

“What do « NEETs » have to teach us?”

Abstract

The Childhood, Youth, and Youth Protection Observatory (OEJAJ) commissioned a qualitative study to assess the situation of young people (from 18 to 30 years old) categorized as “NEETs”, or “Not in Employment, Education or Training”.

The main thrust was to assume these youths as able to mobilize a reflexive attitude towards their own situation and life trajectory, and that their analysis could bring to our understanding some elements of the “flow of life” otherwise not accounted for by the reality as instituted¹, such as the labour education and training and also the housing markets - as well as by the policies contributing to produce them.

The references used by the researchers, as explicitly exposed in our proposal, focused on the critic sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, of which the vast compendium published as *The world's misery* gives an “incontrovertible tutelary matrix”² for this kind of inquiry, both on the content and structure of the work. The research team which conducted the fifty or so interviews on which is set the master piece directed by P. Bourdieu, choose to circumscribe itself to a protocol enabling them to preserve the opportunity to “understand” what the interviewed people had to teach it.

In agreement with this protocol, which is thoroughly explained by P. Bourdieu, we mainly pointed out in our proposal the pressing need to “*avoid any projection or imposition inspired by any social positioning other than those of the interviewed people themselves.*”

Besides, we were aiming to build a suitable relationship with the interviewed people, a relationship allowing reciprocal understanding, notwithstanding the objective difference in positions ; indeed, the OEJAJ hoped it would be given priority to those people most subject to processes of impoverishment ; our various experiences in researches and interventions consistently revealed us that it was most appropriate, in those circumstances, to avoid the traps of a *marvelling* or *admiring* posture that often tends to merge with what Erving Goffman called positive stigmatization, on one hand, and, on the other hand, that may do so at the expense of the very fact that the situations examined are in themselves quite unsatisfactory.

For all of those reasons, the RTA research team chose also to take inspiration from the actor-network theory (ANT), so that the very participation to the inquiry would require abiding by the rules of the making of a *connection type network*. This includes the continuous translation of reciprocal interests, giving a genuine function to every protagonist, searching for the precise mediators. We benefited from the involvement of the Walloon Anti-Poverty Network (RWLP) which helped us to build such a connection type network with the very people we sought to interview. Besides, we grew quite rapidly aware, though we did not foresee it, that we could only reinforce the safeguarding of these principles by including into the researching team itself a person confronted to the very situation assessed by the study: so, for the ANT's “engaging” principle's sake (“giving every protagonist a genuine function”) we hired this person as research assistant.

Thirty one young people agreed to engage with this connection type network with us. They were met, most of the time by two team members, from February the 15th to June the 28th of 2013. With the aid of numbers of active partners, we were able to assert a large diversity in the participating group, concerning the gender (13 women and 18 men), the age (the younger being seventeen, the oldest being in their thirties), as well as the geographical location, be it temporary (7 live in Brussels, and 24 in Wallonia, spread over different provinces – the “NEETs” being quite mobile).

¹ Luc Boltanski's concepts might have been recognized here, he holds the mission of sociology is to render unacceptable the “reality” when it is given within a context of domination.

² This expression is from Claude Lévi-Strauss ; he uses it about the mythical thought and the inspiration it can give to science.

The education levels are themselves quite diverse, as is their relationship with the labour market (one may have ten years of professional experience while others could never land a job). However, these descriptive elements could not, if we are to ensure a sound methodology, be considered de facto as classification and interpretation principles, for, as the ANT recommends, it was necessary on this specific kind of research to follow the actors to the closest and consider how the social dimension is being framed for them and by themselves, “locally”, frame by frame.

Such grounding principles and commitments also shaped the reporting policy of the research.

It seemed necessary for us to give priority to the analytic accounts produced by the interviewed people, which we did by allowing them a major presence in the final report. Next, as K. Popper suggests, we had to consider each of the reported accounts as an *explicandum* – the team being in charge of finding the needed “*explicans*”, declined in “universal” propositions (it is accepted from the work of... that...) and particular propositions (and that is precisely what happens in the given situation), explicans accounting for the situation.

