

CIVIC AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE AND MIGRANTS IN ITALY¹

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Introduction

This paper is based on the content analysis of the focus group discussions. The analysis, which is at its preliminary stage, followed the grid provided by the WP6 coordinators, that was used to build the system of content categories classification within NVivo8.

We are not presenting, however a detailed description of the contents/categories of the analysis: we will instead focus our attention on some key issues that captured our attention, basically related to youths' access to resources, power relationships, and opportunities to participate in the Italian society. Three main questions have guided our analysis:

Youths' perceived opportunities for participation: (why) are they limited?

Which are the layers of identity relevant for participation: Nation, Ethnicity, Gender or what?

Youth's forms of participation: how much space for unconventional experiences?

Procedure and methods

Participants were selected adopting a purposeful targeted sampling strategy in order to include individuals with varying degrees of civic and political involvement. The focus group grid and the photo provided by WP6 coordinators were used.

Participants

Eight focus groups involving 56 participants [28 males, 28 females; 27 adolescents, mean age 17 years, 29 young people, mean age 22 years)

Four focus groups involved Italians (2 adolescents, 2 young people)

- Adolescents 1 (n = 7) (3 males, 4 females; 3 out of 7 declare themselves as formally involved)
- Adolescents 2 (n = 6) (2 males, 4 females; 4 out of 6 are members of scout associations)
- Young people 1 (n = 8) (4 males, 4 females, 4 out of 8 are involved)
- Young people 2 (n = 6) (3 males, 3 females, 3 out of 6 are involved)

Three focus groups involved Albanians (2 young people, 1 with adolescents)

- Young people 1 (n = 8) (4 males, 4 females, 4 actively involved in university organizations, 4 students non actively involved)
- Young people 2 (n = 7) (4 males, 3 females, non students have low levels of involvement)
- Adolescents (n = 7) (3 males, 4 females, 3 formally involved)

One focus group involved Moroccan adolescent (n = 7) (4 males, 3 females, the majority has low levels of participation)

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Results

Youths' perceived opportunities for participation: (why) are they limited?

The Italian society was depicted by our participants as a *gerontocratic* society, with a negative attitude toward young people. System responsiveness to young people's issues and needs is low, because politicians, but also people in charge, are old and distant from young people, and they are not able to understand nor interested to listen to young people's voice. According to young people's opinion, among adults negative representations of youth (as at risk and non competent people) are prevalent compared to positive ones (as engaged and active people): negative representations are used to justify the limited attention devoted by society and politicians to young people's ideas and opinions on political and social issues. Even though such a negative attitude toward young people is not limited to political parties, in these groups it is particularly strong: a young Italian mentioned a very negative experience, where the political group he belonged to, progressively limited younger members' freedom to express personal views and opportunity to participate, thus reinforcing the idea that young people have limited power and are exploited. Tokenism remains the most common experience of participation allowed to young people, in politics but also in school.

The negative attitude of the Italian society towards young people was considered the most important obstacle to youth's participation, however, in particular among migrants, two other important obstacles were mentioned:

- lack of material resources (economic self sufficiency, time)
- the Italian law concerning citizenship.

There was a general agreement that material problems and difficulties related to basic/primary needs, inhibit participation: levels of awareness and worry about this issue were higher among young people compared to adolescents, and in particular among young non student migrants, who know from personal experience, what it means to live in economic difficulties.

The Italian law about citizenship is very restrictive: young migrants have no access to vote, and even if they were born in Italy or have been living in Italy for many years, when they reach legal age they become not regular, unless they get a resident permit for study, work or other reasons.

These particular features of the Italian Law engender negative feelings among young migrants, particularly among young Albanians, who know Italian laws better than Moroccans.

The scarce attention of the Italian society toward young people results in negative psychological consequences: adolescents perceive themselves discouraged and powerless, young adults are pessimist, and disappointed: those who had previous negative experiences of participation share a condition of learned helplessness. This general picture leads to indifference toward social and political issues, with few notable exceptions, which shed some light on this "dark" picture: a university students' association became a relevant subject of the local community, gaining the respect of the local municipality. Coherence and commitment, together with attention to group processes and listening attitude, are considered the successful characteristics of this experience.

Which are the layers of identity relevant for participation: Nation, Ethnicity, Gender or what?

Our results provide some support for the existence of an identity pathway related to collective action, more relevant for migrant adolescents compared to native ones.

Young Albanians experience the condition that Gonzalez and Brown (2003) named "dual identity" pointing to the concurrent workings of identities: they want to preserve their ethnic identity even if they want to be full Italian citizens. For Moroccans girls the situation is quite different: refusal of their own ethnic identity and aspiration for an Italian/Western one is prevalent and is basically related to perception of gender discrimination in the Muslim traditional culture.

Youths' forms of participation: how much space for unconventional experiences?

Young people are not involved in unconventional forms of participation, even if they are considered typical of this age period. Reasons provided by young Albanians to explain why they did not participate to demonstrations for migrants' rights and to other forms of protest, referred in particular

to fear of further discrimination and of negative consequences, such as police violence and brutality. Young Italians judged unconventional forms of participation ineffective and sometimes counterproductive.

Experiences of participation are limited to those offered by mediating institutions like family and school (Flanagan, 2003). Family (parents above all) provides values and information about how the “outer world” works and about access to groups and networks. Parents frame youth culture and ethic (i.e., ideas about social responsibility). With such assumptions, it is not surprising that family is the most relevant source of influence for younger generations. According to our participants’ opinions, school is a significant source of information about social and political issues, and it should have the explicit task to promote political and social involvement, by increasing young people critical consciousness and avoiding any kind of manipulation.

Traditional mass media (TV, in particular) represent another important source of influence and information because of their popularity, used to perpetuate stereotypes and to set the political agenda for ordinary people. Internet provides access to different sources of information, and gives opportunities to express and share opinions. However its perceived influence is limited compared to TV, due to the fact that is less accessible.

Conclusion

In this short presentation we summed up some key points that we have found interesting in adolescents’ and young people’s discourses about participation. We would like, however, to emphasize also some missing points. The first one is Europe (European identity), that is not mentioned by a single participant during the focus group discussions. The second missing point is media activism, despite the growing popularity of social networks sites, and the amount of time that young generations spend on the web.

Youths’ discourses and reported experiences reveal low levels of collective consciousness and indicate that collective youth efforts in the public sphere are very limited and are not nurtured by the desire to change the outer social world and by self-confidence: family and proximal social networks represent the only conceivable sphere of influence, suggesting that reciprocal trust is a basic condition in order to initiate and sustain participation.

References

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