

Young Adult Migrants' Representation of Ethnic, Gender and Generational Disadvantage in Italy

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Abstract:

The literature on the division of labour and labour market segmentation has generally stressed that young people and migrants are, for different reasons, the most disadvantaged categories of workers. Faced with these inequalities, numerous studies have investigated how young people represent and understand their social disadvantage. Similar research on migrant workers is very limited, however, especially as regards young migrants. This article aims to contribute to filling this gap. Our goal is to examine how young adult migrants represent their experiences of ethnic, gender and generational disadvantage and discrimination in the occupational domain. The paper is based on an analysis of in-depth interviews conducted with young adult migrants of Moroccan and Romanian origin living in the Veneto region of Italy.

Keywords:

Workers; Moroccan migrants; Romanian Migrants; Young People; Social Disadvantage; Self-representation.

Introduction

Young people suffer more than older generations from unemployment, sub-standard jobs and weak welfare protections (Woodman and Wyn 2015; Mendola, Busetta, and Aassve 2016). Some studies argue that young adults are the social group worst hit by the negative fallout of globalisation processes (Buchholz et al. 2009; Blossfeld, Hofäcker, and Bertolini 2011). In particular, the literature on the division of labour and labour market segmentation has generally stressed that young people and migrants are, for different reasons, the most disadvantaged categories of workers (Fullin and Reyneri 2011; Barbieri et al. 2016; Sergi, Cefalo, and Kazepov 2018). Faced with these inequalities, numerous studies have investigated how Italian-born young people represent and understand their social

disadvantage (see the literature review below). Similar research on migrant workers is very limited, however (Cederberg 2014), especially as regards young migrants.

This article aims to contribute to filling this gap. Our goal is to examine how young adult migrants represent and explain their experiences of ethnic, gender and generational disadvantage and discrimination in the occupational domain, and in the Italian labour market in particular. We try to answer several research questions. What types of discrimination do young migrants experience in the labour market? Who, in their opinion, are the most hostile actors? Do they think their biographies are framed by structural constraints, or do they represent themselves as free to choose and capable of self-fulfilment?

The study is based on an analysis of in-depth interviews conducted with young adult migrants of Moroccan and Romanian origin. Adopting the Eurostat definition, we consider young adults as individuals from 18 to 34 years of age who are in transition from their dependent childhood to independent adulthood (Eurostat 2010). The two above-mentioned nationalities were chosen because they are numerically the largest foreign groups in Italy (Demo Istat 2016). They are also significant as case studies because recent research on ethnic discrimination found that North Africans experience the most discrimination based on ethnic background (FRA 2017).

This article consists of five parts. The first critically reviews the debate in the field of Youth Studies on young people's representations of disadvantage. We believe that an analysis of this literature can make an important contribution to the development of Ethnic and Racial Studies, particularly as concerns people's understanding of discrimination. We take an intersectional approach (Crenshaw 1989; Lutz 2006), to better analyse how age, gender, class and migrant condition shape the experiences and practices narrated by our interviewees. In the second and third parts, we describe our method and contextualise our interviewees in the Moroccan and Romanian migration patterns and the Veneto region's socio-economic context. Finally, the fourth and fifth parts analyse our respondents' stories of the experience of discrimination and inequality. Analysing such representations is important in framing the effects of discrimination on the

everyday lives and projects of young people coping with racism and ethnicisation due to their country of origin.

Youth Studies and subjective understanding of advantage and disadvantage

Since the 1920s, Youth Studies have alternated between two theoretical approaches. On the one hand, there were those more interested in analysing the structural constraints at school and in the workplace, and the family trajectories of young people. On the other, there were those focusing on young people's discourses about their life experiences (Colombo and Rebughini 2015). Various issues were investigated taking both approaches, including youth subcultures and countercultures, transitions to adulthood, rites of passage, practices and representations.

