

The precariousness of relationships during the age of the digital native

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Received: 10-9-2014
Accepted: 15-10-2014

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Summary. *The life task of each adolescent has always been to define his own identity, and adolescence is by definition the age of precariousness. A precarious situation, however, can be an opportunity for change and growth when it is accompanied by the encouragement of adults. Nowadays, a profound sense of financial insecurity, value loss, uncertain future prospects, lack of stability and lack of consistency within human relationships seems to prevail in the reality of the adult world. These factors affect the process of building the adolescents' lifestyle, which tends to become chronic precariousness. In addition, the pervasive and rapid development of technological tools influences the personal and professional life not only of the younger generations, but of everyone. This has led to profound changes in society that have transformed the way people communicate and interact. All these elements draw attention to how teenagers increasingly search for interaction and relationships through the internet and social media. In the second part of this article, theoretical reflections are explored through teens' words. The authors carried out a survey in a secondary school among approximately 1,000 adolescents. Then, they went into the classrooms to present data and discuss it with the teens.*

Keywords: *adolescence; relationship; precariousness; digital; network*

La precarietat de les relacions durant l'era del natiu digital

Resum. *La tasca vital de cada adolescent sempre ha estat la definició de la pròpia identitat, i l'adolescència és per definició l'edat de la precarietat. Una situació precària, però, pot representar una oportunitat per al canvi i el creixement si ve acompanyada de l'encoratjament dels adults. Actualment, els aspectes que semblen predominar en la realitat del món adult són un sentiment profund d'inseguretat econòmica, la pèrdua de valors, expectatives de futur incertes, la manca d'estabilitat i la manca de consistència en les relacions humanes. Aquests factors afecten el procés de construcció de l'estil de vida dels adolescents, cosa que tendeix a convertir-se en una precarietat crònica. A més, el desenvolupament generalitzat i ràpid de les eines tecnològiques té una influència sobre la vida personal i professional no sols de les generacions més joves sinó també de tothom. Això ha conduït a canvis profunds dins la societat que han transformat la manera de comunicar-se i interactuar de les persones. Tots aquests elements porten l'atenció a com els adolescents busquen cada vegada més interacció i relacions a través d'internet i les xarxes socials. A la segona part de l'article, s'exploren reflexions teòriques a través de les paraules dels adolescents. Els autors van dur a terme una enquesta en una escola de secundària amb uns 1.000 adolescents aproximadament. Després, van anar a les aules a explicar les dades i parlar-ne amb els mateixos adolescents.*

Paraules clau: *adolescència; relació; precarietat; digital; xarxa*

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I. Introduction

If precariousness, as Camus (1951) invites us to consider, is constitutive of the human condition, it is even more so during adolescence. The developmental task of teenagers has always been to build and define their identity and, from this point of view, adolescence is by definition the age of precariousness and conflict. These two aspects can spur human development, becoming opportunities for change and growth, when adults set an example of encouragement and hope.

In today's society, the reality of the adult world, which adolescents approach, is pervaded by a deep sense of materialism and lack of values, together with an instability and inconsistency in emotional relationships. This affects the process of building the adolescents' lifestyle, which tends to become chronic precariousness (Grandi, 2005).

We refer to several forms of precariousness. Economic precariousness is characterized by entering the world of work and attaining independence later and later. Cultural precariousness presents itself as relativism and the crisis of the traditional system of values. The precariousness of personal identity appears in the multiple models offered by adults, which are sometimes contradictory, incoherent, and inconsistent. Worthy of special emphasis is the fact that this process results in precarious social relations (relational precariousness).

The way people meet, date, and maintain relationships has drastically changed, also due to the extraordinary evolution in modern means of communication. Today, smartphones, the web and social networking are fundamental opportunities for meeting and relating to «digital natives». Sometimes these sites are complementary to the street, the parish youth club or the pub, and sometimes they replace them (Ferri, 2011). For adults, who are «digital immigrants», it is difficult to fully understand and identify with these new means, although we have recently started to use them ourselves. We need to be told by the young and listen, if possible, without prejudice.

