Paradise lost. Youth in transition in The Netherlands

Arjan Dieleman & Frans Meijers

The Netherlands is a small country in northwestern Europe; in 2003, it had about 16 million inhabitants. This makes it one of the most densely populated countries in the world. Among their neighbors, the Netherlands has prospered even more than other West-European countries over the last decades. In economic and social respects, the so-called “Dutch polder model”\(^1\) was quite successful. In the nineties, the unemployment rate was much lower than in the rest of Western-Europe. At the same time, the purchasing power (of youngsters, too) has increased considerably. The majority of the population is content with their way of life. However, this period of flourishing has apparently come to an end. The Dutch economic growth rate is quickly falling, unemployment is on the rise again, and the Dutch government is forced to make large cutbacks in expenditures. This means a real test for a young generation that hasn’t experienced serious setbacks. Compared to their English, German and French peers, Dutch youngsters have been better off over the last decades (Dieleman, 2000). Surveys in the Netherlands show over and again that the majority of young people are doing well. The vast majority of Dutch young people feel well or very well, they get along with their parents, have no permanent dislike of school and are reasonably able to handle daily problems (CBS, 2003). About one fifth does less well. It has been estimated that only 3 to 5 percent of young people are badly off. They can be found mainly in the larger cities, in the lowest social classes, in broken families, amongst early school leavers and certain ethnic groups, and in disadvantaged neighborhoods in the cities. Youngsters combining several of these characteristics are at major risk and are very vulnerable (Schuyt, 1995; Veenman, 1999). However, their number is limited (SCP, 2003). Therefore, it comes as no surprise that the Netherlands have repeatedly been classified as one of the happiest countries in the world (Veenhoven, 1997).

However, this doesn’t mean that the majority of Dutch young people have a carefree life as well. In the course of two generations, major developments have taken place in

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\(^1\) The Netherlands' economic success is based on the "polder model" – continuous consultation and co-operation between social partners (the government, employers' associations and trade unions) in order to find solutions to labour market problems. This co-operation model has resulted in increased labour market flexibility, creating more jobs and improving the image of temporary employment.
economic, social and cultural conditions, which have radically altered the transition from youth to adulthood. It has created new challenges and problems that young people have to cope with. The most important developments are socio-demographic trends, restructuring processes in the economy, and cultural changes. Together, they resulted in much uncertainty in individuals’ lives. From ‘standard’ biographies, the transition to adulthood has changed into individualized and fragmented life-courses. The structural and cultural transformations of post-modern, or post-industrial, society have especially increased the difficulties which 15-25-year-olds encounter in their attempts to become full-fledged members of their society. Identity development has become quite a task. On the one hand, identity has to be flexible enough to be able to cope with various roles in different social situations; on the other hand, this identity can’t be free-floating, and a minimum of continuity in the sense of the self is necessary to keep a person mentally healthy.

Traditionally, the transition to adulthood was seen as the period that a basic sense of the self has to become set. The transition was characterized by ‘compactness’ in the age-span during which one was concerned with completing school, marriage, parenthood and beginning one’s career (Shanahan, 2001). In a short period of time, choices for education, work and profession, and partner had to be made. However, in the new social conditions, not only are these life course events dispersed over a longer period of time, but they may also be sequenced differently. The prolonged youth period has, moreover, crystallized out into an autonomous life space. Most young people pursue as high an educational level as possible. They relax from their schoolwork with leisure activities, and spend their free time with peers. The world of work and profession is largely invisible. Many young people in the education system don’t reflect much on the possibilities and choices necessary for a professional career. Some authors (Dieleman, 2000; Meijers, 1998; Leccardi 1999) focus on contemporary youth’s inability to imagine their future, on their tendency to live in the present, and their lack of planning for the future. Young people have difficulties in developing a life strategy, in terms of both time and values, which is based on goals that they intend to achieve during their lifetimes. Life is experienced, not as a coherent collection of interrelated events, but rather as a random set of episodes.

First, we will present an overview of demographic and social developments, and their impact on the transition from youth to adulthood. We will occasionally do this in a European perspective. Dutch young people share many of the same conditions with their peers in other West-European countries, but there are also striking differences. We will analyze the
problems Dutch young people have to overcome in order to get a modern identity that is flexible enough to cope with the diverse social contexts that they are engaged in.

1. Socio-demographic trends

*De-greening and graying*

Since the Second World War, the birth rates in most western European countries have risen: in the Netherlands to 20 per one thousand inhabitants (Uiterhoeve, 1990). The baby boom petered out in the mid Sixties. Thereafter, the birth rates started to fall again: from 18 in 1970 to 13 in 1980 per one thousand inhabitants, after which it remained fairly constant. In recent years, this figure has risen slightly. Nevertheless, the baby boom generation\(^2\) from the post-war years remains in the majority. The declining birth rate since 1965 has further strengthened their numerical presence. From originally being a “juvenile” country, through becoming a young country, the Netherlands now is a nation with an over-representation in the age group between 40 and 60 years of age. The declining birth rate is paralleled by a process of ageing. Because of better health care and better eating habits, people live longer than in the past. Ageing will probably reach its peak when the baby boom generation retires, between the years 2010 and 2035. The relative number of older people will therefore continue to rise over the next years. It is anticipated that the number of older people above the age of 60 will dramatically increase in all EC countries, and that they will form one third of the total population by the year 2030. The Netherlands, with a growth of 64%, beats them all (Social Portrait of Europe, Eurostat, 1998). Graying and de-greening have caused a steady decline of the relative numbers of young people. The size of the age group between 12 and 25 in the Netherlands was about 20% of the population in 1993, but it is anticipated that this will decrease over the next decades to about 15% (Ter Bogt & Van Praag, 1992). In most other EC countries, similar developments can be seen. Falling birth rates were noticeable first in primary education, then secondary education, and in the coming years will especially be perceptible within the labor market. There will be fewer newcomers and within this group there will be a growing percentage of semi-skilled or unskilled young people from other ethnic origins, because the birth rate among these minorities is considerably higher.

