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Reflexivity and Self-development of Competencies as Key Drivers in Individuals' Learning and Career Paths: cases from Italy

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ABSTRACT The article is aimed at analysing the qualitative interviews (in the form of short life stories) carried out within the Learning and Career Paths (LCP) project in Italy. Theories, such as those of reflexivity, agency, self-construction, competencies, and transformation put forward by relevant authors in the sociological and educational field, are used as a conceptual framework to review a limited but significant number of individual experiences. In particular, Archer's model of reflexive types helps in going through the conducts of interviewed subjects (which were 21 in total), guided by reflexive stances. Such behaviours are very individual-specific, but they are all converging towards a more or less successful self-identity construction that allows an employment status, as well as kinds of satisfaction and social recognition. Such a construction seems reinforced in the different cases by an active, intentional, self-development of competencies whose specific, practice-based components are underpinned by fundamental cognitive, social and emotional components (according to Boyatzis' scheme), continuously nurtured by formal and experiential learning. The research outcomes illustrated in the article mainly regard the subjective, 'agentic', sides of individual behaviours. They are intended as having some relevance for new development hypotheses in the field of lifelong career guidance (LLCG), whose policies and practices should be increasingly focused on the specificities of individual trajectories.

Qualitative Research about Individual Trajectories

Qualitative research, based on stories, narratives, individual case studies and other methods entailing in-depth and non-structured interviews, has long since acquired a specific role in the realm of social sciences (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002). It can offer meaningful insights on phenomena that are central in the life of individuals and groups, on the basis of kinds of listening which have been defined as resonant, curiosity-driven and challenging (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Far from being an alternative to quantitative methods, qualitative research can represent a complement to broad-spectrum studies (Elliot, 2005). The combination of quantitative and qualitative research outcomes can provide useful supports for the decisions of policy makers and other stakeholders in different fields, including those of employment, education, continuous vocational training, and lifelong career guidance (LLCG) (Tomassini et al, 2011). LLCG – although in this article it is not at all discussed in terms of its role and methods of intervention – is assumed as the final recipient of this contribution. This article tends to deepen some aspects of the themes of reflexivity and competence development in career paths through a series of theoretical and analytical remarks. The relative abundance of the former is to be related to the sake of clearer foundations for a kind of research

that should be expanded to other cases in the future. All in all, the article aims at presenting and commenting on some of the findings of the Learning and Career Paths (LCP) project, promoted by the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop) (2014), to which all articles in this special issue of *Research in Comparative and International Education* are in different ways related. In particular, this article offers direct evidence from some Italian cases, regarding people, in different social and professional conditions, interviewed during the LCP project. The article tries to shed some light on the processes through which individuals with different backgrounds tend to improve or maintain their own positions within specific learning and career paths. In such processes – which can be typically considered as social agency processes – a fundamental role is played by reflexivity, assumed as the fundamental self-guiding function which regulates subjective deliberations and undertakings, more or less successfully related to objective circumstances. Among such deliberations and undertakings, those hinging on self-development of competencies are considered as the most strategic.

A deeper understanding of such processes might be helpful towards a necessary reinforcement of LLCG policies in Italy, which, as briefly stated in the conclusion, should aim at endorsing the potential of individuals. Such a valorisation could be strategic in the Italian situation in which people have fewer formal learning occasions, lower employment and career chances, and weaker protective nets than in other advanced European countries.

In the following section, a theoretical framework is presented aimed at clarifying the conceptual references used in the analysis, while in section 3 some outcomes of the Italian LCP research study are presented. The final remarks offer some insights that emerged from the analysis and could be useful – as stated above – for policy development in the field of LLCG, as well as for new research experiences.

