours that maximize positive outcomes in terms of personal and professional growth. Subsequently, the analysis focused on effective 'strategies' to support individuals navigating these difficult waters that could help to guide them through decision making, transitions and processes of 'liquid career' construction.

## Method

Qualitative research, based on stories, biographies, case studies and other methods drawing on in-depth interviews, has carved out a niche of its own within the realm of social sciences. As Creswell (1998) states, "one undertakes qualitative research in a natural setting where the researcher is an instrument of data collection who gathers words or pictures, analyses them inductively, focuses on the meaning of participants, and describes a process that is expressive and persuasive in language" (p.14). Moreover, "it is not distance that qualitative researchers want between themselves and their participants, but the opportunity to connect with them at a human level" (Corbin & Strauss, p.13). Far from being an alternative to quantitative methods, qualitative research can instead complement broad-spectrum studies. A combination of quantitative and qualitative research outcomes can provide useful support for policy makers and other stakeholders across several disciplines, including employment, education and career counselling. This article analyses the results of a qualitative research project carried out at Sapienza University of Rome. Subsequent paragraphs describe the research methodology used for the project.

## Participants

60 graduates (32 females, 28 males) from a public university in central Italy with between three and four years of work experience after their Master's degree were interviewed. Half of the participants held degrees in humanities, the other half in the

sciences. The participants ages ranged from 27 to 36 years old; all were Caucasian, native-born Italian citizens. Six of them were married, and one a parent of one child. Given the young age of the participants, socio-economic status was inferred on the basis of parents' level of education and profession (2). Nearly half of the participants had middle socio-economic status (at least one parent with tertiary education and white-collar worker), while the other half represented a few low socio-economic status cases (parents with lower or upper secondary degrees, blue-collar workers) and a few high economic status cases (both parents with tertiary degrees and liberal professions).

## Measure

Interviews were focused on the participants' professional experience as a source of personal growth, learning experiences and identity building. In line with 'biographical research' approaches, the stories aim to understand individual experiences while connecting to wider social and cultural processes; they give a voice to a marginalised category. Furthermore, the research is interdisciplinary and structured around a strong theoretical perspective, the Deweyan theory of experience (Roberts, 2002; Merrill & West, 2009).

The Deweyan criteria of experience, continuity, growth and interaction were used as a groundwork while drafting the interview protocol (Dewey, 1938).

The theoretical model of reference is that of qualitative inquiry (Creswell, 1994). Practically, semi-structured interviews were administered using an 'interview guide' approach (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011) with the following inputs:

- 1) Could you summarise your professional path from graduation until present, mentioning the type or organisations you worked for, the length of your employment with each of them, the role/tasks, the type of contract and salary range? (Continuity)
- 2) How do you assess your professional experience after graduation in terms of its coherence with your studies? (Continuity)
- 3) How do you assess your professional experience after graduation in terms of continuity? Do you feel that the steps you've taken so far are like the tiles of a mosaic, or, on the contrary, are they disconnected one from the other? (Continuity)
- 4) How did you feel during each experience? What did it leave you? Did you feel changed after this experience and if so, in what way? (Interaction)
- 5) How do you assess your professional experience after graduation in terms of personal and professional growth? On the personal side, reflect on your maturity, preparation to face new experiences, curiosity and initiative, determination to reach your goals. On the professional side, reflect on your level of responsibility, your ability to master work processes, your learning and competence building, your self-awareness and confidence at work. (Growth)
- 6) Has your work experience so far helped you to set new goals for your future, or confirm goals that you had already set for yourself, and to focus on them? (Growth)

- 7) Could you describe your socio-economic background? During your studies and after graduation, could your family support you economically and morally? Can you still count on their support?

The interview questions evaluated graduates' work experience while referring to the above mentioned Deweyan criteria of experience. Specifically, questions 1, 2 and 3 assessed *continuity* by analyzing the following stipulations (Dewey, 1938): has the worker had the opportunity to gain experience in the same organisation, or at least, when his/her path is characterised by many transitions, in the same field? Is there any correlation between university studies and work experience that facilitate a transfer of competence from the first to the second phase of the interviewee's life? Question 3 was important because after the sequential description of his/her path in question 1, the participant was able to comment on how he/she felt about being able to 'connect the tiles' and form a clear representation of his/her career path.

