

## **Transmission Belts: On how young adults in Germany and Italy make meaning of mobility in transitions to work and adulthood**

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### **1 Introduction**

This paper focuses on the role played by biographical narratives in the ways in which young people negotiate external demands and individual needs in transitions to adulthood and work, with a specific focus on experiences with spatial mobility.

For a long time, western modernity and industrial societies have been characterised by employment as the core of social integration. The transition to adulthood was marked by the end of compulsory education and the entrance into the labour market for men and into motherhood for women. However, sociocultural and socioeconomic changes of the underlying model of production and work have undermined the linearity and predictability of biographies, and especially the equation of transitions to work with transitions to adulthood. Thereby, the life condition of young adulthood has been paid increasing attention which, however, – just like the label ‘yoyo-transitions’ – serves more as a heuristic perspective sensitising for the fact that passages between youth and adulthood are less direct than assumed by dominant assumptions of normality than as a descriptive concept (Furlong & Cartmel, 2006; Walther, 2006).

Increasing risk and precarity in transitions to work as well as the growing uncertainty of careers have resulted in an individualization of biographical construction and the constant need for individuals to negotiate transitions in the life course (Beck, 1992). Research has revealed a trend towards ascribing decision-making in the life course to individual choices, even if the possibility to make such decisions are limited by social inequality. Thus, individuals’ subjective narratives of their own lives have become an important resource for meaning-making and legitimation (Benasso, 2013) for continuity and self-identity over the life span.

Informally, friends or family might motivate the creation of such narratives, while, formally, other people might stimulate their production, for example, if a person is asked to prepare a CV, participate in a job interview, professional counselling, and, last not least, research interviews. However, due to the uncertainty and biographisation of life course transitions,

narratives also serve as a means for individuals to understand specific situations themselves (Alheit & Dausien, 2002).

One of the challenges of late modern transitions to adulthood are the demands of spatial mobility for studying and work experience or because of a lack of career prospects at home. This article is based on the analysis of four contrasting biographical case studies of young adults aged 20-35 years. It does not, however, offer a comparison that elaborates *what* distinguishes mobilities in youth transitions in Germany and Italy. Instead, it is an in-depth analysis of *how* young people shape their transitions through narratives that make meaning of and legitimise experiences of temporary or undetermined long-term work-related mobility under different biographical constellations. This includes reflecting on the relation between such narratives with dominant discourses of transitions and mobility.

The article begins by introducing the role of mobility in transitions to work in the context of late modern societies and the increased uncertainty, risk and precariousness attached to transitions in the life course as well as its reflection in narrative construction. This is followed by an outline of this study's methodology and sample. The core of the article presents the biographical analysis of the narratives of four young adults about their experiences of work-related mobility. A comparative cross-case analysis depicts the different constellations of how young adults construct their narratives of experiences of mobility. Finally, the paper assesses the relevance of narratives for the reconstruction of mobile transitions.

## 2 Theoretical framework

Processes of social modernisation such as the flexibilisation of labour markets, the individualisation of life conditions, the pluralisation of life styles, and the shift of welfare states towards activation have affected institutionalised life courses, especially in terms of a prolongation of youth and a re-definition of transitions towards adulthood and to work which have progressively become less predictable, linear and homogeneous (Bauman, 1995). One emerging aspect of youth transitions concerns expectations and opportunities of mobility (Elliott & Urry, 2010). The development of information and communication technologies, the increasing speed of transportation and the consolidation of supranational economic and political spaces like the EU have expanded both online and offline localities and have amplified the possibilities of transitions (Appadurai, 1996).

Demands, possibilities and 'choices' of mobility challenge national borders, but also opportunity structures traditionally defined by the nation state such as traditional meanings and options of transition to adulthood (Hill & Yeung, 1999). However, these changes do not reduce inequalities of opportunities of mobility between the 'cosmopolitans' of the Global North and the 'migrants' of the Global South or between the different youths according to social status, gender and ethnicity (Faist, 2013). For instance, low cost airline companies and exchange programmes offer young people from the middle classes of the Global North increasing opportunities to travel, live, study or work in other countries without having to give up their links with their place of origin, and to experiment with their transitions to adulthood across transnational spaces (Faist, 2000). In contrast, young people from the Global South feel forced to emigrate without the guarantee of finding adequate careers and return options.

This differentiation applies also to contexts within Europe such as those addressed by this article. They differ with regard to how youth transitions are being institutionalised in general – with closer links between education and employment in Germany than in Italy (cf. Walther

et al., 2016) – and how they have been affected by the recent economic crisis in particular (Italy much more than Germany). While there is a lot of evidence that youth transitions are structured by social inequalities according to class, gender or ethnicity (cf. Furlong & Cartmel, 2006), these have been even more accentuated due to the crisis and thus increased the divergence of growing up in these countries. As a tendency, these inequalities intersect with mobility being an *option* in the transitions of most young Germans and a *necessity* for many young Italians.

