

STUDENT LIVES IN CRISIS
Deepening inequality in times
of austerity

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Methodological annex

This research has explored the experiences of young people in university in England, Italy and Sweden by employing a mixed-methodological strategy and a cross-national research design. The strategy has been applied by comparing young people's experiences across England, Italy and Sweden in relation to structures (that is, welfare sources and socioeconomic background), through the use of a Q-methodology survey completed by 84 students across the three countries, and 33 follow-up in-depth and semi-structured interviews.

This research was motivated by two essential research questions:

1. How do young people's experiences in university vary across socioeconomic backgrounds?
2. How are young people's experiences in university shaped by different welfare sources?

The two research questions imply a double analytical goal: first, to compare experiences across welfare mixes and across socioeconomic backgrounds; and second, to capture the relationship between socioeconomic background, use of welfare sources and young people's experiences by linking *structural* and *objective* differences to *individual* and *subjective* experiences. The methodological strategy used in this research is inductive, as the research aimed to capture new relationships between young people's experiences in university (with regard to finance, housing, wellbeing and education), welfare sources and socioeconomic backgrounds.

1. Combining Q-methodology and in-depth interviews

Q-methodology is an instrument that allows the exploration of subjective viewpoints and combines rigorous quantitative techniques with qualitative interpretation.¹ It is used in particular to explore 'personal experiences' as well as 'values' and 'beliefs'. In practice, in a Q-methodology study participants are asked to position predefined statements in a predefined grid (for example, as in this case, from +5, representing most agreement, to -5, representing least agreement). As shown in Figure A.1, the usual grid used in Q-methodology consists of a prearranged frequency distribution with the shape of a normal distribution, which reflects the observation that extreme opinions tend

design. In-depth interviews have not only provided additional material in relation to Q-methodology, but have also permitted further exploration of the link between subjective and objective elements emerging from the Q-sort and from the analysis of the individual data. The relationships between subjective and objective elements emerging from the Q-sort, and the ancillary material, have been confirmed and clarified by participants themselves in the interviews. In addition to this, qualitative interviews obtained further material to help the interpretation of the different factors, and to collect unexpected material that was not included in the items. Table A.1 summarises how the quantitative and qualitative material has been used in the different stages of the methodological design to capture both individual and structural elements.

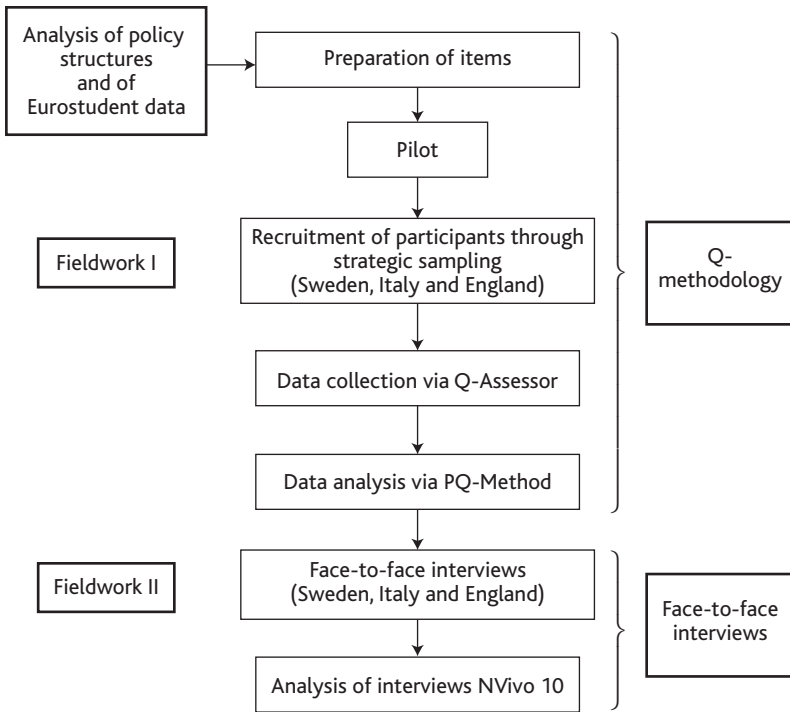
Table A.1: A summary of the different data collected in the study with an explanation of their different functions in the research design

Method	Data	Function
Q-method	Q-sorts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cluster experiences • Select the most representative participants for interviews • Explore the links between subjective experiences in relation to structures
Open questions (survey attached to Q-methodology)	Qualitative written material	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explore reasons behind the Q-sort
Questionnaire (survey attached to Q-methodology)	Data on demography, objective socioeconomic background, housing and welfare sources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify objective differences to help the interpretations of Q-sorts
Follow-up in-depth interviews	Qualitative audio material	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help the interpretation • Clarify the links between subjective experiences and structural conditions • Find unexpected themes

2. Methodological procedure

As illustrated in the previous pages, the methodological procedure of this study combines qualitative and quantitative methods, which have been channelled through the method of Q-methodology which has been defined a qualiquantological method, in the sense that it combines qualitative and quantitative data. The procedure is fully visualised in Figure A.2.

Figure A.2: An overview of research procedures adopted in this study



The first component is Q-methodology. As explained in the previous pages, Q-methodology has been employed to ‘cluster’ the participants into different factors according to their subjective viewpoints and in relation to objective structures. During the Q-methodology survey, demographic and objective information has also been collected. Implementing the Q-methodology has included several steps. First, statements were prepared to present to participants (Q-set), informed by the analysis of welfare structures in the three countries. The pilot has been followed by the phase of recruitment of participants (P-set) through strategic sampling, leading to the collection of the Q-sorts in England, Italy and Sweden, which has constituted the first part of the fieldwork. This phase has been followed by Q-factor analyses performed using PQMethod and involving a three-country analysis and a within-country analysis for each country.

The second component is in-depth interviews. The Q-factor analysis has informed the selection of the relevant interviewees, that is, the most representative young people from the profiles emerging out of the factor analyses described above. Thirty-three interviews

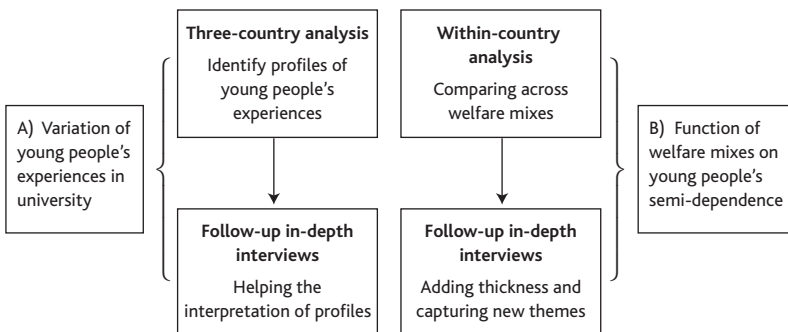
have been conducted across the three countries in what constituted the second phase of the fieldwork. These interviews have been analysed through NVivo 10. The final step has been the combination of Q-sort findings, ancillary data and interviews to interpret the profiles.

In this study Q-methodology and face-to-face interviews have been ‘nested’ in the following way: the analysis via Q-method has informed the selection of participants for the interviews and, at the same time, the interviews have informed the interpretation of profiles. As indicated in Figure A.2, the research has involved two stages of fieldwork in the three countries: a first stage of recruitment and a second stage of face-to-face interviews.

The two methods have also been ‘nested’ in the analysis of the material. In order to answer the two research questions (that is, identifying different experiences of university among young people and clarifying how the variations can be explained by welfare sources and socioeconomic backgrounds), the research has explored how experiences varied *across countries*, and how welfare mixes helped to interpret this variation *within each country*. Therefore, Q-methodology and in-depth interviews have been used for the two types of analysis, as summarised in Figure A.3.

Box A in Figure A.3 refers to the analysis of the three countries, which has been conducted by clustering participants in different profiles and interpreting those profiles through the Q-sort and the in-depth interviews. This type of analysis has enabled an exploration of how the different ‘profiles’ of the young people’s experiences were linked to the welfare mixes and/or the social origins, including socioeconomic background, cultural capital and an assessment of the dynamic aspect of background. In-depth interviews have been used to help the interpretations of the profiles, while the analysis of the

Figure A.3: Goals and function of methods in the two analyses conducted in the study



factors from the Q-sort has aided the formation of hypotheses on the link between subjective experiences and objective conditions, which have been further explored through the interviews. Furthermore, the interviews have added 'thickness' to the descriptions of profiles and have allowed elements to be captured that were not included in the original list of statements.

