

# **Morals in the adult world: how youth see their contemporary elders**

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## **Abstract**

The present study core issue is, how do today's youth judge adults concerning their moral criteria? The issue is twofold relevant for the ethical and moral education of adolescents, both for knowledge on their moral development and for their apparent desertion from the public sphere, favouring the private one. This study aimed at knowing how youth judge adults on moral grounds, while verifying whether youth do clearly separate public and private spheres. Two different surveys were carried out: survey 1 (S1) with 520 students who answered a 24-item closed questionnaire plus two open-ended questions; in S2 a 14-item questionnaire was applied to 36 students, followed by group debate on the issue. This article analyses issues dealt with at both surveys, as well as issues only inquired on at S1. Results show some mistrust among youth toward adult morality. Most don't consider them ethical and, in general, criticise the way they conduct the public sphere. Furthermore, they question adults' virtues, deeming egoism or self-interest to be their worse defect, associated to their sole concern with the private sphere. The adolescents were divided as to wisdom, accountability, and trust assigned to adults. Nevertheless, the image they present of their elders is relativised, according to whether they refer to public or private sphere adults.

## **Keywords**

Youth – Adults – Moral - Values – Contemporaneity

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## ***Moral no mundo adulto: a visão dos jovens sobre os adultos de hoje***

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### **Resumo**

*A pergunta central desta pesquisa é: como os adolescentes da atualidade julgam os adultos no que se refere essencialmente a critérios morais? Responder a essa indagação possui relevância para a formação ética e moral dos alunos devido a duas razões principais: a primeira refere-se ao desenvolvimento moral do adolescente; a segunda, à aparente deserção do espaço público por parte dos jovens em favor do espaço privado. Nesse sentido, o objetivo do presente trabalho foi verificar como os jovens julgam moralmente os adultos e se, de fato, eles operam uma clara cisão entre as esferas privada e pública. Foram realizadas separadamente duas pesquisas: no estudo 1 (E1), utilizou-se um questionário fechado de 24 questões e duas questões abertas; no estudo 2 (E2), além da aplicação de um questionário com 14 perguntas, foi realizado um debate em grupo acerca delas. É importante ressaltar que, neste artigo, são analisadas tanto questões presentes nos dois estudos, quanto algumas presentes apenas no E1. Os resultados obtidos mostram certa desconfiança dos jovens em relação à moralidade dos adultos. A maioria não os considera pessoas éticas e, de forma geral, critica sua condução da esfera pública. Além disso, os jovens questionam as virtudes dos adultos e consideram o egoísmo como o maior defeito deles, associando-o a uma preocupação exclusiva com a esfera privada. Dividem-se quanto à sabedoria, à responsabilidade e à confiança atribuída aos adultos de hoje. Os dados apontam, ainda, que a imagem do adulto apresentada é relativizada a partir da distinção entre os adultos da esfera pública e aqueles da esfera privada.*

### **Palavras-chave**

*Jovens – Adultos – Valores – Moral – Contemporaneidade.*

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This study inquired on how present-time youth judge adults concerning their moral criteria – on issues such as justice, responsibility, interest in and care for education, environment, politics, etc. We believe the issue is relevant for the moral and ethical education of young people, for two complementary reasons.

The first reason concerns youth moral development, known to take place in the interaction with the social world. According to Jean Piaget (1992), in their relationship with adults taken as moral authority, youth would be in a phase of moral heteronomy, to be overcome by moral autonomy, which derives from reciprocal relations among peers, that is, relationships of children and youth among themselves. So far, this wouldn't apparently be of use, for Piaget does not refer to adults in general, but only to those of the private sphere, affectively invested, who in addition would tend to lose their moral influence, being replaced by peers.

However, it must be stressed that Piaget has not meant that youth would necessarily become autonomous; in his own words, "both morals (heteronomous and autonomous) are to be found in adults" (1998, p.33). Piaget's thesis is that there is a moral development, which broadly goes from heteronomy to autonomy; but heteronomy is not exclusively a children's moral feature.

Assuming that heteronomy may be characteristic of youth and of adults, and that it is reinforced by asymmetrical relationships, it is relevant to inquire what youth make of these non-peers, the adults. At least three cases may be devised: first, adults are seen by youth as moral people, hence probably inspiring youth's own moral behaviour. Second, only private sphere adults, invested with affection, are seen as moral people, not the others. Third, adults in general are not seen as presenting a moral behaviour; in the latter case, unless young people have reached full autonomy, which is highly improbable, we

face a troubling scenario, to say the least, for their moral education.

