Forming ourself and Flowing. An interpretative model of children's agency in everyday life *

Salvatore La Mendola°, Antonietta Migliore^

Summary. *The article focuses the analysis on the different children and adolescents styles of agency in the flow of life: "rational control", "traditional control", "charismatic coping", "attempts to be Centered and Open", "on being at the mercy of...".We are for ever dealing with two forces (Simmel 1908): a centripetal one, which brings forms to gather – what might otherwise be called certainty, stability, order or even structure. Besides there is a centrifugal force that is the typical flow of life. On the contrary the concept of uncertainty reflects the regret of mankind's titanic effort (the western world's in particular) to avoid dealing with whatever flows out of predictability, which therefore creates uncertainty. The data come from a wider (about different aspects of agency some of which are treated here) longitudinal research: the same 38 children (then turned adolescents), belonging to two different social backgrounds, and their parents and teachers have been interviewed four times (in 2005, 2008, 2009, 2013).*

Keywords: taking shape, flowing, uncertainty, children/adolescents agency

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Uncertainty?

The concept of uncertainty has been quite a trendy one both in the field of Human and Social Sciences[1] and in a number of discussions in the public sphere. We do have a few problems considering this concept as an interpretative category suitable to understand what happens nowadays in adults' lives. It is even more difficult when it comes to understanding the children's[2].

First of all, we must realize that building interpretative categories in terms of litotes, i.e. as negation of something – in this specific case 'un-certainty', that is non-certainty – implicitly means attributing a positive meaning to the very concept which is being negated. Therefore all the definitions expressed in terms of litotes manifest a syndrome in those – individuals, communities as well as historical ages – which have created that category. On the one hand, this is the expression of the desired symptom, the element expressed in positive terms. On the other hand, this shows what scares us, what we want to leave in the Shade.

The positive aspect which the definition concerning the present context refers to is undoubtedly certainty. It is easy to list a number of certainty, oriented concepts which have resulted in various forms of organization of social life. Among them control, planning, definition, stability of forms, rule, etc. In this respect we might mention Descartes as one of the thinkers who superbly defined a rationalistic perspective in dealing with these issues in his attempt to single out something recognizable with plain certainty. His sharp formulation of what would universally be known as Cartesian Axes shows quite well the necessity for certainty and its practicability. We might adopt this way to talk about the existence of something, be it a human entity, a thing or an object. This is a graphic solution that corresponds and pairs with Descartes' question about the existence of being. Between the two answers – the axes and the expression "cogito ergo sum" – a distinct affinity is easily recognizable, i.e. rational control over existence. This kind of control necessarily leads to the leaving out of bodies and emotions from the sphere of relevant experiences.

No one among those who have grown up and have been socialized in western civilization – as Elias put it (1939) – can escape the fascination of

[1] A case in point is represented by AISLF's four-yearly Rabat convention whose focus was the issue being here discussed. On that occasion we presented a concise version of our work that this article presents in a better- constructed way. Let us mention Nicoletta Diasio's and Régine Sirota's contributions to the conference.
[2] We are aware that in the past we used this concept when it still referred to other categories (Castelli, La Mendola, Rasera, Salvadori, 1994;1994b).

this powerful interpretative model which lies at the core of our symbolic system. It is a symbolic system whose roots are to be found in the rationalism of mainstream classic Greek philosophy, on the one hand – which was first precisely coded as legal provisions in imperial Rome. On the other, in the mainstream of the Jewish-Christian tradition. However, in both philosophical traditions other symbolic systems outside the mainstream ones – Douglas' "central cultures" (1986) – emerged, which point elsewhere and depart from the idea of certainty- infusing control.

Suffice it to mention Heraclitus' thought if we want to show a different mode. This is one that gives prominence to something everyone knows but would rather not consider. Although there are undoubtedly social forms which have been relatively permanent and that, as Simmel pointed out, have tended to a prospective autonomy since the beginning of the Modern Age, they still remain "impermanent" and temporary. Once again it was Simmel to point this out, in particular in his last revision work inspired by Bergson's thought.

It is a mere question of time. Then life flowing will prevail over forms. Therefore, in tune with Simmel's thought, which does not imply Simmelian orthodoxy3, we can only show what is at stake when discussing the certainty/uncertainty axis from a different point of view. It is fundamental to always bear in mind – when dealing with every aspect of human, personal or social life – that we are for ever dealing with two forces: a centripetal one, which brings forms to gather – what might otherwise be called certainty, stability, order or even structure and a centrifugal force that the typical flow of life shapes.