Box B in Figure A.3 refers to the within-country analysis conducted in each country, which has been performed to clarify the effects of young people's semi-dependence within the welfare mixes in England, Italy and Sweden. In this context, the in-depth interviews have not only added thickness, but have also permitted further exploration of the functions of family, labour market and state sources.

Let's explore each methodological step in the following sections: the preparation of items and the pilot; strategic sampling of participants and collection of data during the first fieldwork; analysis of Q-sort; follow-up in-depth interviews; and finally, interpreting the factors to have profiles.

a. Preparation of items and the pilot

Q-methodology is based on different assumptions compared to the use of traditional factor analysis (or R statistics). In particular, the issue of sampling concerns the Q-sorts (the list of statements) rather than the individuals involved in the study, who are considered 'the variables' of the study.⁶ Q-methodology is *not* driven by the aim of finding a statistically representative sample of participants (the so-called P-set); the inherent aim is to conduct an in-depth study of variation of subjectivities by including a limited number of individuals. A careful selection and sampling of statements is what enhances the rigour of a Q-methodological study, and therefore, unlike a traditional statistical survey, this process can take several months.⁷ Also, in the case of this study the selection of statements was a slow process, and the refinement of statements, which has taken around four months, has been conducted in parallel with the analysis of relevant literature.

An effective Q-set is characterised by its coverage and its balance. Coverage refers to the capacity of the Q-set to cover a wide range of opinions on a certain topic within the population (the *concourse*). The technique consists of breaking the subject into a series of sub-themes, including a roughly equal number of items for each sub-theme. In particular I have focused on the different areas emerging from the literature, present in similar studies and pertinent to my conceptual framework. See Table A.2.

The statements have been divided into:

1. *Young people's experiences.* This area contains the statements that help to explore young people's experiences in university. It has been divided into four specific areas that emerge from the literature as central to an assessment of the experience in university: (a) finance, (b) housing, (c) wellbeing (with the inclusion of future expectations and risk) and (d) educational outcomes.
2. *Welfare mixes.* This area contains the items reflecting the use of family, labour market and state sources. To allow for an assessment of each welfare mix I have included items concerning each source of welfare.
3. *Social origins.* This area contains items regarding the cultural capital and subjective measurement of socioeconomic background.
4. *Contextual factors.* This area has been included to 'control for' the presence of cross-cultural variations. The first part (a) refers to the items revolving around cross-cultural variations on attitudes to welfare or transition to adulthood. The second part (b) contains items regarding individualisation in relation to the construction of biographies. A specific remark needs to be made about the items on individualisation (b) (items 44-47), which have been inspired by the few empirical operationalisations of individualisation and risk present in the literature.⁸

Table A.2: Q-sort statements divided per theme

1) Young people's experiences

a. Finance

N. Statement

1	I have sufficient money to cover my monthly costs
2	The costs I am incurring during my studies are higher than I expected
3	I have experienced financial hardship during my time in higher education
4	I experienced financial hardship before starting university
5	I have never considered withdrawing from university
6	Financial constraints might limit my opportunities to continue into postgraduate studies
20	While at university I can afford a healthy diet

(continued)

Table A.2: Q-sort statements divided per theme (continued)

b. Housing

N.	Statement
7	I am happy with the accommodation I am living in while attending university
10	I did not have much choice about my accommodation during university because of financial constraints
11	My accommodation is close enough to the university campus or buildings where I attend lectures
12	My accommodation gives me enough space for my needs
13	My accommodation is a good environment to study in

c. Wellbeing

N.	Statement
18	Sometimes I find it difficult to cope with university-related stress
22	While at university I have periods of anxiety or depression due to financial constraints
23	I have considered using advisers and counsellors within or outside the university to help me cope with stress or depression
24	I am confident that my personal wellbeing will improve after graduation
34	My parents overestimate my future income and the type of job I will find after graduation
39	After graduating I expect to find a job with a higher social status than that of my parents
40	I am confident that my studies will lead to a graduate-level job
41	My future job choices will be influenced by the possibility of repaying my eventual debt/loans
42	I am worried that I will only be able to find short-term, insecure or precarious jobs after I graduate
43	Given the current labour market situation I have lower expectations about my future career

d. Educational outcomes

N.	Statement
14	Considering both the time I spend studying and in paid jobs, I am satisfied with my overall workload
26	I have enough time to get involved in all the core activities required of me by the university (e.g. lectures and personal study)
27	I have enough time and money to get involved in any extra-curricular activities I would like to do at university
28	I enjoy the academic side of university life

(continued)

Table A.2: Q-sort statements divided per theme (continued)

2) Welfare mixes

N.	Statement
25	The money I get from the state (loans, grants and other benefits) is enough to live well at university
15	Income from paid work is necessary for me to meet my living costs
16	In my experience, the jobs available to university students offer an adequate rate of pay
17	I would like to acquire experience through unpaid internships but I cannot afford the loss of income
31	My family has enough money to help me if I do not find a job soon after completing my studies
35	If I needed financial help in an emergency I'd rather ask friends than my family for help

3) Social origins

N.	Statement
19	While at university I have a supporting network of people I can count on
21	While at university I find it difficult to maintain relationships with family and friends outside the university because of lack of time or money
29	Most of my close friends and relatives go, or have gone, to university
30	The advice of my family has supported me during my university studies
32	I am an active member of student clubs and societies at my university
33	The networks and relationships I have built at university will help me to find a job
36	I come from a middle-class background
37	The students from my university have a similar social background to me
38	My family background might prevent me from getting the kinds of job I feel that I am qualified to do

4) Contextual factors

a. Attitudes to welfare and transitions

N.	Statement
8	Everybody who can afford it should move away from the parental home to attend university
9	Sharing accommodation with other students helps to improve the experience of university
48	To be considered as an adult, it is important to have a full-time job
49	To be considered as an adult, it is important to have left the parental home
50	Students from poorer family backgrounds should get more support from the state than other students

(continued)

Table A.2: Q-sort statements divided per theme (continued)

*a. Attitudes to welfare and transitions (continued)***N. Statement**

- | | |
|----|---|
| 51 | Students with outstanding academic records should get more support from the state than other students |
| 52 | Loans are a good opportunity to go into higher education if your family cannot support you |

4) Contextual factors (continued)*b. Individualisation***N. Statement**

- | | |
|----|--|
| 44 | I have self-defined objectives about my future after graduation |
| 45 | I am worried about not finding a job which matches my aspirations |
| 46 | My self-determination, rather than the ideas of people around me, is the central factor in the planning of my future |
| 47 | After graduation I do not expect to move country to find a job |

The other important characteristic of the Q-set is the balance of statements, that is, its capacity to avoid bias towards certain opinions. In this study the bias refers in particular to the risk of the researcher not capturing the cross-national diversity in the selection of items and the need to guarantee a representation of items valid for different contexts (due to a personal bias regarding the national context the researcher is more familiar with). This issue was addressed by reviewing the relevant literature and previous studies from the three countries, but also through the organisation of an ad hoc pilot. The pilot also helped in making a decision about the final number of statements in the study that normally falls in between 40 and 80 statements.⁹

The first phase of selection of items using the areas emerging from the literature led to the identification of 100 items, which have been reduced through the process of elicitation of items, where the researcher progressively reduces the number of items. In order to facilitate this process I involved in the pilot three key actors from English, Swedish and Italian student unions and three young people, one from each country. The key actors have been asked to read and comment on the items that were least significant, while the young people have sorted the statements online (through Q-Assessor software) in a beta version of my research. The piloting had three objectives: elicitation

of items (indicating the items that were least relevant); checking the meaning/relevance of items in different national contexts; and refining the wording. While I originally intended to have 85 items, after the feedback from the pilot (in particular, from the young people who sorted the items) the number of items has been reduced to 52 due to the reported difficulty of ranking 85 items in the online survey and visualising items on a screen.

b. Strategic sampling of participants and first fieldwork

The Q-methodology literature suggests using a theoretical sampling strategy for recruiting the participants for the Q-sort by focusing on theoretical criteria that are central to the research. Even if the sampling of the P-set does not follow the criteria of statistical representativeness, it is not advisable to employ purposive sampling, as this strategy does not maximise the variety of viewpoints. A strategic sampling it is advisable in Q-methodology in particular when different groups are compared, as this research intended to do in relation to socioeconomic background and countries.¹⁰

Capturing cross-national inequality

In order to obtain a ‘theoretically variegated’ sample, the two central goals were to have an equal number of young people from the three countries, and to have participants from different socioeconomic backgrounds. In respect to having participants from different socioeconomic backgrounds, I have pointed out before how a cross-national objective definition of socioeconomic background should focus on both parental occupational background and parental educational background:

- *Occupational background* refers to the parental occupational position, which follows the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO-88), adopted in 1988 as an international, and comparable, classification of occupations used in international research.¹¹ The different categories of this classification have been aggregated into three categories: routine and manual; intermediate; managerial and professional.
- *Educational background* refers to the highest educational attainment of students’ parents measured with the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) elaborated in 1997 by

UNESCO.¹² Also in this case, ISCED’s categories have been aggregated into three categories: elementary (or primary) education (corresponding to ISCED 0-2); secondary education (corresponding to ISCED 2-4); and university level (tertiary education) (corresponding to ISCED 5-6).