Question 4 explain *interaction* between the objective context in which experience has taken place and the subjective, internal conditions of the person living that experience, since any normal experience is an interplay of these two factors (Dewey, 1938).

Questions 5 and 6 explain *growth* as stipulated by Dewey in accordance with the following initiatives (Dewey, 1938): has the experience had a strengthening or, contrarily, a weakening effect on the individual in terms of curiosity, initiative, intensity of desires or purposes (Dewey, 1938)? What is the 'response' given by each participant to the external conditions, in terms of general attitude, level of satisfaction, projects and perspectives for the future ... In other words, in which direction is the "moving force" of experience (Dewey, 1938, p.13) leading him/her?

## Procedure

Graduates were selected for interview from the official pool of Sapienza University graduates, limiting the selection to those who received their Master's degrees in the years 2011 or 2012. The official list was used to build a disproportional stratified sample, attempting to analyse cases from all branches of humanities and hard sciences. Graduates were first contacted by phone to explain the aim of the project, ask about the professional status of the respondent and decide whether it was a suitable case for the project. If the candidate was found suitable availability was established and interviews scheduled which generally lasted between 45 and 60 minutes.

## Data analysis

The analysis was carried out based upon a humanistic and subjectivist approach in which "the relationship between the researcher and researched is an intersubjective one with the putative voices of interviewees, or struggles for voice, being a prime focus and source of reference" (Merril & West, 2009, p.130). Transcripts were scanned for "shared experiences and patterns which connect across the transcripts so that the individual stories become collective ones" (Merril & West, 2009, p.131) and it became apparent "whether and how individuals have been able to use their agency to seek to change, in however

small a way, their structural location in society and hence the interaction of structure and agency” (Merril & West, 2009, p.133).

Each interview was transcribed and then sent to the participants to provide them with an opportunity to add or change anything in their interview. Then, the transcripts were reviewed and the portions of the stories considered interesting or relevant to the research questions were highlighted. A group of researchers worked on coding the text using NVivo. Groups were created with a ‘case by-attribute matrix’ in which it was possible to identify attributes critical in differentiating cases (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Much qualitative research abides by principles of validity and reliability that are very different from those of positivism and quantitative methods. This study respected the principles for validity in qualitative research as described in well established literature on qualitative research (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Bogdan & Bicklen, 1992; Maxwell, 1992). Since qualitative research strives to record the multiple interpretations and meanings given by individuals to situation and events (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011), the notion of reliability in this study is construed as *dependability*, involving respondent validation, debriefing by peers, trails of evidence, inter-rater agreement on coding and data interpretation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, Anfara, Brown, & Mangione, 2002).

## Results

The following paragraph describes and comments on the nine groups that emerged from the interview analysis.

**Group 1, *The Invisibles***, included thirteen workers in extremely precarious positions. Professional paths in this group showed very low levels of both *continuity*, evinced by many short contracts which were often not renewed after the first experience and poor coherence between jobs and university studies) and *growth*, including limited opportunities to learn on the job and poorly defined or recognised roles. Additionally, these participants often clearly expressed a sense of frustration and a weakening process. The *interaction* data from this group indicates that work consistently serves as a source of anxiety and worries; their agency was completely subjugated by structure.

Catia, for example, graduated in philosophy and then attended two post graduate programmes, one in corporate communication, pursued in hopes of finding employment, and one in publishing which was closer to her real passion. In spite of the high investment in training, Catia (3), at 29 years old, was still trapped in short term contracts, without real learning opportunities and lacking any professional identity. She realised that constantly chasing work opportunities was ultimately a drain on her energies and mental resources:

I can't stop. Stopping means starting to fully reflect on the complex situation in which we are, and it's almost like making fun of ourselves. I know that I am making fun of myself, I know that I am working so hard because, if I stop, I am obliged to recognise a number of issues that would lead me to depression. I try not to stop, to seize the opportunities, but I know that it is more of a distraction than a real, constant energy that regenerates.