Representations of transitions to work and mobility — both the traditional and the new ones — are indeed containers for narratives by which individuals construct their biographies and, increasingly, justify biographical choices. Narratives are acts of self-presentation of identity and serve to confirm and justify the positioning towards life course expectations, especially with regard to education and employment (Ricoeur, 1992). Thus, individual biographical construction – or: biographisation (Alheit & Dausien, 2002) – is concerned with (re)producing subjective meaning, coherence and continuity. It becomes a powerful ‘rhetorical device’ (Thomson et al., 2002) or a ‘transmission belt’ transforming the relationship between individual experience (integrating individual aspirations and contextual conditions) and societal expectations young people have to negotiate to legitimise their positioning, especially with regard to the labour market and mobility. Further, they result from selecting representations from the symbolic repertoires defined and reproduced by cultures of belonging and from mediating between the singularity of one’s own story and the codes through which it becomes understandable to others.

“Focusing on young people’s accounts of mobility allows for an analysis of the different ways in which individuals act their biographicity: in the form of access to an independent social life (through transport) [as well as] movement as a rite of passage. [...] Not only is mobility a central motif in young people’s accounts of adulthood, but the different ways in which it is manifest also reflect inequalities and power relations” (Thomson & Taylor, 2005: 337).

### 3 Methodology

This paper draws on biographical analysis (Delory-Momberger, 2015) which aims to explore how young people present, evaluate, legitimise but also refrain from work-related mobility. Focusing on narratives as a means of identity formation and biographical construction implies seeing them neither as an instrument nor a technique, but as a unit of analysis of both a social construction and individual self-presentation and legitimation. In order to reconstruct diverse constellations of subjective meaning-making in relation to mobility, this paper analyses four individual case studies conducted in Italy, Germany and on-line between 2014 and 2015.

The case of Giorgio<sup>1</sup> derives from research on the biographical constructions of a group of middle class young adults aged 26-34 years who, after different experiences of occupational migration, decided to settle in a small seaside town in Northern Italy and to experiment with alternative lifestyles. Barbara was interviewed in the framework of an ethnographic study on new labour migration from Southern European countries to two German regions during the recent economic crisis. Fifty-one interviews were conducted with young adults from Spain and Italy aged 18-39 to understand the processes of inclusion of these new immigrants. Alisa’s case is one of four biographical interviews collected in the context of a German study

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<sup>1</sup> All names and places have been fully anonymised.

focused on the biographical relevance of organized youth travel. The young adults, aged 22-25, were engaged in internships abroad. Beatrice's case was constructed through a datamining analysis of blogs of Italians living abroad with a *netnographic* approach.

The cases were selected as contrasting with regard to both the forms of mobility and of narrative (re-)presentation as well as according to age, gender, social background and national context. Italy and Germany represent different transition regimes, that is, different constellations of socio-economic, institutional and cultural factors involved in shaping youth transitions (Walther, 2006).<sup>2</sup> The range of ages between 20 and 35 reflects the ongoing prolongation of transitions into adulthood as well as the life condition of young adulthood. It also captures the marked difference of youth transitions in Germany and Italy in terms of how and when individuals enter employment and gain economic independence. We assume that age, gender and transition regimes imply different needs and normalities and thus different constellations of meaning-making and legitimation. The same applies for differences in the time spent away from home and material dependency on family resources. Furthermore, the cases differ according to narrative production: three result from face-to-face biographical interviews whereby researchers initiated the narrative's production, one was self-initiated as a personal internet blog and evolved from interactions between the author and her public.

The key difference is that interviews stimulated by researchers entail the challenge of finding evidence of patterns of reconstruction and legitimation in the interview that can be also expected to be effective in other situations. In contrast, the personal blog can be interpreted as intentional in terms of self-presentation, reconstruction and legitimation. Both types of narratives are understood as articulations of the increasing need to justify (and thereby to reflect on) individual choices. We do not take the narratives as expressions of individual selves but as interactions between different actors who are not all co-present at the time of the interview. Societal discourses are reproduced by the researchers, the interviewees and also artefacts. We thus aim at comparing constellations of meaning-making and legitimation in their relation to mobility in transitions to work.

All interviews were recorded and fully transcribed while the blog posts were integrated into a sequential document. Analysis combined sequential narrative analysis focusing on the relationship between 'what' is told and 'how' it is told (Rosenthal 2004), and grounded theory elaborating key categories for cross-case comparison. Regarding the blog, also the approach of online conversation analysis was applied to consider how digital production affects narrative and self-presentation (Kozinets, 2010).