The assessment of socioeconomic background has been conducted by merging the information for both mothers and fathers of respondents according to Table A.3. In the event of a discrepancy between the mother and father’s socioeconomic backgrounds, the nomenclature has combined this discrepancy (for example, lower intermediate for young people with intermediate and low socioeconomic backgrounds).

In order to maximise the variety of the socioeconomic backgrounds within each country, the research has taken into account the intervening dimension of institutional stratification in higher education (HE) described in Chapter 1. As a consequence of institutional stratification, certain institutions might have a higher representation of students from a certain socioeconomic background. In order to recruit young people from different socioeconomic backgrounds I have included a variety of institutions:¹³

- England is characterised by a binary distinction between academic and ex-vocational institutions, in particular between new (ex-polytechnics) and old universities. This division is reflected in the way students from low socioeconomic backgrounds tend to be substantially less represented in old universities, and in particular in universities from the Russell Group. Due to this pronounced dimension of ‘horizontal stratification’, recruiting young people from both old and new universities was used as an efficient strategy for ensuring representation of different socioeconomic backgrounds.

Table A.3: Combining occupational position and educational background of mother/father in the study of youth transitions

		Occupational position of mother/father		
		<i>Routine and manual</i>	<i>Intermediate</i>	<i>Managerial and professional</i>
Educational background of mother/father	<i>Elementary</i>	Low socioeconomic	Low socioeconomic	Intermediate
	<i>Secondary</i>	Low socioeconomic	Intermediate	Upper
	<i>University</i>	Intermediate	Intermediate	Upper

Furthermore, Teesside University, in Middlesbrough, has also been added to introduce an element of geographical variation in the sample.

- Italy represents an example of a unitary system in which HE institutions are considered to be of the same quality and standard. The university system in Italy is not clearly diversified, and young people from different socioeconomic backgrounds are equally distributed, but the stratification arising from the North–South divide makes it crucial to cover both geographical areas in order to capture different groups of young people; for this reason, I have recruited participants from universities in Milan and in Naples.
- Sweden represents an example of ‘diversified systems’ where HE differs in quality, selectivity and prestige between ex-technical universities (*högskola*) and historical academic universities, which tend to attract different groups of young people. In this case, in order to capture both groups, I have opted to recruit students from Lund University (a traditional historical university) and Malmö University, a *högskola* university college, both in Southern Sweden.

Table A.4 summarises the dimension of stratification of the different national contexts and illustrates the institutions and the types of key actors involved in the fieldwork.

Table A.4: The national dimensions of stratification, institutions and key actors involved during recruitment

	National dimension of stratification	Institutions involved during the fieldwork and city	Key actors involved during fieldwork
England	Old university	University of Bristol (Bristol)	Lecturers
	New university and location	University of Teesside (Middlesbrough), University of the West of England (Bristol)	
Sweden	Full university	Lund University (Lund)	Lecturers/student unions
	University college (<i>högskola</i>)	Malmö University (Malmö)	
Italy	Universities in the North	Università Statale di Milano, Università Cattolica, Università Bocconi (Milan)	Student unions
	Universities in the South (Mezzogiorno)	Università Federico II, Università Orientale (Naples)	

Recruiting participants

One of the most challenging parts of the research has been recruiting participants across three countries and six cities. Not only has this involved a significant amount of travel for a single researcher (across countries and within countries), but it has also meant understanding the comparative differences in recruiting students in the three countries. The first part of the fieldwork was conducted between April and October 2012, after constructing a database of 'key actors' to help recruit participants, and setting up a website with the goal of promoting the study.

The recruitment strategy has followed different practices. In Sweden and England, where the student unions have a strict confidentiality policy and do not share information with third parties, the main recruitment strategy has consisted of presenting my research at the beginning or the end of lectures, after arranging with the relevant lecturers. In Italy, where unions have more informal contact with students, I was invited to present my research at events organised by the student unions, while lecturers did not respond to my invitations. While key actors sometimes acted on my behalf to recruit students by forwarding a copy of the invitation, the most effective way to recruit students has been to present my research face-to-face to participants either during lectures or at specifically organised events in Malmö, Lund, Milan, Naples and Bristol.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

This research aimed to recruit young people from undergraduate degrees. While there is no set-in-stone definition of 'youth' employed in the literature, I have set 27 years as a cut-off age, in order to incorporate the less linear transitions of young people who have entered university after a period of labour market participation, but also to exclude those who perceive themselves to have already transitioned to adulthood.

Furthermore, the sampling strategy of this research followed the following strategic sampling criteria to avoid potential biases affecting the findings:

- gender balance (a minimum of 10 female and 10 male participants for each country);
- having young people from at least two educational fields;¹⁴
- having young people from different socioeconomic backgrounds (low, intermediate and upper) in each country.

The sampling strategy has been implemented in an adaptive way: during the Q-sorting and completion of surveys, I have monitored the gender balance and variability of socioeconomic backgrounds and fields of study. When needed, I have redirected my recruitment strategy to improve variability. For example, I have arranged more presentations with lecturers from certain fields of study that were not originally represented, or I have focused on recruiting students from a certain institution/area where I was lacking young people from certain socioeconomic backgrounds.

Collecting data

An information sheet was circulated to potential participants after the presentations or was shared by the key actors on my behalf. A link to the Q-study was sent through via email after students had consented to participate. Data (Q-sort, the demographic data and open questions) were collected through an online instrument for collecting and analysing data in Q-methodology. Two versions of the Q-Assessor were prepared: one with items and questions in English (for English and Swedish participants) and one with items and questions in Italian for Italian participants. According to the information gathered from the participants, sorting the items and completing the survey took about 35–45 minutes.

Until recently there were no suitable instruments to conduct Q-methodology online, but most recently those instruments have been developed, offering a reliable way to conduct Q-methodology at a distance.¹⁵ I have used Q-Assessor, an online Q-methodology software that can also collect ancillary data via an additional questionnaire, which was particularly useful in the context of this research, which aimed to gather data about socioeconomic backgrounds and the use of welfare.

The Q-Assessor requires participants to, first, put the statements into three broad categories: disagree, neutral and agree (see Figure A.4).

Second, participants are asked to review the items that they have put in the three boxes and to express their agreement (from +1 agree to +5 agree), their neutrality, or their disagreement (from -1 disagree to -5 disagree). This is shown in Figure A.5.

In addition to the sorting, the participants were asked to fill in a questionnaire with compulsory and optional questions. The full questionnaire contained numerous questions to explore the objective conditions of young people in the study:

- Open questions for ranking the Q-sort and potential issues in sorting
- Demographic data (for example, name, gender, field of study)