If it is true that these new forms of communication have certainly affected the way adolescents get in touch with each other, it is also true that these means are nothing more than the technological translation of a cultural trend already present, which has its roots in the world that we adults have built. Understanding the changes underway and remaining «connected» to the world of adolescents requires continuous introspection and decoding.

Even prior to the relational level, the new technologies act on the way in which a person perceives and reacts to stimuli, approaches learning, organizes and develops thoughts, and acts. There are now numerous scientific studies demonstrating that the use of these modes of communication transforms the anatomy and physiology of the nervous system.

We know that the brain is built on the basis of genetic information and biological processes of development, but also according to the experiential stimu-

li it is exposed to. Prensky (2001), the first author to introduce the term «digital natives», said that a media diet generates a new language, a new way of organizing thought that will change the brain structure of digital natives. **Multitasking, interactivity** and **hypertextuality** are some of the characteristics of a new stage of human evolution.

Now we will analyze these three aspects, in order to understand how the new media are changing our lives and therefore our way of thinking, approaching reality and relating to each other.

In computer science, *multitasking* is the function that allows an operating system to run multiple programs simultaneously. Just like a computer, our brain, when exposed to many stimuli at the same time, gets used to performing more tasks simultaneously. Nowadays a striking example could be a teenager doing homework while texting a friend, checking contacts on Facebook, downloading a video, answering an e-mail, and listening to music. The brain functioning gains flexibility, increasing the ability to subdivide its attention among different activities and to process information from different sources in the short-term memory. This can be an advantage, because it allows one to capture and respond with immediacy to a variety of stimuli, but similarly to what happens with TV channel surfing, an attentional and perceptual discontinuity occurs.

In addition, as shown by studies using functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI) of the brain (Foerde, Knowlton & Poldrack, 2006), the parallel processing of information activates the central areas of the brain much less. These are responsible for the connection with long-term memory processes (involving the thalamus and hypothalamus). Multitasking involves a greater capacity for immediate and flexible processing of information, but it basically depresses the processes of long-term memory formation and the comparison between the processed information and long-term memory content, what we call the ability to reflect, process, think, and plan.

At a relational level, this mode of functioning and interacting with reality can form the basis of a superficial approach to relationships. The multiplicity of contacts taking place at the same time limits the depth of the relationship and inhibits a continuous, careful, dedicated presence. An immediate responsiveness to stimuli and provocation reduces the possibility of empathizing, understanding, internalizing, reflecting. The relational experience turns into a series of quick contacts, often with little continuity and coherence, in need of something new and always different rather than intense and lasting (D'Alessandro, 2014).

Interactivity, the second aspect mentioned by Prensky (2001), is the possibility for a user of any means of communication to have an active role in the functioning of the means itself and in producing answers. The interactivity moves users away from mere orality (typical of television) to move them closer to the classic characteristics of human relations, thus giving back

to them the power to influence the content of communication.

The internet is definitely much more interactive than other media. The user's will has decidedly more room to express itself. The possibility of asking and finding answers to your needs by surfing the net is great. Users get into a mode similar to that of researchers, of explorers who seek what interests them, or what they want to find (Bettetini & Garassini, 2001).

This certainly is an advantage, but by observing the development of interpersonal communication, a question arises: can the practice of interactivity produce a decrease in listening skills? Being so used to surfing, discovering, looking for something, do we find it harder to stop and simply accept what we are offered, for example, by a teacher explaining the lesson or by a friend telling us about their experience?

Is it possible that the practice of moving into areas where we always get what we want, thanks to interactive machines that listen to us and please us, draw us from the most inaccessible and tricky territories of human relations, where our desires are not always satisfied, where the other fellow is not only a giant repository of information and opportunities, but also a person with strengths, weaknesses, emotions, unpredictable reactions, and originality?

