

## Blindness as a challenging voice to stigma

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The title of this presentation is inspired by John Hull's autobiographical work (2001), in which he unfolds his meditations upon the experience of gradually losing his sight. Suggesting that blindness is "a calling from stigma to stigmata" (ibid. 234), meaning from the stigma of blindness to the stigmata of western society, he challenges us to consider what blindness is to sight as it is experienced in visual contexts. What follows is drawn from my research on blind people, acting in an athletic association of Athens. In particular, I will refer to their ambivalent handling of a stereotypical image attached to blindness. This is the concept of 'insight', which is used by the blinds as a means of individualization and differentiation from the sighted and, at the same time, as a label they wish to get rid of. According to Homi Bhabha, the stereotype, as the major discursive strategy of the hegemony, is "a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always 'in place', already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated" (1994: 66). What I am suggesting here is that blind people's ambivalent treatment of the stereotypical 'insight' is a response to Greek society's conception of blindness either as 'false perception' or as 'insight'. As such, it could be seen as an attempt to postpone the anxious repetition Bhabha is referring to and to articulate the experience of blindness in their own terms.

What society sees in blind people and ranks them in the category of the disabled is their visual deficiency. What blind people see in the absence of their sight is a different perception of the world and a different mode of acting upon it. This is an articulation that asks us to go beyond deficiency. Hence, in order to approach the power relations developing between the sightless and the sighted beyond the notion of deficiency, we need first to problematize the notion of visual absence. This leads us to the anthropological discussion on the visual sense as a panoptic gaze and as a means for society's technification. So far, to counterbalance the hegemony of sight – in terms of its given quality as the more valid access to reality – anthropologists have attempted to

explore sight in contexts that reveal either its omissions, or its *physical* connection with the other senses. Both approaches are taken in order to rehabilitate the sight, in view of the danger for it to be totally denounced as a mode of perception (Grasseni 2006: 1 – 16).

I will not refer that much to the point of the optical omission, as I consider it a false question from its beginning: it implies the existence of a totality, the redemption of which calls for another totality, although from an anthropological point of view this time. Thus, it ends up losing its critical strength. I will rather refer to the anthropological efforts to ‘awaken’ the other senses, so that human perception is not reduced to sight. Among other anthropologists, Nadia Seremetakis (1996) proposes that the interpretation of the senses and through the senses constitutes “a rehabilitation of truth”. Interpreted senses are considered indexes of the cultural diversity vanished by the procedures of visual homogenization of modernity (97). Instead of viewing senses as isolated from each other and as placed in hierarchical order in terms of truth, Seremetakis approaches perception as having a multisensory and a memorial dimension. The senses are channels, connected to each other, through which the world enters dynamically into the body. Meaning, stored into memory, is revealed unintentionally through the senses and is expressed in forms of performance, material culture and somatic determinations. Like language, the senses are social and collective institutions, but not reducible to it. In this way, the truth that emerges is beyond linguistic expressions (ibid.: 40 – 49).

Considering senses as acting beyond the intentional and the conscious, and as revealing an hyper-linguistic meaning, the anthropological project for the rehabilitation of sight seems to follow the western metaphysical shift from the appearance to the depth of reality, from the visible to its invisible dimension. The multisensory perception, as another privileged sensory access to the world, turns the whole body to a visual modality, and presents the subject as being able to perceive a more “authentic” reality, which is concealed under the distorted surface. Is it possible then for the analytical concept of multisensory perception to call into question the objectivity of sight, when it itself proclaims another objectivity, that of the embodied sight? The senses are called upon to “name an absence” (ibid.: 31), a vacuum, that the hegemony of sight creates and conceals at the same time. In this framework, the senses are made to appear as apt answers to questions posed by the visual regime. Yet, they are deprived of modes of

articulation, since their meaning cannot be told, seen or conceived with the objectifying materials culturally available. Thus, by retaining the visual criteria of knowledge legitimization, the embodiment of vision does not recognize the participation of the other senses in the discovery of ‘truth’. Put otherwise, it leaves no space for other sensory modalities to be performed.