Reflexivity and Self-development of Competencies: some theoretical references

Reflexivity

Coherently with the nature of the LCP project, the Italian section has been developed following a theoretically open approach to issues of learning and career paths. Such an approach stems from a broad-scope phenomenological view of the human existence, whose social sides hinge on experiences of intentional choice and action in concrete situations. The analytical focus is not on large scale phenomena regarding institutions or markets, but on human beings, acting and experiencing individuals, considered in their myriad of relations with others and in their meaning-making efforts in their subjective lives (Zahavi & Overgaard, 2008). However, the phenomenological view is enriched with constructs having different origins and references. In particular, the crucial issue of reflexivity – here assumed as a main analysis driver due to its importance for understanding individual learning and career processes – is mainly taken from the 'critical realist' Margaret Archer's approach. Within it, far from being considered as a mere individual self-evaluation of actions, reflexivity is seen as a founding moment of human subjectivity, i.e. the stance from which individuals make choices in devising their most relevant courses of action. Reflexivity, in this perspective, is defined as 'the regular exercise of the mental ability, shared by all normal people, to consider themselves in relation to their (social) contexts and vice versa' (Archer, 2007, p. 4). Reflexivity is seen as directly supported by the 'internal conversation' through which social actors give order to their ultimate concerns, generate their reflexive deliberations, and define their projects and commitments, more or less successfully related to the objective circumstances (Archer, 2003). The factors of autonomy and independence of judgement are stressed in this view, even in terms of their absence, in order to overcome any determinism regarding the interrelation between individual agencies and social structures. Such interrelations are certainly of a paramount importance, but have to be analysed considering the specific role they can play in different cases and not in terms of direct, more or less stereotypic, effects. Following such a direction, human trajectories within the learning and career paths can be observed as a sequence (obviously not an ordered and not necessarily successful sequence) of concerns, projects and practices (Archer, 2007). 'Concerns' regard what the subjects wish to realise on the basis of their 'internal goods'. 'Projects' stem from the concerns and are regulated by specific

individual 'micro-politics'. 'Practices' have to be sustainable by the subjects and capable to bring them to a plausible modus vivendi with their own reality, reaching a sustainable alignment between personal and social identity. Of course every single reflexive behaviour differs from any other, but some regularities can be identified. In particular, Archer, on the basis of extensive experiences of qualitative research, identifies four fundamental types of 'reflexives': (i) autonomous reflexives, open to change, mainly acting on the basis of specific action strategies and clear calculations of ends and means ratios; (ii) communicative reflexives, more dependent on judgements of people in their 'contextual continuity', frequently resisting to change; (iii) meta-reflexives, mostly interested in ultimate goals and values (keen in discerning those to be pursued from those to be rejected), and usually searching for roles that fit with their aspirations; (iv) fractured reflexives, who frequently fail their courses of action, being unsure about their position in society and in work systems.

Such a scheme is largely applicable to learning and career paths dynamics. It can be easily used along with other schemes looking at individuals in terms of their own professional decision-making styles, such as the one which distinguishes aspirational, evaluative, strategic, and opportunistic styles (Bimrose & Barnes, 2010).

For the analysis of research outcomes, Archer's approach, although theoretically very far from Giddens's view of reflexivity within human agency [1], can be integrated by some of the constructs generated by the latter within his influential work. For instance, it seems important to recover the sense of openness of human action to unintended outcomes. It seems important to acknowledge that the stress on intentionality, intrinsic in any idea of agency, does not rule out the existence of unconscious motivations for certain courses of actions and the possibility that actions taken by an actor might lead to unintended outcomes, unfavourable compared to the expected results. Therefore social actors have to continuously activate moments of reflexive monitoring of the results of their own action, of the unintended outcomes, and of previously unacknowledged conditions of it. Moreover, it is useful to maintain that actors have to be able to express different levels of accountability of their own action, which are of the greatest importance for their participation in relevant social processes. The actor's ability to formulate discursive accounts about her own experience is fundamental from this point of view, even if such accounts cannot be deemed as complete due to the fact that a certain amount of tacit knowledge (often not even known by the actor that holds it) is nested in every human action (Giddens, 1979).

In the perspective of the reflexive modernization or neo-modernity (Beck et al, 1994), it is important to underline that such accountability and reflexive monitoring processes are not mere instruments to make individual action more self-verifiable, but they constitute the basis of the social actor's identity itself. In the 'neo-modern' reality, the individual self is intended as a reflexive construction that takes place within the boundaries of a dialectical relationship with the structure. Such a reflexive self-construction has to face 'a puzzling diversity of options and possibilities' (Giddens, 1991) inside a reality that is full of uncertainties and contradictions. The neo-modern age, in this sense, is an age of individualisation, in which human identity appears in the light of a sort of shift 'from a given into a task' (Beck & Beck-Gemshein, 2002). And in which the reflexive relationship of every actor with her structure requires increasing levels of autonomy, subjectivity, responsibility, and choice.[2]