Finally, the term *hypertextuality* means the possibility of accessing a document that incorporates references and links to other documents that may be textual, visual or auditory. The traditional paper-based text offers information to readers in a linear way. It forces them to methodically read all the paragraphs. The hypertext is completely different. Users do not have to follow the content of each page; on the contrary, they can search and read only the parts they are most interested in. The strengths of hypertexts are the readers' personal involvement as well as the construction of personal paths suitable to their own style and their own interests.

As for the risks, some critics (Carr, 2010) argue that reading using hypertexts interrupts the «deep thought» related to writing and reading a book in a linear, concentrated way. In this sense, the internet leads to a certain «bulimia» of information.

Several experimental studies (Dias, 2014) have shown that the memory and visualization areas of the brain activate during linear reading of a text. Navigating on-line implies the ability to make decisions. The reader's mind is calm and reflective, whereas the mind of the web surfer is very fast and activated.

The system of hypertexts fosters «skating» on very broad surfaces, on boundless territories all connected to each other. This limits the possibility of dwelling on things, comparing them inside our minds, reaching original synthesis, linking them to what we already know. So we pass from a kind of critical, meditative intelligence to a more utilitarian one.

We can find the same process of transformation in human relationships, where the fleeting approach tends to prevail, together with superficiality, pointlessness,

and a utilitarian perspective. In accordance with Zigmunt Bauman (Bauman, 2001; 2005), we can say that we went from a model of an ethic community to a model of an aesthetic one, from «being together» to «being nearby». The common trait in all aesthetic communities is the superficial, frivolous as well as temporary nature of the relations established between their members.

When the goal is to simply «be nearby» instead of being together, there is no reason to spend time and energy to negotiate a possible way of living together; we can stay emotionally far from each other, avoiding deeper involvement, within our own boundaries (Grandi, 2002).

There have never been so many occasions to meet people, but paradoxically today social relations are reduced to fleeting encounters (Lerda & Grandi, 2013).

According to Bauman, we risk becoming «people who would like a different present for each of us, rather than seriously thinking about a better future for us all» (Baumann, 2005, p. 38).

At the same time, though, we are witnessing an increase in fears of being abandoned, excluded, rejected, neglected, ignored. Other people, instead of being companions, take on the role of spectators, ready to cheer or to help us when we want them to do so. We don't really meet others, but we need them to feel good. We develop an actual emotional addiction to them (Lancini & Turuani, 2009).

Others make us feel important. On Facebook, the more friends I have the more important I feel, even though I do not know who they are. They might even be complete strangers who have randomly found me with a simple click.

Adolescents are always searching for visibility (Charmet, 2009). They need it in order to feel recognized, to be someone. However, what they receive on-line is private, virtual visibility and narcissistic recognition, which is unable to return a sense of community and unable to create a dynamic relationship (Cappello, 2013).

The recognition that one gets is built on the basis of a sum of approvals, an accumulation of «likes». We are deprived of the authentic experience of boldly experiencing ourselves in reality. We can't have relations based on healthy social feelings, which call for cooperation and sharing of emotional experiences (Lo Sapio & Raviola, 2012).

These aspects encourage an individualistic and narcissistic mode of being in a relationship in which the other one remains a self-object to meet the needs of regressive addiction and narcissistic omnipotence. Moreover, this makes it difficult to approach others for who they are. We only perceive a part of them. The possibilities of mutual exchange and genuine cooperation become even more complicated. This partial relationship is not satisfying enough and leads to the continuous pursuit of the other, not because we are truly interested in them but because we need them (Grandi, 2012).

After these theoretical reflections we made as adult observers of an event, we would like to focus on what teenagers say when it comes to the web and relationships. We would like to listen to their point of view, and compare our reflections with their words.

In 2013 the authors carried out a survey about teenagers and their internet use; they obtained approximately 1000 questionnaires on this topic, which were handed out to adolescents between 14 and 19 years of age.

The questionnaire was developed by a team of researchers of our Institute, which deals with adolescence. The questionnaire was administered and tested in the area of Turin, under the coordination of Dr. Maria Morcinelli and Dr. Laura Mele (Dabbene, Fella & Specchia, 2012).