Within such interpretative framework the idea of "uncertainty" echoes the sense of those who long for certainty and the stability of forms. The concept of uncertainty reflects the regret of mankind's titanic effort (the western world's in particular) to avoid dealing with whatever flows out of predictability, which therefore creates uncertainty.

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[3] Indeed, it is as if we, among many others, recognized how true what Simmel wrote on the first page of his "posthumous diary" is.: "I know I will die with no spiritual heirs- which is fine. Mine is like an inheritance in cash, to be shared among many heirs, of whom each one will invest their share according to their nature, without wondering at its origin (Simmel 2011, 3). Perhaps Simmel's legacy lies in the very idea that schools, like all stable forms, are themselves ephemeral and that life will always be fluid. Therefore the reason why there is no such thing as a Simmelian school – while there are structural-functional, ethnomethological, Bourdiean schools – has to do with the vital energy typical of this master's point of view. Inevitably, this view could not bring about orthodox disciples as it was born outside the very idea of orthodoxy.

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To make this point clear we could mention the angry reactions of the victims of Garfinkel's breaching experiments (1967) who witness the collapse of the certainty of the established social order. When faced with the collapse of a form of order that was taken for granted, they feel a sense of uncertainty which both creates and derives from fearing that the world might not be founded on anything stable. Many contemporary social scientists seem to have perceived the fear that something fluid like water is emerging. Regretting the times of solid societies they coined the expression "liquid society"4. This idea has become quite popular in that it expresses bewilderment.

Indeed, we feel that we should seriously follow the line leading from Eraclitus to Simmel, through Bergson, who highlights, though not exclusively, the engine of the flow of life5.

It is clear then that for us this issue has the dignity of one of general sociological theory. We do not intend to be trapped in the sad division into disciplinary subfields of socio-human theory.

It is therefore quite to the point to present such considerations in a publication on childhood, or better, on little girls and little boys, published in an interdisciplinary journal. This is in fact the social field where it is easier to show the relevance of a method which goes beyond the certainty/uncertainty dilemma. To quote Morin, who implicitly recalls Eraclitus, "We will never be able to predict the way novelties will appear, still we must expect them to come up, i.e. expect the unexpected" (Morin 2001, 30). This involves therefore developing "strategies that allow us to face risks, the unexpected and uncertainty" (ibidem, 14).

In the following stories we will explore how, with what styles of agency, each actor faces the flowing and forms of life. We shall start from concrete examples of a special, long and demanding longitudinal research pointing out a mode of interpreting these experiences. A number of styles have been put in relation with each other through the empirical material, which point at a mode, perhaps even a theory, in their relating to a few theoretical contributions of Social Sciences.

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[4] We obviously refer to Bauman (2000), whom we already wrote about (La Mendola 2009). In that work we underlined, among other things, that present day society has a viscous aspect. This point of view questions moreover, the other element taken for granted when describing the contemporary world, i.e. "individualization".

[5] We would have liked to clarify that speaking of two forces- the process of forms building and life flowing – is quite different from drawing the classical distinctions between ", "static" and "dynamic", "movement" and "institution", and so on.

In our longitudinal survey we made in-depth interviews of a dialogical kind (as well as ethnographic observations) (La Mendola, 2009) to 38 children, then turned adolescents, born in 1994, belonging to two different social backgrounds, and to their relatives and teachers .We interviewed the same people in Turin in 2005, 2008, 2009, 2013. We have been consistent with an epistemological approach of a dialogical-interactionist kind. Therefore no definition of a hypothesis of research has been given. We only singled out a few "sensitizing concepts" (Blumer, 1969) so as to explore the different styles of agency in the various "tranches de vie" (Bertaux, 1997) that we were able to recreate step by step.

Various issues came up during the numerous, varied sessions of interviews since various aspects have been explored, among which relations with relatives and friends, sexual experiences, approaching strategies to the others, schools and free time activities; in other words their everyday life.