As the commission of the research required to acknowledge that the elements of the “flow of life” could alter the manner in which the reality was instituted, we therefore often had to *extend* the conceptual work employed based on the material received from the interviews: it is part of what we learned and which allowed us to account for the extreme *symbolic violence* endured by the interviewed people, an omnipresent violence that we found in the reports and analysis the people delivered us. The least the researcher's team could do was trying to render the mechanism and intensity of the violence as truthfully as they could.

To ensure the clarity of the report, we decided to link together only one or two “explicandum” at a time, even if other stories could actually be accounted for by the same “explicans”: we proceeded, after the analysis itself and *while in the process of writing*, to articulate the different kinds of propositions, following the reciprocal definition principle (the ANT “intertwine-definition”).

These choices constitute a whole; and as such, from our point of view, it both determines and legitimates the content and the shape of the resulting research.

I - How do the interviewed people assess their own situation?

When describing their own situation, what led to it and what they attempt upon it, the interviewed showed us the common sense representation's inadequacy: their lives are but inactive, there is no resigned renunciation less be it complacency in their situation.

The people we met were not “deactivated”: the needs for their survival over-occupy and overwhelm them, but even though, those necessities can become vectors of multiple manifestations of solidarity. There is therefore a huge effort needed upon the dominant representations operating from the “activation” category.

The situation of the individuals met rather corresponds to the outcomes of a disaffiliation process they attempt to restrain, (than if anything else). The differentiation done by Robert Castel between the integration axis (possessing an employment or not, being more or less secured) and the insertion axis (of the familial and social solidarity) prove functional to understand their life trajectories. We deemed it necessary to deepen this concept while giving evidence of the importance of the co-production of the two axis processes of experience, both in matters of undergone difficulties than conquering possibilities.

Therefore we have evidence that an “everything by integration” policy would be quite disastrous, and that “decreasing the allocations as an incentive” is a conception that misses the reality of the people it actually affects live in.

Upon this, we suggested a protocol of intervention for the professional agents that would be coherent with the “dynamic co-production of the two axis” hypothesis. It is actually a participative strategic analysis model set upon concepts like co-production basis, strengthening supports,

convergence points, connecting sequences, identifying tipping points, etc. What we learn from the interviews leads us to think that a model like this one would be more functional than the combination of aid and control the working agents are forced to employ.

Implementing such a participative analysis model implies a non-instrumental and non-sectoral understanding of the difficulties people face. In our investigation we attempted to give an account of how such a reading would function if implemented on housing issues.

Finally, the last element to qualify the situations unduly 'pictured' as "NEETs", concerns the active presence of stigma.

We wanted to bear in mind the actual mechanism of stigmatisation as E. Goffman³ established it (it concerns a deep and lasting *discredit*, based upon an *attribute*, being laid on an individual or a group to such an extent that the person will no more belong to the 'ordinary' group of people, meaning humankind) and we had to note the frequent presence of this mechanism in many of the situations we faced.

It is even of concern that the "NEETs" qualification may itself become a new attribute with stigmatizing ability.

It is therefore necessary to remember that the stigma has many *social uses*: like comforting the "ordinaries" on behalf of their poor ability to be confronted to difference, but chiefly kindling support to society among the ones society itself does and will not support.

We then established that the developing "NEET" stigma could *justify* a disaffiliation society; which seems already actuated in some countries.

II – An approach in terms of the subject's rights

Many of the accounts called for the creation of an alternative way of understanding and of talking about the "causal chains" inducing the situations we studied.

To give a brief account of this section of the research, we could say that the disaffiliation processes encountered are processes of dis-subjectivation.

We were entrusted with life trajectories that show that the difficulties of integration and insertion can alternate, can mutually reinforce themselves, can even add their consequences to one another constituting thereby a *spiral of dis-subjectivation*. The driving force of these spirals could not be counteracted by the existing aids, for those were too rigid to be able to bring the personalised support that would have been needed: many of the people felt they were rather "formatted" than "formed" (as trained), and the new "standards" of social and educational policies (which are support to individual project, to autonomy, to creativity...) proved to be rather ineffective.