Figure A.4: Snapshot of the first stage of Q-sorting

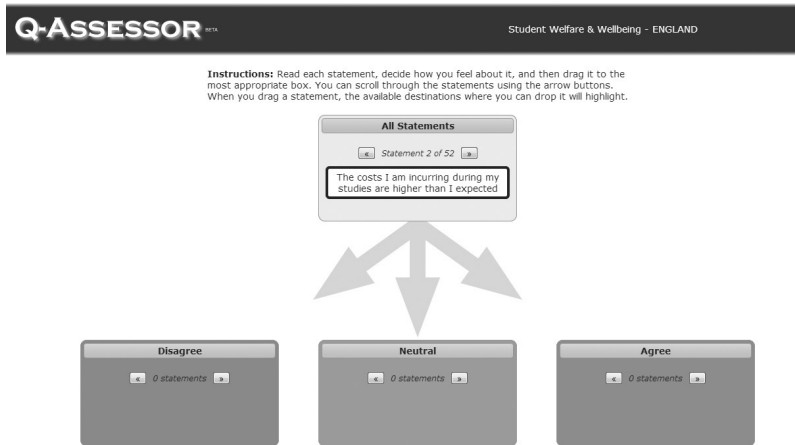
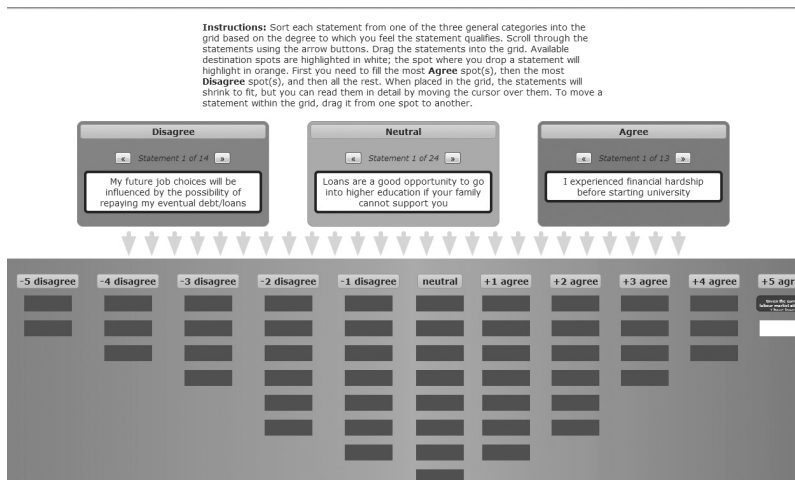


Figure A.5: Snapshot of the second stage of Q-sorting



- Assessment of socioeconomic background (occupational and educational background)
- Questions about the objective use of welfare sources (state support, family sources and labour market participation)
- Questions about housing

The full questionnaire is shown in Table A.5.

Table A.5: Survey questions

Note: currencies have been adapted to national contexts for Q.20 and Q.21. Moreover, this survey has been translated in Italian for Italian participants.

1. What is your first name?
2. What is your last name?
3. What is your gender?
Male
Female
4. What is your age?
5. Referring to the final ranking of items on your left, it would be helpful to know you had any problems in sorting the items and which items you were not able to sort (e.g. forced to select certain items by the structure of the study). Thank you.
6. Referring to the final ranking of items on your left, it would be helpful if you could briefly expand on why you have selected the 2 items you most agree with (+5) (e.g. refer to personal experiences or specific episodes)
7. Referring to the final ranking of items on your left, it would be helpful if you could briefly expand on why you have selected the 2 items you least agree with (-5) (e.g. refer to personal experiences or specific episodes)
8. What is the full name of the university that you are currently attending?
9. What level of qualification are you studying for?
Undergraduate degree (e.g. Bachelor, BS)
Foundation degree
Postgraduate qualification (e.g. Master's, MA, MSc)
Other:
10. What year of your course are you currently in?
First year
Second year
Third year
Fourth year
Fifth year
Sixth year or more
11. What is the broad subject area of your current degree/diploma/certificate course or programme?
Medicine and dentistry and allied to health (e.g. Nursing)
Other sciences, engineering, technology and IT
Human and social sciences (including law, business, economics and psychology)
Creative arts, humanities and languages (e.g. English literature, history)
Education
Other:
12. Which city/town are you originally from?
13. Which city/town are you living in while attending the university?
14. Which type of accommodation are you living in while attending university?
Family
Student hall
Shared house (roommates or partner)
Or Other:

(continued)

Table A.5: Survey questions (continued)

-
15. Which of the following better describes your father's occupation?
 Managerial and professional
 Intermediate (e.g. technical clerk, service)
 Routine and manual
 Does not apply (unemployed, retired or other)
 Do not know
 Do not want to reply
 Or Other:
16. What is the highest level of education achieved by your father?
 Elementary school
 Secondary education
 University degree
 Or Other:
17. Which of the following better describes your mother's occupation?
 Managerial and professional
 Intermediate (e.g. technical clerk, service)
 Routine and manual
 Does not apply (unemployed, retired or other)
 Do not know
 Or Other:
18. What is the highest level of education achieved by your mother?
 Elementary school
 Secondary education
 University degree
 Or Other:
19. Are you doing any of the following?
 Working full-time
 Working part-time
 Internship/stage
 Seasonal job (e.g. summer job)
 Voluntary work
20. How much money do you receive from the state in the form of grants (not to be repaid) per year (refer to the current year):
 0
 £100–£500
 £500–£1,000
 £1,000–£3,000
 £3,000–£4,000
 more than £4,000
 0
 500–1,000 Euro
 1000–2,000 Euro
 2000–3,000 Euro
 3000–4,000 Euro
 più di 4,000 Euro

(continued)

Table A.5: Survey questions (continued)

-
21. How much money do you receive from your family per year (refer to the current year):
 0
 £100–£1,000
 £1000–£3,000
 £3000–£4,000
 £4000 £8,000
 more than £8,000
22. If you receive financial support from the state in the form of loans (to be repaid), please specify how much you have received from the beginning of your studies until now:
23. If you are getting forms of private loans from private institutions, please specify how much you have received from the beginning of your studies until now:
24. Would you like to be considered for the second stage of the study consisting of a one-hour face-to-face interview (anytime between September and December)? If you are interviewed, you will receive a £15 Amazon voucher as a thank you gift.
 Yes
 No
25. Thanks for taking the time to fill out the survey! You can add any other comments here about the survey:
-

c. Statistics and analysis of Q-sort

The data collected in Q-Assessor on Q-sorting have been inserted into PQMethod, the specific software used for Q-method analysis. Principal component analysis (PCA) has been used as the extraction method of choice: although centroid factor analysis is in most cases preferred by Q-methodologists on the grounds that it allows more input on the rotation from the researcher,¹⁶ PCA is the most used type of factor analysis in social sciences and is also increasingly used by Q-methodologists.

As introduced before, I have performed two types of factor analysis in this research. First, I conducted a three-country analysis that included participants from England, Italy and Sweden. The goal of this factor analysis has been to capture the variation of young people's experiences of university across countries, and in relation to welfare structures. This analysis has also permitted an exploration of how experiences were clustered by country and/or socioeconomic background, and has helped to clarify the function of welfare mixes in determining those factors. I have performed a three-country analysis by selecting Q-sorting from 51 young people (17 per country) out of the total of

84 young people who completed the survey, with a balance of genders, socioeconomic backgrounds and fields of study from each country (the selection was necessary as the number of items needs to be equal or lower than the number of participants analysed).

Second, I have performed three within-country analyses (one for each country) involving all 84 students (approximately 30–40 per country). Table A.6 presents the list of participants per country.

Table A.6: List of participants' names divided per country. Note: names have been changed in line with the confidentiality policy of the research

England	Italy	Sweden
Britney	Alfredo	Rasmus
Rob	Leonardo	Hilda
Mandy	Federico	Sofia
Frances	Giuseppe	Adam
Sasha	Francesco	Tilde
Brittany	Valentina	Olof
Mark	Filomena	Klara
Gordon	Anna	Maja
Boris	Giulia	Ida
Tom	Maria	Sigrid
Stewart	Rosaria	Ingegard
Chris	Pietro	Annike
Sharon	Jessica	Saga
Graham	Paola	Ludvig
Charlie	Sara	Joan
David	Eleonora	Kasia
Rebecca	Francesca	Elvin
Lynne	Andrea	Svea
Alexandra	Vincenzo	Klas
Liam	Renato	Lotta
Catriona	Cristina	Elis
Hugh	Marta	Casper
John	Michele	Eskil
Mick	Lara	Markus
Alannah	Salvo	Evelina
Nicholas	Fabiola	Filippa
Kevin	Fabrizio	
	Veronica	
	Roberto	
	Serena	
	Davide	

The rationale for this analysis has been to clarify the function of each welfare mix within each country. By performing the within-country analyses, eight factors of the young people's experiences within each country have been extracted. In the book I have not presented a full discussion of the profiles found within each country, and I am not presenting the results from the Q-factor analysis. I have considered the within-country differences when discussing the role of welfare state interventions in Part 3 of the book.

