

Italian Young People Coping with the Consequences of Economic Crisis: an Intersectional Analysis

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to investigate how the current economic crisis is affecting the daily lives and social positions of young people in Italy. On the one hand, starting from analysis of more general statistical evidence on the worsening situation in the labour market, we conduct an intersectional analysis – both intercategory and intracategory – of some indicators in order to shed light on educational and gender differences. On the other hand, we present the results of qualitative research conducted on the experiences and representations of the economic crisis among young people with low or high cultural capital in the city of Milan. The central hypothesis of our work is that ‘the crisis’ is not just a temporary economic conjuncture; it is also a social phenomenon reshaping the social positions of individuals in both structural and subjective terms. Showing how the crisis is affecting different young people in very different ways, the article investigates both structural evidence and subjective interpretations of the crisis.

Key words

Crisis; Youth; Intersectionality; Italy

Resumen

El objetivo de este artículo es investigar cómo está afectando la crisis económica actual a la vida cotidiana y posición social de los jóvenes en Italia. Por un lado, a partir del análisis de evidencias estadísticas de carácter general sobre el empeoramiento de la situación del mercado de trabajo, se realiza un análisis interseccional – tanto intercategórico como intracategórico – de algunos indicadores, con el fin de arrojar luz sobre las diferencias educativas y de género. Por otro lado, se presentan los resultados de una investigación cualitativa sobre las experiencias y representaciones de la crisis económica entre los jóvenes con un capital cultural bajo o alto en la ciudad de Milán. La hipótesis central de este trabajo es que “la crisis” no es únicamente una coyuntura económica temporal;

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también es un fenómeno social que está rediseñando las posiciones sociales de los individuos tanto en términos estructurales como subjetivos. Mostrando cómo la crisis está afectando a diferentes jóvenes de distinta manera, el artículo analiza tanto evidencias estructurales como interpretaciones subjetivas de la crisis.

Palabras clave

Crisis; juventud; interseccionalidad; Italia

Table of contents

1. Introduction	1034
2. Method: an intersectional analysis of the economic crisis	1035
3. The economic crisis in Italy: an overview	1036
4. An intercategorical analysis of the effects of the economic crisis on young Italian adults	1038
5. Representations and perceptions of the crisis among young Italian adults: an 'intracategorical' qualitative analysis	1043
6. Concluding remarks	1046
References.....	1047

1. Introduction

The aim of this article is to investigate some specific aspects of the current economic crisis in Italy, and especially its effects on young people. Starting from analysis of more general statistical evidence on the worsening situation in the country, we develop an intersectional analysis in order to shed light on gender and educational differences. Precariousness and reduced job opportunities, with their consequences on social mobility, constitute only the more explicit and raw evidence of the lived experience of the crisis among young people. Indeed, as the intersectional analysis highlights, these consequences are diversified according to the economic, cultural and social capital of families, to gender and generation position, and to subjective and contextualized perceptions.

Our aim in this article is twofold: on the one hand, we intend to show that 'economic crisis' is too wide and blurred a concept to describe how the current socio-economic conjuncture is affecting different categories of young people in different ways. Hence, in order to move beyond an excessively generic and descriptive analysis of the conjuncture, we propose an intersectional perspective on both quantitative and qualitative materials that we gathered during our research in Italy. The intersectional perspective helps us to conceive the effects of the crisis as differing for different social groups and to consider how categories such as education, gender and generational collocation intertwine to create different constraints and opportunities. On the other hand, our intention is to show how those diverse categories act by not only 'adding' disadvantages or privileges but also creating distinctive and differentiated 'social locations' (Yuval-Davis 2006, McDowell 2012, Anthias 2013). The purpose of the notion of 'social location' is to suggest that categories and social differences are better understood as ongoing processes, forms of active distinction and boundary-making, rather than as empirically given. The notion recognises the importance of context, and it proposes that social hierarchies should be viewed as the specific results of the intersections among different forms of categorization and identification which may assume diverse configurations in different times and contexts and should be treated as emergent rather than pre-given. It suggests that the specific forms of categorization and identification may assume different meanings, prominence and power in different situations, for different audiences and for different goals (Anthias 2013, p. 131). Indeed, social locations are neither the mechanical effects of reified social differences, structural features of society that have consequences on individual lives, nor the personal achievements of autonomous and isolated individuals who can act independently from contextual restraints.

In pursuit of these two goals, we present first a quantitative analysis of Italian data from the European survey 'Statistics on Income and Living Conditions' (SILC) 2006 and 2011. We then present the first results of qualitative research conducted on the experiences and representations of the crisis among young people with either low or high cultural capital in the city of Milan. The aim of the interviews was to investigate personal patterns in experience of crisis, as well as subjective interpretations of the crisis as a social phenomenon affecting social positioning as a whole.

While statistic indicators and intersectional analysis show that traditional social gaps such as gender and education are still fundamentally biased in explaining unemployment and low social mobility, the interviews reveal little awareness of such social inequalities and a more individualized and situated evaluation of one's social position. The consequences of the crisis are perceived mainly in individualized manner as a historical transformation that everyone must face alone in a personal and contextualized manner. Social networks, personal and family resources are mobilized in individualized, pragmatic and immanent solutions often devised from day to day, without the prospect of a structural transformation. Hence, while aspirations remain high and relate to traditional images of social and economic

success, the constraints of individualized action oblige the interviewees to be realistic about the effectiveness of expectations which, on the contrary, are low and sometimes characterized by overt pessimism.

2. Method: an intersectional analysis of the economic crisis

From a methodological point of view, we propose a preliminary quantitative and qualitative intersectional analysis of the situation of Italian young people in order to capture the impact of the current economic crisis on different social locations defined by the intersection of age/generation, education/social class, and gender.

The first step was to adopt an 'intercategorical' (McCall 2005), comparative approach to analyse intersectionality between structural categories. We did not look simply at the effect of education, generational collocation or gender on income and employment status. Instead, we investigated how they interact in specific ways to create distinctive sets of constraints and opportunities. The second step was to move to an 'intracategorical' analysis of how individuals, located at specific intersections of structural categories, give meaning to their social location and act accordingly. We focused on individual agency, whose 'degree of freedom' is shaped by social position and by the specific set of limits and resources created by particular intersections among different social forms of categorization. For the first intercategorical step, we used quantitative data; for the second step, intracategorical qualitative data.