The recent literature on young people and intergenerational disadvantage highlights how young people shape their life paths within a given context of economic and social crisis (Cairns, Growiec, and Almeida, 2014; López-Andreu and Verd 2016). Publications on young people's understanding of their socio-economic position tend developed within the theoretical debate on individualisation (Beck 1992; Mythen and Gabe 2005; Atkinson and Will 2007). They focus on two arguments. Some studies stress that young people are aware of a social stratification in hierarchies by class, gender, age, ethnicity, race and citizenship. Others make the point that inequalities are blurred as part of a view that delegates to individuals the responsibility for their own success or failure. These studies discussed whether individual biographies are represented as the result of personal choices or the effect of structural forces. The works of Brannen and Nilsen (2005) and Farrugia (2001) show how young people have internalised the neoliberal ideology of free choice. Analysing young people's narratives, they find a strong influence of free choice rhetoric that makes them unable or unwilling to identify their advantages and disadvantages, and induces them to adopt a discourse of moralised personal responsibility. On the other hand, Devadason (2006), Threadgold and Nilan (2009) and Hjort (2014) write that, despite a strong sense of self as the sole resource for self-realisation, the narrations of working class youths also take the structural constraints associated with their starting point into consideration.

In Italy, research on young people's subjective understanding of social inequalities mainly concern the effects of the flexibilisation of jobs and the Great Recession, and it often only considers the narrations of Italians. Bertolini (2012) investigated the identity-making processes and material aspects deriving from precarious work in the experiences of young people. As Bradley and Devadason (2008) had previously reported, Colombo and Rebughini (2015) also found that young Italians in Milan internalise job flexibility, and are persuaded that their future lies in their own hands. The only structural inequality that they identify is the generational one – 'our parents had a better life than us' – while economic, social and cultural capital are described as individual qualities. Another study focused on young people born in Italy with both Italian and foreign heritage (Orlandi 2015): their discourses on their living conditions and the challenges they faced in implementing their life projects revealed different stories for people with a different cultural capital. The better educated expressed a strong degree of internalisation of the individualised approach of neoliberal ideology. They saw the economic crisis is an unfavourable event, but they coped with it individually by taking a flexible approach. On the other hand, the young people with less cultural capital felt the burden of the economic downturn. Those belonging to ethnic minorities particularly stressed the effect of their linguistic and cultural background as a structural disadvantage limiting their life path. Spanò (2015) argues instead that migrants' children express a class-based understanding of the effects of the recession, while no ethnic or racial dimensions emerge. Like other workers, they are affected inasmuch as they belong to the working class, not because of their foreign origins.

In Italy and other southern European countries, the recent literature on youth has also investigated the impact of intra-generational inequalities (Barone, Lucchini, and Schizzerotto 2011; Schizzerotto, Trivellato, and Sartor 2011) and the obstacles and opportunities in the labour market (Bertolini 2012; Sgritta 2014). More specifically, studies in Italy on the relationship between young migrants and the labour market have focused on employment profiles, work expectations and career strategies (Camozzi 2014; Fellini and Fullin 2015; Orlandi 2015). The vulnerability deriving from being unable to count on family ties in a familistic society like Italy was also stressed (Dalla Zuanna, Farina, and Strozza 2009).

In this context, it seems particularly useful to take an intersectional perspective in comparing and analysing young people's self-representations in their own narratives. We look for specific resources and obstacles to their job paths, as well as similarities within this age group. We use the intersectional approach to shed light on young people's various ways of understanding how society is structured, with its social divisions by age, gender and social class, and immigrant status. We focus on these patterns of social division (though there are others) because they are the most relevant intersections in our research field. Age is useful for comparing young people's conditions with those of older workers. It seems helpful to compare immigrants with autochthonous Italians. Gender and nationality are relevant when it comes to considering similarities and differences in the "young migrants group". To analyse the intersection between the structural and the subjective levels (Mc Call 2005; Lutz 2006), we adopt an "intra-categorical method, acknowledging that social categories represent "stable and even durable relationships" to which individuals refer in their daily narrations. We also try to establish whether these categories help to clarify the experiences narrated by the young people we interviewed.

Shifting the focus to young adult migrants' experiences, this paper analyses how they experience and represent inequality and discrimination. We also aim to contribute to the debate by providing insight on the spaces that young adult migrants associate with episodes of discrimination, and the parties exhibiting discriminatory attitudes.

