Cognition
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ADOLESCENTS IN DIFFERENT CONTEXTS: THE EXPLORATION OF IDENTITY THROUGH POSSIBLE SELVES

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ABSTRACT

The research studied the role of context in identity exploration during adolescence. In particular, the research investigated whether the belonging to an 'at risk' context has an impact on self-perception construction as well as on possible-selves exploration. Two questionnaires - Self Perception Profile for Adolescents (SPPA, Harter, 1985) and Possible Selves Questionnaire (PSQ, Oyserman & Markus, 1990) - were administered to 105 participants (21% male and 79% female) from an Italian city (Naples), aged between 14 - 18. Youths were taken from two sub-samples which were distinguished by life contexts. This research used a mixed approach. The results showed different productions of possible selves in function of the context, thus agreeing with our hypothesis. The impact of context was more evident in the dimension of the feared self, in particular for the 'at risk' participants. The role played by the feared self in the identity construction of participants belonging to the "at risk" context was complex. The results are useful in planning intervention projects for the 'at risk' schools.

KEYWORDS: *identity exploration, possible selves, normative and non-normative contexts, adolescence, mixed approach.*

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One of the dominant aspects of human experience is the compelling sense of one's unique existence (Bruner, 2002, 1994). This individual search for meaning, as Bruner (1996, 2002) suggested, is synthesised in the self concept, or in the construction of one's own identity. Self can be a synthesis, a personalised and subjective cluster of different dimensions: current self, relational self, past, future and possible selves, unconscious self, and so on.

Contemporary studies on identity, from many perspectives, link this assumption with Erikson's (1950) postulate: self-definition is the most important challenge for adolescents. This study has been conducted within the theoretical framework of ego-identity development from a psychosocial perspective, in accordance to Erikson (1968, 1980) as well as in light of the study on self as a synthesis of separate life domains and 'global self-worth' (Harter, 1985, 1990). Global self-worth represents a cognitive-developmental acquisition used to construct a concept of one's worth as a person, describing perception as well as the extent to which one likes oneself as a person, with it being based on the perceived view from significant others (Harter, 1985).

Several previous studies reveal that perceived support from significant others is a powerful predictor of global self-worth (Harter 1990, 1999; Rosenberg, 1979), providing a confirmation of the importance of support from adults and peers during adolescence (Harter, Waters, & Whitesell, 1998). According to Cooley's looking-glass self concept, opinions of significant others are incorporated into one's sense of self-worth (Cooley, 1902). Moreover, self-perception has been shown to reflect both developing cognitive abilities as well as social circumstances (Altman Klein, 1995; Dusek & Flaherty, 1981; Stanwyck, 1983). Social components become important in later childhood (Frey & Ruble, 1985) and adolescence (Allison & Schultz, 2001).

Specifically, Marcia (1966) has operationalised Erikson's concept of identity formation during adolescence as a process that involves two dimensions: exploration and commitment. The first is a process in which the individual actively searches for his own identity through different options, goals, actions and beliefs. While, the second represents the actual resolution of identity issues assumed by the individual and the degree to which the individual has made choices about important identity–relevant issues (i.e., *commitment making*). Hence, commitment is the act of adhering to selected goals or beliefs.

Exploration and the future are linked during adolescence, due to the future (e.g., projecting of oneself in adulthood) being an important component of the self-concept (Mc Guire & Padawe – Singer, 1976; Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry, 2006). In fact, adolescence is the time to discover one's true self through the exploration of possible selves (Dunkel, 2000, 2005; Grotevant, 1987; Knox, Funk, Elliott, & Green Bush, 1998; Markus & Nurius, 1993; Oyserman, Bybee, Terry, & Hart-Johnson, 2004; Oyserman, & Markus 1993, 2004). According to this view, exploration is primarily a way to re-evaluate past commitments (Bosma, 1992;

Cotè & Levine, 1988; Jennifer, Kerpelman, Leanne, Pittman, & Lamke, 1997; Meeus, Iedema, Maassen, 2002). Commitment and exploration are two phases of a dynamic and iterative process of constructing one's identity.

Erikson (1980) suggests that individual commitment in psychosocial domains can be more self-chosen after a period of exploration of alternatives ('crisis'). This exploration period, according to Dunkel (2000), uses the forming of possible selves as a process of cognitive testing of future self-images.

Possible selves are therefore future oriented components of a multi-faceted self-concept. They are the selves we imagine we will become in the future, the selves we hope to become, the selves we are afraid we may become, and the selves we fully expect we will become (Markus & Nurius, 1993).

Oysermann, Bybee, Terry and Hart-Johnson (2004) emphasize the important role of socio-economic contexts on the formation of possible selves. In fact, contextually cued possible selves should influence self-regulatory behaviour more than those which are not cued (Oyserman, Bybee, Terry, & Hart-Johnson, 2004).

All the processes of identity construction are not entirely self-defined events and they cannot develop without regard to the socio-cultural context (meso-system, Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Recent studies (Adams et al., 2001; Dunkel, 2002; Jensen, Kristiansen, Sandbeck, & Kroger, 1998; Stegarud, Solheim, Karlsen, & Kroger, 1999) have examined the relationship between social, economic, cultural conditions and identity statuses. They have given an empirical explanation for the contextual nature of self-construction as a balance between self and others (Kroger, 2004) that a variety of theoretical approaches has highlighted in different ways. In particular, the socio-cultural approach proposes that identity is either a reflection of individual adaptation to context (Côté & Levine, 2002) or a reciprocal interaction between person and context (Lerner, 1993).

However, it is important to highlight that this approach does not imply that self-formation is a passive response by individuals to social contexts, but rather a structural role of interactions between individuals and contextual systems, through more levels of influence (Adams & Marshall, 1996). In addition, developmental contextualism has highlighted that this process changes over time. Individuals therefore, can create the sense of their own story and identity over time (Lerner, 1993).

The definition of identity, in synthesis, possesses a social dimension (Bosma 1992; Bosma & Kunnen 2001; Ford & Lerner 1992; Lannegrand & Bosma 2006; Silbereisen, Eyforth, & Rudinger, 1986; Silbereisen & Todt, 1994), but it is an iterative process of transaction between person and context, between internal and external factors in a dynamic and continuous change.

Kroger and Halsett (1987, 1991) have found that situational variables lead to different life-style choices. They have also suggested that environmental and situational factors have a role in the adolescent's different pathways of identity

formation. In particular, Kroger and Green (1996) suggest that some life events are associated with identity changes. Previous studies (Adams & Fitch, 1983; Costa & Campos, 1986) have established relationships between academic developmental environment and identity status distributions. The relationship between adolescent identity exploration and parental communication styles has been studied by Grotevant and Cooper (1985). Oyserman, Terry, and Bybee (2002) suggest that there is a link between possible selves and academic behaviour. Kroger (2000) emphasizes the importance of the interaction between context and the individual in identity formation as well as, in general, the importance of the relation between identity formation and context.