The questions focused on the daily amount of time spent on the internet, the use of social networks, the choice of interlocutors in chat rooms and the management of new meetings and relationships.

The most significant data: time spent on the internet from home is 1.6 hours per day, but 70.2% of the teens says they have a latest generation smartphone, through which connection is much more frequent (85% of those who own a smartphone accesses the internet with it). 89% of teens who use the internet on their smartphone accesses social networks (with the absolute prevalence of Facebook); 45% use them to meet new people, in the face of 39.6% who use them to keep in touch with their friends. 77.5% of the total sample likes chatting, but while this preference is given by 85.2% of 14-year-old teens, it drops to 64.8% for 19-year-olds. Although the use of social networks to meet new people is significant, 81% of the males reports chatting only with people they know in person. 29% of teens report the experience of being friends with people they met on the web: in relation to age, the percentage is 38.8% for 14-year-old teens and it drops to 21.20% for 19-year-olds.

After processing the data, the authors went back into the classrooms and presented them to the students, asking what they thought. In this article, we will not present the full development of our research and the discussion of its results. Rather, we focus on the reflections that teens made with us during the meetings.

II. Method

The research took place in a secondary school in Cuneo, a small town in Northern Italy, in 2013-2014. After the administration and processing of the questionnaires, the authors conducted focus groups with the students in order to access their opinions and feelings about the use of the internet and its influence on their lives, beyond the quantitative data that emerged from the questionnaires. In addition, we wanted to know what kind of relationships they developed across the internet and if they perceived a difference in the use of the web in relation to age.

Participants

974 students aged 14 to 19 years participated and were divided as follows: first year: 233; second year: 201; third year: 198; fourth year: 180; fifth year: 162. There were 169 males (17.3 %) and 805 females. The lack of gender homogeneity in the sample is a result of the fact that this high school prepares students to become teachers.

Instruments and procedure

Each focus group was composed of 47 to 50 students (2 classes) and lasted one hour. A psychologist conducted one meeting for each group (a total of 20 meetings); another psychologist, in the role of observer, noted the answers and the comments of the students. The meetings were organized in the following way: students watched a video on the topic and listened to the research results; students participated in a focus group on the use of the internet through the following questions:

Question 1: What would happen if you woke up tomorrow and the internet had disappeared?

Question 2: What kind of relationships develop across the internet? What is their nature?

Question 3: Does the use of the web vary depending on age?

III. Results and discussion

A first important aspect came out. There is often a discrepancy between what the students had replied in the questionnaire and what they expressed when asked directly. For example, the media connection time that emerged in the questionnaires is 1.6 hours per day, but the students talked about their relationship with the internet as if they were always connected.

This appeared to us as a first sign of that conflict and developmental precariousness that characterize teens. At the same time, though, it seems important to reflect on these outcomes to try to understand whether the precariousness of relationships in adolescence is reinforced by the use that teens make of the web.

We asked how new technologies that allow one to always be connected bring about changes in relational life. Students' replies to the question are divided into those who see the profound risks of not having the internet anymore and those who consider all the advantages.

Replies to question 1: «What would happen if you woke up tomorrow and the internet had disappeared?»

RISKS

- No more communication, no more information, I would have to buy the newspaper to keep updated.
- Now I can do anything on the internet: book a hotel or a flight, whereas without the internet I would have to look for contacts and call a number.
- It would take much longer, instead of having quick information in real time.

- I could not use WhatsApp and social networks. I would not write anyone, would remain cut off, I could not talk to anyone!
- Everything would change all over the world, everyone would be upset and would want to tell others, but would not be able to!
- I would be much more afraid of expressing my opinions.

ADVANTAGES

- There would be fewer isolated people, because with the internet you don't have a proper social life.
- It would be much easier to communicate «verbally», that is by talking directly.
- You would see the «non-verbal», which is almost impossible to understand with the internet.
- There would be much more privacy, which is difficult to obtain with the internet.
- There would be more personal responsibility.
- We would be much more focused on our lives, but much more isolated.