She was also very lucid when assessing the existential impact of precariousness:

I don't have any expectation [for my new job]. You end up having no expectations, because you know that you can't control the events in your professional life. The problem is that the element that some [philosophers] considered essential for a human being, projectuality, doesn't exist anymore. This is a limit to me being a person. The only dimension that I can live is present.

**Group 2, *The Trade Offs***, included nine workers in a situation of contractual stability, obtained by accepting a compromise. In these cases, personal aspirations were set aside in order to reap other benefits, such as longer contracts, a better salary or the opportunity to stay in Italy instead of emigrating. *Continuity* markers were well represented in this group. Additionally, some indicators of professional *growth* were evident, including occasions to learn on the job and chances for professional and/or hierarchical development. In terms of *interaction*, the 'negative trade off' that pushed them to deviate from the desired route and eventually subjected their agency to the structure of the environment cannot be ignored.

As an example of this group, Nadia, (27 years old, degree in astrophysics) after successfully completing her Ph.D., decided not to begin an academic career because it would have required her to leave Italy:

I don't want to be represented by my job – I've always worked and I like working, when I am allowed to do it with dignity and on things I like, but I don't want work to decide where I have to live and the people I have to spend my time with.

Thanks to her qualifications and abilities, Nadia managed to find a job as a *cloud architect* in an important multinational corporation. At the time of the interview, she was an apprentice with excellent career perspectives.

**Group 3, *The Committed***, included four workers who showed strong commitments to their jobs, characterised by a social orientation. *Continuity* in this group was high in terms of professional experiences within the same field and coherence between job and university studies, but low in relative to contractual stability, as indicated by long periods of unpaid or undervalued labour. As far as *interaction* is concerned, these workers differed from those in the previous group because they considered their work a mission and were willing to compromise, not necessarily to obtain material rewards, but to fulfil a social role they considered extremely important and valuable. Generally, the *Committed* were in charge of their own *growth* all of them chose to engage in post-graduate training at their own expense and in their free time in order to become more competent and knowledgeable in their respective fields. Agency in this group was overall very strong, but this self-motivation had to contend with a terribly rigid and non-collaborative professional structure that forces workers to compensate for deficiencies and shortcomings within their work environments by using their own resources.

For example, Maura was a biologist who worked as a researcher in a hospital; she studied rare diseases that affect children. At the time of the interview, she had been working for free for more than a year, patiently waiting for her contract to be renewed:

Many times people asked me while I continued working without getting paid. Obviously you do feel the discomfort of not getting a salary ... but your life goes on, the drive towards

my goal was stronger, my motivation is much stronger than 1000€ per month! [...] My job is very stimulating. The possibility to even improve these children's quality of life a little bit, the idea that maybe in the future we'll be able to cure this illness, keeps me going ...

**Group 4, *The Passionate***, included three workers driven by strong passions and intrinsic motivation. *Continuity* in this group was low in terms of contractual stability, since these workers tended to simply go wherever their hearts took them. These individuals were freelance workers who carefully 'designed' their professional paths, one step at a time. Similarly to the previous group, the *Passionate* were responsible for their own *growth*: all of them engaged in post-graduate training as an avenue for becoming more competent and knowledgeable in their fields. Lifelong learning was a natural consequence of their passion and motivation. As far as *interaction* is concerned, the *Passionate* lived virtually immersed in their work despite very low economic returns, simply because their vocations represented a source of pleasure for them. In some cases they seemed to be caught in a "passion trap" (Murgia & Poggio, 2013) where they allowed work to overwhelm them and take over their entire lives. In this group, agency seemed very strong, but in actuality it was subjugated to a structure that pushed workers to relinquish every other dimension of life in exchange for doing what they loved to do.