In addition, Oyserman, Coon, and Kemmelmeier (2002) suggest that possible selves are always markedly social. When possible selves are based on one's own past successes and failures they are social, due to these successes and failures frequently being successes and failures with others. If possible selves are based on one's own values, ideals or aspirations, they are also social, because these are shaped by social contexts (Kalakosky & Nurmi, 1998; Oyserman, Terry, & Bybee, 2002). Kerpelman and Pittman (2001) explain that social processes occur before and after psychological processes (Burke, 1991; Kerpelman & Lamke. 1997; Stets & Burke, 2005) through Erikson's concept of psychosocial moratorium. They claim that "during the process of identity exploration, possible selves comprise aspects of the self that are more sensitive to feedback from the environment" (Kerpelman & Pittman, 2001, p. 491). The role of context in the formation of possible selves, and in the exploration process, is a part of identity formation, especially during adolescence when reputation, popularity and power among peers starts to have real significance and society pushes young people to explore their identities. These identities (or possible selves explored) are partly defined by the environment as well as the personal perception of context (Burke, 1991) and may become reputation projects for identity development (Emler & Reicher, 1995). In conclusion, specific others and social contexts play an important role in the creation and maintenance of possible selves.

The present study

In accordance to Dunkel (2000), we assume that the creation of possible selves is an important dimension of the identity formation process. Our study therefore focuses on the exploration of identity in adolescence. Current literature, as summarized above, suggests that the exploration of possible selves is a process within a context and we assume it differs in relation to the particular contexts in which the adolescent is integrated.

In fact, there are contexts defined as *normative* and contexts defined as *at risk*. Subjects who belong to the *at risk* context (they belong to a system with low socio-economic conditions and their context is involved in help programs), know

they are considered in some way adolescents *at risk*. Our aim in this study is to verify whether or not the context as a variable may interfere with the processes involved in the exploration of identity. In particular, we explore the role of belonging to different contexts in the formation of possible selves.

More specifically, the study focuses on the process of identity exploration using social context as a variable defining the adolescent as *normative* or *at risk* through: the number of self-described possible selves (future, hoped and feared selves), their specific content, the self- representation in different domains and the global self worth, the relation between possible selves and current self, the relation between possible selves and self-perception domains.

In particular, we hypothesize that particular developmental contexts (officially labelled as *at risk,* in relation to deviance) interfere in the process of identity exploration and, in particular, we would expect that they restrain or alter the production of possible selves.

We base this hypothesis on the assumption that the context to which the adolescent belongs can create possible selves that may in turn become internalized as self-guides (Higgins, 1987) for the identity construction. These identities could become reputational projects or ideal reputations (Emler & Reicher, 1995) for adolescents and they could stop the exploration process (Figure 1).
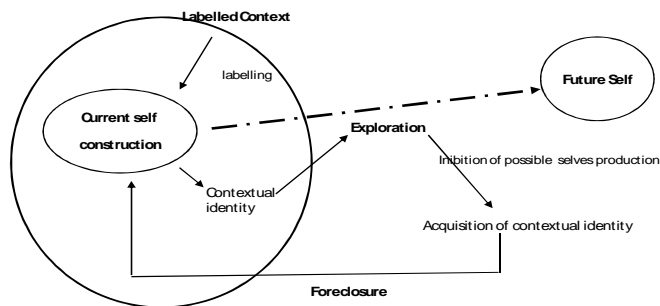

Figure 1
Descriptive model**.**

Specific expectations:

Ho.1: Participants belonging to an 'at risk context' produce a lower number of possible selves (in particular hoped-for selves) than those belonging to a normative context and show an inhibition of exploration processes.

We base this hypothesis on the assumption that contexts labelled as 'at risk' can propose specific and strong models which can become foreclosed models of identity (Marcia, 1966).

Ho. 2: Participants belonging to a normative context produce a high level of possible selves and they show a complex process of exploration.

We base this hypothesis on the assumption that contexts labelled 'normative' can promote the formation of a wide variety of possible selves (in particular hoped-for and future), because they propose multiple models and examples of identification for adolescents (Oyserman, Terry, & Bybee, 2002).

Ho. 3: In relation to the context variable, there is no difference for global self-worth. We base this hypothesis on those empirical studies (Harter, 1989; Rosenberg, 1989) that have highlighted self-esteem as not being related to the type of context to which the adolescent belongs (rich or poor, normative or deviant).

Ho. 4: There are connections between self-perception domains and possible selves. In particular, perception of high competence in life's specific domains is related to hoped-for selves in the same life domains, with these connections being influenced by the 'belonging context' variable. We base this hypothesis on four assumptions: 1. various authors have emphasized the multidimensional nature of the self-concept. The number of domains of the self systematically increases with age and varies across different social roles or contexts (Harter, 1986; Marsh, 1986). This assumption implies the need to assess the self-concept separately across the different domains of the individual's life (Harter, 1990). 2. Harter found that the discrepancy between the perception of competence and the importance of success across age-appropriate domains is highly correlated with global self-esteem or self-worth: "if one's successes were commensurate with one's aspirations for success, one would experience high self-esteem, whereas if one's pretensions exceed one's actual level of success, the individual would suffer from low-self esteem" (Harter, 1990, 128). 3. Rutter (1996) has highlighted that success in specific domains can lead to feelings of self-efficacy in people who empower their skills of coping in other life-domains. 4. The self-efficacy experienced in specific domains important for the subject in turn critically influences one's motivational level and possible/ideal selves images (Glick & Zigler, 1985; Higgins, 1987).

METHOD

Participants

The participants were 105 volunteers (21% male and 79% female) from a major Italian city (Naples). The mean age of the participants was 16 years (range 14 to 18 years).

The respondents were taken from two sub-samples which were distinguished by their respective life contexts. Individuals ($N = 53$) who attended a 'liceo classico', (Italian high school specialising in humanities) were allocated to the *normative* group. The students in this kind of school tend to come from mid-to-high socio-economic family backgrounds and obtain good school grades. The behaviour of these students should be considered 'normative' because it reflects the typical patterns that are observed, approved and promoted within Italian society.

Individuals ($N = 52$) who belong to at risk school contexts (generic Italian secondary school, defined as an *at risk school* and included in programmes and projects of a precautionary nature) were allocated to the '*at risk*' group. Students in this kind of school are characterized by: low socio-economic conditions, multi-problematic families, frequent absence from school, behavioural problems and drug-abuse. These adolescents within the Naples context are considered by the local authorities as youths who need help and assistance. Their families cannot provide them with much economic support and, as a consequence, these adolescents can easily become involved in delinquent behaviour on both individual and group levels. In some cases, their families already form a delinquent or deviant context for their ensuing development and socialization. In all cases, their school contexts are officially labelled as 'at risk' schools. These adolescents are 'at risk' of deviance (patterns of behaviour that are markedly different from the accepted standards within a society, with moral and ethical connotations).

