

## **PROMISE: Promoting Youth Involvement and Social Engagement: Opportunities and challenges for conflicted young people across Europe.**

**WP6: From Conflict to Innovation: Ethnographic Case Studies**

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### **Artistic/Creative Start-Ups in the Suburbs of Naples Italy**

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**Executive summary:** Young people growing up in harsh environments are often stigmatised by society as “troubled” and “losers” and this affects their future life. This report illustrates the case of the stigmatised young people from the suburbs of Naples who have instead succeeded to turn the stigma into a positive value and a powerful driver for social change. Despite coming from social and economic contexts of hardship and often linked to the environments of organised crime, the youth addressed by our research have found a way to put in place an extraordinary innovative potential, for themselves and the community, through the use of art - in particular, circus and theatre. In the absence of strong reference points to which they can adhere (e.g. family, institutions), the values, role models and negative habits learnt from living in the neighbourhood become the only things “grounding” the young people, allowing them to develop their individual identities. In this perspective, the conditions of exclusion and marginalisation can lead young people to develop a strong sense of belonging, which is essentially based on sharing a common setting and experience characterised by marginalisation and exclusion from the rest of society. Albeit a “negative” one, such a feeling of belonging can be regarded as positive in certain circumstances. Research findings demonstrate that young people from marginalised suburbs can promote innovation and lead social change by “investing” in their sense of belonging and transferring it, from the street gang they used to belong to, to the local community. The young street artists addressed in this case study, without denying their troubled pasts, have effectively learned to use their street origin as an asset, something they share with the younger generations they wish to involve in their arts projects. They have maintained their marginality but have transformed it into a positive trait, a sort of “culture of marginality”. In this transformation lies the strong desire for change felt by the young people who are the object of this study.

## Contents

1. INTRODUCTION.....	370
2. METHODS.....	372
2.1. <i>An ethnographic approach to research</i> .....	372
2.2. <i>Access to the field and interactions with interviewees</i> .....	373
2.3. <i>Ethical issues</i> .....	374
2.4. <i>Gender</i> .....	374
3. KEY FINDINGS.....	375
3.1. <i>Experiences of being young</i> .....	375
3.2. <i>The Internalized Periphery: Identity and Stigma</i> .....	375
3.3. <i>Contexts of conflict: Family and education</i> .....	377
3.4. <i>Peers and friendship groups</i> .....	378
3.5. <i>Turning points</i> .....	380
3.6. <i>Contexts of support</i> .....	382
3.7. <i>Innovation and social change</i> .....	383
4. CONCLUSIONS.....	386
5. FUTURE ANALYSIS.....	387
References.....	388
Appendix: Table of respondents’ socio-demographic data .....	389

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 *Conceptual basis and theoretical approaches*

A fundamental assumption drove the research in Italy; namely that troubled youth, relegated to the country's geographical and existential peripheries, have extraordinary potential for creativity and innovation. According to this belief, troubled youth represent privileged agents of innovation, capable of undermining the preconceived ideas of the adult world. Moreover, the youth can make a positive contribution to improving the country's political and social spheres, perhaps even more so than their peers who have a more harmonious social and economic background.

What does it mean for a young person today to grow up and live in a troubled area? As in the rest of Europe, youth in Italy experience a profoundly critical and stagnant period during which they appear more concentrated on themselves and less idealistic, ready to adopt whatever strategy necessary to adapt to a fragmented society characterized by a global economic crisis. The newer generations are overwhelmed by the transformations overtaking not only our society, but also our behavioural models, our fundamental values and beliefs, and thus, politics (Crespi, 1999: 73-4). These transformations have put youth in a state of isolation, confusion and uncertainty where individualism represents the only option. These 'failed youth' or 'invisible youth' (Diamanti, 1999: 45) increasingly specialise in dealing with the present, adapting to the uncertainties of living day to day without ever really taking a stand or showing signs of opposition. These youth must deal with the possibility of sudden changes and have adapted their response times accordingly, reacting immediately to the unforeseen (Leccardi, 2005). Perhaps the most innovative and original of their characteristics lies in their 'ability to deal with the fragmentation and uncertainty of their environment as though these were normal aspects, thus using them to their advantage through constant awareness and understanding' (Savonardo, 2010: 332-3). The most valued ability is 'being able to adapt' or to be 'flexible' (Bauman, 2009: 47-8). In addition, today's youth are generally represented as having foregone the idea of forging new paths, limiting themselves to adapting, albeit with some difficulty, to the existing paths passed down to them by previous generations (Crespi, 1999; Savonardo, 2010). Not surprisingly, the main difficulty encountered when initiating this research was the need to identify troubled areas where youth still felt the necessity to express their dissent by speaking up and challenging the source of their discontent.

### 1.2 *Objectives and questions posed by the research*

The PROMISE project aims to investigate into the innovation potentials of youth and particularly of young people in conflict with authority and with social norms. Youth defined as conflictual can be subjected to a stigmatization that labels them as problematic in terms of social engagement. The effects of such stigmatization can affect the young people's self-identity and hamper the possibilities for them to participate positively in society. The case-study presented in this report intends to contribute to PROMISE by providing a positive example of a group of youth who, despite being stigmatized as criminals and 'losers', succeed in overturning the stigma into a positive value and this allows for their active participation in society.

Initially, finding examples of live conflict or troubled areas as mentioned above led to the exploration of one of the many peripheries in Italy where these invisible youth are to all effects hidden from society. Reaching the centre of this area meant going to Naples, a place that has become, for some academics, the definition of a city in a state of crisis and a city as crisis (Chambers, 1994). Naples, however, has always proven itself a proactive and productive city,

a place where innovation has created increasingly original cultural and artistic paths (Savonardo, 2013).

The idea of exploring ‘off centre’ stems from the belief that it is precisely in the geographical outskirts, far from the centres of power, that youth experience the most difficulty living (and surviving), especially in an increasingly unjust and unfair society. The youth in these areas not only face greater exposure to injustice and social inequality, but also to distorted values and contradictions that effectively isolate them from legality, the state and society as a whole. Yet it is precisely here, amidst social, cultural and economic deprivation that creativity flourishes. The angst of youth, before it explodes into social conflict, can nurture and drive the desire for positive change. Jonathan Friedman (Friedman, 2001) pointed to the possibility that this impasse, identified by urban anthropologists (for example Hannerz 1992), could be overcome. When urban anthropologists depicted cities as exotic cauldrons and creativity as a casual phenomenon, they overlooked key factors such as social class structures and the distribution of power. It is in the suburbs that change can take on its most radical form: the will to subvert the system and to transform negative energy and frustration into positive outcomes for oneself and for society increases in intensity when social injustice and unease can no longer be tolerated. A sense of rebellion drives those living on the margins to redeem their social, cultural and economic rights. Thus, they may be highly motivated to take control and initiate social change and development. Given the potential present in these areas, the emphasis of this research study is on creativity and innovation as a specific “cultural” ability that people can develop in order to compensate for or modify their difficult circumstances (Löfgren, 2001).