Having said this, blindness, as the exact opposite of sight, cannot be seen as the vindication of its non-hegemony. Instead, it seems that the conceptualization of blindness as an ‘insight’ transforms both the western society’s and anthropology’s desire of accepting visual difference to a normalizing procedure of blindness. If we are to perceive blind people as subjects acting in visual contexts and blindness as a different sense of reality, we need to remove our analytical focus from modes of ‘sight’s’ rehabilitation to the procedures these people are engaged in, as they seek recognition of their sensory difference. What I am suggesting then, is that the ambivalent way in which blind people treat the ‘insight’, that is the ‘physical’ possibility of finding out a more authentic reality, can be heard as a contesting discourse of subjectification that goes beyond the visual deficiency.

A stereotypical image that goes with blindness is that blind people can see with ‘the eyes of the soul’. The following short story, swinging between a real fact and an anecdote, is indicative of both western society’s treatment of blindness and blind people’s answer to this treatment.

*There was a priest. Every morning he met a blind man, telling him: You are so happy that you can see with the ‘soul’s eyes’. You will have for sure a place in paradise! After many mornings, the blind man answered the priest: Since you are so unhappy, why don’t you go to a doctor and have your eyes ripped off, so you can also enter the paradise?*

As a way of denouncing the ‘soul’s eyes’ stereotype, blind people may refer positively to another symbolic representation of blindness’ possibility to talk about the more authentic dimension of reality. I am referring to the phrase of the Argentine author Borhes. Himself blind towards the end of his life, he said that what is lost with sight is “just the unimportant surface of things”.

Looking at the historical course of the disability movement in Greece, offers a first step to the interpretation of blinds' ambivalent faith to the notion of 'insight'. In 1976, blind people proceeded to the occupation of 'Blinds' House', an institution for the education and the housing of blinds from all over Greece. One of their main demands then was the recognition of their right to self-administration. This meant that the administration of the institution should be released from the army's and the church's hands and also from the practice of charity that characterized it and upon which it depended largely. This shift would signify both the beginning of the blinds' de-institutionalization and the opportunity for them to prove their ability of coping with the blindness' difficulties and leading a life of their own. In this framework, the current denouncement of the 'soul's eyes' metaphor can be seen as a performance of the blind people's past struggling against charity and for independence. Inspired by the Christian obligation to 'save' the weak, this stereotypical self-presentation reassures the society's anxiety about what is perceived as social deviation. On this ground, what many blind people articulate both as a complain and as a demand towards the society is that the later should see 'the man behind the blind'.

Returning to Borhes' phrase, its positive conceptualization of insight seems to be grounded on its open character in terms of the many different receptive 'completions' it offers. It symbolically represents the depth of things, which is not reduced to one but to many different meanings. Any eyes, blind or not, that 'know how' to discern beneath the one-dimensional – hence distorting – surface of the world have access to all these receptive completions. Contrary to the 'soul's eyes', an idea that prevents blind people from 'touching' this world, the concept of a multidimensional depth gives them space for modes of articulation and action other than those designated by the prevalence of sight. This concept should not be seen as an acceptance of the stereotypical image of 'insight', but as an effort for social recognition of blindness' difference, a difference that emerges from an absence. As such, it 'chooses' to be articulated in a mainly visual and totalizing context, the dualism between the distorted surface of reality and its real depth. Paying attention to blind people touching or hearing this dualism can be a challenge to sight's hegemony, since it can reveal some of its 'blind' spots, concerning both western society's visual faith and its treatment of the Other.

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# **The 3rd HO PhD Symposium on Contemporary Greece: Structures, Context and Challenges**

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**'YOUNG PEOPLE, 'IMAGINED FUTURES' & THE CONCEPT OF 'REFLEXIVITY': INTERPRETIVE POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITATIONS**

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**(Work in progress)**

**Young People, ‘Imagined futures’ and the Concept of ‘Reflexivity’: Interpretive Possibilities and Limitations**

***Introduction***

The present paper is based on my PhD study on youth identities in modern Greece. The object of the study double: On one hand it constitutes an exploratory, sociological research on youth identification processes. On the other hand it is an exercise of interpretive possibilities since it deploys tools from 3 theories (Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault and Stuart Hall) in order to view the data through three distinctive lenses. The study focuses on what has been constructed as ‘mainstream youth’, ‘silenced majority’, ‘ordinary kids’ in the context of youth research. Hence it is concerned with students that are in secondary post-compulsory education and in particular, students in their last year of Lyceum. Identification issues are expected to be particularly relevant and important for young people, at this transitional phase of their lives.