The individualisation issue has an important correlation in the processes through which social actors perceive their role in work and social participation settings. Important inputs at this regard come from the concepts of reflective learning and transformational learning elaborated over time, starting from the 1970s up to recent periods (Mezirow, 1981; Mezirow et al, 2009). Mezirow's constructivist model – generated on the basis of important large-scale empirical research studies – tries to explain the ways in which the existential challenges of adulthood involve processes of transformations in meaning perspective or perspective transformations. The 'meaning perspective' is composed of psycho-cultural assumptions within which new experiences are assimilated and transformed. The process of perspective transformation is therefore equated to the emancipatory process whereby individuals become critically aware of their own assumptions and take action to overcome them. Such a process is articulated into different learning levels, from a partial re-elaboration of well-known meanings and related practices, up to an aware perspective transformation involving the subject's meanings and courses of action. Even from this viewpoint, the reflexive dimension has to be seen as not merely instrumental, but constitutive of the subject

and her own identity as a social actor. Such a dimension plays a fundamental role in the perspective transformation processes regarding the disorienting dilemmas that increasingly characterise non-linear life and career paths and whose solutions often demand deep changes (Mezirow, 1991). In a quite similar vein, within the phenomenological view, the dilemmatic nature of periods and events that lead to reshaping and turnarounds are seen as fateful moments. These are moments requiring imagination in order to cope with changing situations, i.e. 'times when events come together in such a way that an individual stands ... at a crossroads in his existence' (Giddens, 1991, p. 113).

Another important correlation of the individualisation issue has to be seen in the ways in which people find their place and evolve over time in work and organisation processes. At this level, one has to witness the increasing segmentation and breakdown of career paths, more and more evident in many sectors of productive life, particularly the most dynamic ones. The ideas of 'boundaryless career' or 'protean career' reinforce the understanding of career trajectories as highly individualised sequences of roles and activities, to a different extent tied to specific organisation settings (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Briscoe & Hall, 2006). In particular, according to the protean career approach, subjective factors and individually defined goals encompass the whole working life space, driven by psychological attitudes and values (e.g. freedom, self-direction), and not only by objective, 'rational-choice-like' factors, such as pay, rank, or power (Hall, 2002).

Self-development of Competencies

The increasingly open nature of careers and working activities propels the importance of competencies, which could be considered as relevant articulations of individual agency and reflexivity. Competencies self-development tends to become a more and more central aspect of individual agencies in learning and career processes, and entail a new kind of convergence between formal, informal and non-formal types of learning (Werquin, 2010). Companies currently tend in fact to encourage models of competencies self-development based on autonomy, initiative and responsibility, i.e. on individual qualities that are strongly needed within increasingly dynamic organisational systems. Within autonomous work too, often nested in collaborative networks of different kinds, continuous self-development of competencies is even more relevant (Winterton et al, 2005). What seems mostly important in terms of the reflexivity and agency dynamics is that competence development has largely to do with the self-identity construction process. Competency, in fact, can be seen as an underlying characteristic of an individual ability, causally-related to effective or superior performance and expressed through sets of behaviours organised around specific intents (Boyatzis, 2008). The intent is the driving force of any action performed by a subject; it sustains any individual action through knowledge, vision, values and other elements that keep the individual in effective interaction with the job demand (in terms of task, function and role), as well as with the organisational environment characteristics (culture, climate, structures, systems, etc.). At least for analytical purposes, the behavioural approach to competencies (generally used in support of goals of performance measurement and talent identification in big companies) can go hand in hand with the phenomenological approach to reflexive self-identity. In these terms, the individuals' development can be considered as strictly linked to a complex set of competencies including: (i) cognitive competencies, such as systemic thinking and pattern recognition; (ii) emotional intelligence competencies, including self-awareness, and self-management competencies, such as emotional self-awareness and emotional self-control; and (iii) social intelligence competencies, including social awareness, and relationship management competencies, such as empathy and teamwork. The ways in which individuals are able to self-handle such sets of competencies seem to be directly co-related to the success of their self-identity construction (and to the acquisition of a sustainable knowledge ability status as well) within their career trajectories.