The outskirts of city can be a hub for creativity and change, a place where *rebellious energy* can become something positive. The outskirts are no longer merely a place of rejection and abandonment, but a place where one can re-establish a sense of community life (Viviani, 2015). Today real change seems to be in the hands of youth from the periphery. They have shown great determination by initiating *bottom-up* projects for social inclusion, community involvement and active participation. These projects offer inhabitants a way to deal with social unease and juvenile delinquency as well as the general issues related to living in a problem area. If the possibility of a better life exists, then it must be sought right there, digging under the rubble, rummaging in the ash. This study explores the context of these stigmatised and *bad* youth, whom the media hasten to label *youth gangs* or *at-risk youth*. Defining themselves as ‘ex-street kids’, they are the *enfant terrible* rejected by schools, by their peers and often their own families. Finding themselves on the street, these young people try to reverse the injustices they have had to deal with. The troubles these youth experience, however, affect them in various ways: from their conflict with authority (e.g. inadequate education, an absentee state), to their families and adult figures in general, all of which is fuelled by the barren social, cultural and human landscape in which they grow up.

The area analysed covers the Sixth Municipality of Naples (San Giovanni a Teduccio, Barra, Ponticelli) and is the scene of widespread degradation. Unemployment, poverty and crime have flourished in an environment of absolute cultural deprivation and that has the lowest level of education recorded in Italy. In such a fragmented social context, with almost non-existent urban areas or places for socialization, organized crime is a deep-seated presence throughout the area. The youth – a clear majority here compared to the rest of the city – grow up in an impoverished and bleak environment, devoid of any educational possibility, let alone cultural exchange or growth. Consequently, they become easy prey for criminals and organised crime.

The study's objective was to understand how the youth in question have overcome their condition of rejection and abandonment and transformed their frustration and difficulties into something positive, both on an individual and a social level. The study questions focused on the motives and ambitions leading the youth to make such changes as well as trying to understand how their actions can be of value for overall social innovation. In addition, the study investigated the origins of this radical conflict and the burden and consequences of being so hastily and negatively labelled by the media and society in general. The study sought to understand what lies beneath these labels and what motivates and inspires these youth to shed the labels and be viewed positively. Further questions explored why the youth wished to actively take part in society when it had done nothing but exclude them. In short, the aim of the research was to understand how youth branded as *troubled* by society managed to break free from that stigma and how they have transformed their negative experience of being born and growing up on the margins of society to creating a more positive and proactive outlook for change. Findings show that art represents the common denominator linking the youth in question. Art is a powerful medium capable of transmitting knowledge and important values, but, in this case, it is theatre and the circus—two forms of expression characterised by *risk*, which is a key factor in attracting and engaging troubled youth—that played a key role.

## 2. METHODS

### 2.1 An ethnographic approach to research

The study adopted an ethnographic approach due to interest in the forms of conflict adopted by youth and their potential for social innovation. Ethnography offers a means of 'getting to know a world' (Agar, 1986: 32-3) and an answer to the queries posed by the research from the privileged viewpoint of the inhabitants of that world (Cardano, 2011: 55-6; Silverman, 2008: 77-8). In consideration of the heuristic irreducibility of someone else's point of view in relation to one's own, ethnographic research focuses on the relationship and interaction with and among the subjects of a study and analyses contexts and processes (Silverman, 2008: 100-1).

The research focused on the intersubjective dimension of the phenomena observed in order to underline the space of the relationship between the researcher and the field of investigation. With this in mind, the ethnographic methodology led to the use, as the primary means of investigation, of semi-structured interviews. This interview methodology enables the interviewer to conduct the conversation following a line of questioning considered important in order to acquire information. An outline of questions suggests the subjects to be raised and the appropriate linguistic style to use while leaving the order in which to proceed up to the interviewer (Cardano, 2003: 22-3) based on the progression of the interviewee's answers.

For this study the interview outline, developed in agreement with the partners of the PROMISE project, served as the basis for a new outline developed to better suit the research presented here. The outline acted as a guide providing cues to encourage discussions pertinent to the research. However, it did not exclude the possibility of asking unforeseen questions that, during the course of the conversations, proved useful to the researcher, adding context to the study. The interview outline identified five main subject areas within which the interviewer – in no particular order – pinpointed various points to be addressed. Conducted in this way, the guided narrative interview was sufficiently malleable and adaptable to the context and the respondent's specific needs. Data from various forms of documentation (e.g. photographs provided by the youths

interviewed, newspaper articles, secondary data) supported the semi-structured interviews. This additional data recreated 'the performance dimension of street speech' as Bourgois defined it (2005: 77-8).

Thus, the field research made use of the following techniques and resources:

- Active observations in key areas around the neighbourhood were conducted for five days and a total of 20 hours (at the location where the youth attend their cultural and sporting activities, at Their Youth Centre Asterix, on neighbourhood streets and in squares);
- 20 semi-structured interviews (average length 45 minutes each and all of them audio-recorded) were conducted with key figures (ex-street kids, Youth Centre workers, the president of the association), as well as a number of informal conversations with key figures;
- Field diary (approximately 30 transcribed pages);
- Photo elicitation: approximately 100 photos taken by the key figures upon the researchers encouragement ; and
- Newspaper articles and internet research.

Following the field research, all audio interviews, field diaries and ethnographic notes were transcribed and coded using NVivo. Text coding involved two steps: first, case-specific text extracts were identified and labelled (Level 1); subsequently, all Level 1 codes were grouped within broader labels (Level 2) that had been agreed on by all project partners in order to allow for data sharing and comparability across all case studies. The analysis presented in this report are based on the coded data.

## ***2.2 Access to the field and interactions with interviewees***

Researchers contacted the interviewees via telephone prior to beginning the face-to-face narrative interviews. The telephone contact made it possible to present the research to the respondents and provide adequate information about the study, as well as offer reassurance about the nature and use of the material gathered during the interviews. It should be pointed out that all interviewees work for two associations (*Terrote* and *Itappeto di Iqbal*), which made it easier to identify key figures.