We will here limit our analysis to a few aspects which clearly show the different ways of life flowing and its forms. 6

2. Children and adolescents in the flow of life

On the basis of what has been said, we need to talk in terms of "becomings without end" for all humans, children and adults, employing Lee's expression used in his Childhood and Society, Growing up in an Age of Uncertainty (2005)7. This is the point of view of lifelong learning (Balbo, 2008; 2013). By learning we mean the individuative process each human develops his potentials with. We agree with Lee when we maintain that the traditional distinction between the "finished standard adult" and the "unfinished child" is no longer acceptable (Lee 2005,19). Speaking of which, Jung's (1921) and Gilli's (1994) contributions, despite their different perspectives and languages, meet when dealing with the central part played by the deployment of everyone's potentials and the definition of different existential paths8. The former explained this in terms of a process which makes each human being a particular individual (Jung 1928, 1983):

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[6] As for details of our research general methodology we refer to other works, for instance Migliore (2009).

[7] We take much further than the use of Its, which is the author's horizon.

[8] To these we should add the analyses of many more authors in order to talk about the differences in the various forms of knowledge thoroughly. Let us at least mention the works by Gardner (1983, 2011) and Goleman (1996, 2009), whom are mentioned in La Mendola, Migliore (2013).

Thus individualization represents a widening of the sphere of conscience and of conscious psychological life (Jung 1921; 1969, 465).

The latter did so by clarifying the concept of Techne (Sennet, 2008) as adopted in ancient Greece, showing how through this

the original specialized, characterizing form with which individual experience has appeared in the world is represented. Each total individual experience through which identity is expressed and comprehended is a Téchne. To his bearer each téchne represents a total experience also in view of its defining the inextricable outcome of his genetic, biological, physiological as well as psychological specificity. This is why original technei differed from one another (Gilli 1994, 5).

Everything flows. As Heraclitus said, "Panta rei". However, human beings experience this flowing in a number of different ways. We will restrict our analysis to extracting from the abundant empirical materials at our disposal 9 a few practices showing how girls and boys act in life flowing, taking into consideration a few aspects of everyday life. Following Becker's Tricks of the Trade (1998), we do not intend to typify the young ones. On the contrary, we intend to highlight the particular kind of practices known as styles of agency. Though we are well aware that each young one may tend to get accustomed to certain styles in specific situations, each of them has different methods from the prevailing ones, thus bringing out what was left in the Shade (Jung's concept) under different circumstances10.

In our research we adopted the perspective of children's sociology, which favors agency (James 2009) in everyday life, while looking at other relating branches. This focus on the micro did not prevent us from reflecting on society on a larger scale following Simmel's tradition of seizing instants through microsociological observations and the focus on interactions. In so doing, we will use in this paper the words of the interviewees when they were 13 and 15 in 2008 and 2009.

3. Styles of Agency

The concept of agency makes it possible to consider children "active in the construction of their own lives" (James and Prout 1990, 8) but also

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[9] Partly used for researching into other issues (see Migliore 2009).

[10] With reference to what we will say, we are far from excluding that those who traditionally adopt the rational control mode, for example within school interaction, on different occasions, for example within the circle of friends, live the flow adopting the centered-open mode.

having a part to play in the lives of those around them in the societies in which they live and as forming independent social relationships and cultures (James 2009, 41).

We wonder, with Allison James' words:

Do all children have the same capacity for agency?" (James 2009, 44).

Of course not. Elsewhere (La Mendola, Migliore), we have suggested the concept of "styles of agency" to describe various ways of living life in its flowing. A few of such styles will emerge from the interviewees' stories. The first ones could somehow be related to the three ideal types of power defined by Weber (1922). We will then discuss rational control, traditional control and charismatic confronting.

3.1. Rational control

We will start with a definition of rational control in the words of Pietro, who checks his language and posture during the interview. The focus when representing his experiences is on the boundary between rational and emotional aspects with the former checking the latter. Pietro adopts this kind of strategy when facing what he perceives as the uncertainty of life. He tends to work out a style based on rational control mostly with respect to school. He will eventually let us sense a different mode. He is the firstborn in a single-income working class family of five with low education levels. During the interview he checks his language and posture.

I am a hardworking student. Which means I get home at 1 and finish studying at 8, every day, which means. (I get up at) Yes, 6, 7, 6:30, 7, more or less. I revise for an hour just to refresh my memory (…) Well, I have a grade average of 8, so… Hopefully I'll carry on like this. As long as I have a strong will because will is essential in life."

When asked if he does something else besides studying, he replies:

No. I generally don't. Sometimes on Saturday I play football with my friends.