This information and related data comes from the schools' official records collected to plan intervention programmes and precautionary projects (c.f.r. www.campania.istruzione.it/pon).

The most important aspect for this study is that the participants in the 'at risk' schools know that they could be classified as *at risk* subjects, and that the school as well as the social context view them as *at risk* youths. In accordance to Burke (2006), we think that behaviour is premised on a labelled and classified world and that people in society label each other as well as themselves in terms of the positions they occupy. These self labels thus define people in terms of positions in society and these positions carry the shared behavioural expectations.

Measurements

People make sense of their lives through self-narrations (Bruner, 1994, 1996, 2002). The narratives are the discursive ways we organise, understand and form

events, experiences and self-identities into a coherent and meaningful form (Fielding & Lee, 1998; Marshall & Rossmann, 1995; Mc Adams, 1995; Silverman, 1993). The construction of self and the production of possible selves are processes of creating meaning about self.

According to this conceptualization, our study adopted a multi-method approach and, in particular, a mixed approach (Brewer & Hunter, 1989; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, 1998; Henwood, Griffin, & Phoenix, 1998; Lather, 1986, 1995; Lincoln & Guba 1985), that has the advantage of studying different levels of the same phenomenon (Brannen, 2005). In order to test the quality and quantity of *possible selves*, we used the *Possible Selves Questionnaire* (PSQ), in the open-ended version of Oyserman and Markus (1990). Whereas to test the *self-perception* and *global self-worth*, we used Susan Harter's *Self Perception Profile for Adolescents* (SPPA, 1985), the Italian version (Aleni Sestito, Cozzolino, Menna, Ragozini, & Sica, in press).

Possible Selves Questionnaire
Participants completed the Italian version of the *Possible Selves Questionnaire* (PSQ) (Oyserman & Markus, 1990). The PSQ contains four open-ended questions about possible selves.

The translation was done according to the guidelines of the International Test Commission (Hambleton, 1994), using the translation back-version procedure (Brislin, 1980). Differences between the back translated and the original version were minimal.

In response to the open-format questions, subjects were asked to list and describe from 1 to 4 *current selves*, from 1 to 4 *future*, from 1 to 4 *hoped-for*, and from 1 to 4 *feared* selves for the following year after being provided with a short explanation of the questions. The first question asked was that of *current* selves, followed by *hoped-for* selves, *future* selves and *feared* selves (the order of the questions is the same as in the original version of the possible selves interview).
1. Current selves: "Please list below possible descriptions of you as a person".
2. Hoped for selves: "Many people have in mind some things they want to be like in the future regardless of how likely it is that they will actually be that way or do those things. These are the kinds of selves that you would hope to be like. Please list below possible selves that you most hope to describe you in the next year".
3. Future selves: "Please list below possible selves that are most probably to be true of you in the next year".
4. Feared selves: "Please list below possible selves that you most fear or worry about being in the next year".

These open-ended, self-concept probes yielded measurements of the content of *current, future, hoped-for,* and *feared selves*.

Self Perception Profile for Adolescent

The participants completed the Italian version of the *Self Perception Profile for Adolescents* (SPPA) (Aleni Sestito, Cozzolino, Menna, Ragozini, & Sica, in press).

Responding to each item is a two-step process. First, the adolescents are asked whether they are like any other adolescents who are good at a particular activity or like others who are not.

Second, adolescents indicate whether the chosen statement is "really like me" or "sort of like me". Items are scored on 4-point rating scales so that high scores indicated greater self-perceived competence.

The SPPA contains nine subscales: *scholastic competence* (5 items, e.g., "Some teenagers feel that they are just as smart as others of their age BUT other teenagers aren't sure and wonder if they are as smart")*, social acceptance* (5 items, e.g., "Some teenagers find it hard to make friends BUT for other teenagers it's pretty easy.")*, athletic competence* (5 items, e.g., "Some teenagers do very well at all kinds of sports BUT others don't feel that they are very good when it comes to sports")*, physical appearance* (5 items, e.g., "Some teenagers are not happy with the way they look BUT other teenagers are happy with the way they look")*, job competence* (5 items, e.g., "Some teenagers feel that they are ready to do well at a part time job BUT other teenagers feel that they are not quite ready to handle a part-time job")*, romantic appeal* (5 items, e.g., "Some teenagers feel that if they are romantically interested in someone, that person will like them back BUT other teenagers worry that when they like someone romantically, that person won't like them back")*, behavioural conduct* (5 items, e.g., "Some teenagers usually do the right thing BUT other teenagers often don't do what they know is right")*, close friendship* (5 items, e.g., "Some teenagers are able to make really close friends BUT other teenagers find it hard to make really close friends"), *global self-worth* (5 items, e.g., "Some teenagers are often disappointed with themselves BUT other teenagers are pretty pleased with themselves").

The internal consistency measured by the alpha Cronbach coefficient of each domain ranged between .68 and .86. Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) of the Italian version of the SPPA indicated that all the items matched accordingly.

Procedure

The questionnaires were administered during class time, with only those adolescents who had presented the consent forms giving parental approval and accepted to participate being involved in the study. Two researchers familiar with the questionnaires were present in order to assist the students with any possible questions or queries. The time required to complete the questionnaire ranged from 35 to 50 minutes. 100% of the adolescents taking part completed the questionnaires.

Analysis
In response to the open-ended format of the *Possible Selves Questionnaire*, the participants were asked to list and describe their *current, future, hoped-for,* and *feared selves* for the coming years. The responses were analysed in two ways: quantitative and qualitative. Both the content and lexical structure were examined in qualitative terms.

1. Quantitative: In order to test differences between meaning and groups in the production of *current* and *possible selves* (*hoped-for, future* and *feared* selves) descriptive statistics were used, controlling for *sex* and *age*.

In order to test the effect of context on self-perception in the nine different domains, we conducted a one-way variance analysis (ANOVA), controlling for *sex* and *age*. In order to test the impact of each domain (*scholastic competence, social acceptance, athletic competence, physic appearance, job competence, romantic appeal, behaviour, close friendship*) on *global self-worth,* we conducted a simultaneous entry multiple regression. An alpha level .05 was used for all the statistical tests.

In order to explore the relationships among possible selves (*current, hoped-for, future* and *feared*), and the *self-perception* domains, correlations, controlling for contexts and sex, were examined.