We suggest that adding intercategorical and intracategorical analysis helps «to deliver a convincing methodological convergence between structural categories derived from social theory and the analysis of sociocultural practices» (Bürkner 2012, p. 191). In this way, intersectional analysis may yield better understanding of the interaction between agency and structural constraints. It makes it possible to depict a more complex framework for social action in which both a rigid structural determinism and a naive emphasis on individual creativity or resistance are replaced by a process-centred perspective (Choo, Ferree 2010). Along these lines, we propose a perspective based on a social constructionist approach that considers the position of political subjects and their agency as a contested process of creation, resistance, struggle, and translation in a field of power relations.

In recent years, intersectionality has assumed growing importance as a way to reconcile structure and agency without promoting cultural essentialism (West, Fenstermaker 1995). Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 and denoting a specific tool introduced by US black feminist legal scholarship «to critique single-issues agendas of social movements, be they feminist or antiracism, as well as monist and additive approaches to discrimination and oppression» (Bilge, Denis 2010, p. 4), 'intersectionality' is now considered a perspective useful for understanding how different forms of social categorization intersect to create specific social environments – characterised by specific constraints and opportunities – and affect the individual's capacity to act (Hawkesworth 2003, Dhamoon 2011). It «involves the concurrent analysis of multiple, intersecting sources of subordination/oppression and is based on the premise that the impact of a particular source of subordination may vary, depending on its combination with other potential sources of subordination (or of relative privilege)» (Denis 2008, p. 677).

By considering the effects of a 'matrix of domination' (Collins 1991), intersectional analysis suggests that «systems of oppression or, conversely, systems of advantages cannot be separated out and examined in isolation because they are always enacted together as part of a total system» (Guenther *et al.* 2011, p. 102). Whilst originally developed as a conceptual tool with which to highlight the multiple levels of systems of oppression, today intersectionality is often considered an epistemic perspective useful for understanding the multiple and complex dynamics of boundary work that produce exclusion and belonging, opportunities and

constraints, openings and closures (Nash 2008, Walby *et al.* 2012). It is deemed a useful standpoint from which to analyse how the social context for acting is continuously produced and sustained in situated interactions that create the space for the tactical use of social categories, belonging, social networks and power relations (Valentine 2007, McDowell 2008, Heyse 2010, Levine-Rasky 2011). These are social contexts in which oppression coexists with domination, identities are negotiated and fitted to the situation, structural constraints leave room for resistance, and new restraints are created by new categorical intersections (Purkayastha 2010).

In line with its recent broader use, we are not interested in using an intersectional perspective only to highlight different dynamics of discrimination and exclusion. Instead, we intend to show how the current economic crisis is designing new social dispositions of constraints and opportunities which affect personal capabilities in very different ways. By showing how different configurations of intertwining social categories are reshaping new social positions, we hope to highlight the social and constructed character of such categories, as well as the ongoing interplay between agency and structural positions. We believe that the intersectionality perspective could be a tool useful not only for understanding oppression, discrimination and exploitation, but also, more generally, for focusing on the connections between agency and structural constraints. In fact, intersectionality may foster recognition that categories are socially constructed but, once produced, are also 'structural': they are able to define the context and to promote some courses of actions while hindering others. Moreover, attention to intersections shows that categories such as gender, class, age and belonging, as well as other forms of cultural difference, are neither unitary nor universal and fixed; they may change, and people may change them, in relation to personal capacity, will, and external conditions.

After this presentation of our methodological and theoretical tool of analysis, we now describe the Italian case and the quantitative and qualitative data.

3. The economic crisis in Italy: an overview

We begin with an overview of the effects of economic crisis in recent years. In Italy, the consequences of the recession that began in 2008-2009 have been significant and widespread in all economic sectors, and especially visible in the labour market (Choudhry *et al.* 2010, Istituto Giuseppe Toniolo 2013). The impact has been greater on the most vulnerable groups, especially young people aged under 30, among whom the unemployment rate, in 2013, was more than twice as high as the adult rates (ISTAT 2014a). According to the 2012 OECD Employment Outlook, Italy has been hit hard by the economic crisis since 2010, and unemployment has risen significantly (from 6.7% in 2008 to 12.2% in 2013) (ISTAT 2014a), and so too has the rate of long-term unemployment (from 45.1% of the unemployed in 2008 to 52.5% in 2012) (ISTAT 2013). So-called 'labour market distress' has increased sharply for young people and for low-skilled and prime-age men, while it has remained more stable for women and especially for skilled workers. Moreover, Italian young people appear to be over-represented in precarious jobs – notably temporary jobs and other atypical kinds – compared to adults. As a result, they have been the first to lose their jobs as the economy has deteriorated.

According to wider scenario analysis, in the past twenty years Italy has undergone a process of deep de-industrialization, and this tendency has been accelerated by the economic crisis since 2008 (Gallino 2012). The downturn in manufacturing production, productivity, technological innovation, and competitiveness is the result of diverse variables, errors, and decisions at national, European and global level. However, the growing unemployment in Italy of recent years is certainly related to the closure of manufacturing firms or their transfer to other countries, while the precariousness – or flexinsecurity – of jobs is related to the normativity of the job market elaborated in the past twenty years.

Indeed, despite the growing flexibilization of the labour market, Italy stands out for its high youth unemployment rate (44.2% in August 2014 among young people aged 15-24 years old) (ISTAT 2014b), just behind Spain and Greece. Since 2009, the risk of unemployment has been three times higher for young Italians than the rest of the population (25-74 years old) and twice higher than the risk faced by their EU27 peers. With respect to their European same-age peers, the incidence of young Italian people in the economic activity rate is lower. In 2008, before the effects of the economic crisis came to a head, the situation of Italian young people was already unfavourable: their activity rate was 30.9% (compared to an average of 44% recorded in EU27), and their employment rate amounted to 24.4%, compared to an average rate of 37.5% in EU27 (Dota 2010). According to the latest national statistical data (ISTAT 2014a) in the first years after full-time education most young people (64%) find only temporary jobs, and 40% of those jobs are considered to be disappointing and mismatched – in relation to salary and contents – with the education level, so that the young workers feel themselves overqualified for their jobs.

