Trust in whom? Young Italian people and interpersonal relationships

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In recent years, a lot of sociological research carried out in Italy and Europe has shown us the leanings of European and Italian young people toward becoming citizens of the world with a high propensity for geographical mobility and open attitudes towards different cultures. It seems to be a globalized, cosmopolitan generation. What are their reference points? What are the important relationships in their lives? Who shapes the way they see the world? And who represents their social identity.

We could also ask: in whom do young people trust? To whom do they go to for advice? Who provides them support and for what reasons? What are the characteristics of the people who can support, assist, and work side-by-side with these young people as they resolve the problems that they face in everyday life? Would young people prefer having others as points of reference who are able to guide them on their paths, or would they prefer those who are able to listen and understand the problems they face without necessarily guiding them through such problems?

The *Rapporto giovani* by Istituto Toniolo and Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore di Milano has monitored the condition of Italian young people since 2012 and, in order to respond to these questions, in 2015 asked young Italians (i.e., 19 to 31 years old – a sample of 16.00 cases) to identify the people with whom they have established significant relationships and together are building their life-path (Istituto Toniolo 2014).

When there was a large number of people identified, further analysis showed that some of those who were identified were actually not very present or even close to those young people. This distancing is not surprising and it is, in fact, fully in line with the results of previous research carried out. Such separation typically has characterized the young western world – in particular, European and North American - for many years: an increasing distance from political and social institutions, and, consequently, from those who represent them. In the beginning of the 21st century, national research had already clarified the relationships of the young Italian adult generation (those between 25 and 39 years of age) with these institutions, which were already then considered distant and relatively non-influential in one’s own life, and less favorable to face-to-face relationships, daily interactions, and closeness already decidedly at the center of both preoccupations and desires (Bichi 2005; Introini-Pasqualini 2005).

These models have roots that touch the short twentieth century (1914 to 1991), in the period that Hobsbawm (1994) called landslide in which “the most profound revolution in society since the Stone Age happened.” And already in 1997, Alain Touraine described the de-modernization like the de-institutionalization and de-socialization. In 2000, finally, Bauman (2000) launched the luckiest metaphors of liquidity. In this mentioned context, data collected by *Rapporto giovani* show that for the newest generations, there is one institution lives on and really affects the life of young people: the family. Family of origin remains the raft, which young people hold on to in the difficult navigation of the rough waters of society in which they live. The family is the only institution that is able to support the weight and the responsibility of the social bond’s certainty.

Many of the reflections that begin from this point are possible; but I will discuss here only the responses that the young people gave to the questions that deal with people whom they trust. We are also able to see in this particular context that family figures have a strong prevalence over all others, confirming that at least some significant others, which the social psychology points out as fundamental figures in the self-building phase (Mead 1934), are maintained even during later phases of life and are an important centrality in defining one’s own belonging and identity.

For the question, “How much trust do you have?” accompanied by a list of possible figures to choose from, the maternal figure was chosen by 84% of the sample, with the maximum level of the scale. The father figure was second, and other family members came in third. Self trust is only fourth place, and the first figure that represents social institutions is Pope Francis, the only one which young people trust in significant measure .

That is in general, but who are the people with whom young people confide when they have a problem dealing with their sentiments, their work (if they work) and/or their academics (of course if they study)? Another point of interest dealing with the person who, above all others, is the reference point of 19-31 year-olds, the first instinctively mentioned, the leader of the expressive relationships but also those most linked to the legal and regulatory aspects of their own lives. But what are the motivations, the reasons that bring this about? And what are the reasons why some say they do not have a person of reference?

Affection, study, and work are three areas of particular relevance in life, especially for young people. These are three spheres of life characterized by instability and uncertainty of their experience today, but also the future they anticipate. The crisis that affected the entire Western world - and Italy in particular - in the later years of the first decade of the new century continues its effects without leaving too much space to hope and plan and not giving young people much chance of a rational construction of their life path. Just over half of the respondents (amounting to a total of 1,638) still study (52% of the sample) and 42% have an occupation. It is therefore possible to showcase the emerging specificity of each sphere of life.

As it relates to the problems with work , among those young people who work, their parents remain a strong point of reference (for a total of 48% of the sample), however, the relationship with one's partner was chosen by 56% of the respondents. In this field, co-workers have a significant relevance, perhaps less obvious than expected, who are in second place as a first choice (26%) but overall in third place after both the partners and parents.

As for the problems in the school environment , the people closest and most immediately consulted are of course classmates (25% picked it as a first choice); but attention needs to be given also to parental figures since they are in second place; they were chosen for a total of 42% versus 43% of classmates. Faced with the demands of study, therefore, young people are turning to parents and colleagues in equal measure while teachers come in at 9% as the first choice and only 20% overall.

