

RESEARCH
GROUP
PEDAGOGY

RESEARCH AREA:
SOCIOLOGY OF
EDUCATION

Beneath the surface: the culture of poverty among youth in relative poverty

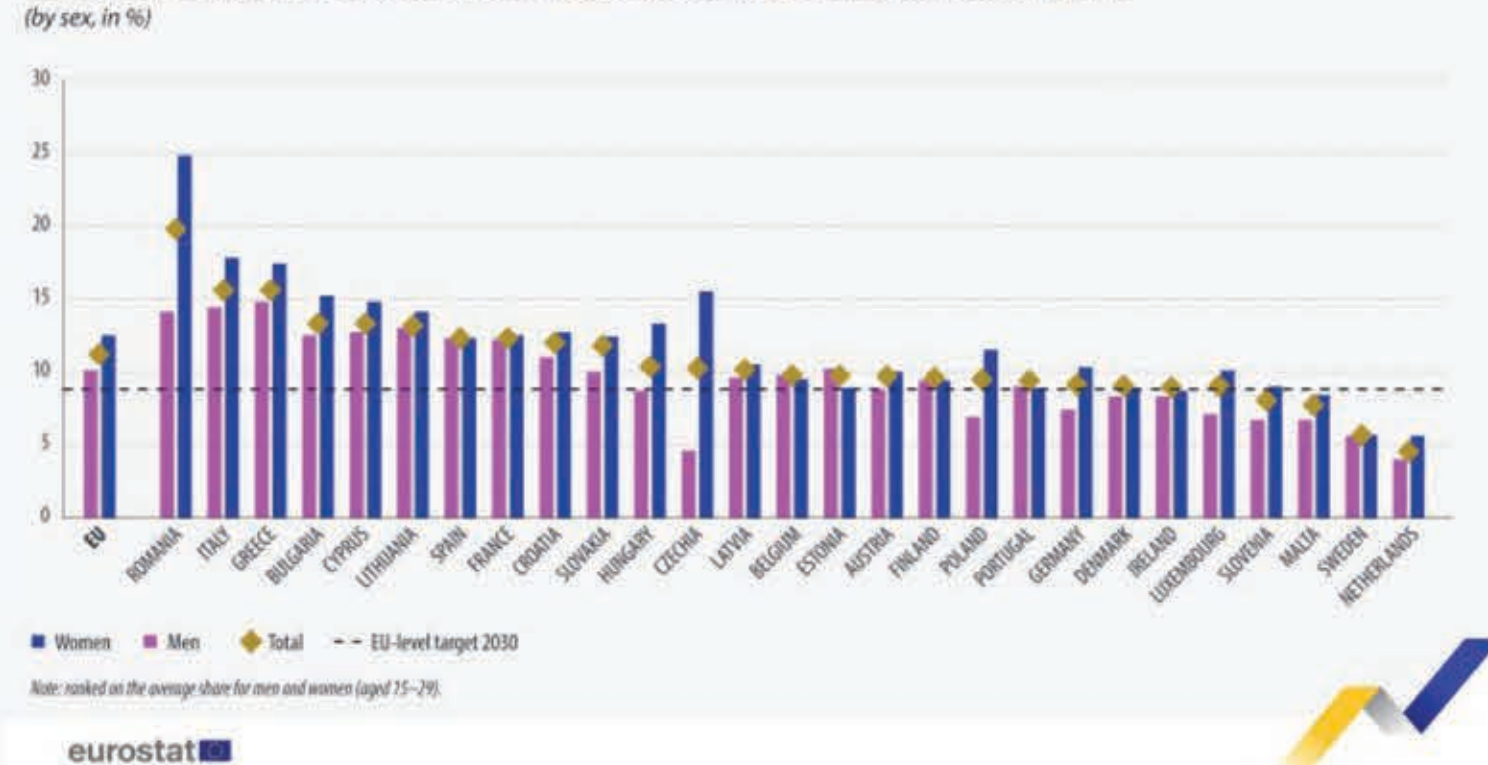
INTRODUCTION

The project focuses on behavioural patterns, cultural characteristics, and life practices that impact individual and social well-being. Research studies the "new culture of poverty," examining how patterns of behaviour and beliefs contribute to poverty not only among those in absolute poverty but also among individuals experiencing relative poverty.

The literature review has revealed how certain life practices and repetitive behaviours create limiting patterns that hinder personal development and fulfilment. These patterns often establish 'horizons of significance'—deeply internalized attitudes and beliefs formed through experience—that maintain the cultural structure of poverty. Such models of thinking and behaviour contribute to a cycle where young people remain at risk of poverty, particularly when they struggle to adapt to the rapidly changing demands of the nowadays labour market.

The study of NEETs (Not in Education, Employment, or Training) youth in Bulgaria uncovered that the country has a higher-than-average share of NEETs compared to European standards, with 16.2% in the 20–24 age group and 18.9% in the 25–29 age group. Moreover, 33.9% of children in Bulgaria are at risk of poverty and social exclusion.