The issue is further clarified by resorting to Lawrence Kohlberg's (1981) approach, who, following Piaget's steps, developed a sophisticated theory on stages of moral development. It is expected that young people have overcome pre-conventional level and act at conventional stages, whose features clearly evince the importance of the social environment. At this level, the individual perceives the maintenance of the expectations of his family, group, or nation as valuable in its own right, and identifies with the persons involved in these groups. At stage 3, following the "good boy-nice girl" orientation, he or she favours the private sphere, while at stage 4 public sphere and social order are valued. At the conventional moral level thus, in order to legitimise morals, there is asymmetrical reference to social environment, in which adults, both family members and citizens in general, take part.

In the moral development perspective then, since adults are insurmountable references at their stage of life, it seems relevant to inquire how youth morally judge them .

There is another reason for such inquiry, linked to moral development: it's the feeling of trust, or confidence (LA TAILLE, 2006), which is not solely moral. For instance, one may trust an aircraft pilot or a doctor for his or her skills. But beyond the skills lies the moral dimension: skills are of no use if the skilled person does not act with earnestness or honesty. Back to the pilot example, however well-trained and talented, if he is careless or operates under the effect of some consciously taken drug and causes an accident, this must be accounted to his lack of responsibility for other human beings, that is to say, to his lack of moral sense.

Having thus elicited the moral dimension of trust, we must ask whether mistrusting others may be a complicating factor for moral

development and moral actions. In the case of an autonomous person, the answer is no, for a morally autonomous person acts following intimately legitimised principles, rather than others' action models. But for a morally heteronomous person, general mistrust in others will deprive him or her of moral models for judgement and action. It is often heard, when justifying a transgression, that "everybody does that" – which may be translated into "since no one is trustworthy, I can't see why I should be the only one".

Hence it may be said that mistrust in others may be a deleterious factor to the construction of moral sense, especially since children and youth have such "others" as important references. And, as adults are meaningful persons for youth, the degree of trust youth have in them is a suitable variable to assess factors that may ease or hamper their moral development. It is worth noting that we don't believe mistrust would mechanically lead to failures in moral development (which would be reductionist), but it might lead to a certain weakening of the *willingness to act morally* (LA TAILLE, 2006, 2009b).

We address now the second reason at the origin of this study: youth's apparent desertion from the public sphere, in favour of the private one.

A recent survey on a sample of 5,160 high-school students in the Great São Paulo (LA TAILLE & HARKOT-DE-LA-TAILLE, 2005) found that youth trust very little, or don't trust, most public institutions. In round numbers, they do not trust at all, or trust very little, religious institutions (63%), the judiciary system (70%), political parties (95%), the National Congress (71%), and the media (82%). In contrast, 97% said they trust, or trust very much, the family institution. Moreover, when asked about the influence of institutions onto their own values, 62% answered religious institutions, and 67% the media, had none or very little influence on them, whereas 92% of subjects stated their parents had much, or

neither little nor much, influence on their own values.

As parents as well as those who manage public institutions are obviously adults, a clear split emerges from these answers, between the public and private spheres: in the latter, there is trust and assignment of values; outside it, there is little trust and scarce influence is felt. There would then be *favoured* adults – those of private life – and the other, little significant adults of the public sphere. Such data are relevant to the moral dimension in as much as trust and value, if confined to the private sphere, drastically reduce the number of people whom one assigns moral sense to; indirectly, data also pointed to a scarce exercise of citizenship by the adults the respondents had in mind.

In view of the above discussed, we have decided to go deeper into the issue and verify: i) how do youth morally judge adults; and ii) whether they indeed operate a split between private and public spheres. We believe the data presented below are relevant for education, in as much as formal education takes place at school, delivered by adults in a public institution.

## **Methodology**

Two studies were separately carried out, which will be here referred to as S1 (survey 1) and S2 (study 2). This article analyses issues dealt with at both surveys, as well as issues only inquired on at S1.

S1 was carried out in 2008 in two public and two private schools in São Paulo metropolitan region. A total of 520 high school students of both sexes, aged 14 through 18, answered a 24(Likert format)-item questionnaire that also included two open-ended questions.