The Italian data also show high instability among young workers with good levels of education. Although a university degree improves the personal capacity to resist the crisis, greater investment in education does not automatically guarantee better, quicker and safer labour-market entry (Ires 2013). Indeed, the effects of education remains important and there are relevant differences between young people with university degrees and those who discontinued their educations after compulsory schooling. As we shall show, a very low level of education is usually related to a higher degree of unemployment, especially for young women. Hence, education still matters, even though high education no longer assures entry to the labour market. Added to this is a situation of apparent over-education in an economic structure unable to valorise high-skilled workers. Many highly-educated young people feel obliged to accept low-skill, low-paid and precarious jobs for lack of better opportunities, or because of their need to cumulate a plurality of small jobs. However, the consequences of the crisis continue to be more dramatic for low-skilled young people, who already have difficulties in good times; at times of crisis, low-skilled and low-paid jobs become even more competitive and less protected in terms of labour rights.

Italy, like other Mediterranean countries, represents the epicentre of a wider European situation. Eurostat data, for the EU-27 aggregate over the period 1998-2009, show a stable situation until 2005, followed by a jump in 2009 to the highest level of unemployment in the entire decade. Moreover, to the official data on unemployment we must add the 'discouraged' young people that would have preferred to find a job but have decided to continue their educations, and, of course, those young people who simply stay at home without studying, working or looking for a job: the so-called NEET generation (Not in employment, education or training). This is not a new phenomenon, it was present throughout Europe also in the 1990s, but it has grown rapidly since 2008: in 2012 in Italy NEETs represented 21.3% of 15-24 year olds – and 54% of them were classified as 'pure inactive' and not just 'discouraged' (OECD 2014). The Italian media call them the 'lost generation', and they will certainly have a major social, political and demographic impact on the country in the future.

Overall, what emerges from the national statistics of the past four years is that employment instability also entails a disadvantage in terms of income, which in turn affects the living conditions of young workers and their passage to adulthood. The current crisis intensifies the structural problems of a situation outlined in previous years (Gallino 2007, Barbieri 2011). The Italian labour-market reforms have brought greater flexibility without a real system of 'flexicurity', and they have not been sufficiently accompanied by the parallel reforms of the education system and school-to-work transition outlined by the so-called Bologna Process (Pastore 2012). In fact, in Italy the role of the family and of networking relations still

predominates in the process of school-to-work transition, and families continue to bear the costs of the long periods of unstable employment or unemployment of their children. Moreover, Italy is famous for having a welfare state based on family resources and particularly for the role of women as informal supports and social safety nets. This is a patriarchal vision of society that goes beyond political differences and is typically gendered. This explains why, for Italian young people, leaving the parental home usually coincides with formation of their own families following marriage or the decision to live with their partners. This transition to adult life in conditions of precarious and low-paid employment is frequently dependent on the economic resources of the parents, who help in paying the rent, the car, or the holidays of their newly 'independent' children. Obviously, also the transition to parenthood strongly depends on achieving stable occupational security, with the consequence of a constant tendency to postpone the birth of the first child (Modena *et al.* 2014).

The 'precariousness' that obliges young people to live their lives day by day, without a clear idea of the future, is certainly the attitude that best matches both the structural characteristics of the current Italian labour market and the subjective perception of constructing one's life with short-term programs (Barbieri, Scherer 2009). After 15 years of labour-market flexibilisation, this is a generation fully accustomed to 'non-stable' life and work, and this attitude was present well before the official onset of the crisis. Hence, living in the present, from day to day, is becoming a rooted generational existential attitude.

Beside this general evaluation of the scenario, our aim was to understand the intertwining among structural variables such as gender and education level in positioning young people in the current environment of economic crisis. In order to obtain a first insight into the role of these variables, we first adopted the intersectional method to conduct an *intercategorical* analysis.

4. An intercategorical analysis of the effects of the economic crisis on young Italian adults

In the quantitative part of our research we used Italian data from the European SILC 2011 and SILC 2006 surveys. These data are gathered and reported annually and provide a representative sample of the population.

We considered the intersections among gender, education, and generational collocation by comparing four different groups. The groups were initially defined by educational attainment, selecting between people who had at least one degree, and people who had never obtained a high-school diploma. Among people without high-school diplomas, we selected two different cohorts: 20-26 years old and 30-36 years old. Among people possessing a degree, we selected the: 24-30 year old and 34-40 year old cohorts. Our rationale for selecting the younger groups – both among lower- and higher-educated subjects – was to choose individuals involved in the generational experience of ending school and entering (or being excluded from entering) the labour force when the economic crisis started to impact severely on the labour market and individual income capacities. The two older groups were chosen in order to compare the performance of individuals who had exited their education track ten years before the younger groups, when the current economic crisis was not yet affecting Western economies. We further disaggregated these data by gender.

To summarise, we were able to compare:

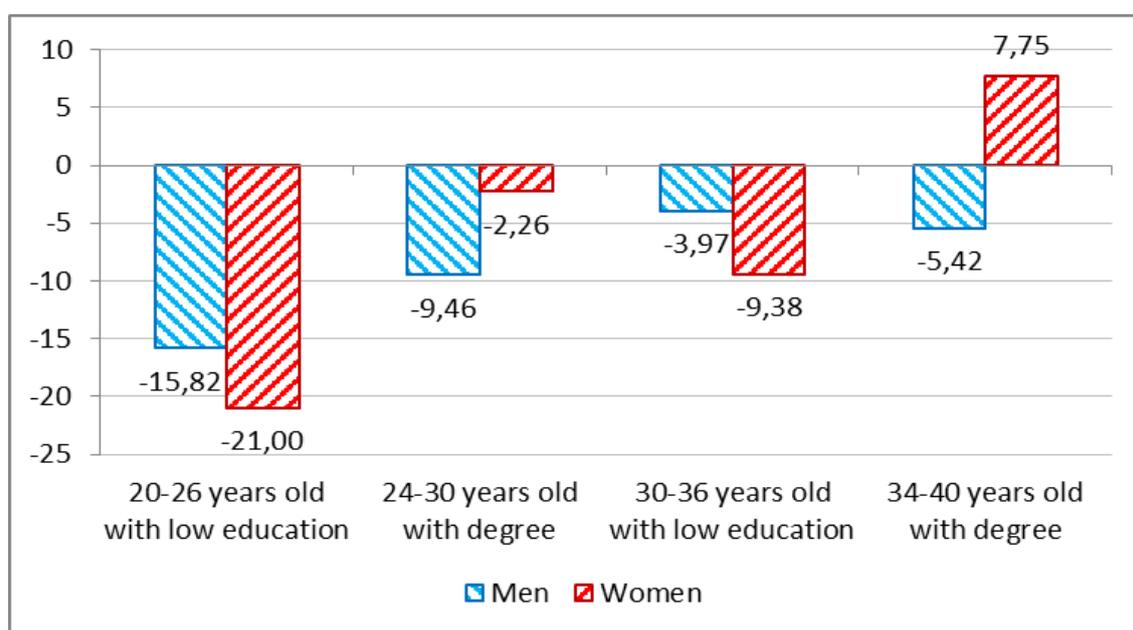
- a) 20-26 year old men, with a low level of educational attainment and entering the labour force during the current economic crisis
- b) 20-26 year old women, with a low level of educational attainment and entering the labour force during the current economic crisis

- c) 24-30 year old men, who have obtained a degree and entered the labour force during the current economic crisis
- d) 24-30 year old women, who have obtained a degree and entered the labour force during the current economic crisis
- e) 30-36 year old men, with a low level of educational attainment and entering the labour force before the current economic crisis
- f) 30-36 year old women, with a low level of educational attainment and entering the labour force before the current economic crisis
- g) 34-40 year old men, who obtained a degree and entered the labour force before the current economic crisis
- h) 34-40 year old women, who obtained a degree and entered the labour force before the current economic crisis

In order to assess the specific effects of the current economic crisis, we compared these groups (whose data were collected in 2011) with groups with the same age and educational characteristics in 2006, one year before the onset of the global financial crisis due to the explosion of secondary subprime financial activity.

Inspection of the change in labour incomes between these groups of people in 2006 (before the crisis) and individuals in the same social position in 2011 shows that almost all the groups are worse-off because of the economic crisis. Only older women with a degree show some increase in labour income¹ (all the data express the percentage variations in means calculated using 2006 labour income as the basis) (see Table 1).

Table 1 – Percentage variation in labour income 2011-2006



Source: Personal elaboration on IT-SILC 2006 and IT-SILC 2011 (Statistics on Income and Living Conditions).

Age plays the main role among men. Young males suffer the most from the crisis, and the reduction of labour income is particularly severe for individuals with low

¹ Labour income is calculated by adding the variables PY010N (the monetary component of the compensation of employees in cash payable by an employer to an employee, deducted by tax at source, the social insurance contributions or both) plus PY020N (the non-monetary income components which may be provided free or at reduced price to an employee as part of the employment package by an employer, deducted by tax at source, the social insurance contributions or both) plus PY050N (self-employment income, deducted by tax at source, the social insurance contributions or both).

educations. Older men with low educations seem to curb labour income loss slightly better than their peers with degrees.

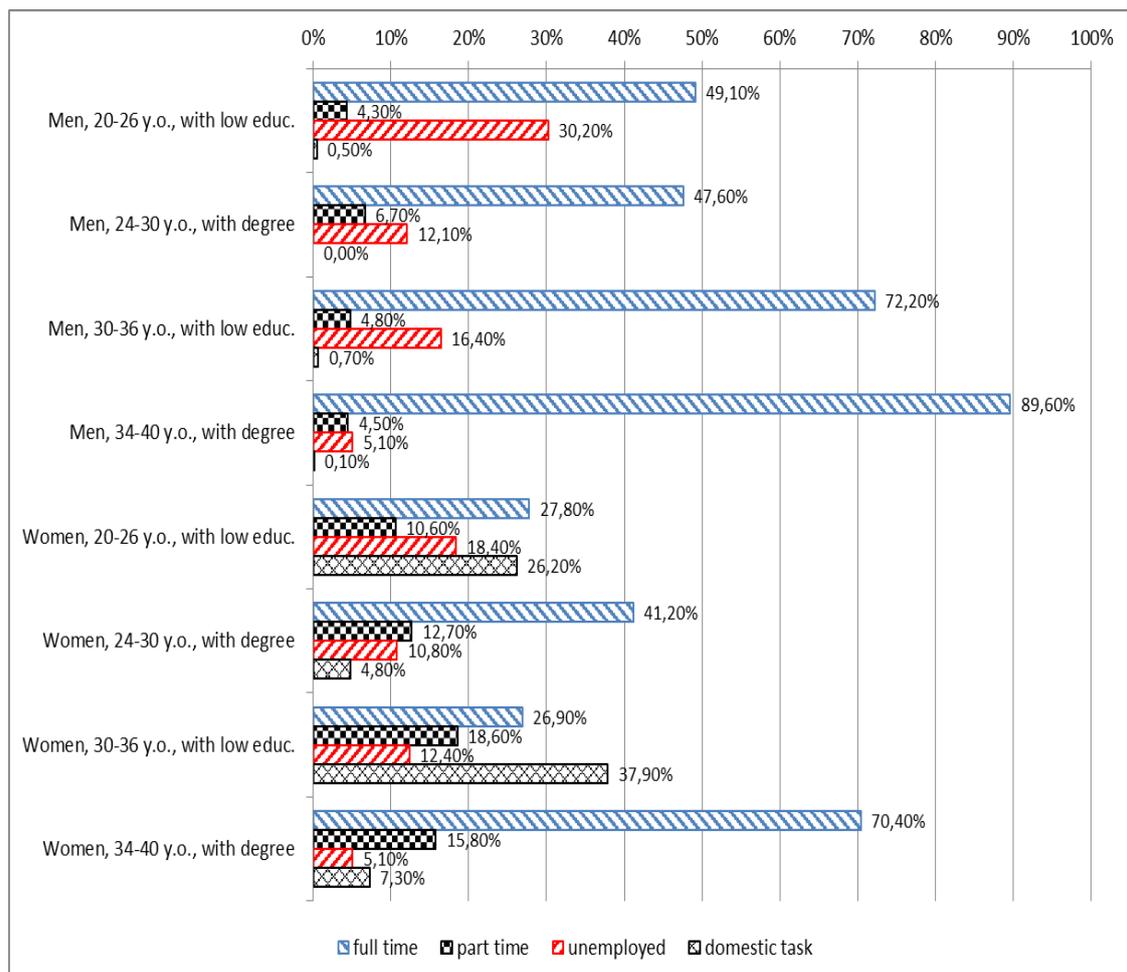
Among women, the situation seems particularly critical for low-educated persons, who show the highest labour income drop. Also in this case, age plays a significant role, penalising younger women. Having a higher education seems to put women in a social position that apparently reduces the negative impact of the economic crisis for both the 24-30 and 34-40 year old cohorts.