I ask him if he has ever got any insufficient grades:

Yes! One insufficient grade only in particular […] In Italian composition writing. In middle and primary school I used to get excellent grades in composition but then I noticed these difficulties which I managed to overcome, in fact now I also get [get good grades] Ehm I practice, I look for new information.

His mother told us that, according to the teacher, the reason of his difficulties in writing was to be found in his use of difficult words, which he could not always handle properly. He was thus told to use a more simple language. This is a telltale element of Pietro's attempt to control the new

reality of his high school in order to be up to it. Despite being located in disadvantaged suburb, the school is a high school specializing in Math and Physics attended by the brightest students in the area.

Well, you have to possess certain skills mathematical, linguistic and what not, at a very high level, you see, not

Pietro talks about his classmates who, according to him, behave like children and do not pay attention in class using these words:

Well, well, well, nothing can be done for such guys.

I try to sound the emotional sphere introducing the topic casually:

I think I'm too young to have a girlfriend, if that's what you mean. […] Because they are, we are [with emphasis] still immature to do certain things. Exactly, having a girlfriend or other […] Yes, there's a girl I'm interested in but I don't cross the threshold, see."

With his sister he acts as the elder brother who is responsible for taming her behavior, just like he does with himself.

Well, she's a very very lively child, not… She never keeps still, she doesn't She won't take my advice, you see.(…) My most important pieces of advice, the essential ones, concern school or how to behave in certain situations […] Well, for instance when there are strangers at home ehm you've got to behave in a certain way, you mustn't shout, and so on.

Facing the different directions his life may take Pietro adopts a strategy based on imposing his own will. He says he pictures himself like this:

As a very diligent person since I hold one's will to be an asset. Absolutely invaluable. To me will is everything because it is thanks to your will that you can achieve everything, even impossible things

Then, at a certain point, beside his rational side that helps him face uncertainty, a more flexible side emerges, which may even be left free:

"I believe that one should distinguish between school life and one own's… one's inner world, see, because there is the It's as if I was split in two , the student and the boy.

Here different styles for different situations have emerged.

3.2. Traditional control

We will now be using Cecilia's words to describe traditional control. She comes from an upper class family. The loss of a sister before she was born has fostered a childish behavior in the girl and, in a circular way, a parental attitude characterized by their treatment of the girl as if she was a child. Cecilia's stories give us insights into the ways in which, in certain spheres of everyday life, one can react to the sense of uncertainty by exercising control in the attempt to remain in the already known universe.

As if one wanted to change and try as little as possible. It is as if Cecilia, at least in these stories, were trying to keep everything as it is in her own world for fear of becoming part of the flow.

When she is almost 14, at the end of middle school, she refers to her school friends as "quite normal children", comparing herself to them. She represents herself as a child, not as a girl. Regarding this aspect, she distances herself from a few classmates in particular.

There are a few classmates of mine whose ideas are quite different from mine that… For example, don't know, at my age I 'm really not very interested in politics and stuff like that, it's my parents who care about such things.

She pictures herself in these terms:

Still [I feel] different… Sometimes because of my ways of… Don't know, of thinking for example, maybe I' m still too young to care for certain things.

Even the choice of high school follows the mode of traditional control. It is traditional in the sense that Cecilia chooses to carry on studying in the building where she has been attending middle school because it is a familiar place.

Well, I actually preferred my school because maybe staying in the same place where I am now, don't know, I, I liked it better, I mean, I didn't like it but… It helped me in my choices.

Her approach is traditional even in the ways she tells us about defining her school career in her relation with her parents. Her words in this respect are telling:

[My parents] told me that I had made the right choice but still they would have to help me choose because, ehm I knew certain things. They knew others and by putting them together maybe we could reach a point where… Actually, I wanted to make my own choice because I had my own ideas. But they gave me advice.

Cecilia is trying to check life flow, which she experiments as uncertain, by avoiding jumping into the unknown and choosing tradition. Hers is an attempt to make the future certain when in fact no certainties can be guaranteed.

3.3. Charismatic coping

In a few excerpts from 14-year-old Paolo's interview, examples can be found of being in the situation in a way that highlights his being attracted

by danger. In this case we can talk about an agency that somehow recalls a charismatic style11 of one who faces 12adversities to the point of looking for them and breaking the routines which make a regular social life possible. His upper class background has been changed by his mother's unconventional behavior (the father is absent), which has led the family to a lower social level.