#### **4 Narratives of mobilities in transition**

In this paragraph, we present the four cases of mobility experience. Each case presentation begins with a brief description of the research context and an outline of the respective social and biographical constellation of mobility in transition. Next, interview extracts are interpreted from the personal perspective in which the narrator presents his or her experiences and representations of mobility relating them to the individual condition of transition. The

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<sup>2</sup> In Germany, there are institutionalised links between education and employment which are much weaker in Italy where the family is the main and sometimes only source of social security for young adults. During and after the recent economic crisis, GDP and unemployment have developed differently. Italy has a high youth unemployment rate (up to 42%) and a negative GDP growth while in Germany GDP has recovered quickly and a youth unemployment rate diminished to 8% in 2017 ([www.eurostat.eu](http://www.eurostat.eu)). An indicator closely related to mobility is the average age of leaving the parental household, which is 21 years for Germany and 30 for Italy (Ibid.).

analysis takes into consideration specific socio-economic contexts (unequal labour market demands, opportunities and resources), constellations of mobility (different forms and destinations of mobility in the context of transitions to work) and narrative styles (justifications, meanings and evaluations). The aim is to elaborate biographical functions of speaking about mobility in a specific way and thereby produce and reproduce normalities of 'doing transitions' (Cuconato & Walther, 2015).

#### 4.1 Giorgio: Moving to stay in-between

Giorgio, 34 years old, was born in [city 1] in Northern Italy. After his graduation in sociology [city 1], Giorgio moved to [city 2] to complete his civic service. This allowed him to maintain his student lifestyle, as compared to [city 1] represented as a 'city of production and work opportunities' [city 2] is a 'city of students'. When he returned to [city 1] he started to work as a content creator for websites living at his parents' place. As the job was not bound to a physical place, he started travelling for several months in South-East Asia. During one trip, Giorgio suffered from what he defines as '*nervous exhaustion*'. He barely managed to return to Italy and spent the summer in a small town at the seaside with his parents to recover. At the end of the summer, he decided to stay and make use of his parents' holiday apartment (thus reflecting many young Italian's dependency on family resources) which was still his living condition at the time of the interview.

In his narrative, the first significant experience of mobility comes immediately after his graduation:

"I decided to move to another city, in order to leave my family home, so I moved to [city 2], because I wanted to continue breathing the air of university that unfortunately was finished".

In this quote, moving away from home is presented as a tactic to continue living '*as a student*', beyond the legitimate limit of this period of life, rather than entering the world of constraining and alienating work like most graduates. With this choice, which is not uncommon in alternative middle class milieus, he distances himself from the 'standard' biography based upon a career and a traditional adult role in order to secure a student lifestyle. Moreover, he also removes himself from the traditional breadwinner role that is ascribed to young men, especially in Italy. He does not present this as a failure or slowdown of his transition but as a distinctive choice. By voluntarily accepting a reversibility of his choices, Giorgio resists the conditioning of the hegemonic linear life course. At the same time, this choice of mobility is provisional since Giorgio is aware of the problems of legitimacy he would face if he extended his 'in-between-condition' too long. Therefore, once he had completed his civic service in [city 2], he returned to [city 1].

"Then I said [to myself]: 'I can spend six months around the world and six months in [city 1] with my parents and, anyway, I'm able to keep doing my work, which however is not so demanding, it takes me half a day'. So, I started travelling... during the last trip, I started getting bored. It was not a real holiday, I was also working, always facing difficult conditions due to a low travel budget".

This part of the interview illustrates Giorgio's perspective towards mobility in terms of travelling. Thanks to his particularly flexible job of writing content for websites, Giorgio discovers another 'inversion' of the ordinary lifestyle in which work and vacation are strictly separated. At the same time, this alternative lifestyle compels him to experiment with

occupational niches in ‘exotic’ web markets and with a low travel budget. Travel periods represent an opportunity for a lifestyle in which the absence of constraints and bonds, however, also implies situations characterised by unpredictability and risk, which undermine his motivation in the long term. In fact, it is interesting that he refers to ‘*getting bored*’ rather than to a breakdown.

“I said [to myself]: ‘I feel so good here [small town], if I went back to [city 1] I would continue doing the same work that I’m doing here, so let’s try to get the internet here and stay [...] Here, I can cultivate my interests... I don’t like to be in a rush doing things. To me, going to the office is like a nightmare... I want to have my life based on relationships in which my job is not the core... Anyway, I still have an escape, if something goes wrong, I’ll return to [city 1]”.

The third quote explains the choice of moving to the small town to establish further distance from the pressure generated by the challenging context of [city 1] and (for different reasons) the tiring style of low-budget travelling. Following the conclusion of the phase of temporary experimentations through his travels, which Giorgio presents both as stimulating and physically and mentally stressful, the narrative about the choice of establishing himself in the small town is the only part of the interview structured by a turning point and determined intentionality. Describing the small town as the ideal place for his desired lifestyle enables him to also present his decision against further mobility as a choice of an alternative lifestyle expressing biographical continuity, coherence and meaning. Thus, he also rejects the interpretation of being a victim of the crisis.

Considering the three different periods and contexts and the related subjective meanings, Giorgio’s ‘mobility career’ may be characterised in terms of experiment-analysis-correction. The first move to [city 2] was aimed at maintaining a student life. However, the need for an income forced him to look for a continuous job and he moved back to [city 1]. He experimented with a new kind of mobility through travelling implying a further change of lifestyle. Nevertheless, this experiment also revealed to be ‘expensive’ in terms of material and mental resources, and this resulted in a new desire for stability, which constituted the main impulse of his last move.