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\(^2\) The Dutch baby boom generation is often referred to as a “protest” generation, because they not only started a cultural revolution during their formative years, but have also in essence been formed by its ideals (Becker 1992). The effects on society have been considerable. The main changes that the protest generation has initiated are the establishment of a culture of negotiation and consultation, the hegemony of pop music and the
Prolonged education

The future of young people is strongly dependent on the nature and level of the schooling they complete. The pressures to achieve well at school in order to reach the highest possible level have increased enormously over the past decades. Nowadays, most pupils are at school much longer than in the past. In the Netherlands, a vast majority of the pupils in secondary education move on to a form of higher education (CBS, 2003). Their youth is often extended to the age of 23 or 24 or even longer. Although the level of education that has been attained is less and less a guarantee for social success, its importance has hardly diminished. The immediate qualifying function of education has indeed diminished, but education still has a key function for the social career that one strives for (SCP 2003, Dronkers & Ultee, 1995). In the past, education was a necessary and usually sufficient condition for a successful career. Nowadays, education is necessary but seldom sufficient on its own for a successful career.

Young people’s future, nevertheless, remains strongly dependent on the nature and the level of the study they complete. Higher education is the entry point to the more attractive part of the labor market, which demands ever-higher qualifications. The kind of work one has largely determines one’s status, and has a growing influence on one’s sense of self-esteem. The Dutch educational sector has been under pressure from a huge re-organization during the last decade. Government policy and educational science stimulate the implementation of more cognitivist-constructivist models of learning; the ideas of self-regulation, self-efficacy and self-responsibility by pupils and students have gained ground. This change demands -at all educational levels- a more active learner who co-constructs his own knowledge and education. The various demands, wishes and expectations, expressed by a number of different actors (central government, local authorities, civil society organizations, educational scientists and parents) are inspired by a range of considerations (social trends, educational innovations, economic factors and administrative rearrangements). When these come together, they can create inconsistency or incompatibility. For example, schools are expected on the one hand to adjust to current parenting styles (which are sometimes traditional and directed at conformity and obedience), while on the other hand, they are pressured to use modern teaching methods, which encourage independent learning and initiative. Schools must, although limited by fixed development of a more hedonistic life style. Because of its numbers and because its culture is still influential, this generation still dominates the social scene.

3 Full-time education is compulsory in the Netherlands for all children aged five to sixteen. After primary school Dutch pupils move on to secondary education which has three variants: pre-vocational secondary education
programs and fixed subject combinations, equip their students with competencies, which facilitate them in undertaking independent study (Bronnenman, 1999). However, the rise of the average educational level is not coupled with a corresponding decrease in the number of dropouts that leave the educational system without their secondary school diploma. Since the 1990’s this dropout rate has been 25%, which means that one in four young people enters the labor market without sufficient qualifications (CBS, 2003). Their job prospects keep diminishing. This deprived group comprises relatively many young people from ethnic minority groups.4

*Flexibilization of work*

From about 1970 onward, the importance of the services sector of the economy has been growing rapidly. This is a global development in all industrialized countries. Wherever industrial labor disappears, work in the services sector takes its place.5 The shift from industrial labor to services entails changes in the nature and the type of work. There is less “steady labor”: less permanent work, less job security. Much of the work in the services sector is rated as being part of the so-called “secondary” labor market. Usually, it concerns companies that depend on semi-skilled and unskilled workers with regard to specific professional skills. The employers in this segment often look for workers that have an instrumental attitude towards the job. The workers are supposed not to object to the limited career possibilities and to be prepared to switch jobs often or be temporarily jobless. However, while specific professional skills are less important, demands on social skills are increasing. The desirability of various employee characteristics is changing. Industry concerns the production of goods, and laborers need the technical skills for that; services usually involve contacts with people, and therefore the employees need rather social and communicative skills (Inglehart *et al.*, 1998; Glastra & Meijers, 2000).

During the first decades after the Second World War, the Netherlands has known a relatively stable job structure. This stability and security were also a characteristic of one’s career. After school, most people were employed in a company or institute and chances were

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4 In 2002 24% of the youngsters leaved school without enough qualification (i.e. without a so-called start qualification). Among Dutch native youngsters this percentage was 19%, 38% among youngsters from Antillean and Surinamese, 36% from Turkish and 40% from Moroccan origin. Source: CBS (2003, page 47)

5 The problem though with this observation is the services sector appears as a residual category (Castells 1996). Under its umbrella, very differing forms of labor are classified: from retail, through banking, to tourism. The share of those working in the services sector was already 65% in 1996, compared to 58% in 1986 (Social Portrait
that they would stay there for the rest of their career. Mobility of labor scarcely existed. One advanced within the company, was promoted, and after twenty-five years of loyal service, one was rewarded with a gold watch or a similar token of appreciation. The career was secure. New social legislation provided protection against unfairness and the worst effects of illness, accident or death. Over the past decades, this has changed rapidly. The economy is developing into a 24-hour economy. The traditional schedules -with their fixed rhythms- are beginning to disappear. Market forces are introduced in work areas and fields that used to have different regimes. The principles of competition, efficiency, and result-orientation create new labor relations. Traditional securities disappear. Work pressures increase. A permanent job is harder to get, especially for newcomers in the labor market. The establishment of temp-agencies led to an increase in temporary jobs, mobility of labor increases, and well-defined jobs are being replaced by rather vague functions (Meijers, 1997; Wijers & Meijers, 1998). Employees – and especially young employees – are supposed to be flexible with regard to the place they work at, their working hours, and their job specification. One quarter of the young people that have work, are in a flexible work relation; this is significantly more than for the total labor force (5%) (CBS 2003). This tendency is to be found in all EC countries.