Finally, we find the literature on strategies for coping with stigmatisation (King and Mai 2009; Moroşanu and Fox 2013; Eijberts and Roggeband 2015) particularly helpful in interpreting our young adult migrants' discourses on their socio-economic position and opportunities for self-fulfilment. This literature is rooted on Goffman's seminal work (Goffman 1963) and investigates how stigmatised people react to stigma. Coping strategies may be individual or collective. They may range between the two extreme poles of concealing and consolidating (Eijberts and Roggeband 2015). In the following sections, we argue that the different discourses polarised between the rhetoric of free choice and the rhetoric of constraints can be interpreted as two different ways to cope with ethnic stigmatisation.

Method

The article analyses the narrations of 17 individuals who were each interviewed twice, first in 2010 and 2011 and then again in 2014 and 2015. At the time of the first interview, they were all young adults, i.e. aged between 18 and 34 (Eurostat 2010).

This is a secondary analysis conducted on interviews gathered as part of a longitudinal study on the impact of the Great Recession on migrant workers (for more information see author 1). Respondents were initially contacted because they had registered as unemployed at job centres in Camposampiero (near Padova) and Montebelluna (near Treviso), two representative manufacturing areas of the Veneto region. They were contacted a second time to follow up their life and work trajectories.

The 17 young adults involved in the study were selected from among 40 people of various ages. Following Mannehim's (1928) approach, in our definition of 'young adult', we chose people characterised not only by the relevant age band, but also those with similar life events and content, and especially those exposed to similar awareness stratification modalities (quoted text, 180).

The literature on the transition to adulthood in Italian, Moroccan and Romanian societies has emphasized that conventional markers of youth and adulthood are rather vague because life course de-standardisation and fluidification processes are taking place in all these societies (Kovacheva 2001; Fidolini 2016; Murphy 2012; Vlase and Preoteasa 2018; Spanò 2018). These processes take on different features depending on an individual's gender, urban or rural living environment, education, religious orientation, and social class.

In most cases, the young adults interviewed share much the same existential condition. They migrated to Italy alone and, while still young, they had to deal with the social, economic and cultural problems of their arrival in a new country, with or without the right papers. Given these difficulties, combined with those engendered by the economic recession, our interviewees had been living in precarious conditions for some time. As shown in Table 1, our sample includes 8 Moroccans (5 men and 3 women) and 9 Romanians (3 men and 6 women), who

arrived in Italy at an age in the range of 13 to 28 years, seeking work or accompanying a loved one.

Regardless of their class of origin and education, in Italy our interviewees have experienced a process of devaluation that has driven them lower in the social strata and labour market, where they can only find dirty, dangerous, difficult and poorly-paid jobs. They usually do manual work in the manufacturing, building, logistics and hospitality industries, or work as home cleaners or care workers. Only two young women from Romania – Monica and Violeta – have succeeded in obtaining a skilled job, after working for many years in low-skilled jobs.[2] Short periods of unemployment are quite common in their careers due to flexible employment practices, and because of the economic crisis and subsequent longstanding recession in Italy.

Table 1. Summary of interviewees

Alias	First interview	Second interview	Year of birth	Arrival in Italy
Moroccans				
Adil	2011(33), single, employed	2014(36), single, employed	1978	2000(22)
Ahmed	2011(31), married, 1 child, unemployed	2014(34), married, 1 child, unemployed	1980	2007(27)
Driss	2010(34), married, employed	2014(38), married, 2 children, unemployed	1976	2003(27)
Fatima	2011(31), married, 2 children, unemployed	2014 (34), married, 3 children, unemployed	1980	1997(17)
Imane	2011(28), married, 2 children, unemployed	2015(32), married, 3 children, unemployed	1983	2006(23)
Meriem	2011(26), divorced, pregnant, unemployed	2015 (30), divorced, 1 child, unemployed	1985	2009(24)
Nabil	2011(24), single, unemployed	2015(28), married, employed	1987	2000(13)
Tarik	2010(34), single, employed	2015(39), married, employed	1976	1999(23)
Romanians				
Anemona	2010(23), single, employed	2014(27), cohabitant, employed	1987	2004(17)
Aurora	2011(32), cohabitant, 1 child, unemployed	2014(35), cohabitant, 2 children, employed	1978	2005(27)
Damian	2011(24), married, 2 children, employed	2014(27), married, 3 children, employed	1987	2005(18)
Dana	2010 (32), married, 1 child, unemployed	2014(36), married, 2 children, unemployed	1978	2003(25)
Dora	2011(33), married, 1 child, unemployed	2014(36), married, 2 children, unemployed	1978	2000(22)
Martin	2010(24), single, employed	2016(30), cohabitant, employed	1986	2006(20)
Monica	2011(28), single, unemployed/student	2015(32), cohabitant, employed	1982	2004(22)
Nico	2010(34), single, employed	2014(38), single, unemployed	1976	2004(28)
Violeta	2010(32), single, employed	2014(36), cohabitant, 1 child, employed	1978	2001(23)