In Giorgio’s narrative, decision-making is related to the extemporaneous opportunities that he encounters. A recurrent phrase to introduce his choices is, ‘*I said (to myself)*’ frequently followed by a practical consequence ‘*so I ...*’. This can be interpreted as a narrative strategy of self-legitimation for his untraditional and alternative choices by applying a rather traditional rationality. The linear logic of decisions that emerges from this narrative style – ‘*I think, I say, I do*’ – reveals a strongly self-centred perspective, limiting the margin of negotiation of his choices, which are presented as autonomous, not caring about the judgements of others – and not referring to the support this implies; for instance, the role of housing provided by his parents. Thus, in terms of decision making, Giorgio’s attitude both distinguishes and coincides with a form of rationality typically ascribed to male Italians who are supposed to manage their biographical paths in a resolute and pragmatic way. Like a ‘transmission belt’, his narrative ‘synchronizes’ his alternative life choices and self-presentation with the traditional image of an adult male worker.

#### **4.2 Barbara: Migration as falling in love, crisis and re-invention as self-entrepreneur**

Barbara, 33, grew up in a small town in the countryside of North-West Italy. She completed a social science degree and moved to the capital of the region where she lived for eleven years.

During her studies, she spent one year abroad as part of an Erasmus exchange programme. After completing her degree, she worked as a researcher at an NGO for three years. She met her current partner in 2011 at the age of 30 and a few months later he proposed moving to [German city] together. He is a musician and a sound technician and had received a job offer from a recording studio there. Barbara decided to leave her job and go with him. Due to her basic language skills, she had to study German. Some months later, she found a job at an Italian restaurant where she worked for one year as a waitress on an irregular basis for a low wage. After one year, she experienced a personal crisis and thought about returning to Italy. However, in this period she also experienced personal development leading to the ‘invention’ of her own business together with her sister in law. In 2014, she gave birth to her first child, the business is going well and she feels satisfied.

In her biographical narrative, she refers to her decision to move to [German city] as ‘naïve’:

“[After a weekend in German city together] [my partner] said to me: ‘Why don’t we stay here? Your contract will expire soon, doing my job in Italy is difficult, while here, there are a lot of possibilities!’ And crazily I said, ‘Why not?’ ... After one year, I really fell into a crisis ... I saw myself without a job I liked ... while in the past, I had a job I liked, that gave me satisfaction and corresponded to my studies ... Here, I found myself working as a waitress. I didn’t like it and so I started saying, ‘No! Either I reinvent myself and create a life here that gives me satisfaction or it isn’t worth it and I go back to Italy’”.

Although Barbara mentions the economic crisis as one of the causes of her migration during the interview, she presents her choice of mobility as a personal decision that she actively made on her own. On the one hand, the reference to emotions in her narrative is a way to justify her choice, which from the perspective of ‘traditional’ modernity seems risky in front of a ‘generalized other’. Indeed, in Italy she had worked in her field of study (albeit in a precarious job) and lived in a house owned by her family. On the other hand, emotional references associate her biography with the traditional gendered female biographical narrative in which women’s choices are driven by emotions and men’s choices (like that of her partner) by ‘rationality’. Throughout the interview, the family emerges as a strong collective interlocutor to whom she has to justify her choice: *‘The concern of my parents was, ‘What are you going to do?’ while I hadn’t planned anything. I’m an explorer by nature’*. This quote reflects the role of safety net that the family continues to play in Southern European societies compensating the State in granting social protection. Transitions to work and adulthood are usually negotiated within the family, which plays a more or less visible role in supporting or discouraging them. Barbara’s parents are a typical example of an Italian working-class family, which has invested their savings in their children’s studies and in housing property to secure economic stability and upward mobility for them.

“At the beginning, it was hard and I felt unsure but now I know that these things just helped me growing from many points of view. I realised that it was a choice taken lightly but involved a lot of things that I had not taken into account”.

One day, in a heavily depressive phase, she woke up with the desire to buy a particular type of plant that is easy to find in Italy but – as she realised – not in Germany. Hence, she asks her mother to send her one.

“[The plants] arrived and I started reflecting on how these plants are able to survive the journey. From there and due to the fact that I hadn’t found them in [German city], I started selling these plants at flea markets”.

It is interesting that even in appropriating her new role, her family is not an antagonist but an ally. It is her mother that creates the stimulus that gives way to Barbara’s epiphany of starting a new business and her sister-in-law became her business partner. In her narrative, Barbara seems to have positioned the act of giving back to her family as the central pillar of her life and a means to apologise for her selfish decision. At the end of the interview, Barbara re-balances her mobility choice in terms of normality, or rather, rationality, concluding that the German city was a better place to live compared to Italy.

She supports this statement by referring to the favourable conditions for starting a small business and the safety generated by a ‘strong’ Welfare State:

“One day I had an idea and it was well received. I know that this is a good place to live and now with [her son] it seems to me that here are opportunities that don’t exist in my country ... For example, if you want to build a family: since he has been born they have given us a lot of economic help ... In Italy this doesn’t exist ... especially with the contract that I had”.