In both cases, it is evident that young people with low educations are most negatively affected by the current economic crisis, in that they lose between one sixth and one fifth of their labour incomes. With the exception of young women with degrees, the cohorts which entered the labour market after the economic crisis are significantly worse-off than the cohorts who entered it ten years earlier.

Other interesting patterns emerge on analysing self-defined current economic status.

The full-time employment rate for older men is constantly higher than the rates for younger males and for women, while women are more likely to be employed in part-time jobs (Table 2). The unemployment rate is particularly high for young males with low educational attainment. However, it is worth noting that the lowest unemployment rate for young graduate persons may be explained by the fact that they tend to protract their educations or end up as NEETs (persons not engaged in education, employment, or training). Women with low educational attainment are more likely to be engaged in full-time domestic tasks.

Table 2 - Self-defined current economic status 2011



Source: IT-SILC 2011 (variables: PL031).

Also in this case, comparison between the groups with the same social location in 2006, before the economic crisis, and in 2011, highlights some interesting features.

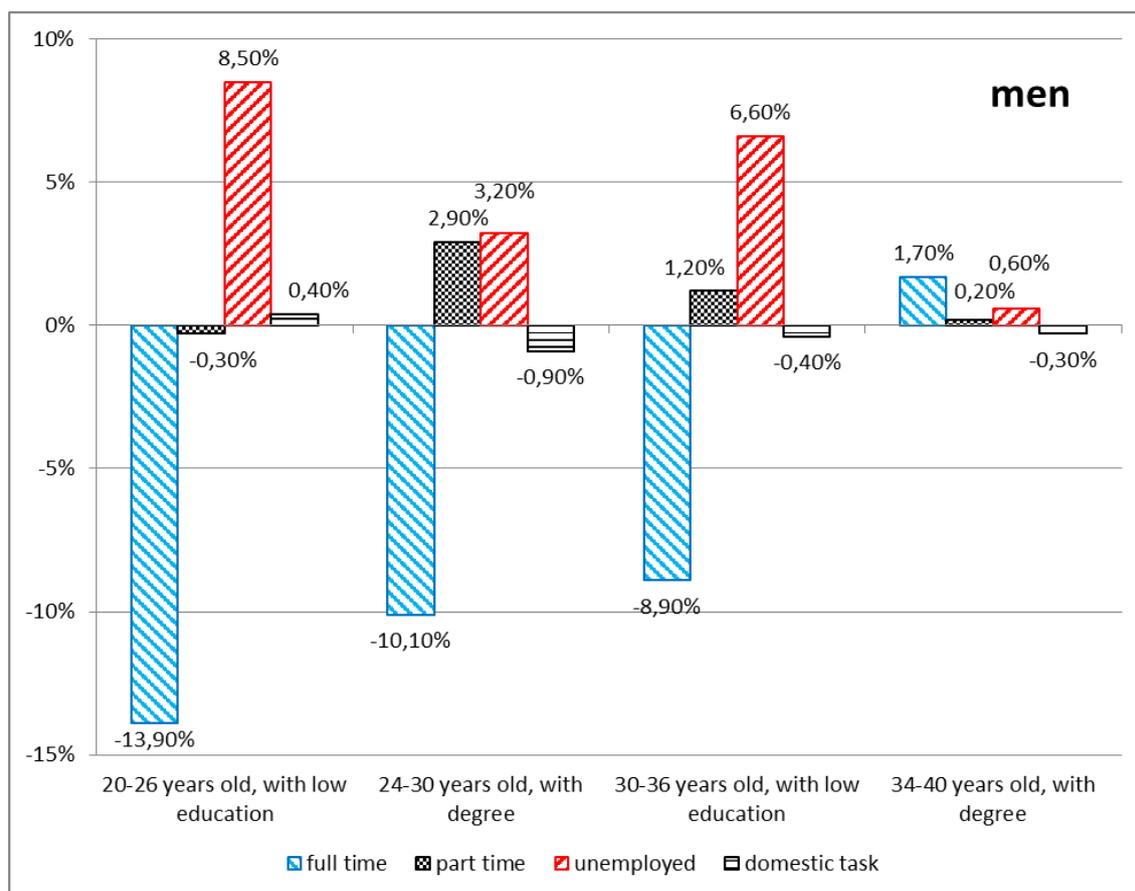
We begin by comparing the situations of men (Table 3). We observe a significant drop in full-time employment for all the groups considered, with the exclusion of older graduate men. The decrease in full-time jobs is only partially off-set by an increase in part-time jobs for younger men with a degree. The unemployment rate rises steeply to 8.5% for younger males with low educational attainment and to 6.6% for older ones in the same educational position.