Interactions with the subjects was extremely easy during the interviews; there were no particular incidents to report. Research participants were very forthcoming and helpful when answering the questions and providing information. Interviews comprised an initial sampling phase, followed by a second phase that enabled the exploration of some aspects that emerged during analysis as well as the inclusion of other interview participants identified during the field research. The second phase proved particularly complex due to some organisational and logistical issues which arose while making arrangements. Overall, the youth were very enthusiastic about sharing their experiences with the researchers.

The interview atmosphere was characterised by the spontaneity and the ease with which the youth shared their experiences. These were frequently frank and emotionally charged stories about their troubled pasts. However, since the primary objective of the study was to establish a climate of trust, be as minimally intrusive as possible and cause the least emotional distress, it was often necessary to support the flow of the interviewees' narratives, regardless of the relevance to the research. Showing sensitivity to the entire story shared by the youth was essential to avoid



undermining the delicate issues that emerged, offending the respondent's sensitivity and potentially causing distress.

Recording the interviews in audio format proved to be particularly well suited to the context, allowing the interviewees to act naturally and thus with greater freedom of expression.

### **2.3 Ethical issues**

Field research and observations of the interactions between people requires not only consideration of the value of the research, but also the responsibility towards the observed. In this study, the first step was to offer participants informed consent in order to provide clear and detailed information about the research, its purpose and the possible uses of the information collected. This enabled participants to make a free and conscious decision about whether or not to take part in the research. Researchers ensured that each participant fully understood the aim of the research and its implications.

An issue of primary importance, from an ethical point of view, was how to gain access to the research field. The approach adopted was to propose an open-observational role that built on the observed subjects' sense of trust. It was equally important to maintain contact with all the people involved in the research. One way of doing this was to keep in touch with the interviewed subjects and, when possible, return to the field after a few months presenting them with the partial results of the study and returning some of the transcripts and audio-visual material. This left them with a tangible autobiographical memento and served as a token of the researcher's gratitude.

### **2.4 Gender**

Less than a third (6 out of 20) of the interviews were with females. This data reflects an objective numerical imbalance between males and females in the groups of youth involved in the research, the main cause of which stems from the economic and social conditions that characterise the neighbourhood. As mentioned, the neighbourhood studied is one of the most degraded on the outskirts of Naples; the absence of numerical gender equality underscores the exclusion of young women in the suburbs of Napoli in general, a 'marginalisation within marginalisation'. Today, as in the past, women are mainly relegated to the home. Extremely young motherhood is the norm, as is the preclusion to furthering their education and wanting to have a professional life. Thus, it was not coincidental that the young women who were part of the groups involved in our study came from other, more affluent neighbourhoods and family backgrounds. Amongst the interviewees, 6 out of 6 females came from other neighbourhoods, while only 3 out of 14 males were not from the neighbourhood in question. This means that the girls and young women involved in the artistic activities studied, became bearers of cultural diversity; a diversity that for the majority of the street kids, was a first glimpse of the world beyond their neighbourhood.

### 3. KEY FINDINGS

#### 3.1 Experiences of being young

The youth involved in the study come from an urban context characterized by deprivation. There are no health services or services in general, no places in which to socialize, no sporting or recreational facilities for young people, and no public transport. Most significantly, there is a dire absence of jobs and economic resources. As 19 year-old Cristian told us:

We didn't have anywhere to hang out...we were always making trouble in the neighbourhood. It was dark. There was no cinema. There weren't any football pitches, we'd use fruit crates, one on the left and one on the right, 50 meters apart, and we'd play. It was bad. There were no theatres, no parks...nothing. Bars closed at 7pm. There was a curfew. You couldn't go out. Nothing, nothing at all! (Cristian)

Crime is very much present in the life of the majority of these youth, so much so that it permeates the entire cultural geography. Crime and drugs are often the reason they do not have families – and therefore lack an adult presence to guide them and provide affection- a fact most of them have had to deal with from an early age. In the stories told by the boys and girls interviewed, the particular characteristics of this area – “the neighbourhood” – appear like a background to their lives, without which they cannot even imagine another existence. The distinctive features of the neighbourhood keep them firmly rooted and linked to their relational references, forcing them to grow up fully aware of the deprivations.

Twenty year-old Paolo explains what it means to live in a neighbourhood on the outskirts, marked by socio-economic underdevelopment, high rates of unemployment, urban environmental decay, and a lack of public transport, infrastructure and services aimed at the younger population:

Compared to the centre of Naples where you can go out and find anything you like, in the squares here in Barra the most you'll find is drunks and drug addicts... it's difficult to frequent those kind of places. So we'd meet at the football pitches. They may have been half destroyed but at least you could play. (Paolo)

Twenty-five year-old Marcello's words also strongly convey the distressful atmosphere that has permeated the streets and squares of the neighbourhood for years: We were born in a neighbourhood where the discontent grows within you. A neighbourhood that can only harm you, a lot... (Marcello).

#### 3.2 The Internalized Periphery: Identity and Stigma

Living in a time, as some authors have highlighted<sup>1</sup>, characterized by the expansion of possibilities in every area and the perception that everything is possible, young people tend to be assigned the task of recognizing themselves in relation to a specific identity and having to deal with feelings of profound uncertainty and instability (above all economic and social). In contrast, the periphery seems to reserve an *awful certainty* for young people, a pre-packaged identity that is socially recognised and approved in virtue of representing social negativity in the collective imagination. The absence of alternatives, the lack of opportunities and the economic deprivation leave no room

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<sup>1</sup>Fabbrini, Melucci 2000: 34-35



for uncertainty: within the neighbourhood, choices are limited and there are but a few set courses. For a street kid from the outskirts of a metropolis such as Naples, one of the most stigmatised in Italy, imagining a life elsewhere is very complicated.