In accordance with what we said in our initial reflections, teens seem to confirm that the new technologies change the way they perceive themselves and others within relationships. They seem to be aware of both benefits and risks and their influence on relationships. Also, they seem to clearly identify the shortcomings of technologically-mediated communication and relationships.

Replies to question 2: What kind of relationships develop across the internet? And what is their nature?

In our initial observations, we talked about relationships of a more superficial kind, aesthetic rather than ethical, which should be defined as fleeting encounters rather than true interactions. Also the teens try to explain what kind of relationship you can build through the web and why they do it.

Here are some of their remarks:

- If you are shy, social networks help you establish relationships much more easily.
- At the same time you struggle with face-to-face communication.
- You are not totally focused on the relationship that you are dealing with, because you might be communicating with others by chatting or texting, what we call multitasking.
- When you are too exposed at a personal level, you are afraid of being judged. That does not happen on the web.
- We can tell each other things that we can't say face-to-face.
- You always have access to information about your friends. You always know everything and you know if anyone is lying.
- They might not be your friends but you can still nose around; curiosity prevails.

Alongside those who highlight the fact that social networking allows you to communicate with those

who are distant and it helps overcome shyness, there are those who believe that it is a way to escape from face-to-face relationships. As a consequence, personal relationships become much more difficult to handle. Not being able to experience the embarrassment, judgment, shyness, blushing, and stuttering that normally occur in the first relationships outside the home – so precious for building one's own identity – could be seen as a failure, a loss in a person's background.

Some comments we have quoted also remind us of what we argued about multitasking: communicating simultaneously on several fronts, being constantly interrupted and stimulated, reduces the concentration on each single communication and affects listening skills. Hence relationships are disrupted.

We should also mention the paradox of maximum closeness (intrusion) vs. maximum distance (defense), visibility vs. invisibility. Teens say they feel «more exposed» in person and can go unnoticed on the web, but at the same time «if you need a little "privacy" you can have it». On this basis, the concept of «friendship» on the web is equally paradoxically altered: you know everything about the others, their most private facts, but you don't really know them.

You can be on the web in different ways, there are those who spend time uploading and posting and others who nose around, reminding us of children's games such as «peekaboo» and «hide-and-seek».

Children playing hide-and-seek affirm their existence, the fact that they exist for others and therefore also for themselves. This need is so strong that sometimes children can't help coming out to be found immediately. There are those who prefer to hide for as long as possible and others who want to be «it» (team of Childhood Psychotherapy coordinated by Dr. A.M. Bastianini).

In any case, uploading information or searching for it, showing oneself or observing others, confirms the universal need for establishing relationships.

On this point, we have understood that even though teens consider these forms of media contact as one of the options for getting to know and staying in touch with people, they also see the limits and tend to use them more responsibly as they grow up.

Replies to question 3: Does the use of the web vary depending on age?

The younger teens we met, state that:

- Older teens use the web less because they have grown up and are more mature.
- They have cars and they can do many more things. They already have friends and a boyfriend or girlfriend.
- They are much more responsible and brave. If they have something to say, they go for it. They think differently. You can see that they are entering into the adult world.
- They don't need social networking as much to gain visibility.

The older teens agree on these points:

- We are older; we have more things to do and more to study.
- Younger teens were born with the idea of connection, but for us it is a new thing that we have become accustomed to.
- Interests change; we tend to prefer a face-to-face dialogue to a web chat.

These statements confirm previous research that shows that behavior, attitude and thoughts with respect to new technologies vary according to age (Dabbene, Fella & Specchia, 2012). The answers seem to confirm the idea we initially expressed – the fact that uncertainties, conflicts, the need for confirmation and visibility, narcissistic traits, and mood swings are features and developmental needs of adolescence.