Our semi-structured interviews were conducted in various places: private homes, parks, bars and the offices of associations. The interviews were conducted in Italian in most cases, but a few were conducted in Moroccan Arabic. The topics

discussed concerned: the migration path; life in the country of origin; the decision to emigrate; the journey; settling in Italy; working experiences before and during the economic crisis; coping strategies during periods of unemployment; effects on the family; future prospects; experiences of discrimination and racism in Italy. The interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed. The names of the interviewees have been changed to protect their privacy.

Moroccan and Romanian migration to Italy and integration in the Veneto region

Moroccans have been migrating to Italy for longer than Romanians. The former started to arrive in Italy in the 1970s, the latter only in the late 1990s (Sacchetto 2004; Mghari and Fassi Fihri 2010; Ban 2012). The two groups also differ from the gender standpoint, since Moroccan migrants consisted mainly of young men, who were later joined by their wives and children, while Romanian women participated in the migration process from the beginning (Vianello 2007; Centro Studi e Ricerche IDOS 2013). These two migratory flows also differ in legal aspects: Moroccan migrants are subject to the legislation for non-EU citizens, while Romanians have been free to travel and settle in other EU countries since their country joined the EU in 2007.

When our research started, in 2010, there were 431,529 Moroccan residents in Italy. Nowadays, as at 2018, there are 416,531 (Istat 2018), and 47% of them are women. Young adults from 18 to 34 years old account for 29% (Istat 2018). As for Romanian nationals, there were 887,763 in 2010 and, by 2018, their number had risen to 1,190,091 (Istat 2018). Women make up 57%, and young adults (18-34) 39% of the total (Istat 2018).

Moroccan and Romanian nationals living in Veneto respectively represent 9% and 25% of the total foreign population in the region. Our Moroccan interviewees arrived after a lengthy journey through the Mediterranean, and several Italian regions. The Romanians came directly to Veneto, exploiting their social networks.

Veneto is a wealthy region situated in the north-east of Italy. It has a sizable manufacturing sector oriented towards the export market, and makes extensive use of foreign manual labour (Andall 2007; Sacchetto, Vianello 2013). Both Moroccan and Romanian workers have consequently been widely employed in

small- to medium-sized factories that are widespread in semi-rural areas. Romanian women have also been employed as home cleaners and care workers. Given the economic structure of the territory, Moroccan and Romanian migrants live both in the urban centres and in rural areas of the region.

With the economic crisis, foreign migrants living in Veneto experienced a downturn in their employment paths. Many of them were fired, but even with the recession job opportunities in this region continued to be relatively abundant (Veneto Lavoro 2011) and the unemployed – be they foreigners or Italians – could still find regular or irregular work relatively easily and quickly (Sacchetto, Vianello 2016).

Finally, it is important to mention in the context of this article that Veneto society has a strong tradition of anti-immigration political orientation, as expressed by its first political party, Lega Nord, at least. Lega Nord was born in Veneto under the name Liga Veneta in 1980. Later on, it merged with other regional and autonomist parties and took part in the foundation of the current Lega Nord (1991). Over the years, the Lega Nord has abandoned its secessionist ambitions and adopted a strongly anti-immigration discourse (Testa and Armstrong 2012; Richardson and Colombo 2013). Its rhetoric often clashes with its legislative action, however, particularly as regards migrant employment issues. In the care work sector, for instance, Scrinzi (2017) underscored how the demand from Italian families overrules anti-immigration principles, leading to a pragmatic, softer approach such that even illegal migrant care workers are ultimately accepted. Nowadays, it is the leading party in the region and enjoys the support of important segments of the working class (Casellato and Zazzara 2010).