Many of the youth on the outskirts of Naples spend the majority of their lives within the neighbourhood without ever leaving, be it because of a lack of means, knowledge or desire. Often, they refuse to leave because they know wider society looks down on them, or because they are afraid of the police. The negativity with which these young boys and girls have been labelled fosters a sense of exclusion from not only the social, cultural and employment spheres in the country as a whole, but also - and especially - the more central areas of their own city. The youth learn from an early age to internalise this stigma and develop the conviction that they are exactly as other people paint them to be:

I was born in the sewers...Everyone here ends up the same way... (Cristian)

The testimony of one of the young *Trerrote* theatre teachers, who comes from one of the upper-class neighbourhoods of Naples, is eye opening:

This condition of internalised marginalisation - of internalised periphery is very strong and clear. They have internalised the inability to get out of their specific context, emerge and change things. A girl recently said to me: "Teach, what do YOU know? I come from the sewers" as if to say, worrying about me is useless, I know more about life than you do because I live amidst gunfire, shit and filth. You adults come here thinking you can help, save me in some way... What do you think you're doing? Nothing, that's what! Because I don't think you can change the way things are. (Maria)

Thus, by accepting the image and prejudice people project upon them, they give up believing they can live differently. The neighbourhood stamps a distinctive mark on the lives of these youngsters deemed dangerous, infamous, and unapproachable. The stigma attached to them makes them out to be angry, eternally defeated criminals, with no possibility of redemption: a stigma that denies them a real individual identity. As time passes, these youngsters internalise the way others perceive them, identifying with that image and forgetting their own identities. The inability to identify one's true self is the steady outcome of an automatic rationalisation and cataloguing process—a process triggered by the way people from 'other' neighbourhoods see these youngsters. However, it also occurs from within - because of the deprivations and the feeling of being different they experience first-hand. In fact, *"the stigma is not a mark in itself, it subsists in the perception of others before being internalized by those stigmatized: it occurs in a relationship between those who assume the position of "normalcy" and those who diverge from it"* (Goffman, 1963:77-78).

Mauro explains this dynamic well:

If you are born in my context, you usually only interact with people from that same context. You talk with and go out with them. When you seek relationships with "others" you are either a bad person who's up to no good or, in any case, there is something not very convincing about it. (Mauro)

There is a strong feeling of insecurity and the fear of the *different* and *unknown* prevent any attempt at communication between the city's centre and its periphery. In truth, the feeling of

insecurity perceived in the outskirts mainly belongs to those who do not actually live there. To all effects they avoid frequenting these places by putting up a mental barrier in the city, as if to permanently erase them from the urban map. That is not to say that the actual inhabitants of the periphery do not shut themselves off for fear or indifference. It is not surprising to hear a woman of only 18 years confess her fear of ‘crossing the border’, of leaving the confines of the neighbourhood and going into the centre of the city: ‘No, I’m not leaving this place. – Why not? – Oh, my mother’s scared. She says it’s dangerous to go way down there’ (Maria, reporting a conversation held with a local girl).

In the case presented here, it is also important to point out that the stigma attached to these youth is collective and that their feeling of marginalisation is shared. They are excluded from the rest of society principally because the area they are from creates an isolated context: ‘There were kids who wouldn’t even come near me because I was from Barra. I had a bad reputation, they would back away from me’ (Andrea).

The stigma is attributed in equal measure to all members of the group and derives from their sharing the same geographical provenance, a place that in their eyes is the place par excellence, as Andrea tells us:

For us kids, the laws of the neighbourhood were the laws of the world! Many, for example, don’t know the centre of Naples...They’ve never been! Their whole world is right here, just up above us, in the council houses. That’s it. (Andrea).

Such conditions of exclusion and marginalisation lead these youth to develop a strong sense of belonging, albeit a negative one. This feeling is essentially based on sharing a common setting and experience characterised by the stigma of exclusion from the rest of society. In the absence of strong reference points to adhere to (e.g. family, institutions) the values, role models and negative habits they learn from living in the neighbourhood become the only things grounding them, allowing them to develop their individual identities.

### ***3.3 Contexts of conflict: Family and education***

For many of the youngsters interviewed, family is nothing but an abstract concept. Whether they grow up without parents (often because they are in prison), or with unprepared guardians who are not capable of looking after them, the youngsters are raised in the absence of emotional and economic support. They do not know what it means to experience the love and care of an adult figure, let alone a parent. In addition, from a very early age some of them are forced to resort to burglaries, robberies or drug dealing in order to provide for themselves. Thus, these strategies, which they have to adopt early on in their lives, compensate for the absence of adult figures of reference and provide a response to their difficult economic situation. To all effects, the youth have to become the adults:

I come from a very numerous family. I have 7 siblings. When my mother gave birth to me she didn’t want to keep me so I was sent to my grandmother who was already elderly at the time...She didn’t have the energy to keep up with me (...) I never hugged or kissed my parents, I don’t know what it feels like to hug your parent (...) Unfortunately, in this neighbourhood you become an adult at 13! (...) I had to take care of myself right from the start. If I needed shoes, I had to go and buy them myself at the

age of 14/15...I had to work and do illegal stuff to simply get normal everyday things...  
(Marcello)

Dad would come home in the evening, put a plate on the table and say: "This is the plate, you think of the rest!" What I understood by that, though he didn't actually say it, was not that he didn't want to provide...it's that he couldn't! (Cristian)

I always had a million things to think about while I was growing up because we had to face a lot of problems. My mum separating from my dad because of his drug addiction and stuff like that... To take my mind off things all I wanted to do was go out and have fun.(Paolo)

The interviews with the youth also highlight school and the negative meaning the youth give it. To them it is considered a *non-place* (Augè, 2009) of education that reinforces their negative experiences with adults who do not know how to listen, care for and guide them. School is the place where they merely receive the confirmation that they are on their own and that teachers and an education do not provide any form of guidance:

For me, well... schools may as well all close down. Life is my school! Living in this world, the universe, is a university. If you don't live, you don't learn...Have you ever heard a teacher at school say: "What's missing from your life? How would you like school to improve that for you?"...There's no time for improvement. There's no time for taking care of us, for relationships. (Matteo)

The interviews also show how the youth treat school as a playground, a place where they go to 'create chaos with friends' (Cristian), and vent their anger and frustration, enforcing the survival of the fittest laws they have learned on the streets:

I used to break everything. I'd throw desks at the teachers.(Andrea)

I liked it because I didn't do anything. I was in charge! I'd leave the classroom without asking permission. I'd go downstairs to the staff room and make myself coffee...We would be very disruptive... We even hit quite a few teachers. My cousin would always hit the music teacher. (Cristian)

Other youth, boys but mostly girls, abandon their education completely and end up on the streets (the girls often become teen mothers), spending their whole day in the neighbourhood and often becoming easy prey for organised crime. In these neighbourhoods, schools could carry out an important function by keeping boys and girls off the streets for as long as possible. But in presenting itself as a *non-place* for education, with adults completely lacking authority who are either incapable, or have no interest in establishing relationships based on trust and respect, the schools contribute to the marginalisation that these children experience and recognise from every other aspect of their lives.

