

## 161 - YOUTH'S SOCIAL DYNAMICS. AN INSIGHT ON THE PERSPECTIVE OF REPRESENTATIONS AND SPARE TIME PRACTICES.

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### INTRODUCTION

In the last decades the wide and varied changes that occurred in society had a deep impact on young men's lives, deeply influencing them on their way of being and of thinking, deeply altering their individual as well as collective identity building processes (Coleman, 2000) and amplifying their social and ideological reference fields.

Apprehended values on a familiar level are confronted with others, realized on the school field or through the media, namely through the television. The intersection of these different fields enhances the social and contextual coordinates changes in relation to which the young men are in.

Young men of today with their ways of thinking and of living expressed on their clothes, songs, amusements and attitudes towards politics, family and education are the ones who better embody these social changes (Gervilla, 1993).

Young men spare time activities constitute an extremely complex theme (McHale; Crouter & Tucker, 2001; Parr & Lashua, 2004). Those activities are gradually influencing the young men's identity formation, well-being (Fletcher; Nickerson & Wright, 2003), on the development of behavioural problems (Piko & Vazsonyi, 2004), on their relationships with their friends (Cardwell & Darling, 1999), as well as on options and future professional orientations (Munson & Savickas, 1998).

It's possible to find Aristotle's position on this theme on his works (1977; 1998), thus showing us that human nature as well as problems presented for over about two thousand and three hundred years only changed a little, thus keeping a singular and perennial actuality.

On his play *Politics*, Aristotle tells us "one needs to work and make war; but above all one has to live in peace and enjoy idleness" (1998:538-539). The term *skhole* which can be translated by idleness is presented not in the sense of doing nothing but rather in the sense of dedication to an activity, be it an entertainment, scientific, philosophic, aesthetic or religious. According to this philosopher, practising idleness requires practising virtues such as research, curiosity, creativity, apprenticeship and reflection. Effectively, "courage and resistance are virtues that matter to work; philosophy matters to idleness" (1998:543). In the Aristotelian context young men's formation acquires a universal pedagogic orientation (relating to every man), integral (relating to all men), and not only in a didactic perspective, oriented to mere competences and information's specialized learning.

In the first two decades of the twentieth century in Portugal also the philosopher and poet Teixeira de Pascoaes (1922:198) fought for an education of the youth's spare time, complementing certain associations from then, by their capacity of taking advantage of the associated young men's spare time, converting them into opportunities of fruition and cultural development.

Baring in mind the importance spare times have on young men, families, schools, investigators and diverse institutions, displays have been appearing regarding the principles that should guide such practices.

Nowadays the more relevant question is not so much knowing how much spare time youths have but rather how they use that time. Is it used in a way so that it contributes to their socialization and development or does that not constitute a problem for them?

In that sense this work's goal is to identify the representations the youths living in urban environments have about spare times as well as to check the implications of the same on teenagers' development.

There are several international studies (Brettschneider & Naul, 2004; Delle Fave & Bassi, 2003; Larson & Seepersad, 2003; Raymore et al., 1999) as well as national ones (Esculcas & Mota, 2005; Fernandes et al, 1998; Machado Pais, 1996; Santos et al., 2005) that had the opportunity of analysing the youth's favourite leisure activities. It seems to us important, however, to study the symbolisms that configure such practices as well. In that perspective we choose using a qualitative methodology once it can – due to its potentialities (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Miles & Huberman, 1994) – proportionate a set of data that could help us understand the way how young men experience them and the meanings given by them.

### DESCRIPTIVE TASK

Our study fell upon young men from both genders living in Braga and Coimbra with ages comprehending 14 to 17 years. These cities are two of the most populated Portuguese cities. Braga is an extremely dynamic city and headquarters of one of the youngest councils within Europe. Coimbra has always been inferred with the youth since its University was institutionalized on the thirteenth century, therefore being the third oldest European university.

Semi-structured interviews (Creswell, 1994) were made to the mentioned students. The interviewees come to about 10% in relation to the universe of individuals attending the 9th grade of scholarship in public schools at the mentioned cities.