In this piece of writing I will refer to young people’s ‘imagined futures’. I am interested in the way young people go about to think of their future education and/ or employment. I focus on their forms of engagement with such issues. The analysis draws on four narratives of the self. These were elicited using semi-structured interviews. All four young people live in Athens and attend the same type of school. That is, they are in the last year of Unified Lyceum. I will discuss these four cases regarding them as exemplar cases of broader tendencies that can be identified in Greek youth.

For the analysis of the narratives the concept of 'reflexivity' is deployed. Reflexivity has attracted the theoretical and analytical attention of several sociological studies (indicatively: Bourdieu 1992, Skeggs 2003, Archer 2007, Giddens 1991, 1994 etc). In each of the above frameworks 'reflexivity' is conceptualized differently; hence, different meanings and significations are attached to it. In the context of this discussion reflexivity is depicted from late modernity theories. More specifically reflexivity is derived from Giddens and Beck's theorizations. I will elaborate on their approach later on along with the discussion of the four narratives.

The paper aims to illustrate a view on young people's engagement with 'imagined futures'. Furthermore while deploying the concept of 'reflexivity', the paper intends to provide an account of the possibilities and the limitations that it entails as analytical tool in the particular context. It has to be stressed that the above constitutes a heuristic analytical device. In consequence, it represents one out of several possible interpretations; one among different ways that the data could be viewed and interpreted. My intention is not to end up with certain and fixed conclusions. Rather my target is to raise discussions and problematizations in relation to the data and the concepts that are utilized.

***Reflexive Individuals: They know what they want and they know how to get it***  
***(Anna & Marianna)***

Anna is a student and at the same time she is dancing ballet on a professional level. She refers to ballet as a way of life, as an important and necessary bit of her life. At the same time she is questioning it and talks extensively about the frustration and the difficulties that such a choice entails.

*'At some point you are getting confused & you don't know if what you believe ...eehm...whether your priorities are correct, because they start... oscillating, & you start wondering...is what I am doing now, correct? Perhaps I am exaggerating? Perhaps I am leaving things back? ...do I leave back friendships?...perhaps...I leave back my personal life in general...perhaps... & what does worth, what doesn't worth...and...at some point you 're getting messed. You 're getting confused, your values are confused'*



The process Anna narrates, could be interpreted in Giddens's terms. According to Giddens's theory, late modernity as a distinctive phase is characterized by the weakening of tradition as well as the weakening of structural forces, within the broad context of globalization and the re-alignment of the global and the local dimensions that results from it. Within these conditions, individuals project and mobilize themselves reflexively. While an 'indefinite range of potential courses of action (with their attendant risks) is at any given moment open to individuals and collectivities' (Giddens, 1991, p.28), individuals, on a day-to-day basis, are asked to make choices for themselves and decide on their trajectories. In this way they are involved in a continuous structuring and restructuring of themselves and their biographies. In this perspective 'we are, not what we are, but what we make of ourselves...what the individual becomes is dependent on the reconstructive endeavors in which she or he engages' (Giddens,1991, p. 75). Two crucial constitutive elements of this process are, individual choice on one hand and reflexivity on the other.

*'The reflexivity of the self is continuous, as well as all -pervasive. At each moment, or at least at regular intervals, the individual is asked to conduct a self-interrogation in terms of what is happening' (Giddens,1991, p. 76)*

Anna can be seen as exemplifying such an attitude. While choosing to follow a career as a ballet dancer and states her sense of fulfillment through dance, at the same time she keeps questioning what she does. She adopts a dialogical form of engagement with her self and her practices. She is doing what Giddens calls the 'practiced art of self- observation' (Giddens 1991, p. 76).

Furthermore, her engagement with ballet as well as with her future plans is characterized by an 'open dialogue with time' (ibid). She illustrates her thoughts on future education as follows:

*'I am thinking of Pedagogy, because that is the only compatible to the ballet. They both have to do with kids. I mean in the ballet apart from a dancer, you can become a teacher later. And it is a department where you don't have workshops, so I will be able to do it in parallel with the ballet. I wanted to go to the Physics Department in order to do an MA in Astrophysics but this is not possible, at least for the time being.*

....