### **3.4 Peers and friendship groups**

In the above contexts, characterised by weak parental ties, the absence of authority at schools, and a high level of urban and social decay and neglect, it is easy to understand why organised crime has become a fixed presence. Youth from these areas have to deal with a desolate environment devoid of educational and cultural opportunities that makes them easy prey for criminal organisations. In such a context, criminals, who represent the only organised group

present throughout the territory offer ways in which to generate income in an area where levels of unemployment are extremely high, and thus easily influence neighbourhood life:

Barra is a neighbourhood where institutions don't exist, the Camorra has taken the place of the state. If something happens here you don't go to the police you go and talk to the local boss to solve things. If you need a job you don't go to the job centre, you go to the boss and he finds one for you. (Marcello)

Standing around for two or three hours being a lookout you get 500 Euros a week... while when you go do hard labour for hours and hours, come Sunday you're lucky if you put 50 Euros in your pocket. It's an easy choice. (Cristian)

The absence of institutions together with the fixed presence of organised crime (and the connected mentality), inevitably condition relationships within the neighbourhood. The youth who grow up here absorb these particular dynamics, which act as a moral compass for their behaviour towards peers and friends. Friendship is based on a relationship where the balance of power reigns supreme. There is also a pack mentality: within the pack you feel safe and protected; the stronger the pack the greater the chance that it will be feared and respected in the neighbourhood. The possibility of violence and the risks to which the youth are exposed forces the youth to become part of a gang in order to defend themselves more effectively. They view friends as useful allies rather than playful companions. Individuals, in order not to feel isolated, become part of the gang. This keeps them safe from predators or rivals from other parts of the neighbourhood. However, their need to unite and build ties is not only to overcome fear, but also to prove themselves and gain respect.

Those friendships are based on the idea that "I do something for you and you do something for me!" If you have an argument with someone today and have to beat them up, I'll have your back just as you'd have mine if I have to go and fight with someone one day! It's a question of reciprocal favours...It's all based on "if I give you this you have to give me that otherwise me and you no longer know each other". (Fabrizio)

A friend is someone who comes to your rescue when you are in danger, who does not betray you and defends you if needs be. Interactions are based on a sense of brotherhood, which means defending one another against outside threats, protecting members of the gang in difficulty, gaining power over other gangs in the neighbourhood: 'If one of us started something, we'd all be behind him. We've been in fights where I would take a punch in the face so a younger member wouldn't have to' (Michele).

I'd go and ask my friends from Barra to back me up. I'd go back to my neighbourhood and say "guys let's go over there, let's go and fight!" There was this, how can I put it...war between two neighbourhoods. (Matteo)

Differential association<sup>2</sup>, the tendency of young people belonging to the same (sub) culture to join in gangs that reinforce deviant behaviour, is commonplace in these neighbourhoods. This behaviour is used to gain the acceptance and respect of other members who share common values and codes that stand in contrast to those accepted by society. Belonging to a gang means

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<sup>2</sup> In 1930 Edwin Sutherland elaborated the theory of 'differential association' whereby an individual will choose the criminal path when the balance of definitions for law-breaking exceeds those for law-abiding.

being part of a parallel social structure to the one commonly found in society and from which these youngsters, from the outskirts, find themselves excluded. Gangs become social structures unto themselves, governed by leaders who have precise roles and whose authority is approved and legitimised. A staunch belief in unity and the real or idealised antagonism towards the society in which they live links gang members and holds them together; they are bound by a strong sense of belonging to their community, something that individuals who are to members of the gang perceive.

The need for these youth to belong to a gang stems from various aspects observed in the neighbourhood studied: complex family situations, failures in the educational system, close proximity to illicit activities, difficulty entering the job market, boredom or depression. Apart from belonging to the same community and sharing the same negative experiences related to family, childhood and education, the *gang logic* also relies on other key factors: the sense of brotherhood that strengthens the bond between members; risks and challenges; and the language of the street. However, it is precisely these key factors that a group of young people from the neighbourhood are using to start changing society. Their aim is to attract younger children, thus removing them from their inevitable life of crime and deprivation, to open up a window to a different future.

### 3.5 Turning points

The ways in which a group can exert a negative influence are not dissimilar to those with which it can exert a positive one: deviant behaviour is assimilated exactly like any other behaviour, the difference is the model being taught. *‘It’s always been said to “learn from your elders...” They learn from whomever they can.’*(Marcello)

This is precisely the aspect the youngsters rely on in order to initiate the renewal process within the neighbourhood. The interviews highlighted that for these young people, being part of a group – a community – is of the utmost importance. The group is in fact the ideal and necessary dimension that helps them bring about a radical change in the area in which they live. Redirecting the negative implications of being part of a gang and adopting a new set of values and ideals, the group can become a positive experience and give meaning not only to themselves, but also to the community to which they belong. In this way, they are changing the content but not the form; belonging to a gang acquires a new meaning, that of belonging to a cohesive and conscientious community; values such as solidarity, sharing and social cohesion replace violence, oppression and crime. The tendency for these young people to join gangs to reinforce deviant behaviour is completely reversed; now they can band together to avoid deviant behaviour and prove that a different way of life of is possible for all of them. The ‘tribal’ aspects that characterize their neighbourhood can be converted into positive ones capable of bringing them out of their condition of exclusion and isolation, simultaneously, modifying the way in which they and their community are perceived.

The thing that distinguishes us from other cooperatives and associations is that we really are a group!...When we’re together we’re really like one big family! Whoever sees us says: “Wow, what a group! How do you manage it?” (Marcello)

Their stigma and marginalization transform into strengths. The youth do not deny that they come from that particular area, but they can now use those strengths to revolutionize their world. How can this be achieved? Which strategies can be put into place to overcome their condition of exclusion and marginality? How can they turn upside down a world governed by violence, crime,

oppression, and death? Some of the testimonies gathered about past times portray, albeit unconsciously, a sense of being lost and dissatisfied with one's life: 'I'm not saying that there weren't times in which I just wanted to leave everything and run away...I wanted to change things even though I didn't know how' (Matteo).

Digging deeper into the past of the interviewed youth reveals that most of them have had a particular experience that acted as a turning point in their lives. More often than not, these experiences were particularly traumatic and affected them deeply, making them realize they were at a crossroads.