The used information treatment technique was "content analysis" (Bardin, 1977; Creswell, 1994; Vala, 1986). This study positioned itself in an exploratory perspective following a path of discovery (Bardin, 1977). This study's corpus was constituted by the transcription of the interviews made to the studied young men. Subsequently the categorical system was built.

Baring in mind the study's function was to collect testimonies, to describe experienced events as well as to capture reality exactly how the individuals saw it, it became necessary to make a descriptive analysis (Bardin, 1977) and contents unities were constituted by the collected interviews' sum-up (Bardin, 1977; Ghiglione & Matalon, 2001).

### INTERPRETATIVE ANALYSIS

When analysing the interviews made to young men, "freedom and pleasure" as well as "non-structured activities" (see Attachment – Lists 1 and 2) are the ideas we find very explicit. These ideas or messages emerge on a lot of the younger's "dialogue lines", thus emerging as this study's decisive categories. These, on their whole, define the worries', values' and attitudes' view that shapes representations and practices of the youth in their time. We will now analyse the found determinant categories.

#### Freedom and pleasure

Young men's representations on spare time constitute complex and different universes according to their position

towards life and to a variety of aspects related to the social, family and scholar context where they are inserted in. When questioned on what does spare time represented for them, answers point out in the sense of a great valorisation of freedom and pleasure.

To youths spare times are related to the idea of "being free". It's a time when they feel there are no restrictions neither constraints imposed by others. To their minds that is "the time when we have no obligations at all", "we have nothing to do", "when we ease the tension, relax and when we can do the things we like the most".

This time of freedom of action offers them a great role of options. In a young woman's perspective, it allows her "doing what I feel like it". In a context in which they can act according to their own will, one points out "I try to fill in time in the best possible way" whereas another tries "doing something that will give me pleasure". These states of joy and satisfaction are united in "fun moments" leading a teenager to affirm it is possible in that way to practise stuff with my colleagues".

Time spent at school is not that thrilling. Some young men point out spare time "is everything beyond my school schedule", "it's the time after school when I can do what I want with no obligations". In this way we get the idea school is not a space of freedom and pleasure for them and that it does not offer them the experiences and feelings they would enjoy.

The concepts of freedom and pleasure have been approached by various authors in the anthropology, philosophy and sociology fields. The philosopher Savater tells us freedom is about choosing within the possible (2004a). Unlike other leaving creatures, the human being can choose and invent their life form. If there are in fact a lot of limiting factors (earthquakes, diseases, etc) there are also many others they can choose from. Therefore, freedom not only defines the human being but also contributes decisively to shape him or her as a species (2004 b).

Also Bauman (1989), the sociologist, states a human being whose free choices are not connected to his/ her well being it's unimaginable, a real inconsistency. Individuals face themselves with the crucial task of building their own social identity.

To begin with, they have to respond beyond themselves to questions such as "who am I", "how should I live", "who do I wish to become", "where do I want to go to" as well as be ready to accept the responsibility of their decisions. Therefore, freedom is to man the fate of which one cannot run from.

The concept of pleasure was already a reason for Aristotle's reflection just as well. He states pleasure grew with men since their childhood and their actions are always oriented by pleasures and sufferings (2004). To this philosopher's mind happiness is a supreme good; it is the most splendid thing. We can choose anything as a means to an end, but happiness. It is the last end.

Savater (2004b) as well states there is always a human desire for their actions to be comprehensible and the desire of being happy should be the first of all.

Every need settle into a tendency to happiness (Baudrillard, 1991). Morin (2003) pointing out the individual does not live to survive but rather survives in order to live, that is, the individual lives to enjoy the plenitude of life, to fulfil herself/ himself, thereby constituting happiness the plenitude of his/her life.

Freedom of choice is becoming accessible to more and more individuals. Progress on its multiple areas despatches to each individual the responsibility of their freedom (Andieu 2004).

On this matter it is important to bear in mind that in the last times a certain tendency to ease individuals from their negative responsibilities has been verifiable imputing them to circumstances that shape and impose themselves to "me", such as the social system, the social communications mean's influence, childhood traumas (Savater 2004b).

The curious part is, however, that these responsibilities' relieves always work by guilt, never by merit. The same is to say if individuals are good such owns itself to their capacities but if they are bad it has its origins on factors foreign to them.