Factor analysis can involve a great degree of arbitrariness in the choice of which factor to rotate and how many factors to extract. In this case, I have decided to limit the number of arbitrary choices. First of all the factors have been rotated orthogonally in order to offer the most informative viewpoint on the factors.¹⁷ I have excluded the option of by-hand rotation where the factors need to be rotated manually, as this implied a decision on positioning that could increase the number of arbitrary choices. Orthogonal rotation, which maintains a 90-degree relationship between the factor axes (therefore ensuring that factors are statistically independent and uncorrelated), has been preferred. Factor rotations have still altered the position of the factors/viewpoints, but, as Watts and Stenner remark, 'the position of the Q sorts relative to one another is absolutely and permanently fixed by their un-rotated loadings (and hence by the viewpoints of our participants).'¹⁸ A further decision revolved around how many factors to extract. The factors to extract have been selected using a 'prudent criterion': keeping only what are called in PQMethod 'pure factors', according to an algorithm that keeps only the factors explaining more than half of the common variance and with a significant loading (that is, with a *p*-value of less than 0.05).¹⁹ Table A.7 presents the rotated factor matrix of the three-country analysis showing the factor loadings for each participant for all eight factors extracted. It also indicates the individuals who are 'most representative' for each factor, who have been highlighted in different colours: these individuals have factor loadings higher than 0.5 when no other factor is interfering.²⁰ Not all the factors extracted have been kept for the analysis and for the follow-up interviews: factors 6 and 7 have not been explored, since their variance explained only 7% and 6% of the total variance respectively *and* they only had a very small number of 'representative' cases that I could have further explored through the interviews. Of the six profiles, given the limited space available I have decided not to present profile 5, as it did not provide additional material to the understanding of the relationship between welfare sources, social origins and young people's experiences.

Table A.7: Factor matrix with defining sorts from the participants (three-country analysis)

Participant	Factors extracted							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Alfredo	0.35	0.07	0.32	0.08	0.03	-0.15	0.11	0.56
Leonardo	0.27	-0.22	0.16	-0.10	-0.01	-0.01	0.15	0.75
Federico	0.31	0.12	0.02	0.00	0.04	-0.09	0.04	0.64
Giuseppe	0.54	-0.07	0.44	0.00	0.09	0.07	0.33	0.36
Francesco	0.36	0.55	-0.08	-0.15	0.02	0.35	0.36	0.12
Valentina	-0.05	0.68	0.29	-0.07	-0.08	0.00	0.14	-0.25
Filomena	0.49	0.13	-0.08	-0.04	0.08	0.52	0.06	0.33
Anna	0.58	0.06	0.03	0.08	-0.10	-0.04	0.33	0.26
Giulia	0.29	0.18	-0.10	0.21	0.27	-0.03	-0.23	0.60
Maria	-0.07	0.62	0.34	-0.06	-0.02	-0.28	-0.34	-0.14
Rosaria	0.17	0.14	-0.27	0.27	0.15	-0.38	0.52	-0.14
Pietro	0.22	0.57	-0.31	0.08	-0.04	0.10	-0.27	0.12
Jessica	-0.11	0.67	0.01	-0.16	0.17	-0.18	0.17	-0.21
Paola	-0.01	0.57	0.01	0.09	0.16	-0.33	0.10	-0.05
Sara	-0.08	0.50	-0.18	-0.30	0.14	-0.16	-0.08	-0.56
Eleonora	0.07	0.46	0.19	0.19	0.49	0.03	0.28	0.17
Francesca	0.26	0.16	0.59	0.04	0.17	0.04	0.37	0.20
Britney	0.00	0.09	0.32	0.18	-0.18	-0.06	-0.06	-0.70
Rob	0.66	0.02	-0.24	0.27	0.24	-0.19	-0.07	0.09
Mandy	0.03	-0.07	0.05	0.67	-0.02	-0.06	0.18	0.02
Frances	0.57	-0.26	-0.20	0.19	0.27	0.33	0.12	-0.10
Sasha	0.32	0.04	0.07	0.03	0.53	0.09	0.11	0.30
Brittany	0.38	0.30	0.16	0.00	-0.16	-0.01	-0.29	-0.70
Boris	0.40	0.13	0.17	0.01	0.58	-0.08	0.09	-0.06
Mark	-0.10	0.16	0.65	-0.22	0.14	-0.18	0.31	-0.14
Tom	0.10	-0.06	0.10	-0.02	0.13	0.13	0.65	0.27
Stewart	0.63	0.01	0.21	0.15	0.16	0.09	0.03	0.20
Chris	0.39	0.21	-0.25	0.28	-0.12	0.53	-0.07	-0.07

(continued)

Table A.7: Factor matrix with defining sorts from the participants (three-country analysis) (continued)

Participant	Factors extracted							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Sharon	0.13	0.00	0.66	0.31	-0.03	0.14	-0.18	0.07
Graham	0.21	0.13	-0.08	0.07	0.65	0.07	-0.05	0.23
Charlie	0.04	-0.13	-0.26	0.74	0.15	0.11	-0.21	-0.14
David	0.06	0.73	-0.02	-0.05	0.00	0.13	0.01	0.05
Rebecca	0.72	0.00	0.04	-0.16	0.36	0.04	0.09	0.21
Gordon	-0.08	-0.11	0.68	-0.01	0.35	-0.03	-0.01	0.07
Rasmus	-0.22	0.04	0.22	0.33	0.34	-0.13	0.19	-0.32
Hilda	0.21	-0.26	0.33	0.02	0.57	0.06	0.22	0.30
Sofia	-0.10	0.12	0.77	0.05	0.30	0.16	-0.35	-0.14
Tilde	0.30	-0.10	-0.01	-0.15	0.21	0.30	0.23	0.13
Olof	-0.11	-0.13	0.12	0.44	0.11	0.44	-0.04	-0.07
Maja	0.19	0.07	0.11	0.67	0.07	0.03	-0.02	0.11
Sigrid	0.18	0.16	-0.03	0.03	0.18	0.12	0.67	0.14
Ingegard	-0.08	-0.38	0.12	0.42	0.20	0.42	0.30	0.14
Annikke	-0.03	0.03	0.11	0.06	0.38	0.31	0.38	-0.23
Tuva	0.02	-0.23	0.23	0.42	-0.09	0.36	0.36	0.42
Ludvig	0.23	-0.26	0.25	0.42	-0.03	0.39	0.13	0.52
Kasia	-0.06	0.24	0.23	0.20	0.73	0.17	0.01	0.07
Elvin	0.11	-0.19	0.28	0.04	0.26	0.41	0.17	0.46
Svea	0.15	-0.15	-0.10	0.21	0.28	0.50	0.28	0.37
Klas	0.18	0.12	0.41	0.06	0.41	0.25	0.24	-0.04
Lotta	-0.08	-0.05	0.12	-0.02	0.17	0.78	0.06	-0.14
Eskil	0.05	-0.44	-0.17	0.29	0.14	0.32	0.15	0.41
Markus	0.07	-0.23	0.15	-0.07	0.55	0.08	0.13	-0.06
Explained variance (%)	8	9	8	6	8	7	6	10

Table A.8 shows a summary of how the different profiles have ranked the items for the three-country analysis.

This is the factor matrix of the rotated factor. The factor matrix summarises which of the Q-sorts are similar to or different from one

Table A.8: How the 52 statements were valued by the five factors/profiles (three-country analysis)

No	Statement	Factors				
		1	2	3	4	8
1	I have sufficient money to cover my monthly costs	1	-3	-2	4	3
2	The costs I am incurring during my studies are higher than I expected	-1	5	0	-2	1
3	I have experienced financial hardship during my time in higher education (HE)	-3	5	5	-4	-4
4	I experienced financial hardship before starting higher education (HE)	-4	0	4	-1	-4
5	I have never considered withdrawing from university	3	-4	5	-1	5
6	Financial constraints might limit my opportunities to continue into postgraduate studies	1	1	-3	3	-5
7	I am happy with the accommodation I am living in while attending university	0	-1	4	2	2
8	Everybody who can afford it should move away from the parental home to attend university	0	1	1	-3	-1
9	Sharing accommodation with other students helps to improve the experience of university	4	3	3	-1	-1
10	I did not have much choice about my accommodation during university because of financial constraints	-2	2	0	-1	-3
11	My accommodation is close enough to the university campus or buildings where I attend lectures	4	-2	4	0	0
12	My accommodation gives me enough space for my needs	2	0	3	2	1
13	My accommodation is a good environment to study in	0	0	1	3	2
14	Considering both the time I spend studying and in paid jobs, I am satisfied with my overall workload	1	-5	0	1	3
15	Income from paid work is necessary for me to meet my living costs	-3	-2	2	-2	-3
16	In my experience, the jobs available to university students offer an adequate rate of pay	-1	-4	-1	2	-2
17	I would like to acquire experience through unpaid internships but I cannot afford the loss of income	1	3	0	-2	-2
18	Sometimes I find it difficult to cope with university-related stress	2	4	-1	0	-3
19	While at university I have a supporting network of people I can count on	1	3	3	1	4
20	While at university I can afford a healthy diet	0	-2	0	2	1
21	While at university I find it difficult to maintain relationships with family and friends outside the university because of lack of time or money	-2	3	1	-3	-4
22	While at university I have periods of anxiety or depression due to financial constraints	-4	0	1	-3	-3