Ernesto, 30 years old with a degree in anthropology, gave in to the temptation of stable employment and career before he decided to embrace his passion for social documentary. For two years he worked as a store manager for an important IT multinational corporation, and consequently he felt very distant from himself. He plunged into a very deep existential crisis that eventually led him towards a drastic change of direction. He resigned from his job and decided to become a freelance documentary producer. This choice was a healing moment and the beginning of a new and fulfilling life, but was also studded with obstacles stemming from precariousness and very low earnings.

**Group 5, *The Competitive*** included five workers who displayed high levels of determination, assertiveness and self-confidence. They were hardworking but also aware of their competence and skills, and were capable of having these assets recognised in the working environment. In general, *continuity* was remarkably high in this group. So was *growth*: it was actually appropriate to use the word 'career' to describe the professional lives of these workers. *Interaction* was quite positive since the *Competitive* seemed to be able to navigate their own paths effectively, even within an extremely challenging external context. Socioeconomic background played an important role in their professional successes, allowing the individuals in this group to establish relationships and invest in high level post-graduate training without compromising their livelihoods.

Daniele is an outstanding literature graduate who was able to learn English in the US after graduation. Upon his return to Italy he was introduced to an important politician, and soon afterwards became his collaborator at the Senate Press Office. Daniele was very satisfied with this result but did not take anything for granted. Far from resting on his laurels, he kept searching for new opportunities and novel ways in which he could remain competitive in the job market:

There is always something better, something new to learn... otherwise you stop ... and you expose yourself to a number of problems, the problems of today's job market... no, you must be always moving!

**Group 6, *The Emigrants***, included three graduates who left Italy to find better work opportunities. Two of them were Ph.D. students, one in Germany and one in France. The third was a graduate in communications whose prospects in Italy were unemployment or, in the best case, under-occupation; he managed to find a satisfactory part time job for a small multinational business located in Germany. The *Emigrants* appeared to enjoy a good level of *continuity* in terms of contractual stability, activities performed in the same field and coherence with university studies. They also experienced personal and professional *growth*; living abroad enabled them to develop and strengthen social and emotional skills, while the work environment provided good learning opportunities. As far as *interaction* was concerned, these workers' professional perspective was strictly connected with their availability to be geographically far from home. Therefore, in this group, as in many of the previous ones, agency seemed strong, but was to some extent subjugated to a structure that forces many young graduates to leave Italy if they hope to find a job that matches their skillset.

**Group 7, *The Chameleons*** included three eclectic individuals who had the ability to carry on several different activities simultaneously. Their professional identities were multifaceted; they often juggled several jobs, each of them representing a different goal, from paying the rent, to networking or simply cultivating a passion. *Continuity* was low when considered in terms of contractual stability, while relative to activities performed in the same field and coherence with studies there seemed to be a choice: carrying on an activity simply meant dedicating time and energies to it, even in absence of an economic reward. Generally speaking, the *Chameleons* had a positive *interaction* with the environment because they were ready to adjust to it; they were willing to invest, in a broad sense although their risk propensity was fairly high, in order to identify new opportunities. On the other hand, in this group *growth* was often limited by a tendency to evolve rapidly and a perennial 'multitasking' attitude.

Emilia was 33 years old and married with a degree in biology at the time of the study, and had completed post-graduate specialisation course to become a science teacher in high school. She stated that she doesn't have children because she "can't afford it". After university she moved to Sicily to be with her husband, but she paid the price; she faced a much less dynamic and shallow job market. Emilia held a number of non-paid or low-paying short term positions, during which she felt "like a hamster running in a wheel", before being hired as a part-time teacher in a private school. Simultaneously, she and a group of friends created a radio program that they produced, completely pro bono, every night until very late, in the hopes that in the future this activity would have some economic return. Emilia was very passionate, energetic, optimistic and apparently strong in this unfortunate situation, but more than once along her journey she realised that she might have been building a house of cards, relying exclusively on her personal resources.