*So how do you imagine your life in 1-2 years from now? Have you got any plans for it?*

*In 1-2 years from now...I believe that I will get into the School of Pedagogy next year, and I will be in the professional department of ballet, the 'Anotera', which is like a proper University, with proper exams and books...So I will be going to 2 Universities in parallel, which means that I will be full throughout the whole day'*

Here Anna seems to make a rational decision on her future education. She tries to find a profession that 'is compatible with' her career as a ballet dancer, thus she leaves out her plans for the Physics' department. Later on in her narrative, she also points out on the uncertainty that ballet dancing career can bring later on in her life, and links it with her decision to go to the University. Thus she plans to follow a double route, which she expects to give her greater fulfillment and certainty at the same time. In addition this is connected with the management of risk that is embedded into a ballet-dancer career. She is dealing with the uncertainty in a rational way. Anna seems to adopt a 'calculative attitude to the open possibilities of action, positive or negative' with which, according to Giddens (1991), 'as individuals and globally, we are confronted in a continuous way in our contemporary social existence' (Giddens, 1991, p. 28). Moreover, she has a clear plan on the steps she has to follow in order to make her plan happen. Interestingly enough, she has a clear view of how she will be distributing her time in the following 2-3 years. That is in Giddens' terms a 'colonization of the future' (ibid, p.86)

Futurity, strategic planning and rational decision-making are elements that could also be observed in Marianna's narrative. Marianna talks about her plans after entering the university as follows:

*'I am thinking of working in a café at the beginning in order to make some money, to be able to be moving...I will be studying ...and...I will start searching. I will search for a temporary job in an accountancy office at first, then I will search in companies and these kind of things...I will find somewhere... ok, it's impossible not to find something. And then... I will write dissertation, and I will graduate. I will go to London to do an MA, I also want to do some other things...I will start learning Italian or Spanish from the next year. So I want...within the next 5 years to be done with the University, to have done Italian or Spanish, to have the 'Proficiency' in English...so I will have something. I will do my MA afterwards...so in around 7 years from now I want to be done with what I want. And then.... yes.... after all these degrees, I will*

*find something good. I don't want to achieve a high economic position. I want to achieve a high **social** position. I think this comes first and money comes out of it. I think it works this way, not the other way around'*

With respect to the above, Marianna's narrative contains a clear view of her goals out of education and she presents herself as having clear plans in relation to her career. Throughout her narrative she makes up a plan for her life and within this framework she sets priorities, makes strategic decisions and guides her choices. Therefore Marianna appears to be developing her life-project and to be the manager of it. Her narrative is future orientated and - similarly with Anna- she is in a position to have a view of what she will be doing in the next few years. She shows a great degree of awareness of the steps she has to follow in order to reach her goals.

Reflexivity in Marianna's narrative of the self is manifested in her way of presenting her awareness of what she wants from her future and why. She is clear that she wants to build up a career and achieve a social position. According to Beck, '*for modern social advantages, one has to do something, to make an active effort. One has to win, know how to assert oneself in the competition for limited resources – and not only once but day after day*' (Beck, 1996, p. 25). Marianna seems to be aware of the above and she also seems to be conscious about the difficulties that such a project entails. Here again reflexivity can be manifested in the form of her proactive thinking. While being aware of the '*competition for limited resources*' she plans to obtain credentials as well as to start gathering working experience early, so that she will be competent to obtain a good job.

The two girls illustrate Beck's case that '*Opportunities, dangers, biographical uncertainties... must now be perceived, interpreted, decided and processed by individuals themselves*' (Beck, 1996, p.27). Both girls indicate a high degree of reflexivity in their narratives of the self. They are future orientated, they have a clear plan for their future, they show aware of the steps that they have to follow in order to get there and they are confident to go for it. Most importantly, they show awareness of the contradictions, the risks, the difficulties and the adventures that their choices entail. They are positioned within the logic of their plans. Finally, they seem to make rational decisions and undertake proactive action for the future risks and the critical moments that they foresee.

