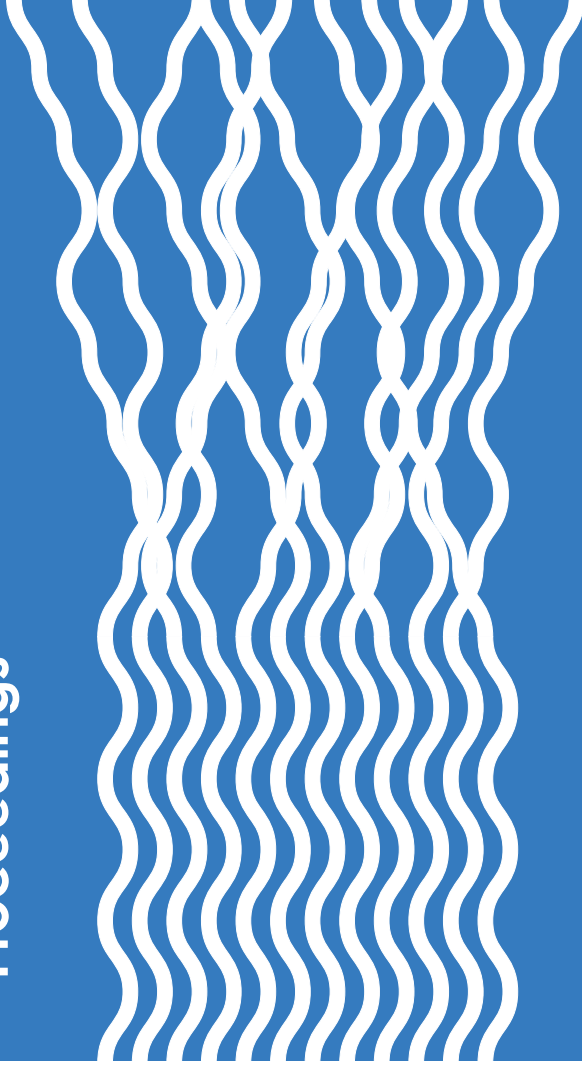


# Conference Proceedings

 Sharing Society



International Conference

# Sharing Society

The Impact of Collaborative Collective Actions  
in the Transformation of Contemporary Societies

May 23-24, 2019 • Universidad del País Vasco/Euskal Herriko Unibertsitatea • Bilbao, Spain

Benjamín Tejerina, Cristina Miranda de Almeida and Ignacia Perugorria  
Editors



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## 5. Methodological Appendix

This is a theoretical contribution. It is mainly grounded on a review of the literature and the discussion of concepts put forward by major scholars in the field. The paper was also enriched by previous research at Asterisc Communication Research Group<sup>5</sup> on risk communication, storytelling and framing wildfire mitigation and prevention (see references).

## 6. Biographical Note

Enric Castelló (PhD) is an associate professor and member of the Asterisc Communication Research Group at the Department of Communication, Universitat Rovira i Virgili (Tarragona, Spain). He was invited researcher at the Glasgow Caledonian University and Loughborough University. His latest book is *Comunicación y ser de la organización* (in press 2019, Tirant lo Blanch Humanidades, València).

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## Sharing the Understanding of the Future. Generational Perspectives on Work in the City of Milan

Enzo Colombo and Paola Rebughini

Università degli Studi di Milano

TRACK  
2

*Economy, Work  
and Consumption*

**Abstract:** *The aim of this paper is to present the opportunities and constraints in implementing forms of sharing experiences, knowledge and reflexivity among young people in a context of work precariousness. The data presented come from a qualitative research, realized from 2015 to 2018, consisting in 85 in-depth interviews with young people (aged 18-31) living in Milan. In this paper, we will focus only on 50 of the in-depth interviews with young people with high cultural capital (with a degree or attending a university course). The analysis focuses on the way in which young people face the neoliberal injunction of self-realization through work and how sharing practices enter or not within the horizon of the possibility of building an autonomous self.*

*We analyse the generational specificities of these sharing experiences, and we suggest that representations and experiences of the job market may be a good basis for understanding the discontinuities that characterize the current young generation, especially concerning the possibility to construct sharing practices. More specifically, we focus: a) on the consequences of economic crisis among young people in Milan, in terms of work expectations and experiences; b) on interviewees' experiences of sharing practices and discourses about their personal and collective situation in front of social uncertainty and complexity, with a specific reference to the job market.*