Younger people with low levels of education who concluded their educations and tried to enter the labour market when the economic conditions became dire are in the worst situation. As observed by Linda McDowell (2012) for the British case, probably because less-educated young men face a severe restriction of the manufacturing labour market, they find themselves competing for low-paid 'servicing' and 'caring' work, generally represented as 'feminised' employment. Hence, male, working-class, low-skilled and low-educated persons are deemed 'too masculine' to be employed in the service sector. As a result, it is likely that «many young male job seekers are disqualified from most of the vacancies on offer and they regard most routine, service sector work as 'women's work' and so beneath their dignity» (McDowell 2012, p. 581). The wide difference in full-time employment and unemployment between low-educated men and women may be, at least partially, interpreted as the outcome of a specific combination between the shrinking of the manufacturing labour market and the social representation of youth masculinity: young women from the same social location are usually more 'appealing' for service and care work than supposedly threatening young men.

Younger graduate men also pay a high cost in terms of the full-time employment rate only partially recovered by the increasing rate of part-time work. Their unemployment increase is less high, probably because younger graduate men in 2011 were 10.5% more likely to remain in education than males in the same social location in 2006.

The impact of low education on economic status is evident when considering older males without a high-school diploma. In the five years considered, they significantly reduced their full employment rate and, consequently, increased their unemployment rate more than men in the same demographic cohort with degrees. This latter group seems slightly better off than people in the same social location five years earlier.

Table 3 - Percentage variation in Men's self-defined current economic status 2011-2006



Source: IT-SILC 2006 and IT-SILC 2011 (variables: PL031 and PL030).

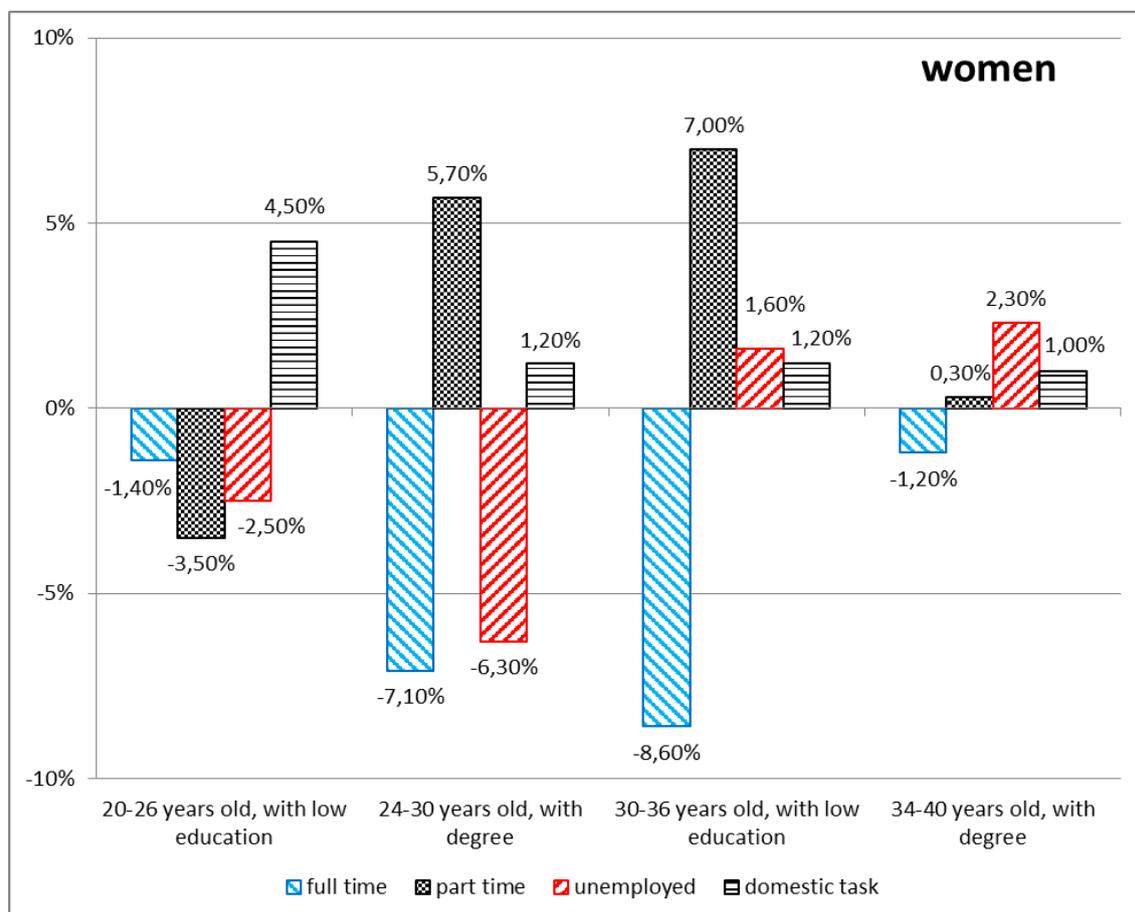
On comparing the conditions of the selected groups of women before and after the current economic crisis, a quite different picture emerges (Table 4). Apparently most severely affected by the current economic crisis are older women with low educational attainment, while younger women in the same educational condition seem to fare better. In part, their performance may be explained – as we suggested above – by the fact that the economic crisis has harsh effects on the industrial labour sectors while maintaining – and sometime increasing – opportunities in the care and service labour sectors. Sectors which require frequent interactive 'body work' at the bottom end of the service economy may have more opportunities for young women than for young men or older women. To be noted is that, in recent years, young, low-educated men have tended to deal with difficulties in employment by increasing their full-time engagement in domestic tasks. Excluded from – or with strong difficulties in – the labour market, they make shift in the domestic environment and forgo finding a job.

Younger women with degrees are less likely to accept full-time engagement in domestic tasks; they continue searching for a job when unemployed and are less willing to leave the labour market definitively. They also tend to respond to employment difficulties by moving from full-time jobs to part-time ones.

The same shift is apparent among older women with low educations. These women are those who suffer most from full-time work reduction. Moreover, their already significant full-time engagement in domestic tasks has increased further during the crisis, and currently about four low-educated women out of ten in Italy, aged between 30 and 36 years old, have left the labour market and returned to the traditional housekeeping role.