Narrations of discrimination: what, where and who

Our interviewees report various kinds of discrimination, based largely on their ethnicity, but also on their gender and age. Such narrations are more common in the first round of interviews (collected during the economic crisis), but persist in the second round of interviews as well. The interviewees describe inequalities mainly in two social spheres: the workplace and public spaces.

The differential treatment young adult male migrants experience in the labour market takes the form of exploitation, unjustified dismissal and involuntary

unemployment. Martin, for instance, uses the term “slave” to refer to the way he was treated in his early years in Italy, precisely because he was a foreigner.

If there was a hard job to do, we [foreigners] did it. We did all the hard work. If there was a wall to break through, it was my job and the Italian colleague watched me. The colleague was older and he told me: “Do this, do that”. Or if there was rubble to take away, I took it away and he watched me. At the end, he said: “I’ll buy you a drink because you did my work too”. I was a slave in the sense that I did twice as much work as the Italians for the same wages, sometime even less. I earned 5 Euros, or 4.50, and he earned 6 [an hour]. (Martin 2015)

In Martin’s narration, different levels of discrimination are interlaced. On the one hand, the older colleague can just sit and watch him work thanks to his privileged position: he is “Italian, older, and with more years of seniority in the job”. The relationship between foreign- and Italian-born workers gives new meaning to practices that are often suffered by young Italian workers too. Then there is the difference in hourly wages paid by the employer, which is a clear example of discrimination.

Young adult women’s accounts of ethnic discrimination are closely interwoven with gender discrimination. In the workplace they have to fight not only against prejudice regarding their cultural background, but also against specific gender stereotypes associated with “Romanian women” and “Moroccan women”. As Violeta reports, the former are considered “loose women”, sexually available and willing to sell their bodies to achieve their objectives. The latter suffer from prejudice tied to their custom of wearing the hijab and perceptions of their personal freedom, education and hygiene.

Nearly everybody had a rather particular idea about Romanian women. Given that I don’t fit into this category, I had to fight to convince people that there are exceptions that prove the rule, and it wasn’t easy. I heard so many bad experiences Italian people had suffered because of Romanian women. At one point, I thought that it was better not to say I was Romanian. There are women willing to do anything to get what they want. (Violeta 2010).

At work there is a lot of negative feeling about veiled women and Moroccans in general, especially in this area. People think Moroccans are dirty, rude, swindlers, disorganized, bad-mannered. They say that we answer back. But they see one and ... If a lady's neighbour is a robber, she speaks to her friends ... and so they see all Moroccans as robbers. (Majida 2011)

In addition to the workplace, interviewees speak of racism in referring to discrimination they have experienced in public spaces. In bars, shops, open-air markets, they often feel affected by racist attitudes. They are so accustomed to this feeling that they have normalised it, even to the point of not caring any more, as in Adil's case. They refer particularly to the way Italian people look at them, that they perceive as judgmental and suspicious.

When you go into a bar, you hear people criticizing immigrants, and there is the look you get, they glare at you. But I don't care. I've never suffered from a serious episode of discrimination. You have to use your head. (Adil 2015)

While episodes of discrimination associated with age are very rare, the generational dimension emerges strongly when young adult migrants describe who adopts racist behaviour. Our respondents clearly associate racist people with the older generations, while young Italians are described as being more open-minded and less biased against foreigners.

Well, yes, there is prejudice too - less among young people, but among those aged between 50 and 60 there is a lot of mistrust. People my age are more accustomed to foreigners. My nationality is particularly hit by prejudice because it's common to hear people bad-mouthing Romanians. It would probably be different if I were Spanish. (Monica 2015)

In particular, older co-workers are represented as more biased and more likely to negatively influence employers regarding migrant workers. Anemona talks about two similar experiences that happened to her five years apart, the first in an ironing shop, the second in a large factory.

It was a little ironing shop, but the majority were Italians, Italian women who had been working there for 20 or 30 years. They were worse than the boss. The employer was a nice girl. But my co-workers didn't help me, they pretended I already knew everything. Where to put the stuff, for instance. They didn't teach me anything. In the end, the boss told me: "Don't worry, it isn't your fault. I haven't explained it to you and these women don't care, so you do your own thing". For instance, I put on some wrong labels. So, I had to do everything again. But my co-workers who were there, near me, didn't tell me I was getting it wrong. They watched me for 8 hours and didn't say a word. There's a bit of racism there. (Anemona 2010).