*Hybrids of reflexivity and un-reflexive individuals: 'Whatever comes up then' and 'Still searching myself'*  
(Angeliki & Giannis)

Angeliki has followed the theoretical direction. The basic reason for that is the avoidance of mathematics. When she is asked if she is targeting to a particular school she says:

*Well...At the beginning of the year I wanted to go to the School of Law but now, I see it as a bit distanced. ☺ so...  
Does it have to do with the degree of difficulty?  
It has to do with it and at the same time...at the end of the day... I don't know whether I do like it that much... I don't know...I will apply for the School of Media, for International and European Studies and then I will apply...for Philosophy...and School of Pedagogy...for several different schools. (p. 7)*

When asked if her parents had any ideas or suggestions in relation to the decision of Departments etc, Angeliki says:

*'my mom...In general, I intend to help her out later ...but I mean later later on, maybe this is the reason why...well School of Law would be helpful...You know... it would help if I knew the legislation and have such a point of view for the issues that come up...But...Ok, she said she would prefer it...but she didn't bring any objection for the rest of the possibilities'. (p. 8)*

.....

*So do you have any thoughts of getting involved with your mother's business?  
Well this thought exist, but...well you never know...yes, I would like to but... whatever comes up then...' (p. 9)*

Angeliki doesn't speak about a clear and fixed plan in relation to her future education. She rather refers to a variety of possible scenarios. She can certainly see herself going to the University but she leaves open the details and the respective possibilities. From this point of view throughout her narrative she keeps an open and fluid position. She presents herself as keeping a loose control and a more relaxed attitude in relation to her future destinations. Bringing back to the discussion Beck

and Giddens' individual reflexivity Angeliki is a rather un-reflexive individual, in Beck's and Giddens terms. She seems to be far away from having, as Webb describes it, an 'individualized sense of responsibility for personal achievements, which in turn encourages a risk-taking and calculative orientation to life'.

Nevertheless Angeliki illustrates her future horizon as one with several possibilities. And in this case, possibilities are conceptualized in the sense of opportunities rather than risks, dangers, or uncertainties. Her narrative is characterized by confidence, optimism and conveys a positive outlook for the future. Angeliki's narrative embodies some aspects of Du-Bois Raymond's (1998) 'being flexible-professional future life-project' (Du-Bois Raymond, 1998, p.71). This refers to the plans of a group of post-adolescents that 'have opted for a lifestyle that is not definite', that 'keep the path open' and at the same time 'they are optimistic and prepare themselves for all eventualities' (ibid, p.71). Du-bois Raymond indicates that their loose kind of involvement in planning and managing their lives is not an incidental one; 'This flexible attitude among post-adolescents also demonstrates a certain nonchalance brought about by their social origin: they know that they are backed up by their parents' financial and cultural resources' (ibid, p.71). Thus, such an attitude is related to the material and symbolic conditions where these young people find themselves in. This then comes to terms with the argument that risk and uncertainty are unequally distributed across different social positions. (Furlong and Cartmel, Ball et al.) and signifies the effect of the continuing workings of structural forces in the spread of insecurity. Finally according to the above, Angeliki's reflexivity and the management of life is generated not only as a side effect of the institutional reflexivity, but also through the subjective perceptions of necessity and need.

Giannis goes to Technical Vocational School and he has followed the 'public health and security' - section.

*He (referring to his step-father) told me, that if I go to T.E.E. for dental-technician...well, he said, I have the laboratory/ workshop, so I will leave it to you later on...you know what I mean...and he said now I see you as my son...and ...so...I went there.*

*So that's how it came...*

*Yes yes.*

*Do you like it?*

*No.*

*Is there something in particular that you don't like about it?*

*I am...from the morning to the evening...I mean...my father for instance, is from the morning to the evening in one room. I want to be seeing people, to be talking...to talk...anyway ☺, well... to be seeing people, at least.*

Giannhs chose the particular specialization after the encouragement of his father. The basic criterion of this choice has been the security of future employment that his fathers' own workshop will offer him. Thus he speaks about his decision to follow the route where he feels that he has got a back-up. Nevertheless he does not feel happy with his choice.

