

Title

Making dream jobs come true: transitions to new attractive professional worlds for young people

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Executive Summary

The difficulties that, in general, young people face today in their transitions to adulthood, and in their process of transition to work, in particular, have turned this social category a privileged target of public policies, as well as one of the most productive research topics in contemporary sociology. In a context of labour market flexibility and volatility and of precarious wages and work contracts, young people are forced to deal with insecurity and versatility elements that increasingly characterise their transitions to work.

However, the value of work still occupies a central position in young people's lives. Not only it continues to be a core aspect, but also their attitudes regarding this dimension of life are more demanding. In the scope of work, they wish for an ideal combination of extrinsic values (such as security and remuneration, for example) and of intrinsic values (such as personal achievement and interest in the task). An ambition which fulfilment was mainly associated to prestigious professions ratified by academic diploma, such as physician, lawyer, engineer or architect. The *dream* jobs used to involve the selective mediation of a higher education.

In the present context, the promises of university that would inform such dreams (security, stability, employment, social status, etc) have been called into question. The diploma no longer guarantees the access and progress within a *career*, or even a job corresponding to the certified training. In the present context of school crisis and labour uncertainty, the academic promises compete with the promises mediated by other social contexts, such as the media and youth cultures.

Young people's dream jobs are no longer necessarily about high-status careers within the formal education. Other type of activities and occupations have integrated the professional expectations of an increasing number of young people, promoting their incursion in new educational and labour territories, as well as of new ways of experiencing transitions to adulthood - subjects that require further research.

With the purpose of exploring a national and international new sociological research topic, this project aims to account for the *aspirations, projects and pathways of transitions to work* in activities that are currently very attractive for new generations, but still vaguely institutionalised regarding resources and established paths of professionalization: fashion, dance music, sports, and cooking. Regarding the empirical observation universes, the analysis will focus on recent occupations in Portugal, such as being a *model* or a *DJ*, as well as professions that have suffered intense processes of symbolic revalorisation and social reconfiguration, such as being a *football player* or a *cook* (as in *chef*).

The core question of the research project is to identify what type of objective and subjective configurations underlie the pathways of young people's transitions to work within the scope of these new dream jobs. The objective configurations refer to the identification of itineraries, of socialization conditions and mobilized resources (social, material and symbolic) in having access to performing these activities; the subjective configurations refer to the symbolic frames (aspirations, expectations and work values) underlying the accomplishment of the *dream of becoming someone* in these activities and its accomplishment as a project and a trajectory.

Methodologically, the research will be based on protocols of a qualitative nature, where the *word* and the *experience* of young people will occupy a privileged position. It is an innovative methodological approach, considering the place of extensive and quantitative methodologies regarding national and international research on transitions to work, which often conceal the subjective experiences of these transitions.

The analytical perspective that grounds this project is also innovative, by looking at youth cultures as context of *production* and of *transition* to work and to adulthood, and not only as contexts of consumption, leisure and cultural identification. Therefore, two established paradigmatic traditions with only occasional dialogue in youth studies will be intertwined: the one on transitions to adulthood (also designated as youth transitions), and the one on youth cultures (often referred as scenes, tribes or youth subcultures).

This project will, definitely, contribute to bridge an important gap in the theoretical and empirical heritage of youth sociology. Not only will it add new knowledge - scientifically validated by an experienced research team on the topics being analysed - on worlds of youth labour still sociologically understudied; but it also will

unveil some myths about worlds daily explored by the *media*, often holding up unrealistic dreams that, in time, may gain features of illusion or disillusion.

Theoretical background

Over the last few years, transitions from school to work have acquired an increasing expression in the European and Portuguese sociological research. These studies have especially focused on the relationships between formal school (more massified and democratised), the social value of diplomas that it provides (that some estimate as in decrease), and the adequacy of academically certified qualifications in the current labour market (more segmented, constricted, and flexible). Two youth populations have been the growing target of these studies: low educated young people, namely the ones dropping out school without completing compulsory education; and the higher educated young people, whose integration in the labour market has become increasingly difficult.

If many of these studies approached youth population in a transversal way, others have been focusing on transitions to work of specific professional segments. These often cover *traditional* dream professions, with a high prestige heritage, certified by higher education and strongly regulated by formal institutions: being a lawyer, an architect, an engineer or an artist, professional activities in which transitions from school to work have already been extensively studied in Portugal.

However, the previous virtuous relationship between the type and level of education, profession, remuneration and social status is no longer certain, a presumed reality that young people and their families are increasingly aware of. This context, related with deep transformations in the labour market, gives good reason for the decrease of the *optimistic demand* concerning formal education, as well as for some dissatisfaction with the more normative pathways that shape transitions from school to work. This set of conditions lead some young people to look for alternative options and pathways regarding school and work.