S2 was done in the same year with 36 high school students, who were divided into six groups of six people each (three boys and three girls), being three groups from a private

school and three from a public school. Each participant initially answered a questionnaire with 14 Likert format questions. Subsequently a group discussion was proposed on the issues dealt with at the questionnaire.

Among all questions made, 11 were common to both surveys, 13 appeared only at S1, and 3 only in S2.

## Results and discussion

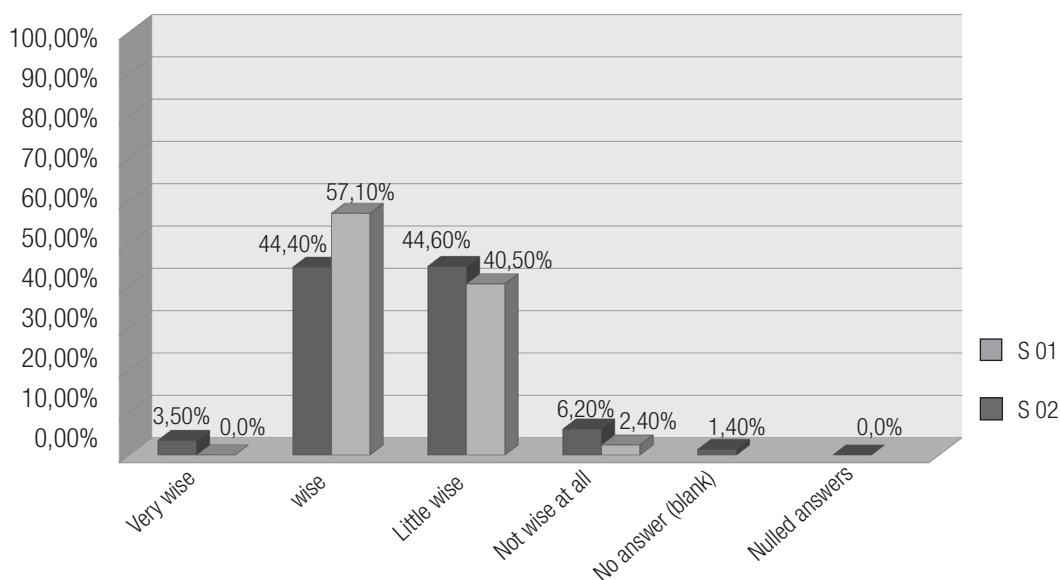
Youth's assessment on adults addressed aspects that are separately presented below.

### Adults' attributes and qualities

The related questions addressed attributes and qualities that are traditionally linked to the adult image, asking the youth to assess adults as to wisdom, responsibility, and ethics.

In S1, the *wisdom* attribute divided youth's opinion: 44.4% considered today's adults not much wise and an equivalent percentage, wise. In S2, a slightly larger number (57.1%) said they believed them to be wise (Graph 1).

### Today's adults are...



Graph 1 - Comparison of the answers on adults' wisdom between S1 and S2

In spite of the answers unevenness, it is significant that almost half of the subjects in S1, and just over half of them in S2, don't consider adults to be wise; moreover, only 4% of S1 participants, and none of S2, believe them to be "very wise".

In the discussions with S2 subjects, public school students assigned adults' lesser

wisdom to lack of information; for some youth, this would be due to adults' little schooling; for others, to their unfamiliarity with law, unawareness of their rights, or to the way they deal with politics.

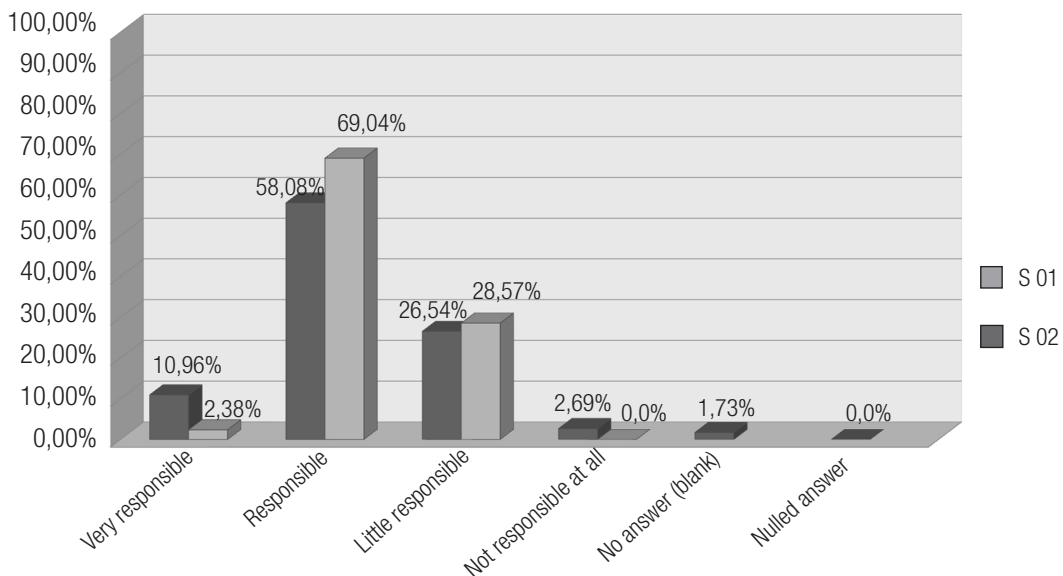
From these indications, one may suggest that today perhaps the role of experience is being overcome by that of information.