Barbara’s choice to move is framed as a postmodern ‘rite of passage’ (Turner, 1969): the decision to break with the old life and dependency on the family and a well-known place (separation), the passage through difficulties (new language, precariousness) when she moves to [German city] (liminal) and her re-invention and re-incorporation to society with a new role (incorporation). The biographical narrative of Barbara’s transition is revealed as a ‘transmission belt’ between her subjective needs and the cultural and structural features of the transnational context in which her life evolves.

### **4.3 Alisa: Mobility as extrinsic demand and challenge**

Alisa, 22, has grown up in a village close to a big city in South-West Germany. She relies on a large family network. Her parents grew up in modest conditions, migrated to Germany and struggled with keeping money together. Nevertheless, they allowed Alisa to follow her life dreams, for example, by spending her holidays travelling with her uncle or with friends and their families. In fact, she has travelled a lot (mostly in Europe) with her sister and two times with a youth travel organisation. After school, she did a vocational training as a nursery-school teacher, which included a two-month internship in a German speaking Italian region, the longest time she ever was away from home. At the time of the interview, she was about to complete a bachelor’s degree in social sciences. After her studies, she wants to marry and have children but continue working.

In her narrative, the first significant experience of mobility is the internship, which she associated with the demands of becoming an adult.

“Before [the internship abroad] I lived at my parents’ house and was mothered. Suddenly you need to be independent and you need to clean up your own flat and you need to get up in the morning, drive to work, come back home and cook dinner. The girl who was living with me in the flat was five years older, and she mothered me. She took care of me the whole time.”



She starts presenting herself as someone who needs the care of others contrasting this with facing the demands of becoming an adult while being abroad. The style of narrative changes when she introduces her flatmate, who does everything for her, she is the actor, no longer Alisa herself. Throughout her biography, the discrepancy between being mothered and becoming an adult reveals as the main topic. First, Alisa tells her biography strictly in terms of her dependence on people who were important during certain life phases. She begins her narrative with her sister and mother and presents herself as the *'little one'* in the family. Second, the style of her narrative changes into passive voice when she is talking about the challenges of everyday life. She introduces her flatmate during the internship as the *'older one'* who does the things *'you need to do'* when you are an adult, for Alisa as well. She does not confront the new situation and the challenges of becoming an adult on her own proactively but reverts to the same behaviour as at home. She also presents herself as passive and oriented towards others when it comes to decision-making:

“One of my colleagues started to study and she became a really good friend. She was the ice breaker for me, she said ‘Come on Alisa, you are young you should study as well’. I mean, I was 21 completing my training and did not want to become a mother yet ... So I said, ‘Yes, I’ll do it’”.

She is persuaded by someone else and turns the external idea into her own. If she makes decisions on her own, like breaking up with her boyfriend, she regrets and tries to reverse them. Regardless of whether Alisa or someone else makes the decision, it is very important for her that it is backed by her family. Regarding mobility, it was in many cases her mother who made the decisions, she has *'always sent me everywhere'*. This is even more astonishing as she speaks about travelling in terms of the fulfilment of her dreams. Her first trip without her parents was also chosen by her mother. She selected the travel company and the most important thing was reliable care. At the end of her narrative about her time abroad she considers this experience to be a very (and maybe the most) important one in her biography. She says, *'I think, this trip made me an adult.'* Strikingly, the style of narrative is again passive: she does not become an adult but the journey *makes* her one. The negotiation between subjective aims and external demands emerges in her narrative, in which Alisa describes her development as depending on someone or something else: the need to move abroad as a rite of passage. Becoming an adult is something that happens to her and it obviously is not experienced positively: *'It was a hard time, normally I am a healthy person... but during these seven weeks I was ill the whole time'*. Accordingly, on the one hand, Alisa refers to these two months as the most formative experience she ever had, while on the other hand as one of suffering. Things change when she speaks of when her parents visited her, as she enjoyed showing her parents around and guiding them. All the pain seems to have faded away. The importance of the family as well as an attachment figure are also revealed when she says she could never travel alone as she needs somebody to take care of her, supporting her and making decisions for her. Not surprisingly, it is important for her that periods away from home are as short as possible:

“I think it is good that people go abroad ... however, I don't need that. I can go two weeks to the US or to Croatia, that's enough ... I couldn't imagine moving to Berlin or further away either. I couldn't, I need my family around me”.

In fact, her narrative seems primarily to be a *'transmission belt'* aimed at legitimising her resistance to the general demand of mobility

#### 4.4 Beatrice: The personal blog as constant reflection and justification of mobility

Beatrice, 32, grew up in a small town in northeast Italy. She studied Law in a city not far from home, but her great passion is reading books. She has a personal blog, which she started in 2009 when she moved to France. Since then she has written extensively about books, the dream and reality of writing a novel, the search for her family roots and her personal life, and about moving among different European cities together with her boyfriend (now husband) introduced as the ‘patient [name of husband]’. Now they are living in a German city.