**Group 8, *The Adult Students***, included twelve graduates who enjoyed a good level of *continuity* thanks to three-year Ph.D. scholarships. Pursuing a doctorate wasn't the first

choice of the individuals in this group, but after searching unsuccessfully for employment they returned to their respective studies. Coherence with university studies was very high in this group since all *Adult Students* were doing their Ph.D. work in the same field as their Master's. In some cases, individuals chose their specific areas of research based on the requests of the labour market. Sara, for example, after graduating with a degree in physical chemistry, unsuccessfully tried to find a job in the private sector and realised that she had to strengthen her knowledge of analytical chemistry in order for her employment profile to be more 'attractive'. This led Sara to her Ph.D. studies in analytical chemistry; although during her third and last year she was worried that she might be considered 'too old' to begin a career in the private sector. As far as *growth* is concerned, these interviews demonstrated that a Ph.D. program of study is in many cases a very challenging path that requires strong intrinsic motivation and resilience. Given the current conditions of academia in Italy, it is not unreasonable to expect that very few of the *Adult Students* will find a concrete starting point for their academic careers after graduation. As far as *interaction* is concerned, the real question is whether or not these young workers will be able to find a job that values their skills and competence, or if they will have to emigrate in order to continue an academic career; or possibly be forced to accept a tradeoff and for employment at a lower level in exchange for contractual stability.

**Group 9, the *Business Oriented***, included eight graduates in the sciences, all employed in medium or large enterprises with relatively stable contractual agreements and favorable conditions. For the workers in this group, *continuity* was acceptable and so was the opportunity for *growth*, not only in terms of knowledge, know-how and responsibility, but also hierarchically. Coherence with university studies was present only in the broad terms of a related 'disciplinary field'. In terms of *interaction*, these workers displayed primarily extrinsic motivation: when facing difficulty, this group would be willing to accept a negative *tradeoff*. These individuals considered overall working conditions more important than the job content itself. They placed their professional evolution in the hands of the organisations they worked for and relinquished a certain level of control over their paths, trusting their companies and their internal mechanisms.

## Discussion

The analysis of each group based on the Deweyan criteria of experience – continuity, growth and interaction – leads us back to the first research question:

- 1) Do such conditions establish a foundation for work serving as an educative experience?

Only in one of the nine groups does there appear to be the conditions conducive to work being an educative experience, at least in a Deweyan sense. It is the group dubbed the *Competitive*, which included individuals with both outstanding personal qualities (determination, assertiveness, self-confidence) and very favourable socio-economic conditions. They seemed to be able to benefit from genuinely educational and rewarding work experiences without accepting any negative tradeoff: for them, transitions serve as occasions to learn and grow. Although not impervious to uncertainty, the *Competitive*

gladly accept the task of building their own human and professional identity (Beck & Beck-Gemshin, 2002) one step at a time.

The *Tradeoffs*, the *Business Oriented*, the *Committed*, the *Adult Students* and the *Emigrants* fall into in an intermediate situation where both growth and personal satisfaction are present, but at a high price. As far as they are concerned, the main question is:

Does this form of growth foster conditions for further growth, or does it limit “the occasions, stimuli, and opportunities for continuing growth” in new directions relative to each individual? (Dewey, 1938, p.12).

There is abundant literature on the phenomena of both mismatch and tradeoff that illustrates their negative long term effects on productivity, economic reward and satisfaction (Lucidi & Raitano, 2009; Ortiz, 2010). Translated into Deweyan categories, these effects can be considered synonymous to limits on further growth. The *Tradeoffs* gave up their aspirations to obtain material advantages; similarly, the *Business Oriented* accepted a form of tradeoff by letting the organisation guide their professional paths, and the *Committed* exchanged economic reward and independence so that they could fully dedicate themselves to their respective ‘missions’. Both the *Emigrants* and *Adult Students* also gave up some control of their lives. They let work decide where they should live, or they postponed decisions about their professional identities, waiting in a limbo where, to some extent, they can be seen as ‘shut off’ from the real world. For these workers, identity building appears to be an incomplete process, a failed attempt to make a mosaic out of broken tiles (Beck, 2002; Giddens, 1991; Hall, 1996).