(continued)

Table A.8: How the 52 statements were valued by the five factors/profiles (three-country analysis) (continued)

No	Statement	Factors				
		1	2	3	4	8
23	I have considered using advisers and counsellors within or outside the university to help me cope with stress or depression	2	-2	-5	-5	-2
24	I am confident that my personal wellbeing will improve after graduation	-4	2	-1	0	0
25	The money I get from the state (loans, grants and other benefits) is enough to live well at university	-2	-4	-4	4	-2
26	I have enough time to get involved in all the core activities required of me by the university (e.g. lectures and personal study)	4	-3	1	2	1
27	I have enough time and money to get involved in any extra-curricular activities I would like to do at university	-1	-5	-2	-1	2
28	I enjoy the academic side of university life	5	-2	2	1	0
29	Most of my close friends and relatives go, or have gone, to university	3	1	-3	-4	5
30	The advice of my family has supported me during my university studies	2	4	1	0	4
31	My family has enough money to help me if I do not find a job soon after completing my studies	1	-3	-5	-5	4
32	I am an active member of student clubs and societies at my university	-2	1	-2	-2	2
33	The networks and relationships I have built at university will help me to find a job	-2	-1	-1	-1	1
34	My parents overestimate my future income and the type of job	-3	1	-4	1	0
35	If I needed financial help in an emergency I'd rather ask friends than my family for help	-5	-2	-2	-2	-1
36	I come from a middle-class background	3	-1	-2	-4	3
37	The students from my university have a similar social background to me	-1	0	-3	0	2
38	My family background might prevent me from getting the kinds of job I feel that I am qualified to do	-5	-1	-1	0	-2
39	After graduating I expect to find a job with a higher social status than that of my parents	-3	2	2	1	-2
40	I am confident that my studies will lead to a graduate-level job	-1	-1	2	-3	1
41	My future job choices will be influenced by the possibility of repaying my eventual debt/loans	-2	2	0	1	-1
42	I am worried that I will only be able to find short-term, insecure or precarious jobs after I graduate	2	2	-3	5	1
43	Given the current labour market situation I have lower expectations about my future career	0	1	-4	4	0

(continued)

Table A.8: How the 52 statements were valued by the five factors/profiles (three-country analysis) (continued)

No	Statement	Factors				
		1	2	3	4	8
44	I have self-defined objectives about my future after graduation	0	0	2	2	0
45	I am worried about not finding a job that matches my aspirations	5	2	-1	3	-1
46	My self-determination, rather than the ideas of people around me, is the central factor in the planning of my future	1	1	2	3	0
47	After graduation I do not expect to move country to find a job	-1	-1	-2	0	-1
48	To be considered as an adult, it is important to have a full-time job	2	0	-1	-2	-1
49	To be considered as an adult, it is important to have left the parental home	-1	-1	1	0	0
50	Students from poorer family backgrounds should get more support from the state than other students	3	4	3	1	2
51	Students with outstanding academic records should get more support from the state than other students	0	0	0	-1	3
52	Loans are a good opportunity to go into higher education (HE) if your family cannot support you	0	-3	0	5	-5

another: statistically, it offers an overview of the loadings of each Q-sort (here indicated with the name of the participant who filled in the Q-sort) for each factor. As we see, factor loadings >0.5 (with no other factors interfering) are highlighted in grey as they are the most representative cases of each factor. Factor 1 corresponds to profile 4; factor 2 to profile 1; factor 3 to profile 2; factor 4 to profile 3; and factor 8 to profile 5.

d. Follow-up semi-structured interviews

The second part of the fieldwork consisted of face-to-face follow-up interviews with my participants in six cities across the three countries: Bristol and Middlesbrough for England, Milan and Naples for Italy, and Lund and Malmö for Sweden. Given the limited resources available, I decided to select 33 participants (11 from each country) to interview. The selection of participants has been informed by the Q-factor analysis, which has identified the ‘most representative cases’ of the three-country analysis according to the criteria explained above, and also of the within-country analyses. In addition to those, I have made sure that a balanced number of participants from different socioeconomic backgrounds were

involved in the interviews. The interviews were conducted between November 2012 and January 2013. Given the lapse between the Q-sorting and the in-depth interviews due to the analysis, the final sampling has been affected by a moderate level of attrition. In the cases where students dropped out of the study, I have replaced the original participants with other young people who emerged as representative cases from the Q-factor analyses.

The interviews were semi-structured, and a general list of themes to explore during the interviews emerged from the conceptual framework: the role of welfare sources, the different areas of young people's experiences (financial position, housing, wellbeing and education) and social origins (the exploration of the dynamic dimension of categorical socioeconomic background measured through the survey and a discussion of cultural capital). Specific direction on topics has been avoided in line with the inductive scope of qualitative interviewing. The hypotheses formulated by using the crib sheet have been further explored during the interviews. In particular, I have used the ranking from the Q-sort of participants as *prompts*, that is, as a reminder of the ranking conducted. *Probes* have been used to further explore the hypotheses regarding the link between young people's subjective viewpoints and their objective conditions (both socioeconomic background and the availability of welfare sources).

e. Interpreting factors: from factors to profiles

In this research I have tried to use a systematic technique to factor interpretation, that is, the logic of abduction. This defines an inductive process from which hypotheses on the interpretation of a certain factor are formulated, and uses the existing evidence to confirm or reject those hypotheses. The interpretation of profiles has been conducted by analysing the information from the survey and the qualitative interviews. The full interpretation of profiles was not completed until the analysis of interviews, and the analysis has been conducted by combining the different (quantitative and qualitative) data collected.

The first step in the interpretation of factors (which led to the identification of the profiles) was to capture the entire item configuration in line with the 'methodological holism' of Q-methodology, which, as explained before, aims not to find traits or characteristics, but to capture whole viewpoints. This involved looking at how each statement was valued by each factor. I have used the systematic tool for comparing across factor arrays proposed by Stenner and Watts, namely, the 'crib sheet'.²¹ This is constructed by

comparing the score of each item across factors and preparing, for each factor, a sheet that includes the items ranked at +5 (most agreement), the items ranked higher in one factor than in other factors, the items ranked lower in one factor than in other factors and the items ranked at -5 (least agreement). Table A.9 shows the general template for the crib sheet that has been used in the research and in Part 2 of the book to illustrate the different profiles.

The crib sheet provides a summary of the items that the profile has ranked distinctively compared to the other factors, and therefore offers an instrument to compare profiles. Importantly, this comparison enables a consideration not only of the most extreme rankings, but also of those in the middle of the distribution. Following the logic of abduction, after forming the crib sheets it has been possible to formulate, for each factor, hypotheses regarding the whole viewpoint. The next step is to use the other data for the interpretation: in particular, I have also used the *objective* ancillary information, such as welfare sources and socioeconomic background, to help in interpreting the viewpoint. The interviews have permitted to further explore the links between subjectivities and objective conditions.

The 33 one-hour face-to-face semi-structured interviews have been analysed by using audio coding in order to describe and organise codes, implemented with the audio coding instruments of the software NVivo 10, which is a widely used instrument in qualitative research. The choice to code directly from audio files without transcribing ad verbatim and analysing textual data is

Table A.9: Template of the crib sheet

Item no	Item
	<i>Items ranked most like +5</i>
	<i>Items ranked higher in factor X than in any other factor arrays</i>
	<i>Items ranked lower in factor X than in any other factor arrays</i>
	<i>Items ranked least like -5</i>

twofold: the researcher already had textual data provided directly by the questionnaire attached to the Q-sort; and analysing directly from audio file permitted an appreciation of the original audio contributions from participants and integrated them with the other textual data. Audio coding allows the researcher to be 'sensorially closer' to the data, and appreciating this diversity is particularly relevant when the researcher is already dealing with different types of data (text and audio) and with different languages, as in this case.²² Importantly, coding directly from audio files has also saved time in the transcription phase during this multi-method strategy, although specific quotes from participants that enabled better illustration of interesting themes or codes have been transcribed.

As described in the previous section, the semi-structured interviews had two aims: first, exploring in more depth the themes covered by the Q-sort and completing the interpretation of profiles by checking the hypotheses formulated with the logic of abduction; and second, including themes that have not emerged in the Q-sort and broadening the range of themes and the richness of the descriptions. In order to respond to these two objectives, two types of coding have been employed.