Beatrice’s personal blog includes aspects of a diary that documents her migration biography over six years and 313 posts (at the moment of data collection). Post by post, a narrative evolves revealing aspects of the author’s job and personal identity. It clearly expresses a desire to narrate, and, in particular, to present and objectify a comprehension and meta-reflection on her life story – and to legitimise what she presents as her choices.

“In late 2006, the patient [name of husband] and I decided to ‘go and study abroad’: he left for Copenhagen, while I went to Paris. As usual for most of the young people who leave home for another country, we were immediately assailed by all kinds of nostalgia. Do you understand the spleen, sadness and longing for grandma’s incomparable ‘gnocchi’? From our stays abroad, [name of husband] and I came back changed (for the better, of course)”.

The online story expresses a need not only for self-reflection, but also for self-legitimation in a context in which life course and employment career require constant re-negotiation. This story is told through posts, flashbacks, pictures, links and memories rather than representing a merely ego-centred self-exhibition that could be interpreted in terms of ‘*extimacy*’, the desire to reveal aspects of the self in a semi-public space. It enables sharing emotional experiences in a quite narrow social context, mostly Italians living abroad like the author, in a favourable and controllable way (for example, without any signs of depression or regret). The majority of comments express agreement with the blogger forming a small fluid online community who share tastes, experiences and opinions. The tone changes, however, when it comes to the theme ‘succeeding abroad’ stimulated by an interview she gave to an Italian weekly newspaper about young Italians in Germany:

“Faced with different ways of life, different cities and different careers, the common feeling expressed in the comments to the article (fortunately not all) is:

‘It’s so easy to leave Italy.’

‘You are billionaires, spoiled children, of course you can go abroad.’

I know a lot of rich and lucky guys who are not worth anything, ANYTHING, ANYTHING ... Is it easy to leave Italy? Is it easy to leave home?

Do not tell me that only those who are well-off can afford to go abroad: everyone can buy a flight ticket nowadays. We are boors, we have spoiled the environment, we are incapable, unworthy and pampered. We are bad people. Why don’t you come and show us what you can do? Come on! (The only warning: Mother will not be there to iron and cook)”.

The style, usually lovely and witty, becomes aggressive and conflictual. The narrative itself is an effort of resistance and resilience, an attempt to believe in oneself, that going abroad was ‘a good thing’.

“In [German city] there is work (there is unemployment but there are jobs), it is fine, the cost of living is still low and those who are here REALLY have a chance to make it. But it is not the start-up heaven. It is more like purgatory, a place of transition, waiting to see if your project will fail or not”.

The home country is remembered not only with nostalgia, but with anger and resentment because Italy represents the impossibility to express one’s talent, aspiring to a job in line with the educational expectations. This bitterness vis-à-vis the home country is shared by the limited and sympathetic public of the blog. A blog like this can support young Italians, living abroad, far away from a country unable to sustain new biographical transitions, but adept at blaming other young people for their ‘inadequate’ choices and transition behaviour. The narrative style is particularly intensive when it lashes out at those who stay at their parents’ home because of their own laziness and/or inability to manage their transition towards independency.

A narrative requires and enables moving the object of the tale far from the perspective of the subject. Yet, this does not work in a public context where it is possible to be questioned and contradicted, but only in a safe environment like a blog. Indeed, it allows the author to build a specific, controlled narrative. The blog not only enables the author to discuss the world in academic or everyday contexts, it also unleashes the imagination of how reality happens and looks for accomplices in a context of uncertainty and seamless mobility. The blog seems appropriate to demonstrate that the author has all the skills requested by contemporary society, although these are not accepted by the public discourse in her own country. This narrative is the ‘transmission belt’ that enables the author to advertise personal and professional skills to a favourable public.

## 5 Discussion

In the previous section, we presented four biographical cases, focusing on narratives of work-related mobility choices that serve as a ‘magnifier’ to analyse how biographical experiences of mobility in transitions to work are reconstructed, endowed with subjective meaning and justified to respond to societal expectations. We argue that narratives work as ‘transmission belts’ whereby individual mobility ‘choices’ and constraints are not only enabled but produced. Inasmuch as mobility results in new experience as well as new demands for legitimation and meaning-making, it also contributes to the development of narratives. Indeed, in times marked by uncertainty, especially on the labour market, coping with the demand of mobility requires producing new constellations of meaning and legitimation for diversified forms of transition. This section aims at comparing both the contents and the forms of the narratives of mobility with regard to their function as transmission belts between mobilities and transitions to work.