At the same time, other extra-school training contexts have been increasingly emerging to meet the accomplishment of new dreams, aspirations, and youth expectations, sometimes at high prices, where private institutions are concerned. In fact, public, modern and formal school is not always open to all young people's professional ambitions, giving rise to post-school or parallel socialization processes, within specific social contexts (non formal or informal) created for young people or produced by themselves, within the scope of their youth cultures.

This is the case of schools or academies that offer modelling, football, DJ'ing or cooking courses in Portugal. Spread across the country, but mainly concentrated in its main cities, they try to respond to the training solicitation (more than qualification) of young people involved in these activities. At the base of this solicitation is the fact that these activities have recently been subjected to a set of social reconfigurations and of symbolic (re)valorisations:

- *professionalization*, that is, the process of progressive professional institutionalization as opposed to amateur forms of performance, through the constitution of professional associations, the organization of common events for professionals, and the claiming for legal regulation and codes of conduct;

- *criativization*, that is, the process of displacement of a mostly technical and practical discourse informing the practices of professionals, to a discourse of innovation and authorship, with the subsequent expansion and multiplication of ways of doing differently these same practices.

- *idealization*, that is, the process that systematically associates these activities to certain values such as success, fame, creativity, autonomy and self-expression, as well as to certain lifestyles characterized by *glamour*, celebrity and cosmopolitanism;

- *mediatization*, that is, the process of intense public exposure of these professional activities and some of its actors, daily mediated in magazines, TV programs and contests.

Despite being expected specific interactions and transactions in each one of the activities under study, this set of processes have redefined and promoted the status of each activity within the hierarchy of social and symbolic legitimization of occupations (fact that can be observed, for example, in the recent change of place of these occupations in the International Standard Classification of Occupations 2008, that will be obligatorily used in the 2011 Census). In Portugal, if until recently football playing or cooking were only modest *métiers*, or DJ'ing and modelling were not promising jobs, nowadays all of these occupations are perceived as successful professions, taking part of the professional horizons of an increasing number of young people – even if with different possibilities of achievement, depending on diverse social conditions background.

In a context of decreasing social value of diplomas and of the working conditions they can provide, these activities are perceived as areas with symbolic status. While in other professional activities youth labour force has only access to marginal positions, within the scope of the activities that we intend to analyse the youth labour force and the young body are hyper-valued, being the youth condition itself, namely its corporal condition, a privileged capital.

Research Plan

The main aim of the project is to know how those structural processes have been reflected on the pathways and on the subjectivities of some youth segments, namely regarding their professional dimension. Which meanings are attributed to the scope of activities under analysis by young people that intend to pursue them professionally? What role these meanings play in the construction of youth identities? How are the processes of transitions to work in each of those activities set? Which effects the choice of becoming a professional in one of these activities has regarding transition to adulthood, and in the several dimensions of young people's lives (family, school, social)?

With the purpose of finding an answer to these questions, the project's research design is composed of three analytical dimensions:

- dream production pathways: how is the idealization order of the professions socially produced and experienced by young people who have embraced them; which are its subjective meanings; which means and social contexts inform and set the dream jobs (media cultures, class cultures, family cultures, school cultures and youth cultures);

- dream accomplishment pathways: social circumstances that involve the transformation of the dream into a project; strategies, capitals and resources (social, cultural and material) mobilized to that purpose; and possible supports, negotiations, compromises and conflicts resulting from that option in several social spheres of young people's lives (family, school, peer groups); strategies and learning contexts of the required skills;

- dream professionalization pathways: social aspects that involve the professional integration of young people in the activities being analyzed, and strategies, capitals and resources (social, cultural and material) mobilized to that purpose; possible (mis)matching between the dream, the project and the realities of professional performance; (non)correspondences between the job dreamed and the real professional activity.

The prescribed linearity in this scheme is purely analytical. This research will attend to the fact that, considering the current social and economic conditions, transition to the labour market can no longer be thought as a *moment* in the life of young people, confined to the phase after concluding their education and finding a stable job, as it was perceived in the past. Considering the current de-linearization of youth transitions, the transition pathways have to be conceptually perceived as *processes*, which are increasingly complex and extended, fragmented and unstable, with no pre-determined paths and at any moment reversible, where an heterogeneity of training, labour and social experiences can be accumulated in a parallel and/or successive way.