*The research carried out in Milan shows that while individualization processes have become 'structural' features of young people's experience, the way in which individualization is intertwined with subjectivity and individualism is more complex. We can broadly recognise two different attitudes. The first one consists in developing a 'competitive' entrepreneurial self; that is, investing in the constant empowerment of the self through the capacity to seize the moments, to take advantage from the favourable circumstances and to avoid putting oneself in critical situations. The second attitude consists in developing a 'cooperative' entrepreneurial self. In this case, the need to invest in oneself to become an autonomous subject, continuously improving one's own abilities, is accompanied by the refusal of an individual solution. Cooperative and collaborative space of sharing are at the base of new forms of collective action as a web of individualized connections of emotions, values, commitments and everyday practices, where individuals can make a difference while being recognized in their uniqueness.*

**Keywords:** *Individualization, collective agency, sharing practices, work, Milan*

## 1. Introduction

Perhaps the world has not entered a true 'metamorphosis', as Beck claimed (2016), but it is likely that since the end of the last century a number of accelerating transformations in the economic, productive and technological fields have changed our social experience of everyday

life. Multiplicity, complexity, and uncertainty are not new, but their impact have today acquired some specific generational characteristics. These transformations have been even more enhanced by the so called 'Great Global Recession' triggered in 2007 by the subprime mortgage crisis. Especially in Southern European countries, this has had a considerable impact on social structures and dynamics in the field of work and professional careers. This brought also to a general 'Great regression' (Geiselberger, 2017) in terms of tightening of social inequalities, democracy fatigue and individualization processes. Young people who have become adult with the economic crisis face a European society accepting the culture for which we are all individual citizens – not subalterns or hegemonic social groups, workers of bosses – and for which what counts is your own personal capabilities.

The aim of this paper is to present the opportunities and constraints in implementing forms of sharing experiences, knowledge and reflexivity among young people in a context of work precariousness and so called cognitive capitalism (Moulier Boutang, 2012). The data presented come from a qualitative research, realized from 2015 to 2018, consisting in 85 in-depth interviews with young people (aged 18-31) living in Milan, both with high and low cultural capital, and focusing on the new forms of youth personal capacities to navigate social uncertainty. In this paper, we will focus on 50 in-depth interviews with young people with high cultural capital. They are equally distributed between women and men, all with a degree or attending a university course.

The analysis focuses on the way in which young people face the neoliberal injunction of self-realization through work and how sharing practices enter or not within the horizon of the possibility of building an autonomous self (Bang 2004; Franceschelli and Keating 2018; Farrugia 2019a). We analyse the generational specificities of these sharing experiences, on the way in which young people engage in forms of commitment, reorganize their personal agency, cope with individualization processes and unpredictability of the future. More specifically, we suggest that representations and experiences of the job market may be a good basis for understanding the discontinuities that characterize the current young generation (Caraher and Reuter 2017; Vogt 2018), especially concerning the possibility to construct sharing practices.

In the following sections we focus: a) on the consequences of economic crisis among young people in Milan, in terms of work expectations and experiences as the main pivot of their relationship with individualization processes and structural constraints; b) on interviewees' experiences of sharing practices and discourses about their personal and collective situation in front of social uncertainty and complexity, with a specific reference to the characteristics of the job market.

## 2. Generational Perspectives on the Individualized Experiences of Work

In academic and policy debates the ethical dimension of the 'sharing economy' has been at the forefront as possible agent of social change and development of new values and solidarity that derive from sharing practices in a context of job precariousness (Arvidsson, Peitersen, 2013). Many young people are attracted by this possibility of combining economic growth with a re-embedding of the economy within communitarian social relations. Small-scale initiatives such as



community agriculture, sharing productions, tool libraries, time banks or co-working spaces are particularly appreciated by young people as possible way to integrate economic initiative, critical attitudes and environmental awareness (Rebughini, Sassatelli, 2008). At the same time, new norms and standards for practicing 'small scale sharing' are emerging as part of their everyday practice. Digital technologies offer the possibility to network and connect these emerging activities in order to create new kinds of commons standards and collaborative projects.