These needs find resonance and partial answers on the web and through social networking, but using these means of communication does not ensure healthy development. With the disappearance of these needs there seems to be a new way of using social networking. Of course, to ensure that this transition takes place, it is necessary to be able to experience enough to satisfy the need for a healthy social life within real and meaningful relationships with adults and peers.

Most teens seem to be aware (at least in theory) of what needs they should satisfy to grow up healthily:

- The need to «physically» see each other in order to express themselves better.
- The need for affective relationships: «I wish we slept hand in hand, I wish you stayed in my life and I miss you when you're not here».
- The need for dialogue as the need for turning to someone you trust when you need help.
- The need to be seen and to see, which has always been there, even though times have changed and modes are different.
- The need to bond with someone.
- The need to be accepted.
- The need to communicate.

IV. Conclusions

Our initial thoughts are confirmed by the words of teens, but we can also say that some of our major concerns receive at least partial reassurance. The precariousness of relationships is undoubtedly characteristic of adolescence, and today it is reflected more easily and in some ways even amplified, rather than contained and orientated in our real society due to the precariousness of the adult world as well as in the virtual environment of the web. Teenagers, though, recognize their own basic needs, including the essential one for relationships, and over the years they seem to develop the critical ability to discern which experiences will be useful for their human development, becoming progressively more aware of the risks associated with digital relationships which play on their developmental weaknesses (Di Summa, 2013).

Also, they tend to use technology in a more balanced way.

Of course, this happens when, regardless of the forms of communication, children can continue to experience intense and healthy relationships with adults and with peers who are carefully involved and still willing to spend time with them, despite the fragility and conflict implied by their age.

The epochal changes we talked about are real and some of them are a threat, but we still have in our hands the power to preserve those experiences that allow children to grow up, which they continue to need and, implicitly, to ask for.

«On the internet there is neither night nor day, neither up nor down, there is no body and there is no handwriting, there is only a travelling bit, which takes whatever shape we give it» (Jovanotti, 2000, p.75-76).

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Author's notes: This work comes from the experience, reflections and constant comparison developed at the Italian Institute of Individual Psychology «Alfred Adler», one of whose locations is in Cuneo, under the guidance of Professor Lino G. Grandi and with the essential contributions of Dr. Francesca Di Summa and Dr. Anna Maria Bastianini. The survey to which we refer in the second part of this article was carried out by the authors in Cuneo as part of a research project developed by a team of researchers at our Institute in Turin: Laura Mele, Federica Fella, Ornella Dabbene, Romeo Specchia, Elisa Lupano and Eleonora Draetta.

La precariedad de las relaciones durante la era del nativo digital

Resumen. *La tarea vital de cada adolescente siempre ha sido la definición de su propia identidad, y la adolescencia es por definición la edad de la precariedad. Una situación precaria, sin embargo, puede constituir una oportunidad para el cambio y el crecimiento si se acompaña por el apoyo de un adulto. Actualmente, parecen prevalecer en la realidad del mundo adulto un sentido profundo de inseguridad económica, pérdida de valores, perspectivas de futuro inciertas, falta de estabilidad y falta de consistencia en las relaciones humanas. Tales factores tienen un efecto sobre el proceso de construcción del estilo de vida de los adolescentes, lo cual puede llevar a una precariedad crónica. Además, el desarrollo generalizado y rápido de los instrumentos tecnológicos tiene influencia sobre la vida personal y profesional no sólo de las generaciones más jóvenes sino también de todos. Esto ha conducido a cambios profundos en la sociedad que han transformado la manera de comunicarse e interactuar de las personas. Todos estos elementos ponen la atención sobre cómo los adolescentes buscan cada vez más interacción y relaciones a través de internet y los medios sociales. En la segunda parte del presente artículo, se exploran reflexiones teóricas a través de las palabras de los adolescentes. Los autores llevaron a cabo una encuesta en una escuela de secundaria con unos 1.000 adolescentes. Después, fueron a las aulas para presentar los datos y poder debatirlos con ellos.*

Palabras clave: *adolescencia; relación; precariedad; digital; red*