Freedom is a confusing blessing to many young people (Bauman, 1989). They need it to be themselves on account of their free choice but such means a life full of doubts and fears of failing. On the other hand the possibility given to them to make options forces them to pay attention to what they do as well as to acquire certain knowledge about living or a true art of life's knowledge (Savater 2004a).

Last but not the least, a young interviewee stated spare time "is a time when we have no responsibility". This aspect deserves reflection from our part because if, on the one hand, Aristotle (2004) states the human being needs rest because they cannot work continuously without resting and "...rest has to be necessarily pleasant" (1998: 575), on the other hand it shows "rest is not the last goal" (2004:242). Such as Garcia & Lemos support (2005) spare time is that time when man is happy, but it is also a time favourable to creativity. It is therefore to our minds a time when men show a real will of future.

### **Non-structured activities**

Before the great variety of activities young men of today have at their disposal at spare times, it is necessary to get to know their tendencies as well as their cultural modalities of expression.

The more developed activities on those periods might be conglobated in one big dimension, the non-structured activities. These are developed within the context of a great spirit of freedom and pleasure, accomplished in a spontaneous way without adult supervision neither orientation.

Such as a young man tells us, they are activities in which "I can do things how I want and when I feel like it". In this kind of activities young men enhanced "watching TV", "the personal computer (video games)/ Internet", "practising sport" and "listening to music".

The preferences here shown go to meet, in general terms, the ones verified in studies at an international area (Delle Fave & Bassi, 2003; Larson & Seepersad, 2003; Lee, 2003; McHale et al., 2001; Nishino & Larson, 2003; Piko & Vazsonyi, 2004; Raymore et al., 1999; Verma & Sharma, 2003) and also national (Fernandes et al, 1998; Machado Pais, 1996; Santos Silva & Santos, 1995; Santos Silva et al, 2002; Schmidt, 1993). The revealed tendencies express a certain generalisation in various cultural contexts, perhaps due to the globalisation process (Giddens, 2001).

In a general way the increasing importance of the audiovisual field is highlighted, or the screen culture, in prejudice of the former centrality on the printing (books, press) in configuring the youth's practices (Santos Silva & Santos, 2002).

The young interviewee's more enhanced practise was "to watch television", which goes to meet to what happens in most European countries, where this is the most developed activity. According to a study coordinated by Brettschneider & Naul (2004), about 24,1% of European young men watch TV for more than 4 hours per day, in average (at weekends). The Portuguese young men present one of the highest taxes in Europe, 32,7%.

The reasons for such preferences are diverse. To many interviewees it is a way of "spending time". In these circumstances there is therefore a need of "occupying time, making moments become more useful...doing nothing is always boring".

To other people's minds watching TV is an activity that provides them states of joy and satisfaction. Effectively is "what motivates me the most", "what gives me more pleasure", "a different way of being in a good mood".

In a context where they can act a lot of times according to their own determination, one indicates TV is good "to relax" while for another it allows him/ her to "rest from stress at school". These relaxation situations are united to "liveliness movements",

causing a teenager to state it is possible in that way to find moments "when I forget about the world".

We also find the valorisation of the television informative component, because by watching TV "it is possible to have a sense of the present time and to know about the events".

Opinions here expressed by the interviewees regarding "watching TV" may help us understand some of the reasons that explain their preferences regarding this activity. It is also important however to point out we should understand these behaviours taking as a reference their social-cultural context. In the modern days television is, without any doubts, a powerful means of influence among juvenile, well expressed by the high number of hours they spend watching television shows. It constitutes itself as a communication channel that reproduces and foments the current ideas from western society on a daily basis.

In Portugal and to the sociologist's Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2002) understanding, one has been assisting within the last decades to the domain of cultural practices made within the domestic sphere in relation to the ones occurring in public spaces. Among the domestic practices watching TV is the one that outstands clearly, a cultural activity that reveals the highest consume taxes, to the prejudice of the remaining others. Television presents itself as the socially more transversal consume cultural product. Although visible the growing expansion of other expressions of the culture of masses (cinema, press, book, music), the truth is they are still little spread among the Portuguese.

In terms of consume only television seems to constitute itself as a field of undoubted statement from the massive culture in Portugal.