The appeal for more flexibility does not receive the full support of young people. A permanent job is still preferred by most young people in the EC (Euro Barometer, 1997), although there are differences between the countries. The desire to have permanent employment is strongest in the southern European countries, and is seen there as almost a prerequisite for having children. Young people in northern Europe seem to be more flexible in this respect, although the differences are small. The vast majority of young people in the EC prefer security to temporariness and change (Vander Steene et al., 2003). Because they lack work experience, semi-skilled young people in the Netherlands and in other European countries are over-represented in sectors with much unskilled, semi-skilled or flexible work, such as catering and trade (De Beer, 1996). However, this not only concerns young workers who left education early, but also students who combine their school-life or study with a part-time job (half of the young between 15-24). Most of them do unskilled work in small jobs in trade, retail business, catering and tourism, less than twelve hours a week (CBS, 2003). These jobs bear little resemblance to the career jobs they are striving for and offer little opportunities for building a job identity appropriate to the skills and attitudes they must develop in their studies.

of Europe, Eurostat 1998). Although the services sector is smaller in southern European countries than in northern European countries, the growth percentages in these countries are higher.
A phenomenon that constitutes an enormous problem in all western European countries is the high rate of youth unemployment. Almost everywhere, the percentage is double that of the rest of the labor force (CBS, 2003). Youth unemployment varied in early 2001 for people under the age of 25 from less than 10% in the Netherlands and Germany to over 25% in France and Italy (Meijers & Te Riele, in press). Sweden, Belgium and the United Kingdom took up a middle position. In southern European countries, youth unemployment rates are much higher: over 30% in Spain and Italy. In these countries, there are also larger differences between boys and girls, the latter being in the worse position.

2. Diversity and variation

The socio-demographic trends described above are general tendencies all young people have to face. However, other developments bring more diversity and variants in life-contexts. Consequently, the life-course is losing its standard pattern. The new representation of the life-course has become a map on which one charts one’s own destination and the route how to reach it. One’s own potential must constantly be adjusted to the available means. Particularly strong among young Dutch people is the rise of individualism. In every part of their life – at home, in leisure time, at school and in work – an individualistic outlook is prevalent. Individualism is rapidly on the rise, especially in the modern Dutch family, in the educational system, and the peer world, (Dieleman & Van der Lans, 1999). Becoming independent and responsible are important goals. Studies of parents and teachers show much consensus about the aims of education (Veugelers & De Kat, 1998; Dieleman, 2000). The main ones are respect for one’s own individuality and that of others. Large surveys in the Netherlands show that parents attach a major importance to educating children to become autonomous and self-responsible (Rispens et al., 1996). Conformity scores low and an item such as “obeying parents” hardly attracts any adherents.

A source of insecurity in this process is the disappearance of the traditional social capital. The community ties that were maintained by family, church and neighborhood have lost their meaning. Government had taken over the responsibility for material care in times of need. However, since the 1980s, the policy has changed: greater economic independence is demanded of its citizens and the responsibility for this is placed with the individual (Van Veen, 1997). Thus, the government co-directs the progressing individualization and appeals to flexibility. It is, again, young people to whom the most urgent appeal is directed. Young people are supposed to react to possibilities and opportunities with alertness and initiative.
They are being made responsible for their own biography and career. At the same time, they are depending on their parents for a much longer period than in the past. Although in most families they have become discussion partners with a voice in many decisions, their influence outside the home varies. In some areas, they enjoy an adult status (consumer, leisure time), in others they have to conform to paternalism and adult authority. In short, their life is filled with status inconsistencies and they lack a clear guide (Hurrelman, 1994). They constantly move between dependence and independence, between responsibility and tutelage, and are therefore often referred to as the yo-yo generation (Pais, 1995).

Variations in forms of living together

Although the nuclear family is still the most important form of living together, the relative number of complete family households is steadily decreasing and is losing its monopoly position. The number of one-person households is increasing relatively fast. One cause is ageing, which has led to a high increase in the number of single widows and widowers. However, this is not the only cause. Even at a young age, people increasingly remain single, whether out of choice or not. About one third of all marriages end in divorce and about one out of six children between the age of 12 and 18 also grows up in a single-parent family (CBS, 2003). In our neighboring countries, these percentages are higher: Belgium 17%, Germany 14%, France 16%, and the United Kingdom 22% (Eurostat, 1997). In the vast majority of these families, the single parent is the mother.

However, there are also many changes in the complete family households. In the past, it was common for the father to work elsewhere and for the mother to do the housekeeping and look after the children. This is changing now, and in the Netherlands, this change is more pronounced, because in the past there were relatively less married women with a job than elsewhere in the EC. Another change concerns the establishment of a personal household. Many young people live longer with their parents. This is especially the case in southern European countries. In Spain, Italy, and Portugal, more than four-fifths of 20-24 year-olds live with their parents. In the northern countries, including France, this varies between 50% and 60% (Eurostat, 1997). Although young people do not mind living with their parents, most of them in the EC still regard this as a decision that has been forced upon their generation by the prevailing circumstances (Euro Barometer, 1997).

When they do leave home, most young people find a partner and live together for quite a number of years, having established a joint household before they actually get married (CBS, 2003). And the number that doesn’t even bother about this last step and is content with
living together -whether under a formal agreement or not- is also on the increase. Because postponement of marriage occurs on a massive scale, we may by now call it a standard pattern. The majority also no longer has any moral qualms about it (Eurostat, 1997). In spite of all changes and demographic shifts, the nuclear family has not lost its attractions. When asked for their future plans, young people everywhere chose en masse for co-habitation or marrying and having children, which makes the family the most preferred of all the various forms. This preference also shows the importance that is attached to family-life. It is the most important concern people strive for, often more important even than work or leisure time (Fischer et al, 2000).