Giorgio, Beatrice and Barbara are similar regarding age (between 32 and 34), level of education (social science graduates) and origin (Northern-Italy). By contrast, Alisa is 22 years old, lives in the South West of Germany, she was trained as nursery-school teacher and at the time of the interview was about to complete a degree in social sciences as well. Forms of mobility differ across the four cases. Social backgrounds differ between working class (Alisa and Barbara) and middle class (Giorgio, no information about Beatrice). In two cases, Barbara

and Beatrice, mobility is of undetermined duration and takes the form of work migration, not surprisingly these cases are Italian reflecting the effects of the economic crisis on the young generation; in the cases of Giorgio and Alisa, mobility was temporary and in Alisa's case a single experience. In the case of Alisa, the journey was planned and organised as an integral part of her training, in the cases of Giorgio, Barbara and Beatrice, mobilities were self-organised with the purpose of work migration in the cases of Barbara and Beatrice and of maintaining an alternative, student-like life-style in the case of Giorgio. Consequently, the duration of mobility varies from two months (Alisa) to several times for several months (Giorgio) to open ended (Barbara and Beatrice). Regardless of the duration, the role of parents and family is very important for all the interviewed young adults. Giorgio and Alisa seek certain degrees of closeness to their families, yet for different reasons, economic and logistic in the case of Giorgio, emotional in the case of Alisa. This may also reflect gendered ways of self-presentation. By contrast, Beatrice does not refer to her parents (but to her grandma's *gnocchi*), while Barbara claims to have become progressively closer to her parents after initially distancing herself from them.

While this sample might seem to lack comparability, this analysis does indeed involve 'ideal-typical' constellations of different contexts—despite not being designed as a cross-country comparison in a strict sense and its small size and heterogeneity. In Germany, mobilities are self-organised either as journeys between school and studies or as elements of regular education and training—thus happening earlier—while emigration after completing studies only applies only to a small minority of the academic elite and is not motivated by necessity. At the same time, leaving the parental home in their early twenties is seen as normal, which explains the challenge Alisa experiences and the difficulties she faces in legitimising while refraining from mobility. In Italy, by contrast, the age of leaving the parental home is higher, contributing to a different normality and need for legitimation. Nevertheless, the recent crisis, with its effects of unemployment and precarity, has added a new wave of young adult emigration (Castellani, 2018) providing 30-somethings in particular with an acceptable reason for leaving. It can thereby also act as a powerful resource of narrative and consequently identity. Even if Giorgio's case is untypical and different, the asset of family housing may be seen as a typical constraint and resource of negotiating dependency and autonomy in Italy (van de Velde, 2008; Cuzzocrea & Mandich, 2016).

In all cases, the subjects' attribution of a general meaning to their life courses becomes more complex due to mobility. Indeed, identity questions concerning origin and belonging, current possibilities and experiences of recognition, occupational aspirations and careers as well as future life plans are challenged through mobility and thereby stimulate and are reflected by the development of identity narratives (Ricoeur 1992). However, *narrative styles* are very heterogeneous, also due to the difference between interviews which are an external stimulus for narrative and a self-initiated blog that allows for greater control and reflexivity. Additionally, the sophisticated and polished style of the latter reflects a clear goal to build an online reputation for writing, a sort of self-branding strategy. Consistently with his general non-conformist and autonomous self-presentation, Giorgio's narrative evolves in terms of internal dialogue — '*Then I said [to myself]*' — without explicit attempts to justify his choices to others and construct turning points. By contrast, Barbara's narrative resembles a story told by an external narrator with an internal focalization on herself like in an introspective session: '*I did not take anything into account*' or '*I realized that it was a choice taken lightly*'. Alisa's style of narrative reflects the demands of being an independent adult with an external locus of control to which she '*needs to*' react. Consistently with her general

self-presentation as a person who is *'mothered'*, the narrative focuses on her flatmate who cared for her. Alisa feels subjected to external expectations which she rejects *ex-post*. She presents herself as the *'little one'* who feels better when 'autonomy' is framed by significant others (van de Velde, 2008). In all the narratives, the subjects enact their 'biographicity' and subjectivity through a constant negotiation between their personal needs and external demands based on a selection of culturally defined symbolical repertoires.

Analysing how narratives are constructed, we first look at how motivations for mobility are presented. Alisa and Barbara present themselves as motivated extrinsically, stimulated by others. Despite the short duration of her internship and despite constant demands, for Alisa this is one factor why she does not want to repeat this experience in future. Barbara frames her boyfriend's initiative as an emotional 'pull factor' that involves leaving her parents, job and house for an uncertain future. Giorgio and Beatrice colour their narratives with references to intrinsic motivation in order to support their alternative choices of a student or nomadic lifestyle against societal expectations. In summary, in the cases of Giorgio and Beatrice mobility is part of their lifestyle, Barbara's life story shifts from coping with disorientation towards a re-invention of her self, while Alisa presents a lifestyle characterised by safety, proximity and familiarity. This can be interpreted as a social inequality as a motivation for mobility (cf. Castellani, 2018).