Such a perspective on competencies can be in many ways used as a support for a better understanding of individual strategies in career and learning paths. It provides ways for analysing the components of self-constructions which might be at the same time self-consistent and resonant with the characteristics of the work and life contexts in which they have to take place and function. The intentional side of competencies put forward by Boyatzis can be easily co-related with the reflexive subjective stance brought about by sociological non-deterministic views. Individuals, like those interviewed within the LCP project, can be seen as more or less consciously putting in place a

kind of continuous reflexive self-understanding and self-evaluation in regard of their own competencies sets. Such self-understanding and self-evaluation represents an internal guide to both career steps and to supportive learning choices, open of course to differently successful outcomes. An assumption of this kind is, for instance, made in a post-structuralist perspective – based on both theoretical and empirical research – whereby individuals are seen as able and, indeed, needing to exercise their own independence in work and learning choices in order to maintain their sense of self and identity (Billet & Pavlova, 2005).

From this kind of viewpoint the idea of lifelong learning as an intertwining of formal, informal and non-formal components appears much more in the form of a canvas, in which social actors paint their own trajectories in the social-productive world, rather than in that of a rigid jigsaw built-up by social, corporate or educational planners. In many ways, the added value of qualitative research can be found in the possibility of shedding light on such trajectories and of identifying significant issues regarding the self-handling of individual competencies as part of wider – for better or worse – self-constructing effects.

However, real research added value seems reachable only when the so far mentioned agentic, intentional, aspects are balanced, taking into account a number of inertial aspects which surround every individual trajectory. They do not necessarily impede individual career and learning choices, but one has to be prepared to find them in action within specific cases, as limiting factors of the capacity for specific choices and even for the development of a plausible sense of self and independence as well. Such inertial factors are frequently linked to personal propensities and bents and to attitudes resulting from experiences and traumas, but they also depend upon social conditions, such as those related to the dynamics of repetition of social and working practices within a given field studied by the sociology of habitus (Bourdieu, 1980). Within such dynamics, the innovative practices are not impossible, but have to go through complex processes. Individuals who are professionally grown-up within static organisational contexts are less favoured in the formation and development of new competencies sets, when the latter are needed, in terms either of internal components (for instance, those empathic traits which constitute a fundamental aspect of the emotional competencies) or of the 'general intent' which underpins such competencies. Likewise, as observed by Boyatzis (2012), for some people, postponing over time choices concerning change can lead to a point in which the reaction reflexes are inhibited, learning cannot take place, and a 'boiled frog effect' becomes manifest.

Stories of Reflexivity and Self-development of Competencies

The stories analysed in the context of the LCP project belong to a sample of 21 people (13 women and 8 men), with an average age of 46 (in a range between 37 and 51). Among them, 12 hold a university degree, 7 a secondary school diploma and 2 a compulsory school title plus a vocational training certificate. Although the stories do not reflect extraordinary lives, they do represent life and career paths which have been deemed of some relevance in relation to the above presented issues. The protagonists told facts whose truthfulness cannot be ascertained, but their most valid contribution was the opening of their own reflexive sphere, as the interviews were conducted less towards the acquisition of factual data and more towards the understanding of internal motives, strategies and reflexive stances.

The differences among cases cannot be fully explained through the types identified by Archer (2007, 2010). However, the latter offered significant hints for the 'clusterisation' of cases and for the identification of traits that are crucial in learning and career paths, such as those related to dynamics of self-construction, self-handling of competencies sets, intentionality, and participation in social contexts. The Archerian 'autonomous reflexive' traits largely cover the cases grouped in the first of the three clusters generated during the analysis of the interviews. Cluster A includes in fact the rather dynamic stories of nine people characterised by work and life conditions which can be considered typical of a knowledge-based economy and society, although marked – like Italy in present times – by a deep economic crisis. These are, for instance, the cases of people who created micro-enterprises in advanced sectors (e.g. solar energy equipment) or held significant roles in companies (like in marketing or financial analysis).