Not only does the nuclear family lose its monopoly, the conventions between young people and adults within the family are changing. Strict rules and obedience have been exchanged for mutual agreements that are reached on the basis of understanding, discussion, and consultation. The sociologist De Swaan (1982) once described this development as the transition from an obedience household to a negotiating household. In upbringing, an obedience household implies that the manners and communications between adults and youth are based on authority, and that young people only have limited means to exercise any influence. A negotiating household, on the other hand, is characterized by a more equal communication between generations, in which rules are negotiated, and where -in case of a difference of opinion- one looks for solutions that are acceptable to all participants. This shift from an obedience household to a negotiating household is present in all EC countries (Tonolo, 1998; Ravesloot, 1977). It is only in the extent and the pace that countries differ. In the northern European countries, this type of upbringing and family life has been common for some time and to such an extent, that it might be called a dominant style of upbringing (Rispens et al., 1996).

Multi-culturalization

Through immigration, many families from other countries and cultures have settled in the Netherlands. One in five young persons under the age of 25 are of foreign origin (CBS, 2003). Among them are firstly those that immigrated from former Dutch colonies, like Indonesia, Surinam and the Antilles. Next came immigrant workers, mainly from Turkey and Morocco, and members of their families. With their Arabic background and Islamic religion, they introduced new cultural forms in the Netherlands. Most of them live up (at least partly) to different norms and values, have different social orientations, and practice different life styles and ways of child rearing (Van der Hoek, 1993; Pels et al., 1998). Integration does not happen
automatically, it requires social intervention and government policy. Almost half of all people from Turkish, Moroccan, Surinam and Antillean origin live in the four large Dutch cities, and usually in specific districts and neighborhoods. In many towns, other cultures are still a minority, and there are even still regions and villages where ethnic groups are (almost) absent. Multi-cultural problems are therefore mainly to be found in the 'Randstad', the urban agglomeration in the west of the Netherlands. In the larger cities, many young people from foreign origin grow up under adverse living conditions (Veenman,1999). Second generations of immigrants often occupy a middle or transitional position. They derive elements from their parents’ background, as well as from their wider environment, in order to create a new body of thought or a new life style. By doing so, they contribute to cultural diversity.

Variations in the life-course

One’s life-course used to follow a standard pattern. Social institutions such as family, education and work more or less regulated one’s progress through life, and determined the transitions from one stage to the next. One grew up in a family, went to school, found a permanent job after only a brief period of uncertainty, chose a partner, started a family and brought up children. Variations in this pattern hardly existed. The nature of the life-stages, their sequence and the periods of transition were very similar for most, although the trajectories, of course, differed in respect to sex and social class. However, nowadays, there are many variations in the life-course. There are more choices and moments of choice. Once a certain trajectory has been chosen, it does not necessarily mean it should be followed to the end. This is the case with education, with work, but also with family. The transition from youth to adulthood is also less abrupt. There is a twilight period of increasing length in which young people enjoy much independence in certain areas, but remain dependent in others. They stay at school longer, but at the same time they are addressed by the commercial sector as if they were adult consumers. Marriage and having children is postponed. Marriage had therefore lost its former meaning as a transition from youth to adulthood. Most western youth now feel that their adulthood starts with taking on self-responsibility and financial independence (Arnett, 1998). This is less so for members of ethnic groups that originate from cultures where marriage around the age of 20 still marks the transition from child to adult (Meijers, 1997).

This ambiguity causes status inconsistencies, requiring that young people alternate, or combine, dependence and independence (Bauman, 1992). It involves constant code-switching, and is mostly needed in environments where traditional authority dominates and obedience is
demanded, but where other environments simultaneously appeal to one’s independence. Not all-young people can (or want to) accept the status inconsistencies of modern youth existence, and they come into conflicts. The lack of independence young people experience in education, for instance, is often the reason for school dropout. If there is no success at school, the mental strain that is caused by lack of independence is the result. They want to earn money, be financially independent, and to make their own decisions (Dieleman, 1997).

The prolonged ambiguity of youth status –with the attendant inconsistencies- makes identity development more arduous. Psychologists like Archer (1992) and Montmayor (1992) believe that the forming of identity has become a more difficult task for young people than it was in the past. While developmental tasks have remained more or less the same, many traditional securities have disappeared. Former points of orientation, such as profession, sexual role and marriage, have vanished. Things that were obvious before have gone. This may have created more freedom, but it also reduced protection and security. The risk of harm caused by one’s decisions has grown and undermines the social moratorium that young people have been granted in the past, in order to exempt them from certain social duties and responsibilities (Dieleman, 1997). All these changes have given rise to new questions about identity development in the Netherlands (Dieleman, 1999). This process is less seen as a continuous internalization of given knowledge and values, and more as a mastering of universal principles enabling autonomy and self-reflection. Emphasis is placed on so-called “meta-skills”, which enable pupils to take a critical stance towards the knowledge and values offered and, thus, to realize a "personalized" integration of knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Learning is increasingly seen as (a significant part of) active identity-construction, which is a life-project (Giddens 1992), and has a dialogical, narrative character, and is therefore always an activity of personal meaning-giving. Identity-construction for the young Dutch more than ever involves handling difficult contradictions, orchestrating diverse perspectives, and managing different participations and performances in heterogeneous communities.