When you go on a break to eat or smoke, you often hear an adult woman say: "There are so many foreigners and my son is unemployed". I understand her. There are lots of foreigners and maybe her son is well-educated. But she should put herself in my shoes. It isn't my fault. Many years ago Italian people emigrated, now we arrive here. Bosses are balanced, they aren't racist. (Anemona 2015)

Like Violeta, who feels like the "exception that proves the rule", Anemona understands in a way why Romanian women suffer from discrimination, and she justifies the Italians' point of view. Both interviewees' reactions reinforce their stigmatisation, according to a practice already studied (King and Mai 2009; Moroşanu and Fox 2013; Toffanin 2015). They transfer the stigma onto co-nationals or individuals in the same situation (Italian emigrants), grouping themselves with their autochthonous counterparts and seeking to detach the stigma from themselves and transfer it onto the people with whom they are frequently associated. In many cases, our interviewees attribute racist behaviour more to their co-workers, with whom they share their day-to-day routines, than to their employers and bosses.

To sum up, our interviewees' accounts of disadvantage refer mainly to ethnic discrimination experienced in the workplace, which is seen as the social setting in which they are most likely to experience structural ethnic and gender-related discrimination. It is also where they experience what is known as everyday racism and sexism (Essed 1991): little gestures and accepted ways of behaving that construct, reinforce and reproduce racialised and gendered power hierarchies through jokes, stories, generalisations, and even compliments, in a sort of act of

symbolic violence (Bourdieu 2001). The people they hear express racist attitudes are co-workers - probably because they share everyday life with them, while they speak less with employers and managers. Finally, we would like to stress the inter-generational dimension that emerges in their identification of older co-workers as more biased.

Ethnic disadvantage: can it be overcome?

Albeit with a shared sense of disadvantage in the labour market, our Romanian respondents are much more optimistic than their Moroccan counterparts about their real opportunities for self-fulfilment despite their immigrant status and ethnicity. Their narratives reveal a strong sense of self and self-confidence. These interviewees echo the work ethic and individualisation rhetoric: they talk about working hard, making good use of their capabilities, having a sense of discipline and responsibility. These young adults seem to believe in themselves and their competence, and are convinced that their diligence will enable them to achieve their goals.

Many Romanian interviewees are satisfied with their employment experience and with their decision to migrate to Italy. Depending on their abilities, they describe themselves as workers who have managed to find a 'good' job despite the recession, or as students who have decided to continue their education to maximize their chances of finding more satisfactory employment. In 2010, despite discrimination and the economic crisis, they were looking to the future, with strong expectations about their future employment. They represent themselves as fully engaged in a path towards self-determination and satisfaction in their working life. Those who "work hard" should not worry or feel discouraged because they can still find plenty of job opportunities. They just need to keep working hard to demonstrate their skills. Monica is a young Romanian woman who arrived in Italy for a holiday and to visit her sister. Then she decided to stay for a while, taking a "sabbatical" to plan her future professional path. She started working in the informal sector because she did not have regular papers. She later obtained a regular visa and worked as a clerk for an insurance company until 2010, when the company went bankrupt. During the same period, she managed to enrol for a Master's degree in economics. In 2010 she said:

If you really work well and hard, you show your skills and, sooner or later, you will find a good job [...]. If you have capabilities, you will manage to achieve your objectives. It may be difficult at the beginning, but you work your way up and then, if you are able to demonstrate your qualities, sooner or later you get results. (Monica 2010)

When we saw Monica again in 2015, she was working as a freelance accountant. She was very proud of her job, but at the same time she was also more aware of the class and ethnic implications for her career.

Sometimes I feel uncomfortable. What I saw when I entered this world is that your origins are very important. I mean, most professionals - such as lawyers, accountants, notaries - come from families of notaries, lawyers, and so on ... There are also some who come from normal families, but the majority come from upper-class families, not working class. My friends' mothers are teachers and their fathers are professionals. I come from a working-class family and I'm also Romanian. I feel it's a world where you need to know people, because they know each other. But others will arrive! (Monica 2015)

Moroccan young adults are more frustrated about their jobs and their decision to come to Italy. They describe their position in the Italian labour market and in Italian society as structurally disadvantaged because of their immigrant status and ethnicity. This representation does not change over the years. Both during and after the economic crisis they perceive strong discriminatory attitudes that drive them down to the lower levels of the occupational ladder.