Cluster B also includes dynamic life stories, told by eight people in working areas which are not typically knowledge-based, for instance, a retail micro-entrepreneur or a middle-level technician in the clothing industry. They also exhibit traits of autonomous reflexivity, crossed with aspects which are close to the 'meta-reflexive' type (like the case of a woman working in the agriculture-tourism business) or to the 'communicative reflexive' type (in cases of women whose conciliation processes tend to skew more and more towards family).

Cluster C, on its turn, includes three people characterised by limited agency in work contexts and poor learning and career opportunities, within life trajectories that in many ways represent the 'fractured reflexive' type, marked by illness and physical inability, or the 'communicative reflexive', definitively bent over the family side, especially after disappointing work experiences.

Reflexivity

Three of the analysed cases, within Clusters A and B, illustrate the dynamics of a rather careful self-construction in which reflexivity plays a major role. Adelia, a 48-year-old professional and micro-entrepreneur from Northern Italy, is an interesting example of continuous care for the development of a high professional standing and for the preservation of it even within unforeseen events and setbacks. Her working path, initiated before obtaining her bachelor's degree, has definitely all the characteristics of the 'autonomous' type. Adelia is significantly attracted by success in private business and by technology-driven innovations. While studying law, Adelia began collaborating with her father, an accounting professor in a vocational high school, in writing manuals of computer science when computers were just beginning to catch on. Based on this experience, that generated in her a specific aptitude for matching theory and practical implementation, she built a career that went through different phases of dependent and autonomous work, up to the management of complex software systems. However, when a new field (photovoltaic systems) appeared to her as more profitable and rewarding, she did not hesitate to enter such a new area and to find a micro-enterprise with a partner, specialised in electric systems. In doing so she was able to recycle her technological and commercial abilities and some of her previous work relationships. Being reflexive means for Adelia to be constantly in tune with newly emerging technologies and business opportunities. She can positively interact with her partners, clients and stakeholders, but she keeps the last word always to herself. She likes being fully autonomous in her choices.

Diana, a 45-year-old owner of a micro-business in the field of credit collection, also represents a case of strong professional self-identity built on reflexivity, resilience, and a clear drive towards autonomy, in this case not resulting from inner tendencies and a rationally-devised (at least at the beginning) strategy. It was rather a fateful moment that, in an unforeseen way, led Diana towards a new activity that now allows her to survive and, to some extent, thrive. After a somehow tentative professional beginning and the attempt to obtain a university degree in law, Diana had to deal with the breakdown of her marriage, just after having had her third child, and lacking any support from her ex-husband. In these dramatic circumstances, almost casually she found a job with a credit collection agency and step by step reconstructed herself around the profile of an expert in this field. She had ups and downs, she did not go along with the company-head, she changed company, and she created her own business. Overall, she was able to keep the point and to build-up a new career and professional identity with only the help of her older daughter (aged 19) and later on of an IT professional willing to find a different working area. The self-identity construction as micro-entrepreneur appeared – in the analysis of the interview – not only as a matter of hard work, but as the product of careful reflexive monitoring of her capabilities acquisition and of her ability to handle clients as well.

On another side, Mercuzio, a 46-year-old who is currently a night doorman in a hotel, represents a suitable case to describe the characteristics of a reflexive type which seems in-between the previously quoted 'meta-reflexive' and 'fractured'. He is a case of an uncertain self-identity, searched for a long time, but supported by a fickle agency and continuously exposed to the tricks of an irrepressible ego. In his professional life, he crossed several areas. Having begun as a waiter in a coffee shop, he then became an expert in maintenance and reparation of coffee machines. He was a barman, sommelier and restaurant manager. He became a designer (shoe designer for a medium

enterprise in this field, then for a smaller business). He tried to become a professional piano player. His educational path started from a very humble professional certification, than he obtained a kind of high school diploma that allowed him to enrol in university and eventually take a university degree in humanities. Mercuzio acknowledges that his frequent changes are a way to go along with his emotional waves, his agitation and instability, and even more so, he does not want to repress his drive towards a never-ending search.