3. The transition from school to work

Several years ago, students of the department of Education and Information of the University of Leiden interviewed their parents and grandparents in the context of a research project. They attempted to sketch the relationships between education, employment, and life stories for each generation. Interestingly, the phrase “our kind of people” kept turning up in the interviews with the grandparents. With this single phrase, those interviewed expressed that their life
stories were largely dominated by the (role expectations of the) social group to which they belonged. Not only was the amount of education influenced by this, but also the type of education, the type of work that they could and wanted to do, with whom they married, and where they lived once they were married. Their children, the parents of the interviewers, had much more freedom of choice, mainly because upward mobility was accepted in the 1950’s, and because of the explosive growth in educational participation in the 1960’s in combination with the growth of the economy. However, even this generation hardly made a conscious choice for a life path and for a career. Within their available opportunity structure (Roberts, 1968) – which was hardly a coincidence, sociologically speaking– they often followed a certain career path and grew slowly but surely in their careers as well as other social roles.

The transition from an industrial society (i.e., a society where industrial production is dominant) to a knowledge society (i.e., a society where knowledge is the most important factor in production) ended this institutionalized socialization. Existential as well as task uncertainty increased (Meijers & Den Broeder, 1999). Existential uncertainty is the result of the increasing individualization of traditional gender-based roles, but it also questions the place and meaning of paid employment in one’s own life story. Task uncertainty is the result of an extensive flexibilization in the organization of labor, which confronts workers with necessity of regularly changing one’s job, and/or of working in processes or projects without a clear task description. At this moment, 10-15% of the Dutch labor force work on the basis of so-called “flexible” contracts (via employment bureaus); approximately 20% of the youth had a “flexible” contract during the last decennium (Meijers & Te Riele, 2003).

The result of this increasing task and existential uncertainty is that the youth have to make more of their own choices concerning their (life) career. In the industrial labor organization, one spoke primarily of “life-long employment”: the golden watch was proof of good behavior for the employer as well as the employee. The labor career was rather static: there was hardly any horizontal mobility –with the exception of some job hopping at the beginning of one’s career- while vertical mobility followed stable and widely recognized patterns. One’s “career” was determined by one’s educational qualifications in combination with seniority (Batenburg & De Witte, 1995). Since 1945, educational qualifications (i.e., the diploma) determined the level at which one entered a company. Thereafter, everything was a question of seniority: after a specific number of years, one was promoted. Therefore, most employees knew at the beginning of their career rather accurately at which level (and at what salary) they would end their career.
In the flexible, post-industrial labor organization, such pre-determined career paths are becoming less and less common. Employability and flexibility are the operative key words (Fruytier & Klomps, 2000; Arthur, Inkson & Pringle, 1999). In such a situation, careers paths have largely become unpredictable. An employee is no longer hired on the basis of professional or functional descriptions, but increasingly on the basis of the competencies required to participate in a project and/or process. This means that careers are becoming increasingly cyclical: at the end of a project it has to be re-determined whether (and if so: where) an employee fits into the organization. In addition, it means that horizontal mobility is much more important than vertical mobility. Finally, it means that personality characteristics, such as feelings of responsibility, creativity, and stress-resistance, are becoming just as important as traditional professional qualities (Moelker, 1992; Van Beek, 1993; Glebbeek, 1993). Table 1 illustrates that this does not only apply to so-called “knowledge workers”, but also to other employers in a service economy, such as house painters. Employers also expect from them that they demonstrate personal qualities in their interaction with customers. In order to do this, they must possess competences that were not needed in an industrial economy, and were even seen by employers as being “undesirable”.

**Table 1. Required competences for the ordinary painter**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>According to employers (N=105)</th>
<th>According to employees (N=745)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Neatness and politeness (93%)</td>
<td>1. Knowledge of materials (99%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Can work together with colleagues (89%)</td>
<td>2. Knows ‘tricks of the trade’ (97%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Can accept constructive criticism (75%)</td>
<td>3. Can accept constructive criticism (88%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. Loyal to the company (70%)</td>
<td>4. Loyal to the company (78%)</td>
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<td>5. Ambassador for the company (65%)</td>
<td>5. Ambassador for the company (67%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Can work in a structured manner (62%)</td>
<td>6. Neatness and politeness (65%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Can explain ‘what’ and ‘why’ to the customer (62%)</td>
<td>7. Can explain ‘what’ and ‘why’ to the customer (63%)</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Knowledge of materials (57%)</td>
<td>8. Can work together with colleagues (59%)</td>
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<td>9. Precision in declaring hours (57%)</td>
<td>9. Thinks ahead (adapts activities during rainy weather, etc.) (56%)</td>
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<td>10. Work looks good (53%)</td>
<td>10. Does everything right the first time (54%)</td>
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In order to have good chances in the post-industrial labor marker, the individual has to be able to deal constructively with task and existential uncertainty, and be able to make his own decisions. The basis for this is what Giddens calls a “reflexive biography” (Giddens, 1991).
By that, he means that the individual has to become more self-reliant in relation to, not only his career, but also his life story. The individual can no longer rely on the existing cultural capital of his/her own social group, which, for the most part, consists of solutions for no longer existing or greatly altered problems. The individual has increasingly only his own experiences, and—to a lesser degree- the experiences of relevant others as a frame of reference and as a basis for one’s own life-plan. These experiences are not meaningful by themselves; they do not automatically produce behavioral “rules of thumb”. The development of a reflexive biography means that one’s own experiences, and the manner in which these experiences have till now been given meaning, have to become the object of reflection. The development of a reflexive biography is therefore—in essence— the process of making one’s identity transparent. For the life domain “work”, this means the conscious development of a “work identity”. The “work identity” may be defined as a configuration of meanings that has been developed around two questions: “What is the meaning of work in and for my life?” and “What meaning do I want to have for, or give, others by means of my work?” The answer to the first question concerns the personal meaning given to work. The answer to the second indicates the manner in which (i.e., in which social role) the individual wants to identify with the society of which he or she is part.