On the contrary, the *Passionate* and *Chameleons* apparently live very fulfilling lives by following their dreams, but some important components are missing: equilibrium, balance and a sense of reality. They may be very strong swimmers in difficult waters, but sooner or later their energies will begin to fade due to fatigue, or simply the burgeoning need to dedicate their time to something other than work. Presently they see multiple possibilities (Savickas, 2011) by observing the world through a distorting mirror made of passion, enthusiasm and optimism that seems to ignore the structure surrounding their movements (Giddens, 1979).

Finally, the *Invisibles* are the weakest link on the chain, although ironically they are also the largest group, with 13 cases. It is impossible to find any “occasions, stimuli, and opportunities for continuing growth” (Dewey, 1938, p.12) within this group. In the data provided by the *Invisibles*, there does not appear to be any ‘thread’ or purpose (Savickas, 2001, 2005, 2006, 2009, 2011, 2015), while their struggles in the professional world bring them no satisfaction, nor provide any benefit to society (Super, 1951).

### **Implications for guidance and counselling**

With these considerations in mind, an attempt can be made to answer the second research question:

- 2) How can career counselling contribute to guiding young workers towards educative, rather than mis-educative, work experiences?

The current complexity of the economic and social system impacts pervasively on people's lives and their work experience. Such a context calls for constant updating and development of competences to be able to re-adapt with ease to changing, often unpredictable, situations (Zollo, Pace, Agrillo, Sibilio, 2016). Today, what is required from individuals and society is not simply the mere transmission of knowledge, but a re-organisation of learning that will enable new generations to navigate in an extremely uncertain reality. For this reason, educational guidance has become a central theme in international and national pedagogical reflections (Zollo et al., 2016). Today, guidance has the goal to empower individuals and to facilitate the development of 'self guidance' skills, that is the ability to "build up projects rather than finding quick solutions" (Batini, 2015, p. 204). Investing in career guidance is an important way to support young people and adults through transitions, to help them internalising the need to take responsibility for their career, making effective use of their skills and be resilient in the face of change (Hooley & Dodd, 2015). A number of studies exist which demonstrate that career guidance can support adults to make successful transitions in a turbulent labour market (Bimrose, Barnes & Hughes 2008) by strengthening career management skills, the abilities that individuals need to make decisions, build their professional identity, cope with change and setbacks (European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network [ELGPN], 2014). An approach for counseling that could be particularly useful for the target analysed in this article is defined as 'narrative counseling' (Batini, 2000; Savickas, 2001, 2005, 2006, 2009, 2011):

Today's mobile workers may feel fragmented and confused by the restructuring of occupations and transformation of the labor force. As they move from one assignment to the next assignment, they must let go of what they did but not who they are. [...] By holding onto the self in the form of a life story that provides meaning and continuity, they are able to move on in a way that advances life purpose and approaches overarching goals (Savickas, 2011, p. 37).

According to the career construction theory (Savickas, 2005), making a self is a task. Individuals construct a self by using reflective thinking to re-elaborate experience. In order to do so, they need language, which both constructs and constitutes social realities (4) (Savickas, 2011). Identity is the self "located" in a social context, assuming a role that continuously adapts and changes while negotiating social positions. When identity gets challenged or "problematized" (Savickas, 2011), appearing inadequate to support the individual's movement, or desired movement, into a new social role, it becomes necessary to re-model it. "Narrative counseling" supports individuals to grasp order in their lives through a "biographical reasoning" able to bridge transitions, so to "keep the story going" (Savickas, 2011, p.22). Narrating the self helps individuals to comprehend "what moves them, what they built their lives around, and what ideas their life serve" (Savickas, 2011, p.39). Contradictory stories can coexist within one plot and determining how they fit together prompts significant progress in sense making: "coherence forms as links join and holds together" (Savickas, 2011, p.40). When individuals tell their stories, a sense emerge, as they recognize the repetition of themes and the presence of values that guide their

actions. Themes and values can build continuity in a “subjective career” even when the “objective career” appears as extremely fragmented and discontinuous.