Evaluations of mobility experiences can also be interpreted as a rationalisation of past experiences through the lens of the present. Narratives link past, present and future and are thus a means of biographisation (Alheit & Dausien, 2002) and become a powerful technology of the self (Jedlowski, 1994). They are ways of making meaning of the past and at the same time justifying the present as a result of past choices. In all the narratives, although related to work in one way or the other, going abroad is presented as a holistic experience of personal development. Alisa and Beatrice describe processes of change and transition to adulthood, Giorgio evaluates his journeys abroad as a search for the ideal balance even if he has to accept personal limitations. By contrast, Barbara evaluates her mobility choice in a broader framework. First, she regrets her emotional choice to move due to the lack of career perspectives, then she develops a new life perspective and to re-frame her biography in the context of the economic crisis, unemployment and precariousness.

In the different biographies, mobility and transitions are synchronized by the 'narrative belt', which brings together individual experiences, preferences, self-representations and adaptation to the socio-historical context. The four stories represent different ways of seeking stability and identity in terms of meaning, coherence and continuity in the context of uncertain life courses and precarious careers. Beatrice moves once she has found new forms of stability, Barbara faces a crisis after moving and copes by re-orienting herself and relying on her significant others. Giorgio starts travelling to maintain flexibility and stops when he feels the need for a more stable yet alternative situation. In Alisa's case, it is necessary to consider her younger age as it may imply a stronger need for external stability while she may also simply be postponing the step towards independence and self-stabilisation.

Across the differences, however, it is interesting to see how the cases can be positioned in a shared cultural frame, namely, the discourse of mobile and self-responsible young people in Western Countries, which tends to disguise the structural differences related to inequalities according to social class and gender affecting youth within as well as across different EU countries. If researchers analyse the cultural construction of 'global citizens' as a neoliberal

category, emphasising the role of mobility, as articulated for example by the EU programme, ‘Youth on the Move’ (Isabella & Mandich, 2014; Yoon, 2014), the analysed stories might be considered as different reactions to increasingly common economic needs and cultural demands. They also might be seen as different expressions of unequal resources and opportunities. Thus, the four narratives can be interpreted as expressions of acceptance of the individualised challenge of mobility induced by flexibilised labour markets, which constructs it as subjectively and socially (for a generalized other) meaningful and presents it as an individual choice in different ways. Each story includes a positioning towards mobility, as the young adults depicted here declare that they have ‘found themselves’ (Alisa) or refer to processes of biographical learning.

## 6 Conclusions

This article is concerned with analysing young adults’ different individual strategies of coping with similar structural contradictions in their transitions to adulthood and working life by producing narratives of mobility experiences. The focus on the dimension of mobility allows for addressing particular choices in managing one’s own life course, while at the same time linking aspects of agency, structural constraints and cultural representations involved in reproducing social inequalities. Cultural representations of mobility crosscut all layers of neoliberal societies, from political discourses to common sense and individual biographies. At the same time, they are reconfigured according to different structural contexts like in Italy and Germany, including the different opportunities the labour markets offer and country-specific transition regimes. This paper focuses on the analysis of how young people present experiences of mobility in biographical narratives. Thereby, it links three different strands of research: youth transitions, mobility studies and biographical analysis. It emphasises that demands of mobility have become a central component of youth transitions, but are mediated differently across transition regimes. At the same time, it has revealed that how such demands are articulated depends on how individuals have appropriated them subjectively in their biographical construction.

However, we do not claim to have elaborated representative differences in the meaning of mobility between looking for better employment and quality of life—‘dropping out’ enabled by family protection—in the case of young Italians—and an institutionalised and almost mandatory ‘rite de passage’ for young Germans. Moreover, other questions deserve further exploration, including the age and length of mobility, the ‘habitus’ of the family of origin as well as the structural and cultural contexts in which these mobilities take place. It also seems worthwhile to look more deeply into the gendered ways in which demands of mobility are reproduced in biographical narratives.

The function and effect of different styles of narrative in presenting or actually making mobility subjectively meaningful is the most central part of our analysis. As a technology of the self, narratives serve to rationalise apparent ruptures and thus provide the biography with continuity to legitimise what is being ascribed as individual choice. The analysis has shown how, depending on the context and the actors, mobility is a demand, a challenge, a strategy, a resource or even a dialectic between possibility and obligation, not only observable in but actually re-worked through biographical narrative. This is why the metaphor of narrative as a *transmission belt* is fruitful as a heuristic. Narratives create both spaces and tools within themselves by connecting subjective aspirations with societal expectations and cultural representations. The importance of this connection as well as of the quality of respective tools and skills increases in a social, economic and cultural constellation in which life course

transitions seem structured less by space and time while and are instead considered an individual's self-responsibility regardless of available resources and opportunities, which are still or are currently increasingly distributed unequally. We conclude with the hypothesis that in the narratives analysed here, mobility choices are not only endowed with subjective meaning and legitimised, they are constructed as individual choices for which young people claim and take full responsibility and thereby fulfil societal expectations transported by powerful discourses about mobility and processes of responsabilization.

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Social Work & Society ■■■ S. Benasso, S. Castellani, A. Cossetta, C. Dittrich, & A. Walther:  
Transmission Belts: On how young adults in Germany and Italy make meaning of mobility in  
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