While the enthusiasm in front of these initiatives is sometimes excessive, the construction of new ways of sharing is an attempt to cope with the continuous down-sizing of welfare state systems, of neoliberal political economy, increasing social inequalities, and individualization cultures enhancing forms of self-entrepreneurship (Bröckling 2015). For young people the ground of experimentation of this social change is mainly the passage from school to the job market (Farrugia 2019b; Scharff 2016). As our interviews reveal, this is often a solitary trial. Hence, we are going to analyse the experience of sharing not in respect to some specific economic or consumption activity, but rather as possibility to share collectively questions and answers to individualized problems especially related to entering the job market.

One of the main outcomes of our interviews was immediately the lack of a specific meaning, and the consequent ordinariness, of the socio-economic situation that the interviewees defined as 'economic crisis'. For those who completed their studies when the Global Great Recession had already produced its effects on the job market, precariousness and uncertainty of job opportunities constituted the 'normality' of their experience; it was the only blurred horizon that they saw around them, and sometimes it was also part of their family experience, when one of their parents had lost his/her job.

When it is difficult to distinguish the nature of the next step and to foresee what is going to happen in the following years or months, it becomes impossible to follow consolidated and shared routines. The narratives of the interviews highlights that the way of life of the parents was no longer a guide, and it was not possible to be confident that what one had learned or achieved today would be still valuable tomorrow. As Ulrich Beck (2016) puts it, young people today are continuously called upon to shape their biography and make choices not because of the weakening of structural constraints but because of their proliferation. Current uncertainty stems from the multiplicity of – sometimes virtual – options and from the multiplicity of constraints that give shape to the different contexts of action. Young people have to learn to move from one context of action to another, changing languages and codes each time they enter a new situation, and "managing the contradictions and incompatibilities of partial but proliferating structures" (Woodman, 2011: 115).

While work remained a central concern for all our interviewees, their common way of talking about work was to point out how the current situation is radically different from what their parents had experienced. Work means at the same time labour, activity, effort, paid occupation, social role, function, and performance. While having a job used to correspond to a quite stable social status, roles and identities, today working seems to have many overlapping meanings and functions, where full and part time, paid and unpaid activities, social roles and status blur and quickly change shape. Social representations, expectations, aspirations, ambitions, goals and motivations tend to be contextualized in more precise space and time references that no longer involve the project of a lifetime, although 'work' continues to be meaningful in terms of

personal achievement, self-esteem, or feelings of belonging (Heggli et al., 2013).

Our interviewees were well aware of the difficulty of relying on inherited established strategies and the necessity to make choices without guarantees of success. Nevertheless, they believed that the current uncertainty could be managed and driven towards favourable directions by those with the 'will' and 'perseverance' to try hard, take action, and seize opportunities.

*My mother got a job when she was eighteen and has always worked in the same place. It was certainly easier because you had an open-ended contract, but I live with the anxiety of contract expiry. Perhaps it used to be easier. Then it depends on what sort of person you are. If you go after them, the opportunities are there. If you're ambitious, if you know how to create networks, then you create opportunities for you to grasp. If you only want to look after your own backyard, then it's difficult. (Anna, woman, 30 years old, degree in biology, medical sales representative)*

As Wyn and Woodman (2006) observe, acceptance of personal responsibility for youth lives was a feature shared by our respondents. They were aware that "in an age of uncertainty, in order to survive they need the capacity to understand the options that they have before them, the skills to make choices, and the basis for being flexible" (Ibid, p. 508).

Faced with the precariousness of job opportunities, the interviewees were not discouraged or distressed, but nor were they conceited or overly optimistic. They were moderately self-confident, but they recognized that nothing can be taken for granted and that they had no assurance that their projects would succeed. Uncertainty was normalized, but at the same time not fully accepted, it continued to raise concerns and translated into a sort of 'active resignation': action must be taken because staying still means succumbing.

Our interviewees have internalized the ethic of self-realization. They invest on their personal capacities (Melucci 1996), that is, on developing themselves as autonomous persons, showing self-control, creativity, responsibility, the desire to improve their skills, and the will to take risks. The young people with high cultural capital interviewed approach work as a project of self-realization, personal fulfilment and self-expression rather than a simple means of obtaining adequate material resources for a satisfactory standard of living.