The first was a theoretical coding informed by the conceptual framework of the study. Theoretical coding applies a deductive approach, as it aims to apply existing theoretical ideas. This phase enabled the researcher to collect empirical qualitative material for each component of the conceptual framework, and also to validate/test the links between the subjective views and the objective conditions emerging from the analysis of the Q-sorts. The second type was an inductive-orientated coding procedure identifying themes that have not been specified a priori but have only emerged during the interviews to allow themes to emerge in a 'bottom-up' fashion. This type of coding addressed more traditional inductive coding approaches and facilitated the identification of themes that have not been covered by the Q-sort and have not emerged in the Q-sort analysis. The final lists of nodes and sub-nodes are presented in Table A.10. The inductive coding has specifically intervened to add new sub-nodes that I did not include in my original coding.

The thematic coding aimed at both identifying the passages of the audio material linked to common themes, and to capture unexpected elements that were not included in the original framework. The coding procedure followed a two-stage process: first, the generation of the initial codes which follows the general topics derived from the theoretical framework; and second, the identification of sub-nodes

Table A.10: List of nodes and sub-nodes identified with NVivo 10

Main nodes	Sub-nodes
Academic side of university	Academic enjoyment Thoughts about dropping out Work–study balance
Family sources	Income/wealth of parents Relevance of family sources in budget Size of the family
Financial position	Capacity to cover monthly costs Experience of hardship
General attitudes	Perceptions of adulthood Attitudes on student support
Housing – accommodation	Quality of housing and distance from university Impact of rent on the budget
Individualisation and biographies	Life after university Aspirations and expectations in the labour market Postgraduate studies
Mental wellbeing	Stress Anxiety
Participation in the labour market during university	Underemployment and wages Relevance of self-earned income in budget
Social origins	Social and cultural capital Socioeconomic background
State sources	Sufficiency of state support Instruments (loans, grants)

which enabled the researcher to define inductively the meaning and content of each theme. The material has been divided and coded into the crucial themes indicated in the table above: welfare mix, social origins, and the different aspects of the young people’s experiences in university (academic, financial, housing, individualisation, and wellbeing), and contextual factors (social attitudes). While these general themes represent the guiding topics of the research and largely derive from the literature, this first stage of categorisation helped to clarify the relationship between the different themes.

The second step consisted of explaining the meaning of each general theme through the identification of sub-nodes. By reviewing the audio data, the selected material has been further categorised into sub-nodes in order to help with the definition of each theme. By an inductive process this has facilitated inclusion of aspects of the themes that were

not included in the original analytical framework. The identification of the sub-notes contributed to define each theme, moving away from its original description. For example, the 'size of the family' under family sources was largely absent from the literature and had not been considered before the analysis of the qualitative data. Similarly, the idea that family sources had to be understood as both income and as wealth is an aspect that emerged from this second stage of categorisation in sub-nodes.

The final step has consisted of integrating the findings from the interviews with the results of the Q-sort by putting together the different hypotheses formulated with the findings from the audio coding.

c. Ethics

The research received ethical approval from the ethics committee of the School for Policy Studies in October 2011. Interviews with young people involve sensitive issues and in this case this involved: discussions about psychological wellbeing, stress and anxiety in coping with independence; about managing risk; and about narratives regarding the participant's relationship with their family. An exception to the confidentiality policy has been added in cases of self-harm, harm to the researcher or harm to other parties. In this case, it has been stipulated that the confidentiality policies will be suspended to inform third parties that have the power to intervene. This exceptional policy has not been implemented. Most of the interviewees have not referred to psychological issues during the interview, and when this has happened the participants have shared their experiences without showing specific signs of stress during the interview. In one case a student became emotional at the end of an interview, after describing an episode involving a relative, and I immediately stopped recording and made sure she was comfortable before finishing the interview.

Ethical procedures have been followed in the different stages of the fieldwork. Participants have been reminded of the confidentiality of their personal information and the policy of not communicating their personal information to third parties, except in the case of harm to the researcher, the participant or a third party. During the fieldwork a one-page letter has been shown to participants specifying the scope of the research, the research goals and their role as participants in line with the policy of informed consent. Before filling in the Q-methodology survey or accepting the follow-up in-depth interviews, participants provided written consent and explicitly agreed to participate in the

study. Before completing the Q-sort participants were also asked if they agreed to be contacted for a follow-up in-depth interview and informed that they were able to withdraw at any time from the study. A voucher for £15/€15 was offered to participants who took part in the follow-up qualitative interviews as a thank-you gift.

Ethical procedures have also been followed in the presentation of findings. In line with the policy of confidentiality, participants' names have not been used in the discussion of the findings, which have replaced the original names with invented names that reflect geographical proximity. The information collected has been used only if strictly pertinent to the discussion of the scope of the research, and the demographic and ancillary data have not been presented when not necessary (e.g. information regarding the city of the participant has been omitted). The discussion of findings has taken into account the risk of data matching and has accurately avoided the potential identification of participants.

d. Strengths and limitations

Limitations in the comparative design

This cross-national research has been conducted by a single researcher and follows what is defined as a 'safari approach' to cross-national research,²³ implying an in-depth exploration as well as a well-defined issue by a single researcher rather than by a cross-national research team. This type of comparative research brings into question my capacity, as a single individual, to effectively capture the cross-national diversity in England, Italy and Sweden, and to guarantee functional equivalence and formal equivalence.

On one level, there is the issue of formal equivalence of concepts across countries.²⁴ In this comparative research this aspect appeared in the specific linguistic issue emerging from the fact that, as the only researcher of this study, I had knowledge of Italian and English but not a spoken ability in Swedish.²⁵ A decision was made, for Sweden, to translate the material of the survey into English and to conduct the interviews in English (although the possibility of interviews with a translator in Swedish was offered to participants but was not requested). This decision was favoured by the reported process of Swedish losing grounds in favour of English in Sweden.²⁶ This seemed to be particularly true for the case of young people in university, given that some of my participants were conducting their studies partly or entirely in English. The choice of using English in Sweden represented

a threat to reliability due to the study's comparative nature, although, while it might have affected the quality of the data, it did not affect the overall validity of the data collected.²⁷

Translation goes beyond the formal equivalence of terms, as it entails the fact that language is a part of the conceptual system.²⁸ While the process of Europeanisation that started with the Bologna Process has created, in part, a common language of European HE, many other concepts in this study proved to be anchored to national contexts, and their meaning has been explored in particular during the conversations with key actors and the interviews. An example is the cultural notion of *working class*, which has been included as an item in the area of contextual factors to explore the cross-cultural variation of concepts. In England, the idea of being 'working class' appeared to have a different meaning to the corresponding notion of *arbetarklass* (in Sweden) and *classe operaia* (in Italy). These comparative considerations have been integrated in the interpretation of findings. Furthermore, I have tried to limit the risks of a bias due to my greater knowledge of the context in England and Italy than in Sweden, by conducting a lengthier fieldwork in Sweden, translating policy papers from Swedish and discussing the interpretation of concepts with key actors and participants in Sweden.

Cross-national research also implies a consideration of the institutional and financial limitations, which in this case have led to the decision to use a two-stage fieldwork approach, rather than a long period of research in the three countries. While the two-stage fieldwork has helped to reduce the costs of the research, it has also increased the potential for attrition, as, due to the gap between the two stages, some students have dropped out of the study. One of the strategies to limit the practical trade-off has been to collect the data online through Q-Assessor, which has resulted in spending less time with participants in the collection of the Q-sort, but has enabled a high number of Q-sorts to be collected across three countries and in a relatively short time.

Validity and reliability of Q-methodology

Critical social psychology scholars have proposed Q-methodology as an alternative to traditional ways of conducting correlational analysis, as it is not concerned with the measurement of variability across populations, but in capturing holistic viewpoints.²⁹ This critical approach fits with the theoretical approach of my research, which seeks to capture both individual viewpoints and the welfare structures that shape young

people's circumstances. What is relevant in Q-methodology is that the question items are ordered in relation to each other, and therefore there is an element of contextuality concerning the inclusion of welfare mixes. Critical social psychologists contrast the assumptions behind the use social attitudes with those of inductive methods of enquiry, such as discourse analysis and Q-methodology.³⁰ While social attitudes assume distinctive and separated individual views, inductive methods, such as Q-methodology, are better suited to capture the interplay between the 'individual subject' and the 'social' given their focus on societal viewpoints. Moreover, Q-methodology has suited the exploratory nature of this research. The interpretation of factors in Q-methodology is not based on hypothetic-deductive reasoning and is rather exploratory and speculative.³¹

Furthermore, Q-methodology is consistent with the aim of exploring the topics cross-culturally in a small-scale comparative research. Q-methodology is also sensitive to cultural variation and, although it is not suited for the purpose of making generalisations, it is suited for small-scale comparative studies.³² Another strength of Q-methodology refers to its way of combining qualitative and quantitative material in the interpretation, which has offered, in the case of this study, a systematic procedure for conducting mixed methods research.³³ For example, in the case of this study, the qualitative material has contributed to providing thick descriptions of the profiles identified in the Q-factor analysis, and has clarified the relationships between the different themes/topics that emerged in the analysis.