The second activity highlighted in this study is concerned with using the personal computer/ videogames/ internet. As a matter of fact the development of new technologies in the information as well as communication areas has been having a central role on teenagers' lives (Mota & Sallis, 2002; Slevin, 2002).

According to the European study coordinated by Brettschneider & Naul (2004), over 13,1% of the European youth use the personal computer more than 3 hours per day (on holidays) whereas in Portugal the figures stand between about 14,9%. On what the kind of activities performed on the personal computer is concerned, the same study refers in Germany boys prefer practising videogames, being online and listening to music via personal computer. In European terms one verifies as one gets older the videogames use decreases whereas the use of internet increases.

The teenagers of our study manifest in various ways feelings of well-being and satisfaction that come from the use of the personal computer/ videogames/ internet.

Some point out "it's very amusing" while others practise them because "it's fun being able to achieve the game's tougher levels". A utilitarian perspective of these games is pointed out since they "cause the mind to develop".

The young men's desire of videogames or electronic games has created concerns in some families. However, despite many studies made on the same ones and violence, it is still not clear to which point the violence presented or experienced on those games foments aggressive behaviours in real life on the youth (Baldaro et al., 2004; Funk, et al., 2002).

On what using the Internet is concerned, the interviewees highlight its formative dimension and the profits that may come from their use. So "it is important for our future"; "we are enriching our culture and we are becoming more and more connected to the world".

In the last times Internet has becoming the centre of the communicational relationship (Santos Silva, 2002). In global terms the number of users in 1999 was of about 150 to 180 millions, increasing to about 1 billion in 2005 (Slevin, 2002). Communication mediated by the internet is still a recent phenomenon, no sufficient data existing yet that allows us to come to conclusions on their real social meaning (Castells, 2005).

In the last years a great question has dominated the investigation on the internet social dimension. To authors such as the sociologist Castells (2005), it provokes phenomenons such as dehumanisation, exclusion, disintegration, dependences, "identity kidnaps", personal isolation, backing off individuals from the society or even disconnecting them from the real world. According to authors such as Slevin (2002), it gives a chance for communication, intelligent relations, inclusion and a new appropriation of knowledge and capacities.

Using the Internet also reveals uncertainties for many but it also creates new opportunities which cannot be wasted or despised. However, one still needs to know to which point do young man have, ore had, on the part of their families and educators, an effective accompaniment that guides them in an aware, demanding and critical perspective, so that they can take advantage of the internet's formative and educational potentialities.

This is a crucial aspect because internet displays with accuracy the matter of the youths formational and cultural orientation functions. Before the 80's family, school, associations constituted themselves as selection instances with hierarchy and contents evaluation attached to the media, namely television.

They used to constitute themselves as guiders or "compass" (Warnier, 2002). Nowadays many young men, when confronted with the contents display presented in a unorganised way by those means and by the internet, they do not have at their disposal capacities that allow them to choose and hierarchize such contents.

On the other hand using the internet poses some questions on the communication level while a social process. On the spot scenery dissolution, the evolvement of communication processes put aside from interaction physical contexts, embodied in sociability and virtual nets imbued on the distant transactions logic in time and space they will be able to contribute to a non-use of non-verbal communication potentialities and their extra-linguistic components (Lopes, 2000).

Signals' and styles' varieties reduce themselves to a set of procedures and minimal languages – such as abbreviations and communication/ conversation symbols via Internet – they do not explore the characteristics of an environment rich in details that enable communication while process of a relationship between people (Biti & Zani, 1993).

As verifiable in other Portuguese studies (Fernandes, 1998; Santos Silva et al, 2002), it has been stated among our interviewees sport does not have a vaste expression as a regular practice. In European terms it is verifiable the Portuguese youth present one of the lower levels of practice (Brettschneider & Naul, 2004). Only about 25% of boys and 15% of girls practice physical activities according to international recommendations.

Our interviewees point out some reasons for such a low index of practice. The more enhanced ones are "I don't have time", "I don't feel motivated", "I don't have company".

On what physical activity is concerned it is also important to enhance the fact that frequently activities such as "watching television" and "using the personal computer" have been pointed out as one of the main factors that contribute to the low levels of practice for many young men. However, several studies already developed (Brettschneider & Naul, 2004; Marshall et al., 2004) point out that contrarily to what was expected, there is no connection between the time spent in front of the television or personal computer and the time for physical activity of young men.