At a point in time when ‘gaining work experience’ is considered extremely important, attention should be given to the quality of such experience. In order to propose a realistic message, it is essential for the counsellor to start from the idea of competence. After graduating and throughout life, attention needs to be directed towards developing and strengthening competencies that are essential to properly fulfilling a professional role. While superficial encouragements to ‘go where your heart takes you’ are commonplace, it is critical for the counsellor to emphasise what needs to be done both before and during the journey to ensure a positive outcome from a career project.

The results of this research clearly demonstrate the risk connected to the ‘rhetoric of passion’ that is often found in our societies. Passion, or at least a strong interest in the field of work, is certainly a crucial element in the development of agency and resilience, but it cannot be the only motivating factor in a professional development project. Counsellors can play an important role in helping young professionals make sound and sustainable professional choices in a setting where passion works in synergy with other essential elements, such as competence development and knowledge of the sector’s dynamics. In particular, counsellors can help young workers understand that competence development is a much more effective ‘guiding principle’ for making professional choices than the trite and often vague concept of passion, which is often, even in bad faith, exploited to obtain total dedication in exchange for (almost) nothing. Further, it could be argued that ‘passion comes by doing’, rather than serving as an impalpable fascination that attracts naïve young workers, driving them towards unattainable goals. Counsellors can help graduates understand that passion stems from competence, dedication and work ethics, and not the other way around. In other words, passion requires a complementary dose of commitment in order to learn and develop skills.

Another service counselors can provide is to stimulate reflection as to what influences, in Deweyan terms, the *interaction* between an individual’s professional choices and the broader context, i.e. the labour market, institutions and society. Young workers should be sensitised to the notion that experience is constantly impacted by its physical and social surroundings. Professional choices and career projects cannot be sketched out without a deep and current knowledge of each sector, its dynamics and potential.

Only on concrete and realistic foundations such as these it is possible to build professional paths made of educative steps. By doing this young professionals can fully exploit the positive “moving force” of experience (Dewey, 1938, p.13), even within a very difficult socio-economic context.

## Conclusion

In a labour market characterised by transience and continuous change, young workers, even if highly skilled, risk being ‘trapped’ in low quality, discontinuous career paths, squandering their energies and losing motivation. This analysis of Italian graduates’ professional experience clearly demonstrates this risk: out of the sixty cases, only five presented the conditions necessary for work being an educative experience. The remaining

fifty five cases show how experience can, to some extent, develop into a ‘negative’ force that limits rather than expands, future growth. In a time when the importance of gaining work experience is highly emphasised, counsellors can play a crucial role in guiding young graduates towards educative, rather than mis-educative work experiences. Given the “structure” (Archer, 2000, 2003), there are actually many options that could help young graduates build positive interactions with their environments based on self-assessment, knowledge, realism and competence development.

In all, there were three things:  
 the certainty one is always beginning  
 the certainty one must go further  
 and the certainty that one will be interrupted before finishing.  
 From the interruptions, to make a new path,  
 from falling, a dance step,  
 from fear, a ladder  
 from dream, a bridge, from search...the encounter.  
 (Fernando Pessoa)

### Note

- (1) The cited percentages refer to ‘laureati di secondo livello’ (Master’s degree) who finished their studies in 2011, just as the participants in the research project described in this article.
- (2) In Italy it is very common to take longer than 5 years to obtain a master’s degree, given the flexible organization of the university system which allows to freely schedule exams, based on individual needs. This is the reason why the participants’ age ranged from 27 to 36 years old. Moreover, the transition between university studies to a stable job and independent life can be an extremely long process in Italy, so that graduates heavily depend on their families as a ‘welfare institution’ to support them. Low salaries and high costs for housing force many young people to continue living with their families or to depend economically from them for many years after graduating: this is why it was reasonable to infer socio-economic status of the interviewees on the basis of parents’ level of education and profession. In all cases examined, interviewees had finished their master’s degree three to four years before the interview and could therefore be considered ‘far’ from reaching solid economic independence.
- (3) All names have been changed to protect the participants’ privacy.
- (4) Differently, traditional career theories state that language is merely representational, providing a mean to express a reality that has a prior existence.

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