Tarik's narration is a typical example of this discourse. In 2010 he was seriously disappointed with his experience of living in Italy. Despite his university degree in history, he was working as a casual labourer. He was single and economically unable to live alone. He described his migration experience as a failure because it had blocked the course of his life and he was unable to achieve the goals he had expected for his age and gender, as other men in the same situation refer (Della Puppa 2019). According to Tarik, Italian society - and Veneto society in particular - is strongly racist and based on a deeply-rooted system of

discrimination and subordination of migrant people, especially Africans. Migrant people are tolerated only if they work and accept a subordinate position. If they do not work, they are no longer useful. They become invisible. Nobody wants or helps them.

If you don't work, you don't become integrated. Integration isn't for us. I'm speaking of the North-East. There's no such thing as integration. It's something they say on the television, but it doesn't really exist, because people here don't care about us. It is only at work, if you work hard, that maybe they will speak to you. But in everyday life you are invisible. This mentality doesn't accept otherness. They're reserved. [...] I don't have any Italian friends. Sometimes I try to speak with them, but if I say I'm a graduate they keep their distance. Because they see you as an African, you must stay low, inferior. They look at you as a person who grew up in a cave. I'm speaking of some people, not everyone. But many think that if you are African you must be very poor, and you should know your place. So, they don't like you being better educated than them. [...] To tell the truth, if I could go back, I would cancel these 10 years in Italy, I made a mistake. Because my friends in Morocco who went to university with me now work, they are married, and have children. They've got it made! (Tarik 2010).

Like other interviewees, Tarik started to reflect on social inequalities during the economic crisis. Unemployment placed him in a very vulnerable position, exposing his disadvantaged condition in Italian society. This is when the utilitarian and meritocratic rationale of immigration policies emerges in all its violence. Migrant people are tolerated only if they are useful to the Italian economy. If they are unemployed they are considered a burden (Chauvin and Garcés-Mascreñas 2014; Vianello, Finotelli and Brey 2019).

In 2015, Tarik's living conditions and lifestyle improved considerably. He was working in a warehouse with an open-ended contract and living with his wife. His previous opinions remained much the same, however, albeit diluted, regarding the structurally disadvantaged position occupied by migrant people in Italy.

I applied for Italian citizenship, partly because I want to vote. It's not easy because you are considered an extra-EU immigrant anyway. Few people think that, if you

work here and pay taxes, you are one of them. Babies who were born here are not considered Italian. (Tarik 2015)

From our analysis of these interviews, there emerges a nationality-based polarisation of employment opportunities and representations of people's real chances of overcoming structural constraints. We wish to stress that ours is not a representative sample, so it is impossible to generalise. Our results nonetheless seem to confirm what Fullin and Reyneri (2011) wrote on the ethnic penalty distribution as regards occupational status among different national groups, and what Fellini, Fullini, and Quassoli (2018) said about the perception of ethnic discrimination. According to Fullini and Reyneri (2018), Moroccans are one of the national groups that experience the strongest ethnic penalty in terms of access to a higher occupational status (skilled manual work, the lower middle class, white-collar posts). By contrast, Romanians experience an ethnic penalty only as regards access to white-collar positions, and the penalty is generally lower than for Moroccans (quoted text, 137). Fellini, Fullini, and Quassoli (2018) highlighted that Moroccan and sub-Saharan migrants have a higher likelihood of reporting episodes of discrimination at work, while Romanians have lower (albeit still significant) odds of this happening to them.

Our hypothesis is that, even though young adult Romanians are discriminated against in the labour market too, they use the free choice rhetoric to compensate for ethnic stigmatisation by making good use of their individual skills (Moroşanu and Fox 2013). This rhetoric is particularly evident among those who manage to obtain a skilled position, but it is also used by manual workers satisfied with their job (because they have obtained an open-ended contract, for instance). On the other hand, being more discriminated against and racialised than Romanians, young adult Moroccans share a pessimistic representation of their chances of overcoming their ethnic disadvantage. Following the theories on migrant people's strategies for coping with stigmatisation (Eijberts and Roggeband 2015), this second discourse on ethnic penalty may also be a way to cope with it – by denouncing it.