The transformative equality of reflexivity is present in several cases, often accompanied by episodes of transformative learning on the non-formal or experiential side, and even on the formal side. Transformations in the previously evoked 'meaning perspective' can occur within working lives when the protagonists are able to identify how their own assumptions (and preconceptions too) shape their courses of action and to introduce new perspectives in them. An interesting example on this point is provided by Tatiana, a creative professional in TV direction and video-making. Her life was dramatically changed when, aged in her 30s, she had the chance of practically deepening some already acquired knowledge in film-making when she received a proposal from a documentary-maker to follow him in the shooting of an important video in Guatemala. She had this experience when she was a librarian. So she had to quit her job in order to follow a rare opportunity, dreamt, but previously let go. The lever for change was a sudden reflexive interpretation of some of her basic assumptions (living in a small town of Northern Italy, daughter of a modest petit-bourgeois family, mostly good for a quiet job), and the revamping of her identity as subject in 'mass communication systems' (the area of her degree). The reactivation of her learning capacities in this area were the starting point for an intense rediscovery of capabilities that allowed her to initiate a new path in her life, also allotting a specific important place to continuous learning (very technical private courses) for her own professional development.

More gradually, Roman (one of the Cluster B cases), who was in his 40s, reflexively rediscovered some talents that for a long time he had considered a limit, as sources of success and lasting development. He revalued his innate good temper and his positive attitudes towards social relationships (those allowing him to go through a number of funny temporary jobs for the first part of his life). He understood that on the basis of such positive attitudes he could undertake a new career as a salesman in a big enterprise. Then he went on working hard in his new professional life, up to a point in which he understood he had to change his work and life path. A fateful reflexive moment arose when his father was diagnosed with an illness and the company he worked for would not allow him to have time off to take care of his father. Starting from this episode, Romano reconsidered everything he had done so far and understood that the relational competences he had developed over time can well represent the basis for a further activity phase, transforming himself in an autonomous agent in door-to-door retail.

Self-development of Competencies

In several cases, like those so far mentioned, building a valid (or at least credible) professional identity over time seems largely dependent upon the attention towards a reflexive self-development of competencies. Of course this aspect stands out in proportion to the complexity and dynamicity of the undertaken career processes. In particular, a common trait of the cases in Cluster A (in which the higher level competencies are concentrated) is the full awareness that competencies have to be continuously cultivated during the career course. Working and building or reinforcing competencies, from this viewpoint, are part of a continuum, weaved together through experience, formal education and training and informal learning.

Berta, a 43-year-old marketing and sales expert, comes from an educational background (Slavonic languages and literatures) which is really far away from marketing, and has developed her current professional profile throughout several different experiences. All her steps were object of a careful evaluation of her own success factors and lines of professional development. Berta started as a technical translator in a furniture firm in North-East Italy, in a phase of expansion towards East European markets. Then, she came to master all aspects of both production and marketing, favoured for this second aspect by her availability to move geographically. She learned a lot from an eccentric and creative manager and by the working team she belonged to. Not only did she reach high levels in the organisational hierarchy, managing marketing in first person, but she also

could drive the design (even in the details of the production techniques) of multifunctional, integrated home furnishing systems. Then, when she left the company, she transferred the approach learned in the furniture firm to other sector, as a consultant. Berta's competence in marketing strengthened through a long training (1100 hours on a time span of two years) that her firm, at a certain point, found convenient to sponsor for her. Therefore Berta can be seen as an example of development of technical competencies through formal learning. But in the interview she declared several times that the competencies she deemed most important for her are those of a social and emotional nature, activated through experience. In her opinion, working experience can be successful only if it is formative of human qualities and of related competencies. She referred to her experience as one of learning through an interplay between the cultivation of specific knowledge on the one hand, and interpersonal competencies on the other. Berta believes that technical skills are generally available in organisations, but the problem is that the people who possess them do not know how to use them, how to interact and communicate in order to reach a goal. Possessing technical competence is important, but this is a far cry from actually using it to obtain useful results. A career, in her approach, is mostly a matter of honing social and emotional competencies that have to go along with strictly professional ones.

The importance of the 'human side' of competencies and of an aware, reflexive development of them is reported by different interviewees, especially those inside professions which demand a close contact with clients. Elisabetta, for instance, a 38-year-old who spent most of her working life in open-air markets (Cluster B), tends to consider the ability to be in tune with very different kinds of people and environments as an integral part of her competitive advantage and even her personal well-being. In a very different context, the one of art galleries and high quality creative craft, Sara (30 years old and also a Cluster B case) declared that she always made a good use of her emotional intelligence and claimed herself capable of observing people, feeling their emotions and 'tuning in' very easily with herself and the others.