Paolo is drawn to "the impulse to experiment with (his) subjective limits" (as La Mendola put it 1999, 202). This is evident from his posture and the tone of his voice during the interview. But also his spirit of initiative in building an acrobatic bike path with others whom he met in a square for years. He is the youngest one in a group which includes even 35 years olds.

He has been perfectly autonomous ever since the first years of primary school when he used to ride his bike alone looking for meeting places while the adults around him were too busy with their own problems. He is definitely a forward boy. He surfs the net looking for what interests him and trying to go further.

Mostly I work. […] I downloaded a 3D program […] And, well, that's where I've learned about it. Now I've been thinking that when I have to work, I'm going to open a shop, right? Selling bikes and clothes and with a park in the back. Indoors. I'm drawing the whole lot.

He is fascinated by experimenting with limits. He wants to see how far he can go, be it acrobatic biking or challenging his teachers.

Between myself and the teachers? Always because they always reproached me, didn't they? At that point I was known to be a trouble maker. Then I started insulting her[…] I told her everything I couldn't… You just couldn't go on like that because I knew they would file a complaint sooner or later because I once attacked her [my teacher] I was about to come to blows, really […]. Well, in the end I said to myself "I'm going to be stopped anyway.

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[11] Weber's indications are truly essential when he opposes – as a disruptive measure-charismatic power to the traditional and legal-rational ones .The latter are considered as modes linked to stability and control, a term that we intentionally adopted to connote the first two styles identified so far. In our present context we might even say to certainty. Charismatic power, under this respect, comes out as the opposite pole, the one linked to uncertainty, from the one which adopts the mode of *coping*.

[12] The coping issue has been explored in a variety of ways , with different conceptualizations and shades. Let us mention Lazarus ' works (1966) on coping. However, most of the literature on resilience (see Werner 2004), despite its differences, may be applied to the present context.

Paolo's generosity as well as his sense of justice accounts for his being on the side of the weak ones. In the following episode a disabled classmate is presented, who is systematically harassed by a tough guy. The ways Paolo adopted, however, are a breach of the social contract.

Well, because we had this disturbed boy in class, older than us, and this guy [a Romanian] kept pestering him, ok? He made fun of him and, well, I just couldn't stand it. […] Maybe that day I was nervous. I just grabbed him [the Romanian] and pushed him onto the desks. He hurt his head and back and got bruises all over him so he didn't come to school for a week. Well, then my teachers really got angry. And they even called home. […] So I said, that's it, I'll change school.

His single mother with whom he lives seems at a loss when having to sanction his misbehaviour. This is what the boy told us about a few such attempts:

Sometimes she would not let me go out or use my bike, something like that, but in the end she never managed to. Because many times she locked me in and I found the spare keys and left […] She hides the X-Box wires […] But she always hid them in the same place and when she left I took them [he laughs].

He reports an episode in which he defended his mother, whom he considers weak (like in the case when he took sides with his disabled classmate). He sees her crying because of an argument with her partner. Next, Paolo grabs his neck and turns him out forcing him to sleep in his car that night, waiting for him to apologize with his mother.

The final episode marks his dropping out of the vocational course he had started after leaving school.

I had bought 10 euro worth of pot to sell. That I had been asked to get by people outside. And, well, it's a long story anyway, the teacher noticed I had the pot so he called the police aaaand, ok I went to the police headquarters, there was trouble, then I got back to school. But somebody said I had blurted out the name of the one who'd sold me the weed, and I don't even know him […] So that meant trouble, you see. So my mother decides not to send me back to school.

When asked when he found himself in trouble he said:

Oh, never. Not even when that thing happened… Not even when they were waiting for me outside school… I don't know why, maybe I've learned to ma-manage things on my own. So when I've got something to do which my mother doesn't want me to I never listen to her. I do it my way. See, up to now it's worked out ok. Almost everything has been ok […] Well, I've done things my way since I was 5 or 6.

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Paolo seems to adopt risk as a way of handling what he perceives to be the uncertainty of life. Uncertainties in life paths start from his relationship with his mother, the only meaningful person to him, who had an upper class standing but then found herself going down the social ladder due to her unconventional ways which differed from her family's.

3.4. Is the certainty/uncertainty polarity adequate?

We are now going to present two styles of agency as they emerged from our interviews of two girls. These styles differ from the ones referable to Weber's model, which have been dealt with so far. In order to interpret them we believe that we need a wider and more adequate theoretical model than Weber's.