Young people (aged 15-29) neither in employment nor in education and training, 2023 (by sex in %)



PROJECT GUIDELINES

This project aims to identify and systematize cultural patterns and behavioural models that create new barriers to successful social functioning, leading to a "non-traditional vulnerability" among youth. The focus is examining how cultural beliefs, values, and behaviours influence individual life success and broader societal development. The research explores characteristics of the culture of poverty, such as the lack of initiative, dependency on others, low motivation for work and achievements, and a rigid approach to social norms. It also investigates the impact of both personal and structural conditions on the persistence of poverty cycles. The expected contributions include the development of a methodological framework for studying the culture of poverty, a deeper understanding of the social contexts influencing youth development, and practical recommendations for educational practices and social policies.

METHODOLOGY

From a methodological point of view this study is designed as a **case study**. The included methods are as follows:

- Theoretical research on various perspectives and definitions for "culture of poverty"
- Semi-structured interview with young people between 20 and 34 years old
- Focus group with teachers
- Focus groups with students
- Observation of young people between 20 and 34 years old in their everyday life
- Single-case analysis
- Survey of people between the ages of 20 to 45

Target group:

The study focus on young people from various social background. However, all participants in the study are chosen based on several common characteristics:

- Inactivity on daily basis
- Absence of autonomy (incl. financially)
- Low income from part-time or temporary employment
- Weak commitment

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RESULTS

Goals and time perspective

A clear vision and well-defined goals are seen as traits of a development-oriented culture. Among respondents, 43.5% exhibit clarity in their aspirations, and 55.1% tend to plan their actions. However, 36.2% often express hesitation about their goals, while 18.8% prefer to let things resolve on their own, and 26.1% occasionally adopting this attitude. These tendencies suggest a culture of poverty characterized by uncertainty and reluctance to plan proactively.

Regarding the statement, "I have clear goals for the future, but I am not sure how to achieve them," 31.2% have clear strategies, but 34% show uncertainty, and 34.8% express partial hesitation. Among women, 31.9% often hesitate about their aspirations, with 22.7% reporting partial hesitation. This uncertainty correlates with unclear educational goals (fig.1): a desire to learn but uncertainty about what to pursue ($r=0.438$), a need for information without knowing its source ($r=0.401$), and doubts about succeeding in further education ($r=0.352$). Notably, the strongest correlation is between uncertainty about coping with further education and the sentiment, "I would like to continue my education, but I don't know what to choose" ($r=0.502$), suggesting a fear of failure.

Men report higher long-term aspirations, such as entrepreneurship, but also significant barriers like insufficient connections and inadequate conditions. These challenges are strongly correlated with a reluctance to plan ($r=0.490$), perceptions of poor conditions for entrepreneurship ($r=0.630$), a preference for not working over low-wage jobs ($r=0.439$), and the belief that financial limitations obstruct their dreams. Such responses might reflect defensive rationalizations for a lack of initiative.

In summary, about one-third of participants show significant uncertainty about their future goals, an inability to plan effectively, and hesitation regarding the means to achieve their aspirations.

		I often feel hesitant about what I would like to do.	To resume learning, I need information, but I'm unsure where to find it.	I want to continue my education, but I'm uncertain if I can succeed.	I would like to enrol in continuing education, but I can't afford it.	I need financial help to continue my education.	I would like to continue my education, but I don't know what to choose.
I often feel hesitant about what I would like to do.	Pearson Correlation	1	.401	.352	0.156	.330	.438
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000	0.000	0.128	0.001	0.000
	N	97	97	97	97	97	97
To resume learning, I need information, but I'm unsure where to find it.	Pearson Correlation	.401	1	.457	.312	.319	.406
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000		0.000	0.002	0.001	0.000
	N	97	97	97	97	97	97
I want to continue my education, but I'm uncertain if I can succeed.	Pearson Correlation	.352	.457	1	.416	.231	.502
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000		0.000	0.023	0.000
	N	97	97	97	97	97	97
I would like to enrol in continuing education, but I can't afford it.	Pearson Correlation	0.156	.312	.416	1	.609	.448
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.128	0.002	0.000		0.000	0.000
	N	97	97	97	97	97	97
I need financial help to continue my education.	Pearson Correlation	.330	.319	.231	.609	1	.264
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.001	0.001	0.023	0.000		0.009
	N	97	97	97	97	97	97
I would like to continue my education, but I don't know what to choose.	Pearson Correlation	.438	.406	.502	.448	.264	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.009	
	N	97	97	97	97	97	97

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Fig. 1 Correlation Matrix of Factors Influencing Continuing Education Intentions amongst female respondents

Continuing education is essential for higher qualifications, employment, and social mobility. Most respondents express stable intentions to continue, but 37.7% are unsure what to choose, 32.6% doubt their success, and 46.4% lack funds. A significant correlation ($r=0.248$, $p=0.01$) exists between financial concerns and a tendency to avoid planning.