**Possibilities for the development of a work identity**

Gottfredson (1981) has shown that, at the beginning of secondary education, young people have, with regard to work, a so-called “zone of acceptable occupational alternatives”, which is the result of primary socialization processes. The occupations within this zone have an acceptable level of prestige (i.e., social status), gender role type, and required (educational) investment for the individual concerned. During puberty, a “unique self” is developed, wherein personal preferences and evaluations are brought into play. The boundaries of this zone of “acceptable alternative occupations” are related to one’s own social class, and are rarely exceeded, at least while social-cultural and social-economic relations are stable. The choice of one’s occupation during this life-phase is largely a social-cognitive learning process, the results of which are determined by self confidence (self efficacy), and—to a lesser extent—the expected result (outcome expectations) (Byars & Hackett, 1998). Self-confidence is

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primarily developed by means of vicarious learning that this positively reinforced (Bandura, 1997). In other words, individuals attempt to attain a place in certain social groups by means of conforming to the behavioral and attitudinal demands made by that group. To that end, they attempt to discern which behavioral rules the group follows, in order to subsequently apply those rules to their own behavior. If this behavior is then appreciated by the group (i.e., positive reinforcement), then it becomes more likely that these rules (and the corresponding behavior) are internalized.

The point is that young people, in present-day society, rarely ever gain experience by working, and therefore have little opportunity to develop the desire to belong to a specific occupational group. There are four reasons for this:

- work has –since the 1960s- increasingly disappeared from the living environment and has concentrated itself in so-called “industrial” locations;
- occupations themselves are disappearing.\(^7\) Occupations are clearly demarcated from other occupations and have a recognizable social meaning. In this way, occupations can manifest themselves as a social role. Occupations are being replaced by much more vaguely defined functions –with a much less clearly defined social meaning;
- there appears to be a continuous extension of adolescence that is seen to be a moratorium, by the young as well as adults. “Being young” is seen as a combination of going to school and having fun, and not as a concrete preparation for adulthood;
- the educational system has increasingly become a “pedagogic reserve”. The motto “We aren’t learning for the school system, but for living” has been turned upside down in the last decennia. Even vocational education has become quite general, in order to give all children an equal chance to obtain as high a diploma as possible. (Meijers, 1983). Concretely this means that two axioms are being applied: theory precedes practical experience, and first of all simple and -only then- more complex learning situations.

The consequence of this is that young people can hardly develop preferences for a specific occupation, or even –more generally- an orientation concerning their own future (Doets et al., 2000; Meijers, 1995). Their “life stories” -at this part of their life- is best characterized as being externally driven. Their parents exercise great pressure on them to stay in the school.

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\(^7\) In 1976 Wiegersma en Van Bochove (1976) distinguish in the Nederland between 5.500 occupations and approximately 2.500 functions. In 1993 the CBS counted 1211 occupations en circa 23.000 functions (CBS, 1993).
system as long as possible, and to achieve as highly as possible (Gibson et al., 1991). Their teachers determine, on the basis of grades obtained by these young people, which continuation of their education is most appropriate. In that way, they determine to a large extent the nature and level of future professional activities to which the young people will be admitted (Dronkers & Ultee, 1995). And the young people themselves: they survive the educational systems and they develop their personality primarily in their leisure time. This is not to imply that they don’t learn anything. Of course they learn something – in addition to survival skills. However, what they learn is –from the perspective of the school- largely accidental: from a teacher who doesn’t limit himself to only teaching the course requirements but is genuinely interested in the student, from a previously existing interest of the student, from the social class of the student, from the support given by the parents, etc.

The consequence is –as previously mentioned- that the boundaries of the zone of acceptable occupational alternatives, such as those that already exist at the beginning of secondary education, are only rarely exceeded. To put it another way: young people derive their wishes for the future primarily on the basis of their parents’ example (Fuchs-Heinritz, 2000, 55ff.) even though the influence of peers is increasing (Meeus, Pels & Vollebergh, 1999). Weekend and part-time jobs are very popular with young people. In 1999, 57% of the youth following full-time education also have a paid job (CBS, 2001: 80); the National Student study showed that in 2001 79% of students in secondary education has a job (Nibud, 2002). These jobs have little, or perhaps only a negative, influence on study- and occupational-choice. There are three reasons for this (Greenberger & Steinberg, 1986; Steinberg, 1982; Mortimer & Kirkpatrick Johnson, 1999; Hansen & Jarvis, 2000). In the first place, the vast majority of the work done by young people is neither cognitively nor emotionally challenging. In the second place, neither the employer nor the youthful employee attaches any relation between the work being done and the future. In other words, it is not seen as part of a career, but as a marginal phenomenon. Finally, the potential socializing influences of this sort of work are dwarfed in comparison to the influences of primary socialization and the values and norms communicated therein. Summarizing, part-time and/or summer jobs are viewed by young people (and by the adults which are relevant for them) as a way of earning some extra money, but these jobs have absolutely no association whatsoever with life fulfillment. A consequence of this fact is that young people learn nothing from this work as far as developing a work-related identity is concerned. Simply put, young people, as well as adults, feel that part-time and summer jobs have nothing to do with developing a work-related identity. Veendrick (1993:324) concludes that part-time and summer jobs are “nothing more than an unpleasant chore: their study or
education offers them sufficient possibilities for identification in order to compensate for this.” Greenberger & Steinberg (1986: 235) also conclude on the basis of their review that these jobs for young people "do not generally provide environments conducive to psychological growth and development". The fact that the boundaries of the acceptable alternative occupations, as they exist at the beginning of secondary education, are rarely exceeded, is certainly not an assurance that this never happens. When the social environment offers larger or other possibilities for development, this zone of acceptable alternative occupations may change. For example, when social attitudes about the social role of women changed during the 1970s, this resulted in a change in identity (self image) in girls and women in the 1980s (Coleman & Hendry, 1990; Meeus, 1991). The consequence of this was less traditional study- and occupational choices (Peters, 1992). The presence of adults who are viewed as role models and with whom young people can identify, seems to be important for making choices outside of the zone (thereby deviating from the norms and values of their parents) (Conger & Petersen, 1984; Meijers & Reuling, 2002).