However, Weber's theory is still the most important reference point of all conceptualizations which deal with the certainty/uncertainty polarity, independently of the disciplines they formally refer to. We believe that such perspective is not really the most satisfactory way to interpret "mainstream culture", the "Zeitgeist" of Modern Age, as most sociological literature does. Weber's has been undoubtedly a remarkable theoretical systematization which has helped outline the typical features of legal–rational power, which has led to the widespread rationalization process of the western world, which differentiated it from other modes of power.

What constitutes the limit of this perspective, however, is the fact that it basically adopts and remains within the boundaries of the epistemological assumptions of western civilization. Weber, in fact, did not choose to deal with "power" by chance, leaving out the sphere of potential, which is only just mentioned. If he had explored this dimension and had not just written a few lines only about it, he might have been able to open up a framework within which to inscribe his conceptualizations. He might have had a vague idea that the three ideal-types of power he identified only represent - a possible systematization of -one of the two forces to use to describe social life.

Another force needs to be added, a complementary one, trying to highlight the different characteristics it might manifest itself with. We feel that this second force has been analyzed by Simmel, though only initially. If we start from the latter's thought and integrate it with references to others, we can interpret the stories and living styles these two girls have manifested and placed at our disposal.

3.5. Attempts to be "Centered and Open"

Arianna's words allow us to describe a few traits of a style which we may define as "of being inside the situation", or better, of flowing with life in a "centered/open" way. Arianna has a younger sister. She lives in a place in a residential area, which is still being renovated. Her mother teaches Physical Education while her father has a job in the field of social services. Her family seems to give her a sense of strength and balance in order for her to be centered. At the same time, she is following her own individualization path.

She tells us about the difficulties she has had trying to live the new reality of a demanding high school. Her grammar school specializing in Greek and Latin is considered the most prestigious one in Italy.

Well, let's say that it was hard at the beginning to get used to the subjects and get on with the class. However, I must say that I've managed to overcome these difficulties because I became more extroverted and I've managed to organize schoolwork. […] Greek and Latin but Greek more and I said: "Oh my God! I can't handle this. Is this the right school for me?" […] I become hysterical! Well, I've changed also because I've sort of become more self-confident. I'm no longer anxious and I no longer say: "Gosh I can't manage!" […]. So, well, I'm happy.

Her confusion was due not just to learning problems but also to her relationship with her classmates still to be built.

Well, the first days of school when, you see, I knew no one and I felt confused, like…Like I didn't know who to talk to, that kind of things… I didn't , didn't feel great […] But then I have a nice relationship with these girls whom I invited to my place the Friday after Easter. They're really nice… I feel good with them.

Speaking of the things she does with a friend she indirectly reveals how she experiences herself at home and with her family:

Like we sometimes go out or… ya, I invite someone round (she laughs) because I like it. I must say I feel fine because once I had a small flat so… well, I didn't feel at ease, while here, I must say; I'm happy… Well, I wouldn't change anything about my family, because I'm quite happy, anyway. I find my family to be something certain, to have a family… I do. It gives me strength.

She takes stock of the year that has just finished in terms of school results and friendships:

Speaking of friendships, the second term was better because during the first term you get to know people, you experiment, while you make more friends during the second term. As for my grades, I'm quite satisfied.

At this point it becomes apparent how Arianna manifests in her studies what with Jung we might call individuative process, which allows her

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téchne to start working, as Gilli would say (1988). This she does while disappointing her parents who, being sports people, try to force her to take up a sport, which she cannot bear. She brightens up, instead, when talking of humanities and her readings:

I must say I enjoy coming across a new word which comes from, from… An Italian word that derives from a Greek one and I must say I really like it. […] I like to pop into a bookshop and it takes me hours to choose a book sometimes… So I'm one who enjoys reading.

Arianna's sense of lightness, to mention Paul Valery (1930), whom Calvino superbly referred to (1988), is the lightness of a bird which flies following the currents. Arianna feels the support of her family which gives her a sense of strength but at the same time she stretches out towards the path she is herself shaping.