Women with basic education show 33.3% anxiety about coping, those with secondary general education 43.1%, and those with secondary vocational education only 7.7%. This suggests that those uncertain about continuing education due to financial reasons may lack confidence in the value of their previous qualifications.

Men show less anxiety about coping but are also unsure about their choices. Financial concerns often seem defensive. For women, hesitation correlates moderately with the belief that a diploma is more valuable than knowledge ($r=0.377$). Differences in this view are statistically significant between those with secondary and vocational education ($F=5.056$, $p=0.014/0.019$).

Youth Employment and Financial Independence

A significant proportion of young people showing goal instability also display a reluctance to work hard. The correlation between avoiding effortful work and refusing "boring and difficult" jobs is notable ($r=0.464$, $Sig=0.01$). About 32.5% would rather not work than accept low-paying jobs (fig. 2). Among those lacking financial independence, 41.7% rely on "things to work themselves out," showing a strong correlation with rejecting low-paid work ($r=0.707$, $Sig=0.000$). Uncertainty about career preferences also correlates with refusing low-paid work ($r=0.664$, $Sig=0.000$). Reluctance to work hard is most pronounced in the 27–35 age group.

Financial independence varies significantly with education: 33.3% of those with vocational education, 17.1% with general secondary education, and 50% with a bachelor's degree are financially independent. However, 22.7% of graduates in tertiary education are still dependent, and 27.3% partially so. Young people living with parents show less effort ($F=7.770$, $p=0.016/0.013$) and higher dependency ($F=7.970$, $p=0.01/0.011$).

Additionally, 23.9% of respondents frequently receive financial help from partners, indicating a tendency to seek financial security through cohabitation. Gender trends in this behaviour are inconclusive due to limited data. Urban-rural disparities are evident, with 43.1% of Sofia residents believing they can achieve goals independently, compared to 36.4% in villages. This suggests structural conditions influence financial independence and ambition.

		I don't like to plan; I expect things to sort themselves out.	I would rather not work than work for little money.	Work that requires a lot of effort does not attract me.	Even if I have no money, I still wouldn't work at something that is boring and difficult.
I don't like to plan; I expect things to sort themselves out.	Pearson Correlation	1	.336	.211	.220
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000	0.013	0.010
	N	138	138	138	138
I would rather not work than work for little money.	Pearson Correlation	.336	1	.392	.340
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000		0.000	0.000
	N	138	138	138	138
Work that requires a lot of effort does not attract me.	Pearson Correlation	.211	.392	1	.464
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.013	0.000		0.000
	N	138	138	138	138
Even if I have no money, I still wouldn't work at something that is boring and difficult.	Pearson Correlation	.220	.340	.464	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.010	0.000	0.000	
	N	138	138	138	138

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Fig. 2 Correlation Matrix of Attitudes Toward Planning, Work, and Effort

CONCLUSION

- The consolidated findings suggest that a considerable proportion of young people demonstrate pronounced uncertainty regarding their goals, intentions, and pathways to achieving their aspirations.
- Manifestations of defensive reasoning concerning the lack of initiative are evident.
- Defensive rationalizations for deferring further education are also observed. In the context of limited initiative and the postponement of continuing education, these individuals do not exhibit anxiety about their circumstances. Instead, they display an outwardly directed negativity, attributing causes to external factors. The emphasis on perceived injustices (both genuine and exaggerated) appears to function not as an articulation of a social position but rather as a mechanism to justify inaction.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Proposed Measures for Addressing the Issue:

- Implementation of early intervention and preventive strategies through more individualized training programs aimed at unlocking potential, cultivating practical skills, and enhancing coping abilities.
- Career guidance and mentorship initiatives to facilitate informed decisions regarding educational and professional pathways.
- Provision of paid internships and programs for entry-level and career transition jobs to promote workforce integration.
- Expansion of outreach initiatives to raise awareness about existing training opportunities.
- Entrepreneurship education to foster innovation and self-employment capabilities.
- Employer-subsidized training programs to incentivize skill development aligned with market needs.
- Training in 'life skills' focusing on the development of non-cognitive skills alongside with cognitive competencies to improve adaptability.
- Enhancement of vocational training and financial literacy programs to support informed economic decision-making.
- Establishment of a flexible linkage between educational structures and labour market demands to ensure the relevance of acquired qualifications.

For further reading:

Varbanova, Silvia, and Maria Petkova. "Nowadays Culture of Poverty: Social-Pedagogical Dimensions and Spread in Bulgarian Conditions". *Pedagogika-Pedagogy*, vol. 96, no. 5s, 2024. Available at: https://azbuki.bg/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/pedagogy_5s_24_sivliviya-varbanova.pdf.

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