2. Qualitative (*thematic content categorization*) (Mayring, 1983; Strauss 1987; Strauss e Corbin, 1990). On the basis of the categorization systems developed by Little (1983), Klinger (1975), Oyserman et al. (2004), *current*, *hoped-for*, *future* and *feared selves* were coded into one of the six following categories (Table 1): *personality traits, interpersonal relationship, achievement, material/lifestyle, physical/health related, negative.* The *current*, *hoped for*, *future*, and *feared self* questionnaires were examined jointly by two coders who scored the number of self-descriptions produced. The open-ended responses were coded by two coders, jointly, using the *N-vivo* software (Richards, 2000). After individually coding, the two coders subsequently compared the codes and came to an agreement on differences, with an agreement index of 87%.

Table 1
Category labels of possible selves.

Category labels (for *current, hoped-for, future* and *feared* selves)	Description of coding
Personality Traits	relates to personality characteristics, self-descriptions of traits
Interpersonal Relationships	involves family, friends, relationships, and social interactions.
Achievement	relates to school and school interactions with teachers, achievement-related activities
Material/Lifestyles	relates to material possessions and living situation, including moving
Physical/Health-Related	relates to physical health, weight, height
Negative	includes all negatively worded responses

3. Mixed (*lexical analysis of the textual corpus*): The content of possible self-narrative responses was analysed by a statistical methodology of textual data using the *Alceste* software (Reinert, 1986, 1993). The analysis is based on the statistical distribution of words in the text. It is assumed that word association depends on the context in which these words are used. The Alceste software is based on the counting of co-occurrences of words and gives a result in the form of a series of lexical fields in which each term is accompanied by statistical elements.

   The main steps of the analysis are: 1. *Lemmatization*: reduction of the words to their roots and elimination of rare words. 2. *Partition of the text into "context units*", each having approximately the length of a sentence. The units are then classified according to the distributions of their words. The analysis is performed in parallel with two different partitions in order to check that the results do not depend on partition itself. 3. Groups of concurrent words (lexical fields) are created by a *hierarchical cluster analysis*. The procedure adopted consists of the automatic extraction of content classes (a result of the statistical analysis of descending hierarchy classification) by means of singling out significant *lexical worlds*, or the areas of discourse characterised by a specific vocabulary, recurring and shared by the majority of the speakers. In order to facilitate easier interpretation of the output lexical fields, the software allows representative variables associated (*sex* and *context*) with the narratives. These variables (*illustrative variables*) do not influence the results, but they are associated, at the

end of the analysis, to specific lexical fields (Reinert, 1993). 4. The *Correspondence Factorial Analysis* (CFA) allows to graphically represent the links between the elaborated classes. Each factor organizes a spatial dimension, represented by a line or an axis, on whose centre is the value "0" and developing in a bipolar way towards the "negative" (-) and "positive" (+) extremities, in such a way that the different clusters of words set on the opposite poles are those that differ the most from each other.

RESULTS

Quantitative analysis of current and possible selves: descriptive statistics and preliminary analyses

In order to test the specific composition of possible selves production in normative and at risk participants, the production of current and possible selves was analysed considering the mean scores of the *Possible Selves Questionnaire*, simultaneously assessing the differences between the different kinds of self (*current, future, hoped for and feared*) for each group.

Table 2 shows the means and standard deviations for both the normative and at risk contexts for all the measurements of self (*current, future, hoped for and feared*).

The participants belonging to the *normative* context produced a higher quantity of *current* self, while also producing many *hoped-for*, *feared* and *future* selves. The participants belonging to the *at risk* context produced a higher quantity of *feared* and *current selves* than *future* and *hoped-for* selves.

Table 2
Means and standard deviations for study variables (Possible Selves).

Variables	Normative context		At risk context		F
	Mean	(SD)	Mean	(SD)	
Current selves	3.23	(1.04)	3.18	(1.10)	.05
Hoped-for selves	3.02	(1.10)	2.67	(1.09)	2.51
Future selves	2.72	(1.07)	2,59	(1.07)	.04
Feared selves	2.14	(1.20)	3.53	(.93)	3.95*

Note: N = 105
*p ≤ .05.

In order to test the effect of life context on *current* and *possible selves* (*future self, hoped self* and *feared self*), we conducted an independent one-way variance analysis (ANOVA).

The dependent variables were selves scores (*current, future, hoped for and feared*). Context was found to have a significant effect on the *feared* self

[*F* (1,95) = 3.95; *p* = .05], whereas the belonging context was found to have no main effect on the *current*, *future* and *hoped- for* selves (Table 2). The participants belonging to the *at risk* context produced a higher quantity of *feared selves* than those belonging to the *normative context*.

A multivariate variance analysis (MANOVA) was conducted to examine possible sex and context-related differences, with sex and context as between–subjects variables and all selves variables as dependent variables in both groups. No overall multivariate effect of sex and context-related was found, neither in the *normative* group (Wilks' λ=.83; F(3,50)=1.25; p=.26), nor in the *at risk* group (Wilks'λ=.80; F (3,45)=1.34; p=.12).

Self- perception and global self-worth: descriptive statistics and preliminary analyses
Which are the most important dimensions of the current self? What does the global self-worth consist of for the subjects?

In order to test the specific composition of dimensions of current self in the normative and at risk participants, the self-perception domains and global self-worth scores were analysed considering the mean scores of the *Self Perception Profile*, for each group (*normative* and *at risk*), jointly.

Table 3 shows the means and standard deviations for both the normative and at risk contexts for all the measurements of the self-perception domains (*scholastic competence, social acceptance, athletic competence, physical appearance, job competence, romantic appeal, behavioural conduct, close friendship*) and *global self-worth.*

Both the participants belonging the normative context as well as those belonging to the at risk context show high scores for *global self-worth*, *close friendship*, and *social acceptance*.

Table 3
Means and standard deviations for the context variable (Self Perception Profile).

Variables	Normative context		At risk context		F
	Mean	(S.D.)	Mean	(S.D.)	
Global self-worth	2.93	(.64)	2.82	(.66)	.76
Scholastic competence	2.93	(.64)	2.71	(.62)	3.17
Social acceptance	2.93	(.64)	2.71	(.62)	3.17
Athletic competence	2..60	(.71)	2.59	(.66)	.00
Physical appearance	2..49	(.63)	2.54	(.88)	.13
Romantic appeal	2.70	(.64)	2.69	(.63)	.00
Behaviour	2.81	(.63)	2.61	(.66)	2.69
Job competence	2.71	(.52)	2.73	(.61)	.54
Close friendship	3.13	(.81)	2.87	(.74)	3.15

Note: N = 105

We conducted an independent one-way variance analysis (ANOVA) to test the effect of the belonging context on *self-perception*. The dependent variables were the self-perception domains scores (*scholastic competence, social acceptance, athletic competence, physical appearance, job competence, romantic appeal, behavioural conduct, close friendship*) and *global self-worth* scores. There was no significant difference ($p = .078$, ns) between the mean of each sub-scale of the normative and at risk contexts..