3.6. On being at the mercy of…

We are now going to describe how little girls and little boys can live the flowing being at the mercy of events. We do so with 14-year-old Allegra13. She is the firstborn of three. Her parents run a shop on the outskirts and are therefore busy all day long. This is why they chose a middle school run by religious people where she can spend the whole day. She failed the previous year (the third). She had pre-enrolled in a vocational school because she believed it to be easy and because a friend would attend it. The second time in third grade middle school – same private catholic school, she says she chose a vocational school for the following reason:

At least at… (the name of the school), I'm interested in computer science even though I cannot use a computer because I don't have one… but still I go there to learn something, so I'm interested… [A friend], not from my [class], but from another that gave me advice because I'd told her I didn't know where to go. […] I'll try and then I'll change.

She seems to focus on her relationships with the boys:

Well, my concern hasn't really been the school because… for various reasons… back then I mostly focused on a guy, girlfriends

Two days before her boyfriend left her. They had been going out for a couple of months:

He left me because he loved another but he still sends me text-messages, I can't see why so I just can't forget him. He writes "I want to say goodnight", he asks how I am, and stuff.

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[13] This is a case which was included, while dealing with different aspects, in an article by Migliore published in the third issue of Minorigiustizia in 2013, pp 36 to 44.

Concerning sexual life she says:

He asked me but he said: "I don't want to rush things- and then- if you don't want I don't mind because I want a serious relationship, I don't want…"

When I asked her if she had had sex with her last boyfriend she answered:

No, no, not with him.

She gave us to believe that she had had intercourse with the previous boyfriend when she was 13. Actually, this is how she describes her second-last boyfriend:

Let's say that from girls he wanted only a certain thing, but I didn't know, things he wanted to do with me. At the beginning I said no…

About her friends she says:

Well, they're actually grown –ups… They've had since the age of 20

About her parents she says:

I was angry with my parents as well… that was a time when I said things I shouldn't have said […] Like, I told them I didn't want to live at home […]. Actually, I didn't really believe them, I just told them because I was nervous and they told me off because I did badly but actually I felt bad about a number of things, also because my class of last year tended to exclude me for this reason […] One who was a close friend last year, among other things, behaved well in front of me but then she talked behind my back and told the whole school I was a bad girl, which wasn't true, and then everyone at school thought I was because of course they didn't know me.

She goes on to talk about the different aspects of her life14 – her relationship with her parents and friends, her schoolmates and teachers, the choice of high school – but as soon as she can she goes back to talking about her frustration for having been left by the boy even though he keeps sending her text-messages. This seems to be now the pivot of her life. It seems that she is at the mercy of the events. At the mercy of the boy who keeps contacting her making her feel important and who also suggests having intercourse, and then he leaves her. She seems helpless and overwhelmed by school events. Even during the current year when, despite repeating it, she keeps getting many bad grades… Allegra reminds us of the feather mentioned by Paul Valery (1930), which is moved here and there by the wind.

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[14] In this ideal-type too we are dealing with typifications of modes, not with the girls and boys. We do not know if, for example, Allegra behaves differently with her brothers.

4. To sum up: taking shape, flowing

The stories we have described here do not represent the whole range of scenarios which our research allowed us to explore, much less of all the possible experiences of children. They are instead typical accounts15, in other words, they are extracts of reports on oneself around which other similar experiences gather. Also, they are the focus towards which the experiences of the others involved with the speakers tend. That's to say that they are the gathering elements around which the various experiences take place.

On the one hand, we have explored how focusing on forms when interacting has led Pietro to a rational mode of control, for example when dealing with demanding school subjects. On the other hand, this has led Cecilia to a traditional kind of control, i.e. the framework with which she interprets what happens to her is solely the one provided by her family. Paolo's mode of risk is another example of focus on the form. The boy sets himself against it, which is his reference point, in order to go as far as to cause the framework itself to break. His mode, which might be defined "counter-dependent", is still an example of dependence. For example, his turning out his stepfather when he was 13 implies being tangled in family dynamics rather than tending to face whatever novelty life offers outside the family circle.

With Arianna's story we move away from the focus on form. If the focus is on flowing we are no longer within the certainty/uncertainty antinomy with its attempts at rational or traditional modes of control, neither are we dealing with charismatic coping.