Having to experience the extreme trauma of a friend being killed is a clear example of how an event can be the defining moment between then and now:

My best friend was the son of Barra's boss, F... F. was killed by 16 shots to the chest, the head and the back. When I saw him lying there in all that blood my thoughts weren't that I was sorry for him but that I was glad it wasn't me down there on the ground. (Marcello)

I mean, can you believe it? You get a call on your cell phone... You know, when I think about it I still get chills! When they called me and told me: "A. is dead!" I said "what the hell are you talking about? A. is dead?" It makes you put things into perspective and say to yourself: "what the hell are we doing?" I mean, at 18 he had hardly lived, he'd done nothing, nothing! At 18 you should have a girlfriend, a job, you should travel, see the world, experience things. Instead, at 18 they put you out like a light! They just flipped the switch? No... for me that won't do!...How can you possibly want to live on the streets like that? ...It would either have to be you killing A...or A. would be coming to kill you.(Michele)

The fear of ending up like many of their friends who have disappeared over the years, whether they were killed, imprisoned or lost to drugs, spurs the youth to find a way out. They may only have a vague idea that a different life is possible, but that does not stop them from searching for a different path to turn their lives around.

Positive experiences can also act as catalysts for bringing about a change in one's life. Travelling is an example and many of the interviewees talked about how the trips they had made. For many, it was their first experience outside of the neighbourhood and was eye opening because they came into contact with peers who led totally different lives and even spoke in a different way.

Before, this was normality for me! But since I've started getting out of Naples with G., away from the Campania region... I've seen other towns in Italy and I've seen the difference between them and us down here. It's astonishing! (Cristian)

Just the fact that I've had to communicate in Italian and not in my Neapolitan dialect has been a breakthrough for me. (Andrea)

...Then I went to Padua where I met loads of young people my age who were continuing their studies in higher education. When I came back here all the people my age were doing was stealing and bag snatching!...I had never imagined it was possible



to work and study and lead a regular law abiding life. It never dawned on me to live “above board” let’s say! (Michele)

The project also offers the youth the opportunity to travel and be away from their city and above all, their neighbourhood. Their new circus and theatre skills provide a chance to explore other places for the very first time in their lives. The stories they tell of these experiences often convey a sense of amazement at the discovery of new and different possibilities. Travelling also allows them the possibility to look at their lives from a different point of view and to compare themselves with others. This comparison is experienced in a positive way and helps to trigger the process of transformation since it allows them to see a different future for themselves.

### **3.6 Contexts of support**

For these youth from the outskirts in the process of changing their lives around and discovering new possibilities, a decisive factor was meeting an adult figure whom they could rely on. In this case, the adult in question was Gianluca, a 28 year-old from the same neighbourhood. He shared a common background with the youth, yet wished to change the social and cultural geography of the area. He had taken over a cooperative that had been active for years but was on the brink of failing and decided to ‘ask the ex-street kids who were over the age of 18, if, instead of working on the streets they would be interested in becoming partners of the cooperative – presenting them with the challenge of turning the neighbourhood around’ (Gianluca). He uses his background to become part of the group of youngsters and be recognized as one of them: ‘Firstly, I’m from Barra. I know all these kids’ stories’ (Gianluca). He revolutionized the cooperative’s organisation and its mission and selected, as partners and operators, some of the neighbourhood’s street kids who frequented the cooperative in the past: ‘Iqbal was made up of all ex-street kids. We all spoke the same language’ (Marcello).

The youth accepted the challenge and effectively gave up their former street lives to take on a new role under Gianluca’s positive guidance. In this way, he represented a key figure who implemented the process of change on two levels: he developed a relationship based on caring and trust; and he used art as a means to educate the youth. Art was perfectly suited to raise awareness, functioning as an effective means to transmit values, affection and care. The youngsters were able to see Gianluca as a credible role model, someone who could transmit passion and knowledge about new things. For the first time in their lives, these youth felt what it was like to experience a meaningful relationship. Gianluca’s main mission was to ‘take care of the kids, help them to grow into their full potential and bring out their inner beauty and resources’ (Gianluca). An astonishing experience for these youth, who for the first time were able to form a positive relationship, full of trust and respect, with an adult:

I would have liked to have had him (Gianluca) for a dad, that’s for sure. My decision to come back here stemmed from the fact that I wanted to spend more time with him and learn from him... (Paolo)

By that point I trusted him (Gianluca) so whatever he suggested, I’d do it! Bungee Jumping? Ok, tell me when! Swimming? Let’s go! Anything would have been fine. I trusted him and believed in what he said!(Andrea)

### 3.7 Innovation and social change

The idea that ‘the individuals and/or groups from this neighbourhood possess the capacity and the skills necessary to improve their lives’ (Gianluca) is the premise for all the activities carried out in the neighbourhood. Circus skills (Aerial acrobatics; Trampolining; Juggling; Clowning) theatre and sports (basketball, parkour, rugby, gymnastics, etc.) are some of the activities carried out *by* the youngsters *for* the kids at the neighbourhood’s community centre. An important social meeting place for the kids of the area as it symbolises an indispensable point of reference. As previously mentioned, the arts represent a decisive turning point in the lives of the young people interviewed, a revolution: they are an effective means to transmit new values and skills; to gain a new perspective on the world; to have a valid alternative to street life, crime and the ‘obligatory’ paths previously imposed by the troubled neighbourhood; they allow a sense of freedom in which one can find one’s true identity; the possibility to compare one’s self with others and escape one’s confines to explore the world. The arts also grant a unique opportunity to be with others in a positive way, not as an individual or worse, as a ‘pack’; they transmit a sense of community characterised by very different values than the earlier ones. However, the arts are simply the means and not the ultimate goal of the activities provided by the project. As the cooperative’s slogan points out: *‘Not so that everyone can be an artist, but so no one has to be a slave’*.

Thus, the process of social innovation started by the neighbourhood youth is based on collaboration between individuals. Each of them participates and contributes in their own way, acquiring an active role in the activities aimed at providing them with support. The study observations clearly indicate that these marginalised youth from the degraded suburbs benefit enormously from such a social enterprise. The project organized *by* the youngsters *with* the younger children from the neighbourhood can also be seen as social entrepreneurship. The fact that they take on an active role not only benefits them as individuals, but also the community as a whole, as Nino explains:

It is a joint task! We are building a cathedral, all together, each with their own knowledge and their own skills. Thanks to this metaphor we can accept things that we generally tend to reject: being distressed, being judged negatively, being asked to make an effort that goes beyond your personal interest and what you would normally accept as an individual... An effort you make not only for yourself, but for the greater good. (Nino)

These young innovators have found creative ways in which to compensate for the lack of resources. They ignore the scarce economic, social and cultural resources their area has to offer, instead concentrating on and enhancing the value of the opportunities their area *does* have. Acting on their endogenous resilience or ability to develop ‘good energy’, they have effectively overcome the obstacles they have had to deal with for most of their lives. Furthermore, their active participation in the project means that they go from being simply members, to having a much more significant role; a role that will guarantee the project’s continuity in the future.