A multivariate variance analysis (MANOVA) was conducted to examine possible sex and context-related differences, with sex and context as between–subjects variables and all the self-perception variables as dependent variables in both groups. In the *normative* group, no overall multivariate effect of sex and context-related was found, Wilks'λ=.39; F(3,55)=1.39;p=.12. In the *at risk* group, no overall multivariate effect appeared (Wilks'λ=.62; F (3,45)=1.38;p. = .12).

Self- perception and global self-worth: simultaneous multiple regression analyses

In order to examine the impact of the eight sub-scales (*scholastic competence, social acceptance, athletic competence, physical appearance, job competence, romantic appeal, behavioural conduct, close friendship*) on *global self-worth,* we used a simultaneous entry multiple regression where all the predictor variables are entered into the regression equation simultaneously. The relative contribution of each variable (in explained variance in the criterion variable) is assessed at the same time. We treated the self-perception domains (*scholastic competence, social acceptance, athletic competence, physical appearance, job competence, romantic appeal, behavioural conduct, close friendship*) as predictor variables and regressed these variables on the criterion variable global self-worth simultaneously.

First, we performed regression analyses on the *normative* group, then repeated this process for the *at risk* group.

As indicated in Table 4, we found a significant model (*F* (7, 53)= 7.4, *Sig*. = .000) of relationships for the normative group between the domains of self-perception and *global self-worth*. *Physical appearance* and *social acceptance* were positively related to *global self –worth*.

Table 4
Simultaneous multiple regression analyses of self-perception domains
 regressed on global self-worth (Normative context).

Variables	R2	Change in R2	ß	t- value
Social acceptance			2.25 *	2.29
Athletic competence			0.50	0.40
Physical appearance			0.43 **	3.57

Romantic appeal			0.11	0.99
Behaviour			-0.90	- 0.79
Job competence			0.15	1.54
Close friendship			0.07	0.71
Model	0.49	0.49		F (7, 53) = 7.40, p = 0.00

*p = .026; **p = .001

As indicated in Table 5, we found a significant model (*F* (7, 37) = 9.29, *Sig.* = .000) of relationships for the *at risk* group between the domains of self-perception and *global self-worth.*

In this group, only *physical appearance* was positively related to *global self –worth*.

Table 5
Simultaneous multiple regression analyses of self-perception domains
regressed on global self-worth (At risk context).

Variables	R2	Change in R2	ß	t- value
Social acceptance			0.02	- 0.48
Athletic competence			0.16	1.44
Physical appearance			0.63***	4.76
Romantic appeal			0.10	0.78
Behaviour			0.20	1.87
Job competence			0.08	0.65
Close friendship			0.04	- 0.36
Model	0.63	0.63		F (7, 37) = 9.29, p = 0.00

***p = .000

Associations among possible selves, global self-worth and self-perception domains

The H0. 4 of the present study was to investigate the associations between possible selves, global self-worth and self-perception domains. By means of Pearson correlations, we assessed the strengths of the associations between current and possible selves (*current, future, hoped for and feared*), global self-worth and self-perception domains (*scholastic competence, social acceptance, athletic competence, physical appearance, job competence, romantic appeal, behavioural conduct, close friendship*). First, we performed bi-variate correlations on the Normative group, then repeated this process for the at risk group.

There are few measurements which are significantly correlated between the self-perception domains and possible selves.

Table 6 presents bi-variate correlations of participants belonging to the *normative* context. The normative participants' reports of *feared selves* were significantly and positively correlated to *romantic appeal*.

Table 6
Association among self-perception domains, global self-worth, current selves and possible selves (normative context).

	Current selves	Future selves	Hoped-for selves	Feared selves
Global self-worth	-0.109	-0.114	-0.113	0.163
Scholastic competence	0.039	-0.007	0.076	0.019
Social acceptance	0.039	-0.007	0.076	0.019
Athletic competence	0.019	-0.020	-0.046	0.142
Physical appearance	0.001	-0.217	-0.064	0.067
Romantic appeal	-0.128	0.034	-0.052	0.295*
Behaviour	0.041	0.192	0.017	0.055
Job competence	-0.147	0.138	-0.226	0.142
Close friendship	0.120	0.024	-0.051	0.173

*$p<.05$ (2-tailed).

Table 7 presents bi-variate correlations of participants belonging to the at risk context. The at risk participants' reports of *hoped-for* were significantly and negatively correlated to *athletic competence*.

Table 7
Association among self-perception domains, global self-worth, current selves and possible selves (at risk context).

	Current selves	Future selves	Hoped-for selves	Feared selves
Global self-worth	-0.213	0.256	-0.147	0.056
Scholastic competence	-0.131	0.070	-0.071	0.089
Social acceptance	-0.131	0.070	-0.071	0.089
Athletic competence	-0.048	0.180	-0.365*	-0.106
Physical appearance	-0.177	0.023	-0.218	-0.106
Romantic appeal	-0.217	0.103	-0.068	-0.209
Behaviour	0.034	-0.028	-0.199	0.007
Job competence	-0.185	0.044	-0.111	-0.072
Close friendship	-0.215	-0.061	-0.171	-0.177

*$p<.05$ (2-tailed

Qualitative analysis: the content of possible selves.

On the basis of the categorization system developed by Little (1983), Klinger (1975) and Oyserman (2004), *current, future, hoped-for* and *feared selves* were coded into six categories: *personality traits, interpersonal relationship, achievement (school/job), material/lifestyle, physical/health related, negative* (Table 1).

Moreover, on the basis of the texts produced by the respondents, further sub-categories of contents were defined. These led to the detection of 132 descriptive categories. In particular for the normative context (Tables 8-9), the specific contents of the categories are: for current selves, *personality traits, school achievement, family relationship*; for hoped-for selves, *job achievement (social success), interpersonal relationship (family and love)*, for future selves, *school achievement, personality traits, development*. In the at risk context: for current selves, *physical dimension, appeal, body description,* for hoped for selves: *no expectation, interpersonal relationship, family, travel and trips,* for future selves: *to be the same, no expectation.* 'No expectation' does not imply the absence of an answer. 'No expectation' was coded into the 'negative' category of possible selves that includes all the negatively worded responses.

The responses are: "*I can't have any expectations about the future*", or "*I don't have any expectations about the future. I don't know who I'll become*".

Table 8
Typical categories for normative and at risk.