*Freedom of choice versus forced choice*

In opposition to the importance attached to self development is the pressure to conform to scholastic behavioral and attitudinal requirements, noting that the educational systems has become *the* de facto selection instrument. The school career that one has been able to achieve has become the primary determining factor for one’s success in life (De Graaf & Luijkx, 1995). The consequence of this is that young people today spend a great deal of energy (and possibly also time) trying to balance the demands of school and leisure time. Gibson et al. (1991, 1992) asked young people what the five most important problems in their lives were. Problems with school dominated all other problems, making up 32% of all problems mentioned. The authors indicated that this category concerned questions involving the value of investing in education and schooling, as well as problems caused by parental and teacher pressure to achieve good grades. The study of Wittebrood & Keuzenkamp (2000) re-confirms this finding. Dutch young people are often deeply concerned about their school achievements, because they are very conscious that the knowledge society demands an ever-higher educational level. In addition, demands for self-reliance frighten many young people, because they don’t feel competent enough to carry that responsibility (Luken, 1999).

Other studies indicate as well that today’s youth are quite insecure about their own future:
• In 1997, almost two thirds of the German youth had no confidence in their own future. This is almost 25% more than in 1991 (Jugendwerk der Deutschen Shell, 1997). In 1999, confidence in the future has grown somewhat, possibly as a result of better economic prospects. However, there is certainly little sign of “unbridled optimism”: about 40% of the young people interviewed were actually rather pessimistic about the future (Fischer et al., 2000: 13).

• About 75% of the German youth agreed with the statement that everything has become so uncertain that one should be prepared for everything and everyone (Heitmeyer et al., 1995; Holtappels et al., 1997).

• 40% of Belgian youth are of the opinion that the future is too uncertain to be able to plan very far ahead (Elchardus et al., 1997).

• More than one third of the Italian youth foresees large risks involved in making choices for one’s own future (e.g., occupation and partner). They accept this as an inevitable characteristic of modern life (Buzzi et al., 1997).

The knowledge that their future is uncertain is a source of negative feelings by many young people. More than one third of the Dutch youth feels frightened when thinking of the future (van der Linden, 1991) and 20% is quite concerned about their personal future (Scholierenonderzoek, 1994). Choquet en Ledoux (1994) found that almost 25% of the French youth wrestles with feelings of despair, when considering their future.

A recent study of mental fatigue uncovered contradictory results for the Dutch youth (Breedveld & Van den Broek, 2002). On the one hand, there seems to be little difference between the youth and adults in subjective and objective time pressures. Young people between 12 and 19 years of age have -on average- 47 hours per week of obligations in terms of work, care, and/or study. That is only 4.1 hours less than the age group between 20 and 34 years, which has the largest amount of “mandatory hours” per week. Almost half of the young people (46%) has a feeling of being under pressure for one or more days per week; they obviously feel more time pressure than people 50 years of age or older, but less pressure than those between 20 and 49 years of age. On the other hand, it is striking to note –as shown in table 2- that in 2000 more young people said that they have sufficient leisure time as compared to 1977 (71% versus 67%). They also said that they feel less rushed in their leisure time than young people in 1974 (26% versus 30%). This contradicts the general trend: in 2000 fewer adults felt that they had sufficient leisure time than in 1977, while they also felt
more rushed in their leisure hours than they did in 1974. Apparently, young people are able to better separate their leisure and their mandatory hours: the two seem to be separate worlds.

**Table 2. Subjective judgments about leisure time in 1977 and 1974 versus 2000, split by gender and age**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender/age</th>
<th>% sufficient leisure time</th>
<th>% feelings of being rushed during leisure time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 - 24 years</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 – 34 years</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35 – 49 years</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50 – 64 years</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Breedveld & Van den Broek, 2002:25 (adapted by present author)

We also encountered such a differentiation in a longitudinal study of the work orientation of young people attending school, which we carried out during the early 1990s (Meijers, 1995). For the large majority of young people school and leisure time were totally separate worlds, as were youth and adulthood. Everyone wanted to eventually accept the role of adult and a good education was seen as an essential prerequisite in order to do that. However, these young people were not concerned in their daily affairs about how they wanted to give form to their adulthood. The consequences: an extremely vague future orientation, a strictly functional experience of their school career (school career as survival strategy), and a primarily hedonistic orientation towards one’s life (forever young, enjoy your youth).

**(Young) adulthood**

The consequence of this is that few young people, at the moment that they enter the job market, have actually developed a work identity. The first job -for most young people- is in many ways a practical shock. Not only are they confronted with a daily rhythm that is more stringent than they were used to, but they are also required to learn to function in a social environment that is regulated by norms and values other than those of the educational system. They have to adapt
in three different ways: (a) they have to acquire the technical-instrumental skills necessary to carry out their tasks; (b) they have to learn to be successful in their new role as employee and they have to integrate this new role in the others roles that they already fulfill; and (c) they have to develop a positive attitude towards the group values and norms that they encounter at their work (Wenger, 1998). It is therefore hardly surprising that “job hopping” is rather frequent at the beginning of a career. Van der Linden and Dijkman remark, on the basis of their research findings, that this mobility is caused by “the fact that young people are still busy with their first acquaintance with the world of work and career. Their work is a form of search. A portion of these young people are searching –by means of trial and error- for an acceptable niche in the workplace, and everything that they attempt has a provisional character” (Van der Linden & Dijkman, 1989: 340).

The practical shock that they undergo is -for the large majority of young- only temporary. They are, for the most part, able to adapt, certainly if they are properly introduced into the workplace and are initially supported by an experienced colleague. Recent research shows that good support of young people in their first job is relatively rare (Meijers, 2003). When support is absent and when there are few possibilities for learning on the job, it turns out that the values and norms acquired in the primary socialization strongly determine the adaptation and socialization over a longer term (Fischer, 1986). This often has negative consequences for the employability of less well-educated young people.