Finally, there is also the opportunity to address the youngster’s economic needs by offering them employment within the project. Many of the young people have gone from being members to becoming partners of the cooperative, benefitting from an economic return and a source of livelihood. These young people not only play an important role in social development by supporting social integration, improving local services, promoting the active participation of young people in society, and encouraging a positive sense of community, but also promote dignified and

quality employment. They reverse the culture of exploitation and debasement present in the illegal labour market.

It is possible to identify some common pillars that represent the fundamental principles to the work carried out by both associations that were part of our study. Firstly, the *operators/educators are the members' peers*. They come from the same area. They have the same cultural, social and economic background; they have had the same life experiences, use the same language and have suffered the same marginalisation. The majority of the operators are ex-street kids who now have an active role in organising and implementing the centre's educational and training activities. The fact that they too have been marginalised helps them to attract other, younger street kids as these testimonies explain:

If you came along and wanted to hold a workshop for difficult kids from the suburbs of Naples... They would never listen to you because you'd be Italian... You would be seen as being detached! Like "this one's Italian is way too proper!" (Riccardo)

I saw something of the street in him, like me, he spoke my same language, the language of the street I mean, and that's important because to connect it's exactly what you've got to have. (Marcello)

Secondly, the *use of the arts* turned into the elective means to move the youth first towards an individual transformation and then towards a social one:

One day this little group came along to teach circus skills. I went out and was intrigued by all the things they were doing. One was on stilts, another was juggling clubs, balls... I went up to them because I wanted to try! And I liked it... it was fantastic. It made you feel good! (Paolo)

Thirdly, the main elements used by the proposed art forms (circus and theatre) are immediately recognised by the youth and something they can easily associate with: *risk and challenge*.

When we went into the streets and they'd stare at us. None of us would lower our gaze. We'd stand there and challenge their stares. However, we had to know how to handle that challenge otherwise it would just end up in a fight! We'd challenge them then say: "do you want to try the stilts?" and they'd answer "Why not? How hard can it be?" A bit like what I would have said some time ago - also because these are kids who are used to challenging the police every day. Nothing and no one scares them. So we'd get them up on the stilts...(Marcello)

These are kids who are constantly at-risk, even when they're not doing anything, simply because of the context they come from. So we transformed that risk from a negative one to a positive one: they have to take risks, do risky circus things like aerial silks or parkour but with positive connotations. That's what we work on. (Marcello)

The main idea behind the project is to use the arts to teach these new generations to become more self-aware and proactive individuals, capable of initiating a long-term social transformation:

We don't go around singing PEPPEPEPEPE and making people laugh...of course, that's important too but at this moment in time what we need to do is something else. We

need to create awareness!...People have to be made aware and get involved in everything we do. (Gianluca)

The aim is to raise awareness throughout the whole neighbourhood by influencing the younger generations, building their creative and artistic skills and divulging a new *forma mentis* within the entire community. Emancipation and development is possible by working with resources the neighbourhood has to offer and giving the community a sense of *empowerment*. The main project promoters assert that is only way that transformation can occur, a transformation capable of turning the internalised marginalisation of the neighbourhood's inhabitants into a new awareness based on the *culture of marginality*.

The project attracts a large number of children and adolescents due to the team of educators, almost all of which are ex-street kids. This implies that because they share the same cultural background and speak the same language, the children they teach do not have difficulties with the process of identification. In addition, the ex-street kids represent *credible adult models*, new points of reference in a previously barren environment from a human and cultural point of view. These *model* adults also have another fundamental role: that of being a guide for the neighbourhood's youth, someone who can point them in the right direction – an alternative one – and support them during the difficult period of growth and the development of their personal identities.

The work I do with these youngsters is actually quite selfish! You know my kids right? Well one day, these youngsters will be my kids' leaders! I mean, when I won't be able to do it anymore, who will my kids have to relate to? With them, that's who! So you see, if they are going to go on to take over the leadership of my kids, if I don't act now it means I'm not taking care of my kids. I have to do a good job with these youngsters so that they can do a good job with my kids. I'm investing in the future! (Gianluca)

The aim is to guarantee the new generations the possibility of a different future and an alternative way of life that sees the youth as promoters of a possible social, cultural and economic change in the entire community. Working for and with the younger generations, means multiplying the number of potential agents of social change, thus guaranteeing a better future to them:

We are doing a work on generational change. We work with their children (...) for example, the sons of [mafia] bosses. We work with them, not with fathers, to hope that the child will not replace his father tomorrow, but he will choose a different life ... (Matteo)

The involvement of an ever-growing number of youth and the continuous expansion of the proposed activities aims to shape an entire population of youth. In the future, the younger generations are expected to take over and continue the project's work. Armed with a new set of values, these youngsters are expected to be able to create a better social environment and a better life for themselves and their community. Only then, the young people who are working today with the younger kids will feel free to leave their neighbourhood, if they wish so:

I'll never leave this neighbourhood. If I do, it'll be because I know that Barra is capable of making it, that the kids will be fine on their own and that a whole new generation will be able to grow up correctly, in the right way, with the right rules, experiencing the beauty of childhood. (Marcello)

## 4. Conclusions

Many threads have become intertwined in our research. Firstly, there is the re-semanticising of the idea of *suburbs*, that proposes to overturn exclusion into value, marginality in a positive sense. In this sense, the need to trace an innovative image of social exclusion and spatial confinement starts from the periphery, which transforms a place of shortcomings and conflict into a creative space of trust and relationship. The outskirts of city thus become, as Viviani (2015: 66-7) puts it, places where it is possible to re-establish a sense of community life.

This study has originated from the PROMISE project, which aims to investigate the possibilities for positive social engagement and the innovation potential of young people defined as ‘conflictive’. The original assumption beyond the project is that ‘conflicted youth’ are confronted with the effects of stigmatization and such effects can reduce the possibilities for them to engage positively in society. The case study presented here has aimed to depict a different picture of conflicted young people. In fact, it demonstrates how young people labelled as ‘conflicted’, on the margins of society and losers can become agents of positive social change.