	Categories	Normative	At risk
Current self	Personality Traits		
	Interpersonal relationship	*Family* *School*	
	Achievement		
	Material/lifestyle		*Appeal, body description.*
	Physical/health related		
	Negative		
Hoped-for self	Personality Traits		
	Interpersonal relationship	*Family, love*	
	Achievement	*Job*	
	Material/lifestyle	*Social success; travel, trip.*	
	Physical/health related		
	Negative		*No expectation*
Future self	Personality Traits	*Self development*	*To be the same*
	Interpersonal		

	relationship	
	Achievement	*School*
	Material/lifestyle	
	Physical/health related	
	Negative	*No expectation*
Feared self	Personality Traits	*Fear of forgetting*
	Interpersonal	*oneself dreams, of*
	relationship	*obscurity, of death*
	Achievement	
	Material/lifestyle	*Fear of emptyness*
	Physical/health related	*Being too rich*
	Negative	

Table 9
Content analysis: texts examples.

	Normative	At risk
Current self	"*Now, I'm a teenager, I'm a student who has good performance and high scholastic competence in maths and in Latin*" (school achievement*)*	"*I'm me: I have brown eyes and I'm tall*". "*I think I'm a good-looking boy, and I like myself*" (physical dimensions)
Hoped for self	"*I hope I'll be a famous professional, a rich manager. I want to be an important person with many friends and many houses*". (social success)	"*I don't want to think about my future, now*". "*I don't know who I will be in the near future and I don't care either*". (no expectation)
Future self	"*In the next few years I think I'll develop*" *(*development*)* "*Next year I think I'll be a better student than I am now*". (social achievement)	"*Next year, I think I'll be happy and I'll be like I am now*". (to be happy; to be the same)
Feared self	"*I fear that I'll be homeless and I'll be alone, without friends or love*". (Loneliness, inter-personal and intrapersonal). "*I don't want to be a poor man, without any social power*". (social failure)	"*I fear I will forget my dreams and hopes, and I fear I will become a bad person without rules or moral principles*". "*I am afraid of developing*". (Fear of forgetting oneself dreams; fear of growing up)

    In the *at risk* contexts, there is a greater variety of feared selves. New kinds of categories are present here: *fear of forgetting one's dreams, fear of being too rich, fear of obscurity, fear of emptiness, fear of death.*

Thus, the role played by the feared self in subjects belonging to an *at risk* context is more complex and has more than just one dimension.

For subjects belonging to the *normative* context, instead, feared dimension is anchored to canonical themes linked to *social failure* (well represented by the image of a *homeless person*). However, in *normative* subjects there is a specific element which, as will be seen later on, is confirmed by lexical analysis, linked to the sphere of *loneliness*.

Loneliness plays an important role in both its inter-personal and intra-personal dimension, such as the feeling of not having anyone to share one's life with and of being emotionally alone.

This fear is strictly related to one's own individuality, to the aspects of one's own self defining hoped-for and emotional dimensions of identity.

The structure of possible selves: the lexical analysis (mixed method)

a. Text corpus

In order to explore the content of texts (the content of possible selves), we used a statistical method, guaranteeing a non-subjective a priori codification. The software used does not modify the internal organization of the text, it relies on a pragmatic text analysis. Its objective does not consist in understanding what a person wants to say, but to analyse what is actually said. According to Reinert (1990), the concept of the repetition of words is a crucial one in the building up of meaning. The frequent occurrences of a same linguistic sign allows to model the structure of the discursive activity or, in our study, of the construction of possible selves.

Our *text corpus* consisted of 105 written narrations produced by subjects in response to a possible selves open-ended questionnaire (Table 10).

Table 10
Textual corpus parameters.

Texts	105
Circumstances analysed (words lemmatized and used in analysis)	6168
Total circumstances (total number of lemmatized word)	10288
Hapax (words that are present just once)	1164
Elementary unit context (*ecu*)	485

Within the *corpus*, 485 simple propositions or *elementary context units* (*e.c.u.*) are selected.

b. Lexical fields

In order to explore the presence of specific kinds of word use, that reflect "lexical universes" in the organization of possible selves, we used a *hierarchical cluster analysis.*
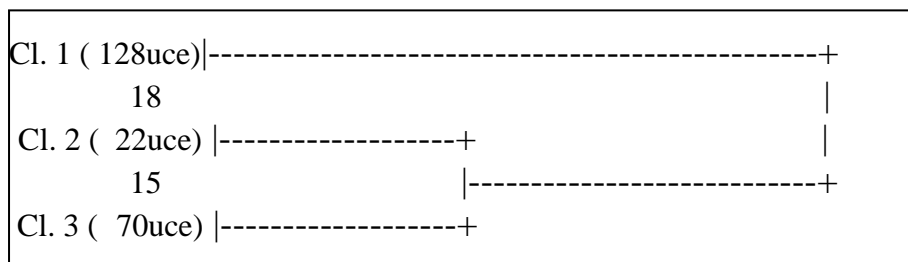
We can therefore explore the presence of topics about the possible selves linked to illustrative variables. In our case, the illustrative variable specified the group (*normative at risk*) of the participants.

The descendent hierarchical classification singles out a first division of *corpus* proposition into two different *macro-areas* and then into three further *classes.*. Every macro-area reflects a particular focus on the subject matter. Every class defines a lexical world, or semantic universe, in the sense that they represent the manifestations that are observable in the places of 'more habitual enunciation', in the 'places of thought', in the mental spaces persistently used by our speakers. Such places can be conceived as latent dimensions, subordinate to the discourse produced and not directly observable. The lexical traces of these hypothetical places are observable.

The result is represented by a *dendrogram* (Figure 2), showing the hierarchical division of the lexical fields. The *index of stability* – representing the percentage of the circumstances used in the analysis over total circumstances - 71.66% is good (according to Reinert, 1993, 50% upwards is considered good).

Figure 2
Dendrogram: descendent hierarchical classification.

```
Cl. 1 ( 128uce)|--------------------------------------------------+
        18                                                        |
Cl. 2 (  22uce) |------------------+                              |
        15                         |--------------------------+
Cl. 3 (  70uce) |------------------+
```

Dendrogram: descendent hierarchical classification

The results reveal three "classes" composed of sentences having minimal dissimilarity degrees. We found that classes 2 and 3 produced strongly linked semantic universes, in comparison with class 1 which was more distant than the other two (see the dendrogram in Figure 2).

The "labels" established for different lexical worlds (classes) were assigned according to: 1. the specific vocabulary for each class and 2. the more representative units of contexts.

Class 1 (58.18% *e.c.u.*): *The cost of social success* (*e.g.*,"*I wish I could become rich and powerful; I fear I'll become unfulfilled and sad, without any interests*" *e.c.u.)*

The specific forms associated such as *to become*, *man*, *world*, *fears*, *without*, *I won't*, *to succeed*, show a conflict between social success and the loneliness that the subject feels as the price of social success. The loneliness that we saw in the categorical analysis of feared self is explained here as a cost of the professional success that the *normative* subjects describe in their hoped-for selves. This class is associated to the illustrative variable: normative context.