*Have you got anything else in mind?*

*No...I have...I am lost.... ☺*

*Yes? Hmm... ☺*

*I don't know what I want. I like several things...I like public hygiene for example...I would like to be going to the public sector later...social worker...I like that one as well...but...you see...these require to be talkative...and to...to know how to talk to others...you know what I mean...And I don't know I hesitate to speak...*

*I don't know, I am still searching myself, I don't know what to do in my life.*

Here Turners' (1967) notion of liminality could provide some insights on this state of being lost, of puzzleness and confusion. Bettis (1996) uses the notion of liminality to refer to a transition period of de-industrialization (p.107), which is marked by the co-existence of elements from the old and new social and economic order. In this context, new urban complexities emerge, having as main characteristics 'the fragmentation, loss of community, and de-industrialization of cities, along with the post-industrial plethora of images, focus on consumption, and changes in types of employment' (Ibid, p.107). Bettis (1996) finds that young people, while confronting uncertain, unknown, unfamiliar futures and with little guidance from their parents and teachers, are reluctant to envision and articulate career ambitions and in more broad terms, to articulate their future.

From such a standpoint Giannis could be seen as being lost within the perplexities of such a liminal stage. While the economy and the labour market of

Athens develops new characteristics, such as the expansion of the service sector, the collapse of some industrial sectors, the development of information and communication technologies, the new type of requirements for up-skilled workforce, Giannis finds it tricky to orientate himself in relation to the future education and work. Extending Bernstein's' notions and setting them in this context, Giannis does not have 'rules of recognition' and 'rules of realization', while being positioned within this shifting context, in order to orientate himself and organize his practice.

### ***Final Remarks***

Giddens' and Becks's notion of self-reflexivity was useful in Anna's and Marianna's case. It provided insights in relation to their awareness, planning and managing of their lives and their orientation towards future ('futuraity'). Nevertheless reflexivity is not a common characteristic among all young people, which in turn sets a question-mark to the universalism that these theories claim. Here Savage (2000) has to be taken into consideration, while commenting that these theories do not attempt to persuade through empirical application but on the level of a rhetorical battle. Nevertheless in the context of this study I utilize them as analytical tools and from this point of view I account for their usefulness and their limitations.

There are some important points to be taken into consideration. First of all, the above discussion captures a moment in the open process of subjectification. Hence young people narratives are regarded as snapshots in their lifecourse. Room for change is always there and constitutes a dynamic element of youth struggles for subjectivity. Furthermore, young people's future plans, as they are represented in their narratives are not deemed to be indicative of their actual lives in the future. In other words it is acknowledged that there is a distance between their narratives and the actual lived realities. What is expressed in the narratives is no more than 'imagined' futures. The importance of 'imagined futures' lies on the fact that they are indicative of the ways young people engage with questions of future education and employment and from this aspect has consequences for youth struggles for subjectivity and their sense of the self. Finally the labels that I presented above are done for analytical purposes. Young people are reflexive and un-reflexive for the analytical purposes of this study. Even in the context of this study young people are reflexive or un-reflexive

not in general, but in relation to their forms of engagement with 'imagined futures' at this particular moment of their life.

Going back to the analysis, seeing Angeliki's narrative through the lens of Giddens's theory and through his exact definition of reflexivity, she doesn't seem to embody such characteristics. She is not strategic and proactive, she doesn't have clear targets and she doesn't adopt a calculative attitude towards her future. Angeliki's relaxed planning, the leaving open aspects of her future and leaving things to luck up to a degree is related with her perception of necessity and risk could be traced back to her socioeconomic background. Then, Angeliki, in Bourdieu's terms doesn't need to cover a big distance between the position she is now and the one she would like to find herself later on in the future. She is also confident that her capital enables her to be flexible and easily adjust to several settings and play efficiently in different scenarios.

Giannis's narrative is not indicative of a reflexively organized biography either. Giannis narrates himself as puzzled, lost and perplexed. He doesn't seem to have a feeling of controlling and monitoring his biography. Using Turner's notion of liminality in Bettis's way, Giannis is seen as being in a liminal stage where he is faced with a changing economic and social environment with little guidance from adults. As a result he is unable to orientate himself and articulate a view of his future in a clear way. The above in Bourdieu's terms would signify that Giannis is at a point of mismatch between his habitus and the field he chooses to play in. His sense of little control, his little confidence, his restricted ability to mobilize himself according to what feels attractive to him, is related to the symbolic and material resources that he is armed with.



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