Their search for a different horizon finds an answer in the realization of a joint venture. The drive of such counterculture experience, of the transformation process analysed in the course of this research, is initially triggered by an event that, for various reasons, marks a break in the lives of young people. The encounter with a *credible adult figure*, with whom to experience for the first time the power of a relationship of care, will then be a crucial factor to turn an individual experience into social aspiration, towards the building of a different community. The challenge posed does not lie so much in the subversion of a constituted order, but in the youth’s transformation of this state, while remaining well anchored within the community to which they belong. A challenge that is carried out daily through arts and that finds its main weapons in the circus, the theatre and the sporting disciplines proposed. Arts therefore become, in this case, the privileged means by which to make the new generations aware and, through them, the whole community.

Studies on young people in Italy tend to focus on *uncertainty* and *fragmentation* as typically affecting their lives, with young people finding themselves responsible for confronting these key features and having to find answers to them. The young people who have been at the centre of our study, however, do not seem to reflect such a view. They have grown up in a social and cultural environment in which *scarcity* (e.g. of economic resources) and *absence* (e.g. of a care relation, or of *credible adults*) is a certainty for them. Nor do these young people seem to reflect the stigma that is often projected on conflictual youth, and that views them as scarcely interested in participating in society nor in becoming agents of positive change. On the other hand, studies on stigma, starting from Goffman's (1963) work, rarely pay attention to the possibility that the stigmatised transformed the negative label into a positive value.

The findings of our research indicate that the status of marginal and excluded, far from requiring an intervention of mere correction, can become the spring on which to trigger change. In this perspective, the stigmatised youth are fully capable to assume the task and the responsibility of being the key actors of a process of social change. The culture of marginality is therefore maintained, but it is transformed into positive marginality. In this transformation lies the strong desire for change felt by the youth who are the object of this study.

## 5. Future analysis

### a) *Themes encountered:*

The study presented here highlights some issues, proposing a reversal of the significance attributed to core items:

- Marginality: can be regarded as a positive value;
- The outskirts: can be transformed from places marked by exclusion and insufficiencies to places in which to experiment with new forms of social cohabitation, taking away the need to leave at all costs;
- Youth labelled as ‘marginalised’ and ‘problematic’: have the potential for extraordinary proactive participation *in society for society*;
- Inter-generational relationships: can mark a decisive turning point in the paths of problematic youths if they provide the necessary understanding and support; and
- The arts: circus skills and theatre in particular, can be used as a means to encourage positive social transformation, turning problematic youngsters with no hope into active protagonists for change.

### b) *Issues of concern or hypothesis for triangulation with quantitative data:*

In regards to the modalities of participation, the research findings suggest that the indicators provided by the major (quantitative) European surveys are limited when referring to how young people participate in society. Belonging to a human rights group, a religious organisation or other group or organisation is considered an important indicator of social engagement, possibly demonstrating youth involvement in the community. Nevertheless, some academics (Quintelier 2008, see PROMISE Deliverable D7 – D4.1) do not regard another set of indicators – including education, arts, music, cultural activities, sports or recreation - as likely to have a significant impact on society. This study demonstrates that social participation and commitment to a community can also be achieved by belonging to artistic and sporting groups. The authors believe that these activities can help youth radically change their community and society as a whole. It would, therefore, be useful to review the indicators used in EU surveys, possibly by adding a set of questions on the individual’s intentions and expectations regarding belonging to a group or association. In this way, it would be possible to understand both the expected and the effective outcomes in society produced by participation in these activities.



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## 7. Appendix: table of respondents' socio-demographic data

File name	Age	Gender	Education	Employment	Residential status	Family status	Ethnicity	Country of birth	Religion
1_Cristian	18	Male	Completed vocational academic secondary education	In part-time employment	Lives at home with parents	Single	Not applicable	Italy	Not applicable
2_Carla	29	Female	Completed university	In part-time employment	Lives independently with friends	Single	Not applicable	Italy	Not applicable
3_Gianluca	38	Male	Completed general academic secondary education	In full-time employment	Lives independently with own partner/children	Living with partner	Not applicable	Italy	Not applicable
4_Matteo	19	Male	Did not complete secondary education and left	In full-time employment	Lives at home with other relatives	Single	Not applicable	Italy	Not applicable
5_Marcello	25	Male	Completed vocational academic secondary education	In full-time employment	Lives at home with parents	Single	Not applicable	Italy	Not applicable
6_Mauro	22	Male	Completed vocational academic secondary education	In full-time employment	Lives at home with parents	Single	Not applicable	Italy	Not applicable
7_Michele	22	Male	Completed vocational academic secondary education	Working and in part-time education	Lives independently with own partner	Single	Not applicable	Italy	Not applicable
8_Paolo	20	Male	Completed general academic secondary education	In part-time employment	Lives at home with parents	Single	Not applicable	Italy	Not applicable
9_Sabrina	31	Female	Completed university	In full-time employment	Lives independently with friends	Single	Not applicable	Italy	Not applicable
10_Andrea	22	Male	Did not complete secondary education and left	In part-time employment	Lives at home with parents	Single	Not applicable	Italy	Not applicable

11_Franca	24	Female	Completed university	In part-time employment	Lives at home with parents	Single	Not applicable	Italy	Not applicable
12_Fabrizio	22	Male	Completed vocational academic secondary education	Unemployed	Lives at home with parents	Single	Not applicable	Italy	Not applicable
13_Gabriella	25	Female	Completed university	Working and in part-time education	Lives at home with parents	Single	Not applicable	Italy	Not applicable
14_Maria	26	Female	Completed university	In part-time employment	Lives at home with parents	Single	Not applicable	Italy	Not applicable
15_Nino	36	Male	Completed university	In full-time employment	Lives independently alone	Single	Not applicable	Italy	Not applicable
16_Riccardo	23	Male	Did not complete secondary education and left	In part-time employment	Lives at home with parents	Single	Not applicable	Italy	Not applicable
17_Patrizio	28	Male	Completed university	In full-time employment	Lives at home with parents	Single	Not applicable	Italy	Not applicable
18_Nevio	34	Male	Completed university	In full-time employment	Lives independently alone	Single	Not applicable	Italy	Not applicable
19_Federica	27	Female	Completed university	In part-time employment	Lives independently alone	Single	Not applicable	Italy	Not applicable
20_Giacomo	27	Male	Completed university	In part-time employment	Lives independently alone	Single	Not applicable	Italy	Not applicable