Arianna's modes of individualization and differentiation from parents and friends, which is not the same as individualization, without reactive confrontations is based on her being centered (with a strong Self) and open (to life flowing, novelty, reconsidering whom to favor in the peer group, school, subjects, etc.). This shows her personal balance and openness to the flow of life, as if she was saying:

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[15] There is an elective affinity between this methodology and, on one hand, the one suggested by Clifford Geertz (1973) when he mentions cock fighting to explain Balinese culture and, on the other, the one discussed in Passeron and Revel (2005) in their work *Penser par cas*. Unlike Weber's ideal-types, which are abstractions and as such they are not present in the real world, each element of this modeling has a direct empirical reference. Under certain respects and being cautious we might detect assonances with the specification of the so called fuzzy variables in quantitative methodologies (Cardano 2002).

Let's see what's going to happen and how I'm going to handle this with my flexible firmness.

Allegra's stories take us even further. With Valery, we could say that what might seem lightness takes on the characteristic of being at the mercy of the events, like a feather in the wind, in what Calvino (1988) would identify as another side of heaviness. She is moved on by whatever happens without becoming the subject in the process, be it a course of studies or a boyfriend.

These last two styles of agency seems to have remained in the Shade of the western civilization model and its consequent socialization model, by which the grownups, already members of the ethnos, try to turn the children, Goffman's non-persons (1959), into competent members.

The emphasis on the necessity of rational acting, to be opposed against the traditional not-rational mode, leaving space to the other non-rational mode, charismatic coping, only if it is expressed rationally, like in the "risk" mode (La Mendola 1999). This seems to have led to leave in the Shade a style which the very children show to possess more manifestly than adults. The certainty/uncertainty dichotomy is built within this symbolic framework16.

However, we need a wider perspective which allows us to understand styles of agency like the one we defined "centered and open". This is a kind of lightness similar to Simmel's when he talks about sociability (1911), but it actually goes further. It is what Calvino described with these words:

It pairs with precision and determination, not with vagueness or giving oneself up to chance. (1988, 17)

This echoes an excerpt from Valery, which goes:

Il faut être léger comme l'oiseau, et non comme la plume.

This is a style of agency which deals with life flow without being trapped in fear, which leads to modes of control, or in modes of letting go which drift towards impotence. It thus emerges that potential is the typical trait of agency. It allows children's acting as social actors – as already pointed out by Corsaro's concept of "interpretative reproduction" (2011) – to influence the cultures of the adults17.

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16 This question appears to be extremized in rational choice interpretative models, but also in the ones deriving from the important variation of limited rationality introduced by Simon (1979).

17 See Migliore (2012) for bottom-up socialization processes between children and adults.

Within such interpretative framework, in accordance with childhood sociologists who deal with everyday life18 – Corsaro 2011, Sirota 2006, among others – we can definitely support the idea that children should be considered beings rather than becomings, i.e. beings living the present, without considering them in the light of what they will become. We therefore distanced ourselves from those psychologists who consider development to be a sequence of pre-constituted phases. We have here in mind what Piaget said about children all having to go through the same stages as if infancy and adolescence were not social concepts.

An interpretation of an interactionist kind makes it possible to grasp the elements which gather in forms, melt in a new process of becoming to eventually take on new forms and so forth, like in a kaleidoscope.

These processes have an obvious relation with the different styles of agency the actors actively form with the adults, in top-down, bottom-up socialization processes as well as in horizontal ones, like Corsaro (2011), who focused on the building of peer cultures, taught us in particular.

The issue of differences, which does not refer to inequalities only (Rettore 2007), becomes central. This, however, is an issue which would require in depth analyses not to be dealt with in this work.

Today's teens: a digital generation.

The daily life of children in industrialized countries today, compared to that of the past generations, is characterized by the massive presence of the so called new technologies (Computers, Internet, Mobile, Ipad, Ipod and others), resulting in a generation gap between the previous generation and the current one, so clear that today we talk of age divide (Pattaro, 2006).

Today's youths, from industrialized countries, living in this era of Information Communication Technology, are nicknamed E-Generation or Digital Generation or Digital Natives by European Institutions, as well as

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[18] See James, Jenks and Prout's outline (2002, 166) modified by Migliore (2009), in which four fields are described in childhood sociology. One in which the focus is on structure and the universal, like in Quortrup (1994) on children's condition in the different European countries. A second one where the universal and agency prevail, like in the publications on minors'rights (for ex Belotti 2010). A third one in which the focus is on the particular and on structure, like for example in the literature on old media (D'Amato 1997 on TV) and new ones (Drotner 2009). A fourth one focuses on agency and the particular in everyday life (Corsaro 2011, Sirota 2006) within which our research work was carried out (Migliore 2006).

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