Older, high-educated women seem to be in a better position: their full-time and unemployment rates are more or less unaffected by the current economic crisis. Nevertheless, when compared with men in the same social locations, women still occupy a disadvantaged position. In fact, they have a full-time employment rate about 20% lower than that of men, and they are still significantly confined to full-time domestic tasks notwithstanding their educations and skills.

Table 4 - Percentage variation in Women's self-defined current economic status 2011-2006



Source: IT-SILC 2006 and IT-SILC 2011 (variables: PL031 and PL030).

5. Representations and perceptions of the crisis among young Italian adults: an 'intracategorical' qualitative analysis

After this quantitative overview, we now present the second step of our analysis. This was based on 30 qualitative in-depth interviews with young people aged between 20 and 30 years old. The interviews were conducted in 2013 in the city of Milan, with 15 young men and women with different education levels, more specifically a university degree or a diploma from a vocational school.

Within the same methodological framework of intersectionality that we used for the quantitative analysis, in this case we took an intracategorical approach. The aim was to investigate how the subjects located at a specific intersection among structural categories – particularly gender and level of education – gave subjective meanings to their social location, perceived situations of economic crisis, coped with different social forms of categorization, and used their capabilities to deal with the uncertainty typical of the current labour market.

In fact, during the interviews both gender and educational level emerged as important variables in designing the social location and the practical reactions to

different combinations of these variables according to the situation. In this section, we present and discuss only a selection of these findings. We focus on how interviewees perceived and used their educational level in the present job market, paying particular attention to gender differences.

Overall, the interviews revealed some more general, and generational, characteristics based on a pragmatic attitude to work and the job market. In most cases, the expectations of interviewees regarding the opportunities offered by the current Italian labour market were pessimistic. They did not foresee an imminent improvement of the situation, and they relied on the resources of their personal networks to find – and cumulate – small jobs in a situation of longstanding uncertainty. By contrast, their personal aspirations were high and relatively independent from the environment of crisis: improving one's economic situation and being able to buy a house without the help of the family, starting a business, having a family with children.

This pragmatic attitude was confirmed by the central importance of networking in the job search. All the interviewees had found their current – always temporary – jobs with the help of friends and personal networks, usually by chance, sometimes without having looked for that specific occupation. Serendipity was a constant feature of their daily lives. They followed opportunities and – especially interviewees with a university degree – they were willing to gain experience in work areas very distant from their educational backgrounds. Uncertainty, change, and discontinuity obliged them to live in the present and be able to recognize the right moment and the right opportunity. Pragmatism, immanence, capacity to deal with the constraints of everyday life kept them from making long-term plans. Hence, the situation of uncertainty and the focus on the present induced them to perceive their personal situations in terms of being 'lucky' or 'unlucky'. If they obtained a job it was because they were lucky, had friends able to help them, and were at the right place at the right time. Conversely, they considered themselves to be an unlucky generation in a hostile economic environment, especially when they compared themselves with the generation of their parents.

"There has never been a real project in my life, things have simply happened, by chance so to speak (...). The most important things are to learn, know how to move, do stimulating things (...) my life is a continuous becoming. I never think about what is more feasible, I simply focus on what I desire, nothing is really impossible, little by little if you want something you can get it. Emanuela, woman, 29 y.o., university degree

I don't believe in the word 'forever', nothing is forever, this is not a dream-world... For us there's no longer a 'forever'... Now I live with my boyfriend, then who knows, will I still love him in ten years' time? It's like on the job market, there's no forever. Anna, woman, 26 y.o., vocational school.

I live my life day by day, I let it go, I accept what happens, I take opportunities when they come even though they're not the best ones, they don't match my preferences... but I don't care, I don't want to waste my time complaining, I don't want to be angry about what's going on, I take what I can get. (...) Now with this crisis they've taken everything from us, we are losing everything, so I don't want to give up my hobbies and passions, if I want to have fun I don't hold back, I don't trust anybody and I live life day by day. Samuel, man, 23 y.o., vocational school

In spite of this attitude of serendipity, the economic crisis was perceived by our interviewees as a serious moral problem rooted in Italian political corruption and incapacity to govern properly, as well as in the irresponsibility of the previous generation. This representation follows the rhetoric circulating on the media, and it is sometimes associated with the image of better job opportunities in foreign countries. The inability to understand the mechanisms of the economic crisis – considered a too complex 'technical problem' related to financial speculation and European austerity policies – produced a fatalistic attitude suspicious of collective solutions.

Consequently, reactions to the crisis were entirely individualized. All the interviewees stressed that everyone must cope with the hostile economic environment with their capabilities, with strong determination and optimism in spite of all the difficulties. This attitude cut across gender and educational backgrounds. It shows that the consequences of the crisis are perceived as part of an individualized pathway – with opportunities and risks – more than as a historical phenomenon with collective consequences.

Flexibility is an opportunity to improve your position, our generation must be ready to quick changes... The lifestyle of the older generation is no longer possible, it's useless to dream about it... You have to accept compromise, adapt yourself to the situation. Alberto, man, 28 y.o., university degree.

We (young people) are able to adapt. You have to think in a positive way, to be proactive. Annalisa, woman, 27 y.o., university degree.

What does it mean to say 'I can't find a job?' You have to move on! You need initiative, to be resourceful! To be a bit ambitious (...) Well, I'm certainly not rich, but I'm going where I want to go, I'm constructing my path, I do what I want to do... Instead, too many people are satisfied with so little, they don't have the courage to change but complain all the time. Emanuela, woman, 29 y.o., university degree.

Whilst uncertainty, serendipity and improvisation are the shared existential features of this generation, the intersection between gender and education can change the representations of, and the reactions to, similar situations. For this reason, an intersectional and intracategorical perspective is also useful for the analysis of qualitative material.

