

Long abstract – Monographic section

YOUNG PEOPLE BEYOND STEREOTYPES

Edited by Carlo Buzzi

Introduction.

New generations on the move: young people beyond stereotypes

Carlo Buzzi

The changes that have characterised Western societies in recent decades have contributed to creating a world in continuous and rapid evolution, where generations constantly modify their living conditions, needs and motivations. In particular, compared to the past, the young population showed the strongest and most visible evolutionary trends from a demographic, economic, social, and cultural perspective. As for the first three fields, there are a lot of studies highlighting the effects on the new generations; instead, with reference to the fourth one, analyses of cultural aspects have often been limited to descriptions of the phenomena, without providing critical reflections on youth culture as an effect of structural or social transformations.

This initial consideration reaffirms the difficulty in interpreting youth phenomena from a cultural perspective. Despite some commonalities, young people are not a homogeneous group, but rather exhibit significant internal variability, often invisible to adult eyes. This leads to the spread of superficial and stereotypical images, whereas the youth population is complex and requires careful examination. For instance, while discussing the evolutionary processes of youth culture and identities, from a methodological point of view it is necessary to consider at least two levels in order to ensure heuristically meaningful studies of the youth universe. On the one hand, an external plane, which puts young people in front of adults according to an *inter-group* comparison (between different age groups), and on the other an internal plane, which considers culturally different groups of young people of the same age, according to an *infra-group* comparison. This comparison can be played on multiple paradigms, the most significant ones being values, language, systems of meaning, the image of the future, lifestyles, and generation gap.

The debate on these issues has been going for a long time, resulting in significant interpretive ambiguities, which can be summarized by the opposition between two dichotomies to a large extent unresolvable. For instance, while comparing youth to adults, signs of conformity can be identified. There is no clear generational divide, as demonstrated by the low level of intra-family and school conflict, widespread individualism, further decrease in youth participation, and generational rapprochement in the propensity to consume. At the same time, there are no signs of *separateness*. Rather, new systems of meaning are emerging, and young people seem to become more and more difficult to understand, for adults. Separate, non-conflicting cultures are emerging, as they mostly refer to different areas of judgement. In this context the question is: *do young people differently express the same ideas of adults* - which is an issue of form and language - or *do young people express ideas that are fundamentally different from adults' ideas* - which would also become a question of substance?

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Regarding the internal plane, related to comparisons within the youth world, the dichotomy is instead between *homologation* and *segmentation*. In the former case, young people would always be more and more similar to one another (in terms of fashion, forms of expression, globalized consumption, planetary culture). In the second case, growing differentiation would no longer depend on traditional structural and socio-demographic factors, but rather on cultural fractures producing new forms of belonging and diversified lifestyles.

This Issue of Welfare & Ergonomia responds to some of the abovementioned issues. In the contributions, although not strictly homogeneous, research paths are identified on themes and conceptual areas characterised by a certain convergence and organized in three sections:

- *Transformations, redefinitions, identity*, on progressive and extensive processes of individual and social identity acquisition;
- *Peripheries, resilience, life choices*, on attitudes and behaviours allowing to cope with difficult contexts or situations giving rise to particular life choices;
- *Science, trust, uncertainties*, on youth sentiments towards science, a factor having a strong impact on many aspects such as the idea of technological progress, the relationship with institutions, the concept of health, the origin of humans.

The transversal objectives of this work are to identify and address the various ways in which young people present themselves beyond stereotyped representations, often conveyed by the media. The dominant narratives often place the new generations at the centre of a fictitious debate, emphasizing the idea of 'youth as the future'. In practice, policies marginalise young people by disregarding their social rights, from education to labour, from housing to support for new families.

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