The dream jobs being analysed can be distant and blur as to their accomplishment. Its achievement may result from an opportunity that occurs (a casting, for example), a resource or skill that is valued by someone in a given moment (such as *scouters*, in the case of football players or models), without obeying to the definition of a long or medium term project. Other type of trajectory might take place from previous and clearly defined experiences, based on a relatively well defined project, grounded in an analysis of investments needed and the resources available.

At the same time, the option for an investment in this type of activities or capitals does not have to be mandatorily made at the expense of dropping out of formal education. It can be combined with attending the official school trajectory or the involvement in other more conventional professional activities. Youth enrolment in these activities often begins as a leisure activity, with the simple recreational goal of occupying some spare time or of expressing a personal identity through consumption practices.

For some young people, in due course, they might begin to experience their hobby as a professional possibility, not only as an *art of existence*, but also as a *way of subsistence*, whether in the form of *odd jobs* (temporary) or as a *career* (with a future). Faced with the perspective of unemployment or job precariousness, the opportunity of transforming *leisure* or *consumption passions* into regular and lucrative sources of income begins to be outlined, at a given moment in the life of some young people, as a tangible and feasible alternative.

In this sense, young people who choose the activities under analysis end up obtaining a peculiar fusion between identity and work, between the life project they

built from leisure and consumption practices and the life means needed for its autonomy, or even independence, keeping themselves fully enjoying the youth scenes they take part in. They are not just able *to live for* youth scenes but also *to live from* youth scenes. And this is not only real for the case of underground scenes such as music or body modification, but also for youth scenes that are currently under the spotlights, such as fashion, sports, dance music or even cooking.

On the other hand, occupations like being a model, a DJ, a football player or a chef can provide young people with a *full-time* sense of identity, positive professional gratification and social distinctiveness, in a context where the models of positive identification are becoming rare within the school and labour spheres. In fact, the actual public visibility of these professional practices and some of their actors, offer young people a very positive identity reference, associated to the youth ideal itself.

The main hypothesis of this research project is that the choice of these professional activities is, at the same time, a strategy to extend and to accomplish a fulltime personal and social identity that often is not allowed to be expressed within the more conventional professional spheres; and a decision that shows new ways for young people to cope with uncertainty in the processes of transition to the labour market and to adulthood.

Therefore, to capture youth cultures from the perspective of their production possibilities, and not just as consumption spheres, allows broadening their theoretical scope as transitional contexts – where professional dreams and expectations emerge and training and labour opportunities are provided. Simultaneously, to observe youth transitions also as a process of *becoming* someone allows seeing the particularity of transitions to work also as an expression of socialization and (professional) identity construction.

Methods

Methodologically, the research will be based on protocols of a qualitative nature, where the *word* and the *experience* of young people will occupy a privileged position. We place ourselves within an active listening perspective regarding the actors involved in the processes of *making a living*, articulating their subjectivities and biographic trajectories with the conditionings and objective opportunities that underlie these dynamics.

For each of the four activities analyzed, and confining our scope to the Lisbon Metropolitan Area, two contrasting contexts will be selected. In each one of these contexts the following methodological technique will be conducted : a) two *focus group* of young people beginning their training (a total of 16 focus groups); b) four in-depth individual interviews to criteriously selected young people based on the defined profile-types resulting from the *focus group* material (a total of 16 interviews to young people beginning their training); c) four interviews to the parents of the same young people selected for the interviews on the topic of their professional integration (a total of 16 interviews to parents).

Regardless of the previous contexts of training, we will also conduct in-depth biographic interviews to young people already professionalized and integrated in the

labour market, namely those who stand for examples of success in each area of professional performance, representing role models for young people in the beginning of their career. For these biographic interviews, eight young people will be selected for each of the four areas of activity analyzed (a total of 32 interviews).

In close articulation with the discourse and biographic focus, we will also explore the protocols of direct observation and audiovisual recording 1) in context of practical learning of young people in training (practical lessons); and 2) in situations of professional performance of those who are already working. It will then be possible to have access to discourse areas that would be difficult to capture only through individual or collective interviews conducted in a formal context.

The relationship that social agents establish with the values embodied in their multiple processes of socialization cannot be understood as something that takes place in a total conscious and reflexive way. The values are, to a great extent, embodied and activated in practice, revealing themselves in the social action of agents regarding specific objects and situations and, therefore, being difficult to express discursively. Hence the added value, in terms of scientific knowledge, of observation and video recording (to be submitted for subsequent content analysis) of those privileged moments: the first, regarding the pedagogical practices that promote the embodiment of work skills and values required to perform each activity; the second, corresponding to the activation of those skills and values while pursuing the professional activity.