According to Christopher Lasch (1983), our societies would have lost the concept of wisdom, and knowledge would only acquire importance on an instrumental level. Due to technological advances and the consumerism dynamics, knowledge is constantly becoming obsolete, hence non-transferable. In such a scenario, we might wonder whether today's adults would be a little lost, feeling unauthorised to assume

a standing of those who resort to experience to guide the younger. The broad numbers of experts who attempt to inform, or even provide recipes, to parents on how to educate their children is an example of how much wisdom has grown apart from the idea of experience.

As to the *responsibility* attribute, 69.8% of S1, and 71.8% of S2 participants deemed adults to be responsible or very responsible (Graph 2).

### Today's adults are...



**Graph 2** - Comparison of the answers on adults' responsibility between S1 and S2

We must however argue on which adults the youth had in mind when answering these questions. During S2 group discussions, it became apparent that most youth found it hard to think of adults “in general”; they said it was “complicated” to make generalisations. This might be due to their having as references adults close to them, possibly their parents, who seemed to be a guiding reference. Furthermore, among S2 participants, we could perceive that

responsibility assigned to adults referred most to family and work. When responsibility was associated to politics, the young people thought adults were irresponsible.

In their words, we could perceive two associated trends: the difficulty to think of adults in general and, conversely, a concern in assessing each in his or her individuality. Precisely, this concern with the particular, as opposed to the general, and the trend to

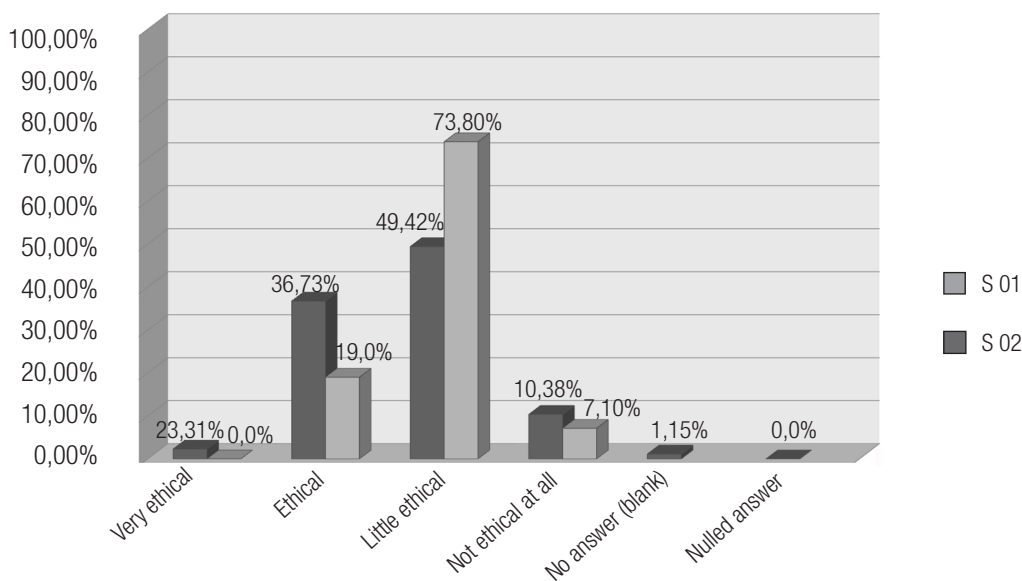
approaching the other through that which is most intimate, or familiar, are some of the main contemporary values. For Gilles Lipovetsky (2005), such particularisation reduces socially established differences and favours the hyper differentiation of individual behaviours.