*As a matter of fact, once there were more opportunities, but who cares. It's our time. If there are fewer opportunities, we find the ones that are there ... You create the opportunities. If you're smart, you'll find something, if you waste too much time moaning, it means that you don't want or can't do things (Giulio, man, 31 years old, master degree in Communication, co-founder of a digital communication company)*

In some interviews the question of uncertainty was approached positively, almost as an opportunity; uncertainty assumed the face of the inevitable necessity to which one can only react by mobilizing oneself virtuously, putting oneself to the test, using the best of one's resources. Although in terms of power relations this could be considered a form of self-management (Kelly, 2013), we can also consider it a generational attitude. In the absence of structural opportunities able to converge claims or protests against the inequalities of the job market, and in the absence of adequate vocabularies to frame one's situation, an individualized approach based on situated





practices prevails. Trusting one's capabilities to manage local constraints seems the only way out, making adjustments as necessary.

### 3. Sharing the Experience of Work Uncertainty

Our interviewees adopt different strategies in order to face the unpredictability of their future. They are generally convinced that they can master their life and that they derive and renew their capacity for action from within themselves (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Kelly 2013; Bröckling 2015; Farrugia 2019a). They accept 'individualization' as an unavoidable characteristic of their biography and take for granted that it is up to them to construct an independent and autonomous self, in the mist of the collapse of social-sanctioned normal forms of transition to adulthood, frame of reference and roles.

While this general individualistic stance is widespread among all these young people, the way in which they share, or not, their experience related to job uncertainty and everyday complexity varies significantly. Generally, we can identify, on the one hand, a majority group of interviewees who prefer to adopt a more superficial and symbolic form of sharing their choices, experiences, attempts and expectations about the job market. In this case, the normal experience of sharing the events of one's life with friends and peers remains based on an individualized attitude in front of the challenges of uncertainty and complexity. On the other hand, there is a minority group of interviewees, involved in forms of political participation and other sharing activities, who are accustomed to confront themselves with their peers to discuss about their experiences and representations of the current job market, sharing specific spaces of confrontation and debate.

While young people not directly involved in forms of political activism tend to collapse 'individualization' with 'individualism', those who are politically active endorse the former but openly oppose the latter. So, while young people not directly involved in politics are focused on building an 'entrepreneurial-self' adopting an individualistic and competitive attitude, young people politically active are more involved in developing a 'cooperative-entrepreneurial-self':

Young people who are committed to developing an entrepreneurial-self trust their personal capacities to cope with the uncertainties of the job market, and do not feel the need to confront or to sympathize with other similar experiences.

*You have to invent yourself, understand what you want to do. A network of contacts is needed in my sector [music industry]. You need the ability and the desire to know how to relate to people. You have to let people know that you're worth. You have to have a lot of passion too ... My field is very competitive [...] I'm not a dreamer, I'm very practical, I've always preferred to work alone ... I am individualistic. In the most absolute way. The idea of an association of some kind doesn't give me any security. When ideas become a political group, they lose their initial strength, they all become 'OK, we have to come to an agreement'. I have opinions on everything, but, even in the broadest terms, I find politics too stifling for me (Carlo, man, 30 years old, degree in Sociology, owner of a music-recording studio)*

In their view, any experience of work, no matter how much precarious, is an opportunity to capitalize professional knowledge, individual know-how, practical information and forms of self-improvement. To put oneself to the test is presented as a personal and individual experience, the reference to social rights as collective aim is rarely mentioned. To be able to answer to the challenges of uncertainty is a proof of personal capacity and self-realization. More than being a process of struggle against forms of domination, autonomy lays in the ability to keep this process of self-development and self-positioning open. The context is taken for granted. To share one's experience of the job market is limited to social networks and common conversations with friends. This does not necessarily mean that these interviewees do not trust political action as such; rather they believe that the current available forms of political intervention are inadequate, guarded by older generations who leave no room for change (Colombo 2017; Genova 2018). This does not mean that there is a mistrust in sharing their experiences with others; rather, these young adults prefer to cultivate themselves as 'subjects of value' (Farrugia 2019a).