4. Acquiring a stable identity – a difficult task

Acquiring a stable identity in the transition from youth to adulthood has become increasingly difficult for young people in the Netherlands during the last decennia. In order to clarify this statement, we will first discuss the process of identity development.

The development of identity, according to Meijers & Wardekker (2002), is a learning process starting with a significant experience coupled with emotions. Such an experience is mostly an experience of conflict, of shortcoming, of not being able to act, and/or of uncertainty, which is coupled with negative emotions. This experience occurs when an individual drops out of ‘normality’ (for instance, due to a serious illness or job loss), or when an individual tries to participate in a social practice in a more central or more competent way. He thus brings himself into a situation where he is unable to act adequately, because he cannot fully identify with the new situation and its (role related) exigencies. This may be primarily a cognitive problem of not understanding the situation or not possessing the necessary
knowledge or skills. More often, the problem will be of an emotional nature: earlier identifications and bonding may pose obstructions – in other words, the present identity configuration is not adequate to the situation. The experience that is at the beginning of identity learning is therefore best called a “boundary experience”: the boundaries of the self-image become visible.

To restore the 'fit', the individual looks for and constructs a balance between emotions and cognitions. It can and will – at least initially – do this by falling back on conditioned reflexes. However, such a reaction normally has a defensive character, and is not very productive for the individual when its environment keeps confronting him with a boundary experience (for example, because the environment itself is involved in a fundamental change). In such a situation, the individual will need to restore the balance in a dialogical way (i.e. by means of dialogue). He or she uses concepts (shared meanings) available in the social environment to understand the boundary experience and the emotions it evokes. To be able to do this, the individual has to participate in an existing discourse. Therefore, this step is called 'discursive meaning–giving'. In this process, the individual tries to understand what is happening or has happened to him by finding (possibly together with others) images, analogies, and concepts that provide an insight that is cognitively and emotionally satisfying for all participants in the dialogue. It is only if the emotion is understood by the individual, that is, can be put into words, that the situation causing the emotion can obtain a meaningful place in the individual's own life story. If this is successful, the result of discursive meaning-giving will be mutual understanding and shared values. However, in order to reach this result, an introspective dialogue has to be carried out at the same time. Understanding a situation in terms of shared concepts does not suffice: the 'new' concepts, and thus the situation, must acquire personal meaning (or 'sense') for the individual, before he is able and willing to act adequately in this situation: “The problem of identity is the problem of arriving at a life story that makes sense”, says McAdams (1985:18). This means that the (role) demands of the situation must not only be understood, but must also get a place in the individual's identity configuration. We call this process 'intuitive sense-giving'. In this process, the images, metaphors, and analogies must be coupled to emotions and the experienced self-image, so that once again a feeling of fit is reached between person and situation.

Constructing an identity is thus a circular process, in which experiences and identity are related by using images and concepts that are endowed with personal sense. In this process, identification with persons, roles, organizations, values, etc. is accomplished by
reinterpreting the self and the situation. Thus, identity is a configuration of meanings that constantly changes when, as a result of new experiences, new elements have to be accommodated. The reverse is also true: concepts and meanings that are disponible -but cannot be related to experiences and thus do not acquire personal sense- will not become part of the identity configuration. The model just described is rendered visually in Figure 1.

We can now describe –on the basis of this model- why the task of acquiring a stable identity is quite difficult for young people at this moment. In the first place, young people have been sheltered by their parents -as well as others responsible for their upbringing- from boundary experiences during the last decennia. In the Netherlands, we sometimes speak of the “back seat generation”: young people who are transported by their parents in the back seat of the car to carefully selected activities, because it is too dangerous to allow them to explore society on their own. Even in the educational system, young people are sheltered from “real” experiences, because the Dutch educational system is completely dominated by the approach of teaching the required educational materials. It is true that sometimes reference is made to the Latin motto ‘Non scolae, sed vitae discimus’ (we learn for living, not for school), but the reality is the exact opposite. Young people learn only for the school. The consequence of this is that (and also our second reason) the relation between young people and their teachers may be characterized –in the words of Willis (1977)- an exchange of knowledge for order. There is hardly any discursive meaning-giving at all, while the process of intuitive sense-giving is made even more difficult, because no one is really interested in the life history of an individual. And, when a life history cannot be told, then it becomes obscure and largely unconscious. The third reason is that there is no room for emotions in the learning process, either in the school or in the work place. When an exchange of knowledge for order is dominant, ideas are not offered ”with love”. A recent study shows that “warm relations” hardly exist between young people and their teachers in the educational systems, or their teachers in the work place (Meijers & Geurts, 2002; Meijers, 2003). There seems to be only a purely functional relationship instead of pedagogic one.

The lack of opportunities for stable identity formation has not been a socially recognized problem during the last decennia. The main reason for this was that there was sufficient economic growth that made it possible to “buy” solutions for problems caused by the actual non-integration of youth. At this moment, a strategy of “buying” a solution is
rapidly becoming problematical, due to the threat of an economic recession (with quickly growing youth unemployment), increasing tensions between different social groups (along the traditional fault lines of labor and capital, as well as the newer ethnic ones), and substantial social unease (i.e., feelings of un-safety, that was highlighted during the parliamentary elections in 2002, when the traditional political parties lost a huge number of members, and new parties emerged with theme’s which were previously taboo, such as the negative consequences of multi-culturalization).

This almost certainly means that young people will be confronted with different types of boundary experiences (mainly unemployment and ethnic disenfranchisement) during the coming years, however without the pedagogic structures and relations that would encourage discursive meaning-giving and intuitive sense-giving. In this sense, we may speak of a “paradise lost”.

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