Within competencies self-development processes, an important role is of course played by education and training, frequently (not always) intertwined with the reflexive strategies related to the career paths. Considering the research outcomes altogether, the rather backward characteristics of the Italian education and training system seem to entail a comparatively higher orientation towards informal rather than formal learning. The latter is anyway a recurrent element of personal and professional reflexive strategies. General education seems mostly esteemed for the opportunities it provides in terms of enhancement of cognitive-cultural abilities (i.e. being able to see a given problem within a wider frame, being able to understand the background of phenomena, etc.) which are always considered as very important by the interviewed, independently of their specific activity. What is learnt within the formal channels is generally considered an important driver for further developments in life and career. School and university are taken as generators of cultural visions and critical attitudes, and not in terms of specific technical preparation, this way confirming a well-known characteristic – their rather abstract nature – of higher studies in Italy.

In many cases, the value of general education seems to be rediscovered after a long time in a sort of reconstruction *d'apres coup* of the function it had in an individual's development. For instance, Adelia, the solar systems entrepreneur, previously software programmer, affirmed that her studies in law helped her to acquire an analytical mind which was subsequently at the basis of her success in understanding all problems with a rather systematic approach. And, at another level, that juridical knowledge was a much better basis than technical knowledge in order to effectively work in software programming for law firms. In such a perspective, the cultural and the practical or instrumental side of knowledge acquired through education are both present.

On another side, Tatiana, the video-maker, affirmed that she profited a lot from the cultural background she absorbed within a very highly theoretical study path (in mass communication, dominated by a character like Umberto Eco who was dean of faculty and teacher on her courses). She had to restart her technical competencies when she decided (not easily and not soon) to become an active member of the 'mass communication system', but the viewpoints she got from her studies were fundamental for her and still in many ways form a sound frame of reference for her activities. Over the time, Tatiana found it very useful to attend courses even when she had to pay for them: she thought they were essential to learn new technologies and new leanings in the area of film-making. Also for Irma, a 45-year-old expert of Eastern cultures and animator of cultural events (Cluster A), it is necessary every now and then to attend courses, seminars or workshops

with relevant characters in her field, even if the fees are high or very high and it can be difficult to take breaks in her professional activity to attend the courses. For these kind of professionals (like in a different way for Berta, as already seen), technical training is a sort of practical complement of a preparation which has different – rather humanistic – roots. At the opposite extreme, as an example of a different way to see technical training, Alberto, a 38-year-old middle level network technician of a software house handling the systems of big public administrations (Cluster A), tended to appreciate technical training not only for its intrinsic value, but as a source of formal recognition. Computer network technicians use to attend different courses, even if not particularly relevant in terms of contents, due to the legitimation they get from such courses. The latter are fully certified by third party bodies and frequently represent indispensable means for accessing software and pieces of equipment which are precluded to non-holders of such certifications. Alberto, too, used to pay good money for such courses which create a significant professional boost.

Concluding Remarks

This article, which solely concerns the Italian case, attempts to comment on some of the LCP project's findings in order to describe how individuals with different backgrounds tend to maintain or improve their own position within specific learning and career paths. Coherently with the mission and limits of a qualitative research study, these findings tend to identify some significant key issues which could highlight important aspects for collective subjects who have interests in the reality itself. In this case such subjects should be decision makers and stakeholders in learning and employment policies, in particular those committed to the development of lifelong career guidance activities.

The role of reflexivity is crucial for any consideration about the individual strategies observed through the interviews. Far from just being mere pawns in wider-scale games within the arenas of learning and employment, the interviewed actors showed marked traits of subjectivity and individuality, expressed through substantial reflexivity in the development of their own paths. This is largely linked, of course, to the above-average characteristics of the sample itself. Although not at all endowed with very high degrees of formal education and social status, the respondents represent a medium-high standard of cognitive, social, emotional (and professional) abilities and competencies. The autonomous reflexive type (mainly looking for success, according to Archer's typology) is prevalent in the sample, together with, to a lesser extent, the meta-reflexive type (mainly moved by ideals). The prevailing individual agency traits are in fact those based on sufficiently self-cleared concerns and projects and aimed at establishing viable modus vivendi despite the contradictions and constraints that are inevitable in every work and life path. Such limits were reinforced by the worsening of structural difficulties in the last six to seven years, due to the current economic crisis, therefore directly or indirectly influencing any individual path.