On the other side, Q-methodology presents several limitations that are linked to both its premises and the specific ways it is implemented. First, the inductive potential of Q-methodology is limited by the fact that participants are asked to sort statements in a pre-set framework, which influences and limits the choices of participants. Participants might be influenced in their sorting by the structure of the pre-set framework; for example, they could place certain items in certain positions just because their initial choice was already filled. In particular, given the substantial numbers of items to sort (that is, task complexity), participants might have been more accurate in their sorting of their first items, rather than in sorting the last items, when they had less available slots. The use of Q-Assessor software in this study means that having 52 items to sort in an online screen has logistically limited the possibility of comparing statements by participants. Moreover, as the statements (the *concourse*) are decided by the researcher, the initial choice could strongly influence the findings of the research (although piloting should minimise this

risk). An additional issue in the analysis of resulting data is that while interpretation is informed by the findings of the Q-sort and by the ancillary material collected, the researcher might give more importance in the interpretation to the items on which participants tend to agree the most and the least, while it is more difficult to interpret the statements on which participants have milder opinions. In other words, this approach may over-emphasise differences in participants' views and underplay the extent of commonalities and continuities.

Ultimately, the utility of the Q-methodology instrument arises from its capacity to balance both the quantitative use of factor analysis with the more qualitative understanding of participants' viewpoints. On the one hand, Q-methodology aims to overcome the deductive-centrism of classical social attitudes surveys, while on the other, its structure might ultimately limit its inductive potential. In the case of this research, the capacity of Q-methodology for exploring individual points of view by paying attention to the context (in line with the theoretical framework of this research), its inductive approach in the interpretation of factors, and its suitability for small-scale cross-cultural studies, have made Q-methodology a preferred approach.

The issue of reliability can be explored in this study in particular in relation to Q-methodology in its use of quantitative techniques and in questioning how good the instrument has been at effectively capturing subjectivities, and in capturing in an exploratory way the variety of perspectives and the potential relationships between them. The issue of reliability is explored in Q-methodology in the form of replicability, which refers to the possibility that, under the same conditions of instructions, broadly the same factors representing similar viewpoints will emerge when the study is administered to different sets of people.³⁴ Test-retest reliability for Q-methodology has been demonstrated by several studies to range from 0.80 upwards,³⁵ meaning that by administering the study to different sets of people, a Q-methodology research leads to results that are 80% similar to the findings of the original study, provided that the same strategic sampling is used (in the case of my study this would mean having young people from different countries and socioeconomic backgrounds).

Notes

¹ Baker, R., Thompson, C. and Mannion, R. (2006a) 'Q-methodology in health economics', *Journal of Health Services Research & Policy*, vol 11, no 1, pp 38-45.

² Taken from Watts, S. and Stenner, P. (2012) *Doing Q methodological research: Theory, method & interpretation*, London: Sage.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Stenner, P.H., Cooper, D. and Skevington, S.M. (2003) 'Putting the Q into quality of life; the identification of subjective constructions of health-related quality of life using Q methodology', *Social Science & Medicine*, vol 57, no 11, pp 2161-72.

⁵ Bryman, A. (2012) *Social research methods*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

⁶ Watts, S. and Stenner (2012) op cit.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Cebulla, A. (2007) 'Class or individual? A test of the nature of risk perceptions and the individualisation thesis of risk society theory', *Journal of Risk Research*, vol 10, no 2, pp 129-48; Taylor-Gooby, P. (2005) 'Pervasive uncertainty in second modernity: an empirical test', *Sociological Research Online*, vol 10, no 4.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Shemmings, D. and Ellingsen, I.T. (2012) 'Using Q methodology in qualitative interviews', in J. Gubrium, J. Holstein, A. Marvasti and K. McKinney (eds) *The SAGE handbook of interview research: The complexity of the craft*, London: Sage, pp 415-27.

¹¹ ILO (International Labour Organisation) (2004) 'International Standard Classification of Occupations, ISCO-88', Geneva: ILO (www.ilo.org/public/english/bureau/stat/isco/isco88/index.htm).

¹² UNESCO (2014) 'ISCED: International Standard Classification of Education' (www.uis.unesco.org/Education/Pages/international-standard-classification-of-education.aspx).

¹³ Shavit, Y., Arum, R.T., Gamoran, A. and Menahem, G. (2007) *Stratification in higher education: A comparative study*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

¹⁴ Considering that the five educational fields put in the survey were medicine and dentistry and allied to health (for example, nursing); other sciences, engineering, technology and IT; human and social sciences (including law,

business, economics and psychology); creative arts, humanities and languages (for example, English literature, history); education; and others.

¹⁵ Watts and Stenner (2012) *op cit*.

¹⁶ *Ibid*.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p 273

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p 287.

¹⁹ The pre-flagging algorithm in PQMethod is designed to flag 'pure' cases only, according to the rule that loading a if (1) $a^2 > h^2/2$ (factor 'explains' more than half of the common variance) and (2) $a > 1.96/\text{SQRT}(\text{number of items})$ (loading 'significant' at $p > 0.05$).

²⁰ No other factor interfering means that no other factor presents a p -value > 0.30 and the same positive or negative sign as the main factor.

²¹ *Ibid*.

²² Wainwright, M. and Russell, A. (2010) *Using NVivo audio-coding: Practical, sensorial and epistemological considerations*, Social Research Update (SRU), Guildford: Department of Sociology, University of Surrey.

²³ Hantrais, L. and Mangen, S. (1996) 'Method and management of cross-national social research', in L. Hantrais and S. Mangen (eds) *Cross-national research methods in the social sciences*, London: Pinter, p 4.

²⁴ Marsh, R.M. and Merton, R.K. (1967) *Comparative sociology: A codification of cross-societal analysis*, New York: Harcourt, Brace & World.

²⁵ In the time I have spent researching Sweden and dealing with Swedish material, I have developed an elementary knowledge of written Swedish that has allowed me, with the help of translators and native speakers, to translate important pieces of policy documents included in the bibliography.

²⁶ Hult, F.M. (2005) 'A case of prestige and status planning: Swedish and English in Sweden', *Current Issues in Language Planning*, vol 6, no 1, pp 73-9.

²⁷ The issue of formal equivalence also applies to me as a medium of language as, while I am fluent in English, I am a native Italian speaker.

²⁸ Lendvai, N. and Bainton, D. (2013) 'Translation: towards a critical comparative social policy agenda', in P. Kennett (ed) *A handbook of comparative social policy*, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, pp 115-34.

²⁹ Watts and Stenner, 2012, *op cit*, p 273.

³⁰ Stainton Rogers, R., Stenner, P., Gleeson, K. and Stainton Rogers, W. (1995) *Social psychology: A critical agenda*, Cambridge: Polity.

³¹ Ibid, pp 252-3.

³² As underlined by Stenner, P.H., Bianchi, G., Popper, M., Supeková, M., Lukšík, I. and Pujol, J. (2006) 'Constructions of sexual relationships: A study of the views of young people in Catalonia, England and Slovakia and their health implications', *Journal of Health Psychology*, vol 11, no 5, pp 669-84.

³³ Ramlo, S. and Newman, I. (2011) 'Q methodology and its position in the mixed methods continuum', *Operant Subjectivity: The International Journal of Q Methodology*, vol 34, no 3, pp 173-92.

³⁴ van Exel, J. and de Graaf, G. (2005) *Q methodology: A sneak preview* (<https://fcis.vdu.lt/~n.klebanskaja@evf.vdu.lt/FOV1-000B33EC/Q-methodology%2520-%2520A%2520sneak%2520preview.pdf>).

³⁵ Brown, S.R. (1980) *Political subjectivity: Applications of Q methodology in political science*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press; Nicholas, J. (2011) *Reliability in Q methodology: A case Study*, Sarasota, FL: Eastern Education Research Association Annual Conference.