Conclusion

This paper has examined how young Romanian and Moroccan migrants experience and represent their social disadvantage, particularly in the labour market. We draw the theoretical framework for our analysis from Youth Studies that have paid a great deal of attention in the last 20 years to young people's understanding of the inequalities they suffer. They have focused mainly on autochthonous young people, however, while very little research has dealt with young migrants. Our aim was to help fill this gap by identifying the burden and the intersection of various sources of inequality - such as age, ethnicity and gender - and then analysing the discourses of young adult migrants on the implications of their ethnic penalty for their life and career trajectories. This paper thus adds to what is known in the social sciences about young adult migrants' understanding of the inequalities they may experience. That said, the small size of our sample and the fact that only two nationalities are considered mean that this is only a first step towards improving our understanding of how young adult migrants interpret the social disadvantage and inequalities to which they are exposed. It would be interesting to investigate this issue in a larger sample, also considering other nationalities. Another interesting aspect to include in further studies concerns the implication of how migrants perceive and explain discrimination on the level and content of their involvement in trade unions and industrial conflict.

Our interviewees mainly describe ethnic discrimination interwoven with gender stereotypes, but no substantial generational inequalities. Notably, the only reference to a generational divide is when they report experiences of racism in the workplaces: the more hostile workers were older (both during the economic crisis and afterwards). In other words, they do not see being young as an issue. According to our young Moroccan and Romanian migrants, the reason why they occupy the lowest positions in the Italian labour market is their stigmatised ethnic origin, not their young age. Women also have to deal with stigmas that match gender with ethnic stereotypes. Romanian women are seen as having "loose morals", while Moroccan women are considered dirty, lazy and backward.

The social situations in which our young immigrants suffer discrimination are in the workplace and in public spaces. They feel exploited by employers and mistreated by Italian colleagues, especially the older ones. So young adult migrants

report both structural and everyday discrimination (Essed 1991) based mainly on ethnic and sexual stigmas. Public places are another space where migrant people commonly experience discrimination, particularly in rural areas where everyone knows everyone else. Recently, there have been more and more interesting studies on rural racism especially in the British context, which highlight the fact that people who identifiable as “alien” in rural areas are immediately recognisable and may experience more severe forms of racism than in urban areas (Chakraborti and Garland 2013). Further research on the Italian context would be interesting.

Our analysis identifies two types of discourse regarding the feasibility of the two national groups considered overcoming their ethnic penalty. Young Romanian migrants tend to represent themselves as very determined to achieve their goals, stressing their education, personal skills and sense of responsibility. They focus less on the negative impact of the recession on the labour market, or on their experience of ethnic discrimination, preferring instead to underscore the human capital they have accumulated over the years, even in previous precarious and unsatisfying work experiences. Going along with the analysis published by Moroşanu and Fox (2013), we argue that this is a tactic to cope with ethnic stigmatisation based on silencing ethnicity and stressing individual skills. Moroccans, on the other hand, tend to emphasize the effects of structural constraints on their careers, and on their daily life and biographical paths. When naming the obstacles to their access to the labour market, and more precisely to secure and satisfying jobs, they mention gender, immigrant status and racialisation as determinants. According to these young people, it is impossible to overcome their ethnic disadvantage because a subordinate position is reserved for migrants in Italian society, however skilled they might be. This representation can also be interpreted as a way to cope with stigmatisation by pointing the finger at inequalities.

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Endnotes

- [1] The A.s jointly contributed to the design of the work, interpretation of data and drafting of manuscript. We attribute each section as follows: F.A.V. has authored paragraphs 2, 3, 6; A.M.T. has authored paragraphs 1, 4, 5, 7.
- [2] This fits with Romens' analysis on the positioning of graduates based on gender and nationality in the Veneto region (Romens, 2019): migrant women with a university degree are more often employed in skilled jobs than equally qualified migrant men. In other words, high-skilled migrant women seem to be less penalized than their male compatriots.