In the majority of cases, the interviewee's reflective and reflexive attitudes and capabilities seem mainly expressed by competence-centred strategies. As appears in many of the interviewee's narratives, surviving or even thriving in difficult and challenging environments seems to require continuous individual – not institutionally supported – efforts in terms of acquisition, maintenance and development of wide-spectrum competencies. These attitudes seem diffused among autonomous reflexives and meta-reflexives in both knowledge-based and non-knowledge-based activity areas. The presence and effects of such active attitudes in competence development significantly decrease in other reflexivity types in which projects and concerns either follow traditional paths (up to choices simply dictated by family conditions or by limitations linked to health problems) or get more or less lost involved in paths where competence is in fact a non-issue.

As far as the crucial issue of learning is involved, it seems that the relation between formal and informal has to be seen less as a juxtaposition and more as an integration reflexively guided by people themselves. The construction of competencies is often regarded as starting in education (secondary school and university) and not – as one could have expected – in terms of specific professional setups, but mainly of acquisition of enlarged skills for reality interpretation. After the education phases, for the majority of the interviewed people, the competence self-construction process takes place in close relation with the work experience. This is deemed as a wide-spectrum experience, more or less successful in the different cases, but in which the relational and emotional

dimension plays an important role anyway, together with the acquisition of specific knowledge and abilities. The thickness of the latter can be reinforced in some cases by formal learning experiences, mostly highly specific training modules exactly fitting for individual needs in a certain moment. Due to the weakness of the Italian public training and retraining systems, such experiences often have to be accessed on a private basis, even affording significantly high costs. The informal side of learning anyway prevails: in some cases, it also allows some levels of formal knowledge development thanks to opportunities intrinsic to the working networks and the interactions with technologies.

In the perspective briefly sketched above, lifelong career guidance policies and interventions seem of course to be strengthened and oriented towards a reinforcement of individual reflective and reflexive processes. These are intrinsically indispensable in a general situation like the Italian one where people have fewer employment and career opportunities than in other advanced European countries, as well as fewer protective nets. Some forms of dialogical counselling could be very appropriate for the stimulation in each single case of more accurate 'discursive accounts' about the learning and career situation and for the identification of new – even transformative – development paths. From this viewpoint, the narrative-biographical approach that underlays the LCP research project could be also seen as an important methodological perspective to be imported even in the guidance and counselling practices. Among such practices, those developed according to the *bilan de compétences* or the validation of prior learning approaches could profit from dialogical arrangements aimed at retracing the lines of an individual story in terms of agency or structure, self-construction, individualisation, competence, and transformative learning. Such a kind of retracing could be established as a main reference also for other kinds of interventions, like those – of a soft nature – based on reflective questionnaires, or more engaging like in the cases of interventions based on reflective writing, or even those who tend to create self-development groups aimed at discussing learning and career issues among peers.

Notes

[1] Archer criticises the 'conflation', produced by Giddens and several other authors, between 'agency' (the individuals' flows of action) and 'structure' (the rules and resources that hinder or facilitate such individuals' flows). The dialectical implication and mutual constitution that bind together these two components of the structuration of society (Giddens, 1984) sum up, according to Archer, the defects of the 'downward conflation' and the 'upward conflation' intrinsic in different dominant streams of sociological thought. On the former side, society appears as a sort of enlarged repetition of individual actions, while on the latter side individual actions become mere effects of social structure. Agency and structure must be kept well separated according to Archer, this way valorising the role of reflexivity, assumed as an intermediary between the two (Archer, 2007, 2010).

[2] Reflective modernity is deemed by Archer as being an oversimplified thesis. She states that with the advent, development and incipient passing of modernity, there has been not only a continuous growth in the extensiveness of reflexivity, 'but also transformations in: (1) *the scope of reflexivity* (that is the proportion of the population practicing it intensively); (2) *the reach of reflexivity* (that is, in the range of issues addressed reflexively); and (3), most importantly, *the modalities through which reflexivity is exercised*' (2010, p. 5, original emphasis).

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