For instance, in the interviews, class culture and level of education still seemed important in terms of perception of gender differences. The idea of the man as the head of the family and the breadwinner was still widespread among interviewees with low education levels, both males and females – even though their mothers worked. In this case, the woman's job was considered to be additional, but subaltern, economic help for the family. Consequently, unemployment or an insufficient wage were considered particularly humiliating for young men. By contrast, young women could easily mask their unemployment behind the traditional role of housewife. Nonetheless, this was not a simple return to traditional patterns. Young women with low cultural capital seemed deeply divided between the desire to improve their educational and professional status, and a more traditional life as mothers and wives with a subordinate economic role in the family. Hence, their perception of unemployment and crisis was always filtered by their gender condition.

I disagree, because according to me they're desperate housewives, but I know many young women of my age who would prefer not to work and to marry a rich man. Then I had some school mates who became pregnant before they were eighteen, so now they are obliged to stay at home... I'd like to have a lot of children but I don't want to renounce my aspirations. Nicole, woman, 20 y.o., vocational school.

Compared with young women with low education levels, interviewees with a university degree were more motivated to gain personal and economic independence. Family life was usually a blurred horizon, and even though they aspired to have a traditional family with children, they also expected to have equal condition within the family, where each partner contributed in the same way to domestic life. More generally, male and female interviewees with high education considered following their aspirations and their professional dreams to be goals that could not be sacrificed on the altar of the family. The uncertainty of their occupational futures simply made them postpone the idea of settling down in stable family life. Moreover, the situation of precariousness or unemployment was not perceived in the same negative and humiliating way by young adults with high

education levels. The perception of time was more stretched than among young interviewees with low cultural capital who had started to work when they were adolescents. Self-realization beyond the simple level of consumption and wage-earning seemed to be more important. The presence of a family safety net beneath them probably explains this 'waiting' attitude.

Even though I'm unemployed I have some savings, because when I had a job my wages were around 1600 euros, so I can continue to live alone, well, I share the apartment with another girl. I like the apartment and my independence is too precious, this is certainly a temporary situation, but my parents know that I'm economically independent. Of course, now I have to pay attention to my expenses... but I'm waiting for the right opportunity, for a job that I like.
Francesca, woman, 30 y.o., university degree

By contrast, for young male interviewees working in what they called 'manual occupations' – i.e. related to lower levels of education but to more practical training – seeking a reasonable wage and a good level of consumption was considered a pragmatic attitude towards life. Materialistic values – instead of post-materialistic attitudes – prevailed. A satisfying level of consumption was considered the main anchorage amid the instability and variability of everyday life. This was not necessarily related to pure instrumental reasoning, and some of these interviewees said that they had a real 'passion' for their jobs. Most of them had found their first temporary job immediately after finishing school, usually with the help of their teachers; others had served long apprenticeships as electricians, plumbers, or car mechanics. Their aim was to achieve economic independence by their twenties, and they usually considered the age of thirty as the symbolic date of entry into adult life with a stable professional status.

I found a job immediately after school. Before finishing I was almost certain to get a job immediately... if you're serious and you work hard, people hire you. (...) I like my job because I'm independent, I earn my own money, I turn around to see my clients, then I don't like front-office jobs, sitting down all day, independence is the first thing... I was able to buy a car and pay for my favourite hobbies... Then I'll open my own business. (...) I wasn't good at school, studying didn't interest me, this (vocational) school was easy and practical... and then if you go to university you finish too late, then you have to work for forty years, no thanks. Then I see so many young people, university students, who spend their time in pubs, discotheques, smoking, having fun. They aren't adults, they don't work and they spend their parents' money. An adult is someone who works and thinks of the future, saving for the family. Marco, man, 21 y.o., vocational school.

Overall, despite statistics showing a worse situation for young people with low education levels, our interviews with young adults with vocational school diplomas showed that personal abilities, circumstances, networks, and gender differences intertwine to define differentiated positionings in the structural hierarchies and constraints. Hence, the intracategorical superposition of structural variables like gender and education can have different effects in different situations.

6. Concluding remarks

In this article we have investigated the two – and sometimes contradictory – tendencies highlighted by, on the one hand, quantitative data and, on the other hand, qualitative interviews on the consequences of the crisis on young Italian adults. Intersectional analysis has helped us highlight that the current economic crisis has very different effects on people in different social locations. Gender, education and generational collocation intertwine to create specific constraints and opportunities. The different social locations make it possible for people to 'interpret' and 'play' – within the limits imposed by the specific situations – the different categorizations and identifications that define their social location. Intersectional analysis furnished a more composite image of the consequences of the current economic crisis on the lives of young people. On the one hand, the intersection between gender and institutionalised cultural capital structures different sets of

constraints and opportunities, producing different ways to conceive the economic condition, attitudes towards the future, and possible strategies to deal with the 'precariousness' that obliges young people to live their lives day by day. On the other hand, the various intersections create room for the subjective management of categorizations and identifications: being a man or a woman assumes different restraining power, relevance, and 'fluidity' in relation to the different contexts and its crossing with other categorizations and identifications.

The social inequalities or 'discrepancies' identified by the intersectional analysis were not necessarily perceived as such in the qualitative interviews. When we investigated the crisis with qualitative methods and in-depth interviews, *generation* appeared to be the main element of distinction and discrimination. By contrast, gender and education were interpreted mainly as individual elements, not as social categories. Only when comparing themselves with the older generation – born in what was considered to be a more 'favourable' era – did our interviewees perceive an inequality of treatment, even though they believed this to be more the result of fate than the consequence of political decisions, ideologies, and power relations. While our interviewees did not seem to expect a better future obtained via social struggle, they were all convinced that they had been born in an era in which only personal capacities can make the difference.

These findings are the first results of an ongoing research programme. We based our analysis on the intersectional perspective in order to shed light on the way in which current economic crisis is creating a new mix of opportunities and constraints for young people. In spite of common generational characteristics, the variability of opportunities and constraints is often related to contextualized situations in which gender and educational capital can act in different ways. Hence, class-based, generational, and gendered structural positions seem much more complex and unpredictable than they were in the past. The unemployment and precariousness exacerbated by the economic crisis can be perceived and confronted in different subjective and contextual ways, so that we may expect that this 'crisis' is not only a conjectural economic accident, but a social and historical phenomenon reshaping society as a whole.

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