In regards to sentiments, as highlighted in the chart , friends were chosen the most (39%), and partners in the second place (25%). The parents (one or both) are mentioned as a first choice by 13% of the sample and 19% as their second choice. Even in the field of sentimentality, which would seem to be perhaps the most distant from family ties, shows the importance of parental figures.

Who is, therefore, the most important point of reference? Mother, surpassing all other figures hands down, is the most important figure for 33% of young people, compared to 26% who chose a friend, 14% partner, and 9% father. Only 5% of young people surveyed say that they don't have a particular reference point.

The difference between the two parental figures is high enough to signal a major divergence that would require a more in-depth analysis. With respect to this piece of data, one can hardly imagine a stronger affectionate relationship with the mother. The question to identify whom one turns to talk about him/herself could be interpreted more from an expressive point of view rather than an instrumental one.

The difference between men and women is relevant. The father and friend are those referenced to be more masculine than feminine. The father figure, in particular, was chosen by 12% of men and 6% of women, indicating, perhaps, an identification of the kind that also operates as part of the most important relationships, because even for women, the mother is the first figure in 38% of cases versus 27% of men. Additionally, you can highlight a more frequent choice of the father who graduated from university (10%) than those who did not reach this level of education (7%).

The difference among age groups highlights that the youngest people privilege their mother more than others and we can see the maximum percentage for the partner in the oldest age group.. It is a traditional path—first the mother then the partner.

"If you had to say why he/she is your point of reference, what would you say?". The young interviewees responded as the figure shows. In first place, considering the two main characteristics mentioned that go to the interest of well-being of the respondent (37% chose him or her as their first or second characteristic). If this is the reason, it can be entirely the result of the choice that privileges parental figure as the first point of reference.

Well-being is very closely accompanied by the importance of listening without judging (35%) and understanding personal problems (35%). For 36%, however, there is also a different motivation, which refers to an area of rules and corrections: "always shows me where I'm wrong," in fact, it was also chosen by 36% of respondents. Far away from these four reasons is the giving of serenity and enthusiasm in life, the right of good advice, which only 11% considered it a motivation for the award to a person, without speaking of consistency, which is considered an important prerogative only for 9% of the respondents.

Question 9 places further emphasis on the functions performed by single figures in a particular manner than the others. Therefore, fraternal bonds, for example, cover the area more than others regarding the awareness of one's own behavior problems. These are the people from whom they can more easily accept criticism for their actions. Friends, as already mentioned, are mainly to be heard without being judged and are represented by those who have greater understanding of the issues; the partner brings serenity and passion; the father has a lot of experience and is recognized for his authority and ability to advise. And the mother?

The mother has a positive effect on all needs and desires without prevailing in any area but attending all: it is a “factotum mom”, the one useful for any eventuality, who is able to understand, listen, give advice, and in whom you can confide. In addition, she has experience, is consistent, understands mistakes, and provides serenity and joy of living. The mother is the person who, in 2015, is closest to the new generations. You can trust her because she will never act against her child and is always for his or her own well-being.

If this maternal image may in some ways seem stereotypical and predictable (albeit real and active), the persistence of listening and understanding function is of interest—for many years the prerogative of a maternal figure very close to friendship—that carries with the minimization of the conflictive dimension and the prevalence of direction and guidance.

In conclusion, young Italian people seem to be having meaningful relationships that help and support them both in key decisions and those of everyday life. These reference figures often remain in the familiar boundaries in the most intimate relationships, and the mother, above all others, has the prevalence as the main anchor point or as "coverage "—although not exclusive—of all the regions: expressive needs but also instrumental.

The father emerges from this survey having little influence. These data are certainly not sufficient to draw any conclusions about the relationship of this generation with the father, so much discussed, in the last decades, even in the field of psychoanalysis.

There are points of reference outside the family but they remain in the narrow circle of informal interactions and when off the institutional area, are not perceived as useful for their well-being.

In addition to what we have stated thus far, we can also say that the great majority of respondents consider being open to and aware of others: the item "I like to compare myself with others, I come out often enriched" is agreed by more than the 90% of the sample. Almost all the young people, therefore, declared to not be closed in their individuality but ready for confrontation in a reciprocal exchange.

It appears that interactions have the power in order to draw the life paths in the age of mediated relationships which seems to leave space for mosaicking the choices and constructing a narcissistic self. But the lives of young people continue to be built through family relationships and friendship in a way that privileges above all face-to-face connection, with a reference to an Other that—if designed with a strong reference to their individuality, with a strong emphasis on individual well-being—continues to aim reciprocity and thus the creation and permanence of a social tie.

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