We had to go further and investigate whether a new "negative transversality"⁴ was at work. That is how P. Bourdieu inquires into a new form of social work that "attaches itself to the collective conversion to neo-liberalism" : it suggests to each one to behave like a small "business owner of their own business", somehow maintaining that the problem (which is the neo-liberal logic) can become the solution.

We therefore examine, in practical situations, how the work on subjectivation is replaced (perverted) by a (compulsory) "investment" in the manifestation of a *substance of the self*, which generally turns out to be a decoy and might operate as a confinement.

We can only state that "personal choice" can, when over-praised, suggest quite damaging "investments", or be unable to convey the expected results, even when behaving like what L. Boltanski and E. Chiapello called the "new spirit of capitalism".

We then wonder if this "new spirit" (and the activating policies that so perfectly embody it) does not constitute a formidable *ideological lie*.

To offset this dominant interpretation of the idea of subjectivation, we suggest a *non romantic conception of the subject*, which should allow for a better understanding of the subjectivation difficulties much of the people concerned by the situation encounter, and to imagine more effective

³ Every discrimination does not inevitably amount to stigmatization.

⁴ Cf. René Lourau.

ways of support.

Following the work of Michel Wieviorka, we established that the life trajectory difficulties encountered by the people can prove to be figures, which are generally combined, of the “floating subject”, the “survivor-subject”, or even the “anti-subject”. This approach seems to us to represent an alternative for conceptions that quite lazily mobilize hypothesis such as the generational reproduction of poverty situations, or complacency in state handouts.

III – Aggravating factors

The accounts given by the people also compel us to speak of the existence of aggravating factors, acting on the level of professional social workers -'beneficiaries' interactions.

A first mechanism identified in the accounts, concerns an “activative optimum” logic, inadequately employed by some agents. This concept is developed in reference of the excesses of the neo-management, which, as it was brought about by Jean-Pierre Le Goff, demand from workers a destructive “productive optimum”.

A second mechanism is the implementation of procedures attributed by E. Goffman to the “total institution”, whose outcome are to destroy the person's cultural autonomy : mortification of the image of self, “disculturation” from one's identity, role dispossession, alienating effects... their presence is far from anecdotal in the analysed situations, and somewhat paradoxical in a political context that, as we saw earlier, prides itself on sustaining personal choices, autonomy and creativity ; and that, by exercising the requirement they impose on those matters, can bring about the implementation of cultural destruction processes.

We therefore, following E. Goffman's work, build a model of the social aid practices that would allow the agents to guard themselves against the implementation of such procedures.

IV - The weight of structures and structural policies

In fine it should be borne in mind that a greater vigilance on professional practices alone is far from being enough to reduce the symbolic violence of which we found much evidence. It is indeed on the structural policies level that a radical change of course is needed.

Indeed we noted the consequences of the *weight of structures* throughout the reported life trajectories: fragmentation of the labour market, multiple disaffiliation procedures, contradiction between keeping a sectoral approach and an individualised 'activation', downfall of the new spirit of capitalism.

It is the Active Social State model that must be here questioned, because it did not keep its promise for a larger, dynamic and individualising social protection; on the contrary, its implementation enacted an impressive range of regressions.

Ultimately, we give evidence, by criticising some of the possible social uses of the “recognition theory”, that the model of a socially activating state can exert a negative attraction force.

But identifying the weight of the structures and the structural policies does not mean considering them irrefutable or immutable, and the account the people we met gave us does not incline us to resignation.

The people unduly categorized as “NEET” did not only represented themselves to us as analysers of social policies and their symbolic violence, they share with the mobilised associations at any rate (notably those that engaged themselves with us in inviting them to participate on this research) but also with other social forces, some forms of resistance and fighting goals that we must identify as common to us all and translate in each other languages and references, so they can magnify and strengthen themselves.