Besides trying to know the universe of physical activities developed by young men on their spare time we think it necessary to understand those practices, so as to know their orientations and senses and the way how they are experienced (Fernandes et al., 1998). Therefore and in global terms "fun" was the more pointed out aspect to the practice of certain activities because "it's a way to be in a good mood"; "while practising them I forget about the world".

We live at a time some call "late modernity" (Giddens, 1995) and others postmodernism (Lipovsky, 1994), where hedonist and narcissist individualism, pluralism and relativism are unquestionable characteristics (Fernandes, 1999). Postmodernism regained values such as: emotion, kindness and pleasure. In the mean time, however, we can not stop reflecting upon their consequences to the youth's education.

First of all we have to recognise postmodernism wisdom when valorising kindness, emotion, since these might proportionate a greater amount of happiness. It is important to remember formation is a personal process meant to perfect man and making them happier. This is a well shown aspect in Aristotle's book *Ethics to Nicomaco* (2004) where he expresses happiness is the supreme good that might be obtained through human action.

Before the value's changes, however, post-modern education might be as mutilating and unilateral as modernism, only in an opposite direction. That is to say, it might in the future mutilate rationality on behalf of emotion. Emphasising pleasure might cause to debilitate will, to depreciate self-discipline, thereby raising difficulties to integration and fulfilment of young men in a society growing more demanding and competitive. Refusing effort in favour of pleasure might lead young men to situations related to violence, drugs dependency and alcohol. Pleasure is as necessary as effort. Both are essential to the youth's integral formation. Within that perspective, the formation's task is to know how to conciliate pleasure with effort, fun with compromise and brief with permanent (Gervilla, 1993).

In the last times new sociability contexts have been imposing in the youth's daily spare times (Fernandes, 1998). By intending to analyse social contexts where spare time practices are developed we verify the more evidenced aspects are: "being with friends", "by themselves", "with the family" and "in community/ public interaction".

Friends play a more and more determinant role in youth's lives. The young's cultural dynamic is directly associated to a universe of values and aspirations that enhance the sociability and relationships logics (Fernandes, 1999).

The levels of youth's associative participation are low in Portugal (Fernandes, 1998). Such might owe itself to the lack of stimuli to a juvenile associative participation fit to the youth's own aspirations. Juvenile practices tend to characterize themselves more by passivity and inertia rather than social and associative participation, therefore giving privilege to informal and mini-grouped nets of sociability (Schmidt, 1993).

On the other hand, a growing tendency to the called "apartment culture" (Fernandes, 1998) or "leisure's domesticity" (Schmidt, 1993) has been expressed. New technologies' progresses in the areas of sound and image and a whole set of cultural furniture has been expressing itself, thereby turning the domestic area into a more and more attractive place to leisure and sociability moments (Fernandes, 1999).

It is important to refer that when intending to know the context in which the youth spend their spare time it worries us knowing how far such might contribute to the youth's development or promote deviating behaviours in young men. This is a preoccupying matter to many parents and investigators since studies reveal time spent with friends may promote the use of various substances as well as less adequate behaviours (Aseltine, 1995).

A spare time activity held dear for many young men is participating in parties with friends. These present multiple benefits namely at social interaction and integration. Caldwell & Darling (1999), however, refer young men who spend more time at parties consume more alcohol and do more drugs. On the other hand, investigators such as Dekovic (1999) state spare time activities developed within the family sphere put aside young men from deviating behaviours.

The young interviewees state as well they spend a substantial part of their spare time by themselves usually in their bedrooms "because I have television there as well as the Playstation". This option tends to be recurrent since these spaces constitute more and more another context of reflection and exploration (Larson, 1997).

## CONCLUSIONS

The young men interviewees of this study ascribe to spare time a meaning denoted with freedom and pleasure. They represent times when they like having a possibility of acting without imposed restrictions by others or conditionals of various natures, choosing pleasant activities that proportionate feelings of joy, satisfaction and quietude.

Interviewees privilege non-structured activities on their spare times. These correspond to them as a set of activities developed in the absence of adults that coordinate or guide them and where one does not dazzle often a way of adjustment neither organisation of the same competing to a certain end.