This implies accepting, at least in general terms, the neoliberal assumption that the free market offers a fair system where the talented and hard-working can overcome all obstacles and achieve greater success (Brown et al. 2011). This group of interviewees have assimilated the neoliberal injunction to constantly demonstrate enthusiasm, flexibility, determination, creativity, innovation and the will to take risks, to invest in their own personal capacities, while continuously improving their skills in order to live up to the demands of highly competitive contexts. Sharing activities can be considered as useful to contrast specific problems such as pollution (car sharing, for example), but they are not at the forefront of their projects in relation to the job market. In this respect, a culture of individualism, more than the push towards individualization, seems in contrast with the possibility of sharing experiences and practices.

In contrast, those who are more oriented towards building a cooperative-entrepreneurial-self consider sharing with others their experience of complexity, beyond the precariousness of work, as an intimate moment to overcome the bewilderment of uncertainty, inequalities and injustice. Rather than a form of self-management, in this case interviewees seek to construct a new horizon of 'self-cooperation' for which the construction of oneself as autonomous subject is not a solitary auto-referential process, but a collective enterprise, based on sharing individualized experiences. For these young people a sharing economy, alternative to neoliberalism, cannot exist without a sharing society, that is, the capacity to construct collaborative exchanges in terms of experience, knowledge, symmetric and not hierarchical relationships. Interviewees engaged in this effort attempt to realize these forms of sharing individualized experiences through the organization of spaces of social activism, typically in squatted urban spaces, where political and entertainment activities are associated to moments of more intimate discussion about their personal and generational situation.

The interviewees who feel the need to share their experiences of precariousness, involving themselves in collective initiatives, common spaces of practices and political or civic commitment, give to the notion of sharing a specific and more complex meaning. The experience of sharing is not in contrast with the contemporary culture of individualization as enhancement of autonomy, rather it is conceived as an antidote to the entrapment of self-entrepreneurship and internalization of forms of self-discipline. What is considered necessary to share is not just a service, nor material resources. Instead, it is important to share emotions,



experiences, narratives, and feelings. There is a need to share everyday life, spaces of intimacy, where it is possible to be listened to and to listen to others.

*We, as a generation, need a lot of intimacy ... because we live in a world of insecurities, paranoia, things that inwardly divide you. So, we need to talk to each other, to have a place where we can develop mutual trust ... because our generation is struggling to find channels of expression ... to have confidence ... because trust must be strengthened [...] This is what we do here, trust is made working together, cultivating projects together, sharing interests and passions and making them become a shared moment, and, above all, every day. (Marta, woman, 25 years old, degree in Art and Design, free-lance)*

Even though they are all absorbed in an individualistic culture, for which the sacred autonomy of the modern individual is taken for granted, their cultural enemy is individualism as social translation of market dynamics in neoliberalism. Selfish attitudes, naive convictions of self-sufficiency, aestheticization of oneself as exhibitionist practices, incapability to recognize one's weakness in the current economic system are considered as the cultural ground of the struggle. Individualism, rather than individualization, is the true enemy of the insightfulness and critical capacity that these young people hope to construct in their social spaces of sharing. They believe that individualism and convictions of the possibility of 'bowling alone' can help only the search of security in self-referential identities and communities, made by individuals unable to communicate among them and governed by instrumental action.

Hence, interviewees interested in the construction of sharing practices fully recognize the existence of individualization as the transformation of identity from a 'given to a 'task', charging the actors with the responsibility to perform that task and for the consequences of their performances (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001). They recognize also the necessity to develop their personal capacity (Melucci, 1996), and to preserve it from its recovery by commodification and self-disciplinary practices.

*The important thing to do is to root out the idea of individualism you find among students... the guys of my generation... The latest education reforms have contributed a lot, both at high school and university level, to what is called the corporatization of universities, the commodification of universities... having people believe that university is the launching pad for the labour market... and there's no doubt about it... and therefore you have to have a very individualistic attitude. The idea that you have to study... alone... and get top marks in everything, so you'll have a degree that counts for something and so that you can be someone... without looking around you... with tunnel vision. [At school] they teach you that you're on a lower rung... in high school already... and I reckon this is a cause... that is... not a cause of disinterest in itself... but one of those things that leads students... to be a lot more individualistic and less... less of a social animal. (Andrea, man, 23 years old, Degree in Political Sciences, unemployed)*

For these interviewees, sharing spaces of political and cultural activities are at the same time spaces of 'good individualization', of agency and autonomous construction of oneself, and areas for the construction of collective agencies and identities. These are spaces where personal characteristics are fully implemented and can be fully developed, tested and strengthened through sharing opportunities. This generation can no longer imagine that their

political and cultural activity will contribute to change the world, their attitude is sober and realistic. Rather, they think that constructing themselves as true autonomous subject is a hard enterprise that have to be developed together, in sharing space of open and frank dialogue, as best opportunity to foster personal fulfilment. In respect to the abstract knowledge, they acquired at school and university, these spaces of shared discussion around power-knowledge dynamics can offer to the individual the possibility of self-determination in an environment of increasing forms of control.