Class 2 (10% *e.c.u.*): *I'm a student and I'll be a student.* (*e.g,.*"*I'm a student in the last year of school, next year I'm going to be a university student.*" *e.c.u.)*
The specific forms associated are *student, year, last, school, now, next, university.* This class is focused on the present role of the student, and in this class the subjects think of their future as a continuation of the present role - they think that they are students and they will continue to be students.

Class 3 (31.82% *e.c.u.*): *How I am: I feel good with others.* (e.g.,"*I'm an honest and altruistic person, I have a lovely family and many friends*" *e.c.u.*).
The specific forms associated are *I'm, happy, altruistic, normal, friends, to pay attention.* In this class, associated with the *at risk* context, the conflict between social success and the private dimension of life is solved by focussing attention on the current self and on the present moment, in which the relational dimension of life is the most important domain of the self.
This class is associated to the at risk context.

c. Correspondence Factorial Analysis

In order to identify the explicative links between the elaborated classes as well as identify dimensions of the self that link the different aspects of possible selves underlined by the lexical fields with the illustrative variable, we used a correspondence factorial analysis that analyzes these links and sorts out the most salient ones.

The factorial plan allows to graphically represent the links between the classes, reporting the two extracted explicative factors on the horizontal and vertical axis (Figure 3).

Horizontal axis: first factor (*Current self*): V.P. =.2228 (58.05 % inertia)
Vertical axis: second factor (*Exploration of identity*): V.P. =.1610 (41.95 % inertia)

Figure 3
Factorial plan analysis.
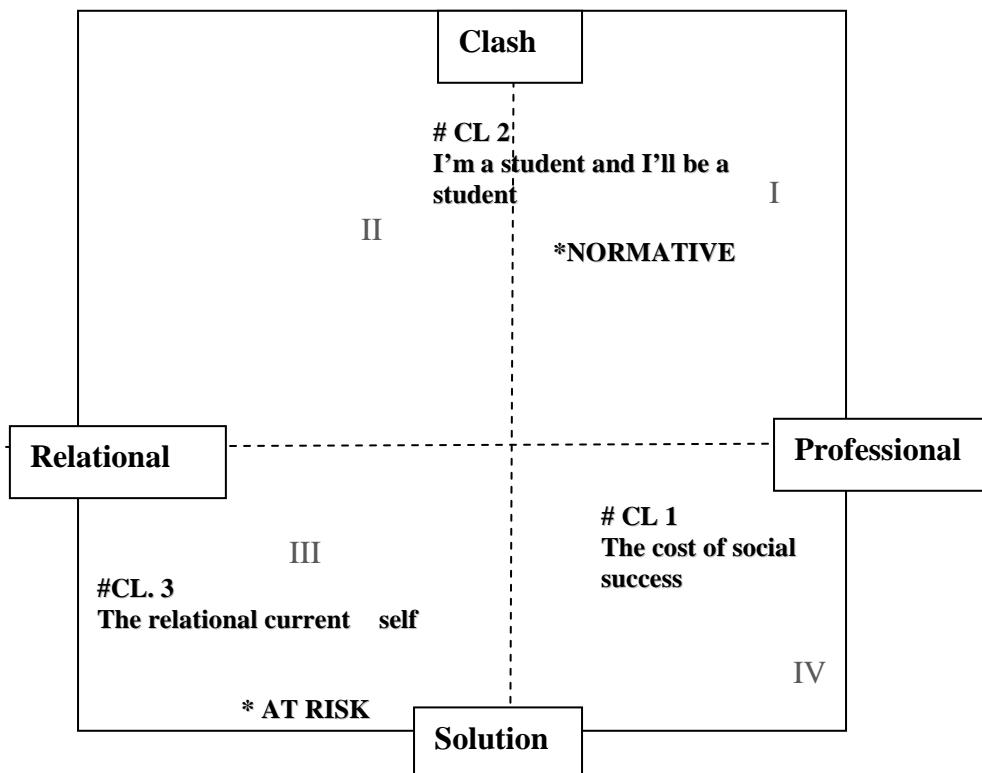
Classis; *Illustrative variables.*

The *horizontal axis* (58.05 % *inertia*[1]) identifies the *current self* , where one side (*left side*) refers to the *relational* dimension of the self and on the other side *(right side)* there is the *professional* dimension of the self (here lies the first class).

The *vertical axis* (41.49% *inertia*) identifies a *dimension of exploration of identity* in which one side (*down*) refers to a solved exploration process, or a

---

1.   Inertia of an axis is the factorial weight (axis represents factor).

solution (here the second and third classes, that are focused on the present, are collocated). On the other side (*up*), there is a conflicting dimension of the exploration, which has not ended, and its *clash* (here lies the first class).

In synthesis, subjects belonging to the *normative* context are placed in the second quadrant, with high co-ordinates that link the fear dimension of exploration and the professional dimension of identity. Whereas, subjects belonging to the *at risk* context are placed on a lower level in the third quadrant. This position suggests that a strong relational dimension of the current self is linked to a tendency to the conclusion (or the preclusion) of the exploration process.

DISCUSSION

In this study we tried to describe how adolescents belonging to different contexts (normative and at risk) conceive their future. We focused on the role of context in identity exploration process, characterizing the possible selves and the self-perception of youth who varied in the kind of context to which they belonged.

On the other hand, we were interested in both collecting qualitative and quantitative data as well as using a mixed method as a means of developing a more complete theoretical interpretation of the data.

The quantitative results, related to the exploration of identity through possible selves, indicated, as expected (Ho. 1), markedly different types of statements appearing for the youths in the at risk group compared with those in the normative group, particularly in the categories of feared selves. While subjects belonging to a *normative* context give more importance to present and future dimensions of their identity, explaining a higher production of possibilities linked to the hoped-for future, *at risk* subjects dwell upon feared selves. What prevails is the information that their negative expectations might come true, as they fit in with the definition of their current self.

In the self-perception domains, the results show that close friendships and social acceptance are the most important aspects of self for both the normative and at risk adolescents. Therefore, according to Kroger (2004), in adolescence the relational dimension of identity has an important role in the construction of self, which implies the continuous balance between self and others.

There is no significant difference in global self-worth for the context variable, as expected in Ho 3. This result shows that the belonging context (normative or at risk) does not exert any influence on self-esteem, as a global evaluation of identity and perception of self. Oyserman and Markus (1990a) highlighted that there was no decrease in self-esteem related to belonging deviant contexts, but they claimed that delinquent groups had the highest self-esteem scores. Nevertheless, they highlighted that global measures of self-concept may probably mask significant individual variations in the content as well as the structure of self-concept. This assumption has some empirical support (e.g. Harter,

1990; Rosenberg, 1986). These individual differences can probably be detected in the correlations between the self-domains and possible selves.