Tendencies here manifested by young people should be calculated by families, schools and other responsible institutions so that they adjust their multiple ways of intervention bearing in mind the youth's interests but guiding them according to formative and educational principles.

The manifested longing for freedom and pleasure should be seen and developed so that young men might express it through a creative responsibility that not only reveals a will to live but above all that it shows a true life project.

We understand it necessary to regain Aristotle's idea of *scholé*, which meant idleness, rest, a liking in knowledge, formation and innovation. The classic idleness implied doing something that would be translated into education opportunities therefore contributing to an effective wealth of man. Taking that perspective into account, it might be possible to interfere in a way so that young men have the capacity of exploring and appreciating non-structured activities such as autonomy and creativity. On the other hand, acting taking into account that in young men's integral formation, one needs to know how to conciliate freedom and responsibility, pleasure and effort, fun and compromise, the present with the past and the future.

## ATTACHMENT

List 1 – Categories related to the spare time concept

Categories	Frequency
Freedom and pleasurer	54
Rest	4
Development opportunities	2

List 2 – Categories related to the developed activities

Categories	Frequency
Non-structured activities	51
Actividades não estruturadas	
Structured activities	9

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#### **YOUTH'S SOCIAL DYNAMICS. AN INSIGHT ON THE PERSPECTIVE OF REPRESENTATIONS AND SPARE TIME PRACTICES.**

##### **ABSTRACT**

Spare times constitute a central matter on the field of social dynamics that shape the youth's contemporaneity. Attitudes and behaviours evidenced on those periods are decisive in determining the respective identity, education and development (Cardwell & Darling, 1999; Fletcher; Nickerson & Wright, 2003; Munson & Savickas, 1998; Piko & Vazsonyi, 2004).

Therefore this study's goal was to identify the representations young men have over spare time, to check on the developed practices on those periods of time and to examine the implications of those on their education.

The study had its incidence on 60 young men attending the 9th grade in public schools in the Portuguese cities of Braga and Coimbra, to whom semi-structured interviews were made. The used information treatment technique was the one called "content analysis" (Bardin, 1977; Creswell, 1994).

Spare times represent freedom and pleasure for the youth. The more developed activities are unstructured, prevailing watching TV, using the personal computer (video games), the Internet, practising sport and listening to music. The more appointed reasons for these practices are the fun and the development of new knowledge.

Social contexts in which they develop occur among friends, while alone, with the family as well as in community.

**KEYWORDS:** young men, spare time, representations

#### **DINÂMICAS SOCIAIS DOS JOVENS. UMA VISÃO A PARTIR DAS REPRESENTAÇÕES E DAS PRÁTICAS DE TEMPOS LIVRES.**

##### **RESUMO**

Os tempos livres constituem uma questão central no âmbito das dinâmicas sociais que configuram a contemporaneidade dos jovens. As atitudes e comportamentos evidenciados nesses períodos são determinantes para a definição da respectiva identidade, formação e desenvolvimento (Cardwell & Darling, 1999; Fletcher; Nickerson & Wright, 2003; Munson & Savickas, 1998; Piko & Vazsonyi, 2004).

Assim sendo, o objectivo deste estudo foi identificar as representações que os jovens têm sobre os tempos livres, averiguar as práticas desenvolvidas nesses períodos e examinar as implicações das mesmas para a sua formação.

O estudo incidiu sobre 60 jovens que frequentavam o 9º ano de escolaridade em escolas públicas das cidades portuguesas de Braga e Coimbra, aos quais foram realizadas entrevistas semi-estruturadas. A técnica de tratamento da informação utilizada foi a "análise de conteúdo" (Bardin, 1977; Creswell, 1994).

Os tempos livres representam para os jovens liberdade e prazer. As actividades mais desenvolvidas são não estruturadas, predominando o ver televisão, uso do computador (video games) / Internet, praticar desporto e ouvir música. As razões mais apontadas para essas práticas são a diversão e o desenvolvimento de novas aprendizagens.

Os contextos sociais onde elas se desenvolvem ocorrem junto aos amigos, solitariamente, com a família e em comunidade.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** jovens, tempos livres, representações