The space for discussion created through collective action is 'political', as it is the necessary condition for both full personal fulfilment and social transformation. It is through the intersubjective, dialogical cultivation of personal capacities that a public space is created; this is a space that counteracts individualism and allows a concrete and real transformation of society. Political action is conceived of less as an arena, and more as a lived experience (Marsch et al. 2007). It mainly concerns sharing emotion, feeling together, belonging, and feeling that the place where we are is 'our place', a space realized connecting individualizations. Effective political action requires sharing spaces and moments where it is possible to rediscover the authenticity of relationships, personal dignity, and become 'subjects' capable to resist the commodification of oneself enhanced by the neoliberal culture.

In our opinion, these practices of shared experience, based on a continuous confrontation and investigation of the present, take the form of a *politics of the present*: it is not primarily oriented towards the general transformation of society but to the transformation of the context of everyday life (Colombo and Rebughini 2019). This can be considered as a wider generational attitude, involving also young people not specifically interested in practices of sharing. The politics of the present is a form of political action that reflexively recognizes the difficulty of changing the 'rules of the game', the structural conditions that define the spaces for individual and collective action, but that count on the possibility to find new ways to manage such rules.

This is a generation accustomed to live in deep immanent conditions: practices and choices, personal capacities and tactics have to be processed here and now. While their efficacy rests on the individual's ability to adapt and be flexible. To create spaces to share such experiences can offer a buffer to freeze the acceleration of temporality and to give room for reflexivity and criticism. In this respect, political action assumes the form of a 'micropolitics of becoming' (Connolly 1999; Bang 2004), a set of activities that is not confined to formal participation in organized groups struggling for the control of specific social resources, but is embedded in attitudes, personal opinions, lifestyles (Farthing 2010).

## 4. Conclusions

The relationship and the representation young people have of the job market are a good standpoint to analyse the way in which they develop (or not) practices of sharing. The dynamic between individualization processes and practices of sharing arise as a crucial generational mark.

Young people recognize in individualization processes the original footprint of modern emancipation, the possibility to express oneself as autonomous subject, free from the conditioning of family, communities or authoritarian state. Yet, they hardly recognize the way in



which economic processes have been able to appropriate this thrust to autonomy in forms of self-government, and few of them recognize the consequences of the loss of spaces for sharing experiences on a common ground, as once where working-classes' spaces of encounter, with their capacity to provide relief and room for discussion (Côté 2014; Weeks 2011). The result is the perception of insecurity as an individual failure rather than a common generational destiny.

The research carried out in Milan shows that while individualization processes have become 'structural' features of young people's experience, the way in which individualization is intertwined with subjectivity and individualism is more complex. Cooperative and collaborative space of sharing are at the base of new forms of collective action as a web of individualized connections of emotions, values, commitments and everyday practices, where individuals can make a difference while being recognized in their uniqueness. To be part of a space of sharing experiences means to avoid the undervaluation of the structural constraints and to recognize one's own fragility in front of them. This can foster new forms of empathy and the needs to share one's personal experience with others, leading towards shared forms of engagement.

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## 6. Methodological Appendix

The data presented in this paper come from a qualitative research, realized from 2015 to 2018, consisting in 85 in-depth interviews with young people (aged 18-31) living in Milan. Interviewees were mainly contacted by word of mouth and through the Municipality of Milan Youth Guidance Service. Ten of them were activists in political squats and were contacted by taking part in an activity at a social centre set up in illegally occupied premises in Milan. The interviews, lasting 60-110 minutes were mainly concentrated on current job situation, school-work transition, and work expectations, as well as on lifestyles and social participation including sharing activities and involvement in politics and voluntary work.

## 7. Biographical Note

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