On the contrary, the data shows a different impact of the self-perception domains on global self-worth in normative and at risk adolescents. For normative adolescents, physical appearance and social acceptance have an important and positive role in the construction of global self-worth, while for at risk adolescents only physical appearance is a predictive variable in global self-worth.

With reference to the associations among possible selves and self-perception, our data shows that, for adolescents belonging to a normative context, feared selves are positively correlated with competence perceived in romantic appeal. This result confirms the important dimension of the perspective-taking ability (Harter, 1990) and the developmental role of intimacy, relationships and love during adolescence (Erikson, 1968, 1980; Furman & Wehrmer, 1997; Kroger, 2004). The result of 'at risk' participants is interesting because it shows a negative correlation between hoped-for selves and the perception of athletic competence. This result needs further research in order to investigate the role of sport in identity formation and in the exploration of future possibilities in life.

According to the mixed approach, the explanation of the quantitative level of the results is to be found and investigated thoroughly in the meaning of the words used by the participants.

The results of the content analyses showed the interpretation of meanings derived from the narration of current and future identity. Our data explains that for the normative adolescents current and hoped-for selves are linked to the interpersonal dimension of identity, with hopes of love, social success, and job achievement. The feared selves are related to 'loneliness' (see the quantitative correlation between feared selves and romantic appeal).

 On the one hand, 'normative' subjects show a higher exploration (as expected in Ho 2), while on the other, they seem to conform to external social expectations. The contents of their hypothetical dimensions, indeed, seem to operate within what is socially codified as esteemed and show strong adaptation to collective expectations. It is as if the identity dimension inclines towards role assumption, more than towards exploration and knowledge of different components of one's own personality inherent to spheres other than the social one.

The subjects belonging to a 'normative' context show a greater production of possibility tied to a desirable future than other subjects. In fact, the contents of their hypothetical dimensions move within the roles socially codified as appreciable - versus reprehensible - and show a marked adaptation to collective expectations. Thus, the 'normative' formation of identity is like a process of social status accession.

For the at risk adolescents, current selves are related to physical appeal and body description. At risk adolescents have 'no expectation' about their future and their fear of forgetting dreams, obscurity, death.

Somehow, they have no expectations of development or identity change, i.e. to be anchored to their present image (as *physical appearance* and a person known as an 'at risk' person). This result can be linked to the Oyserman and Markus data relating to deviant adolescents: "individuals who cannot imagine themselves behaving quite differently than they are currently behaving are likely to become trapped in their current behavioural course" (Oyserman & Markus, 1990b, p. 123).

The lexical analysis of textual corpus investigated the processes of identity exploration, using the lexical fields as aspects of a general abstract cognitive engine.

The results show the emergence of a lexical dimension (class 1 *The cost of social success*) associated to *normative* subjects which describes a conflict, or, better still, an ambivalence between social success (and, therefore, an adaptation to external and collective pressures and expectations) as well as a more intimate and private dimension.

This severance persists in the *at risk* group (class 3 *How I am: I feel good with others.)* where, incidentally, it seems that a decision has already been taken in favour of private life, of the relational dimension linked to the present, excluding any reference to social success.

In fact, Blustein (1997) found that adolescents need to resolve issues related to personal identity or self-concept prior to being involved in occupational exploration. It is as if the two groups were opposing one another. On a 'vertical' dimension, in the case of *normatives* (who aim at social success, even though they know they are losing other dimensions of the self), and on a 'horizontal' dimension in the case of *at risk* youths (who leave out social success focusing instead on horizontal relationships linked to affection and peer relations).

In addition, the lexical analysis allowed us to investigate the factors of the identity exploration system. In this frame, we also obtain an unexpected result: the adolescents in normative contexts are more in despair (clash), and adolescents in the at risk group do better coping (solution). This interesting evidence has few links with a body of evidence that suggests that most delinquency can be interpreted as a form of problem-solving behavior in response to the pressures of adolescence. Moreover, data indicates that delinquent responses are often experienced by the offender as a reasonably effective means of short-term coping. Thus, it may be legitimate to interpret most delinquency as a form of self-regulation (Brezina, 2000).

Moreover, the static condition of the at risk adolescents can be explained as a stagnation step (Hendry & Kloep, 2002). Environmental and socio-economic conditions (difficult and poor for many Neapolitan adolescents) entail a lack of resources that imply limited developmental choices. Adolescents are therefore exposed to two principal disadvantages: to be 'condemned' to accept life without any changes, because they feel they do not have the necessary skills as well as to be anxious about life transitions and pressures. Both these disadvantages induce

adolescents not to explore possibilities for development and personality. Thus, adolescents do not explore their professional or personal possible selves, but they turn to the relational dimension of life and do not face up to new challenges (solution).

Consequently, the development of different self domains can be different in terms of the different life domains selected by respondents as more accessible and rewarding. When we use socio-relational interventions to support these adolescents, we can improve their self-efficacy (Philip & Hendry, 1996).

These results, as in the lexical analysis of the open-ended responses, show that further analysis can be done on written texts, thereby examining other hidden dimensions.

In synthesis, our results show a different production of possible selves and a different way of identity exploration related to context. The impact of context is more evident in the dimension of feared selves. These results are related to the Oyserman and Markus study (Oyserman & Markus, 1990a) in which they demonstrated that the balance between positive and negative selves within similar content domains is associated with the least delinquency. It seems that the adolescents we interviewed are in the third order of consciousness of Kegan in which the self is very vulnerable to attitudes within the immediate social context (Kegan, 1982).

The subjects belonging to a 'normative' context show a greater production of possibility tied to a more desirable future than all the other subjects.

Additionally, those in the normative context provided more possibilities in their hoped-for futures, compared with those in the at risk schools. The role of others and the relational dimension are often important in the formative process of adolescents' identity (Cross, Bacon, & Morris, 2000; Surrey, Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, 1991). Connections between identity exploration and context are evident and provide indirect support for self-in-relation theory (Shepard, 2003; Surrey, Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, 1991).

The possible selves approach has potential for increasing our understanding of identity formation in normative and non-normative contexts as well as identifying practical objectives for counselling efforts aimed at providing pertinent resources and support for the exploration of developmental possibilities.

In conclusion, we want to highlight that a combination of statistical analyses using data expressed in numerical form and semantic and qualitative interpretation can be a powerful method of revealing the complexity of psychological phenomena.

Implications for future research

A further step of our research is currently taking place. We are now testing an exploratory model of possible selves based on a SEM model which apart from the context takes into account the age factor (with reference to specific moments of transition).

Through these results, we are planning intervention projects on the future orientation and identity construction for the 'at risk' schools: extra-curricular activities, counselling for developmental transitions and identity crisis and exchange programs could broaden young people's horizons.

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