This issue is also related to the above mentioned distinction between public and private spheres – the latter being, for the youth, the only reliable one. We wondered whether they had in mind adults in general or those of their close relations when saying adults were responsible, and concluded that apparently

their assessment tends to be more positive when thinking of private sphere adults. It may be thus suggested that the image of “adult” is influenced by the degree of closeness the youth have with him or her, and that adults receive more negative appraisals when their ability to relate and act upon the public word is at stake.

Among the analysed attributes, *ethics* is certainly the one most related to social and public relations. When assessing adults as to their ethics, youth’s answers were mostly negative: 59.8% S1 and 80.9% S2 subjects considered adults little or no ethical (Graph 3).

### Today’s adults are...



**Graph 3** - Comparison of the answers on adults' ethics between S1 and S2

During S2 discussions, when talking of ethics and lack of ethics, subjects dealt with the public sphere, referring to relations established by adults in the collectivity and judging their ethical behaviour at work, at school, in politics and towards the environment.

In two groups of public school students, egoism or self interest was pointed out as

predominant in today’s society. According to the youth, adults’ relationships in the public sphere would be pervaded by concern on themselves and their own interests.

In view of the importance of ethics in social relations, we inquired how adults are assessed as to their actions in the public sphere. Negative appraisals reinforce our hypothesis

that closeness, or impersonality, are important criteria in youth's judging adults.

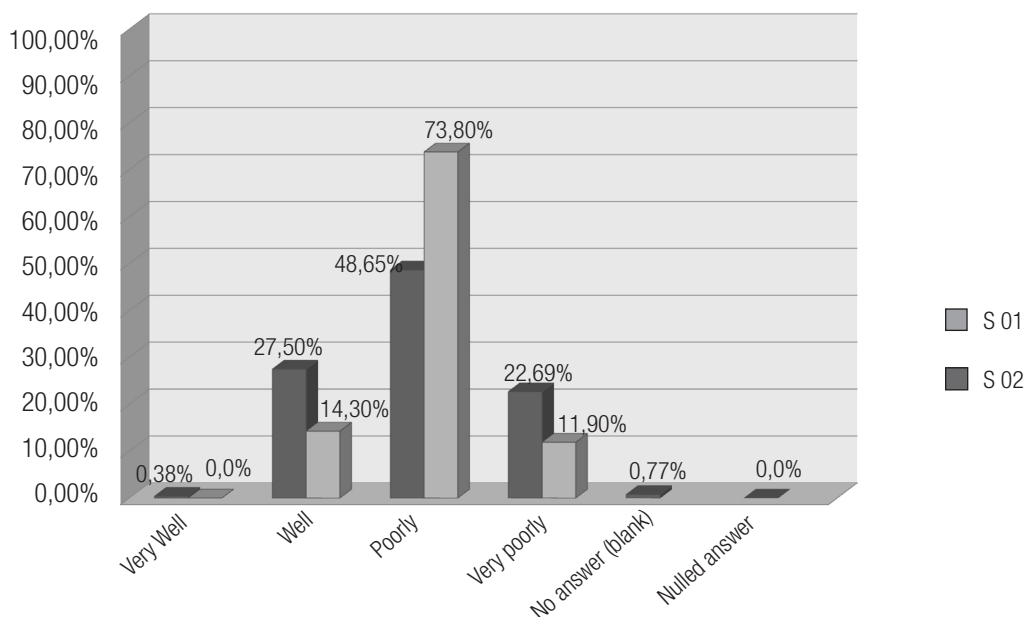
### Adults and the public world

Questions on this topic inquired on the ability of adults to direct the world, hence the public sphere. A first question dealt with the issue in general ("How do adults direct the world?") and the others were more specific: "How do today's adults conduct the education

of the new generations?" was asked both in S1 and S2, and the remaining ones only in S1 (how today's adults manage politics, the environment issues, and the media information and programs).

To the broader question (on how adults direct the world), S1 subjects answered "poorly", or "very poorly" (71.4%); S2 subjects equivalent answers reached 85.7% (Graph 4). These data certainly suggest youth's pessimism as to adults' ability in being responsible for the world.

### Today's adults direct the world...



**Graph 4** - Comparison between S1 and S2 of the answers on how adults direct the world

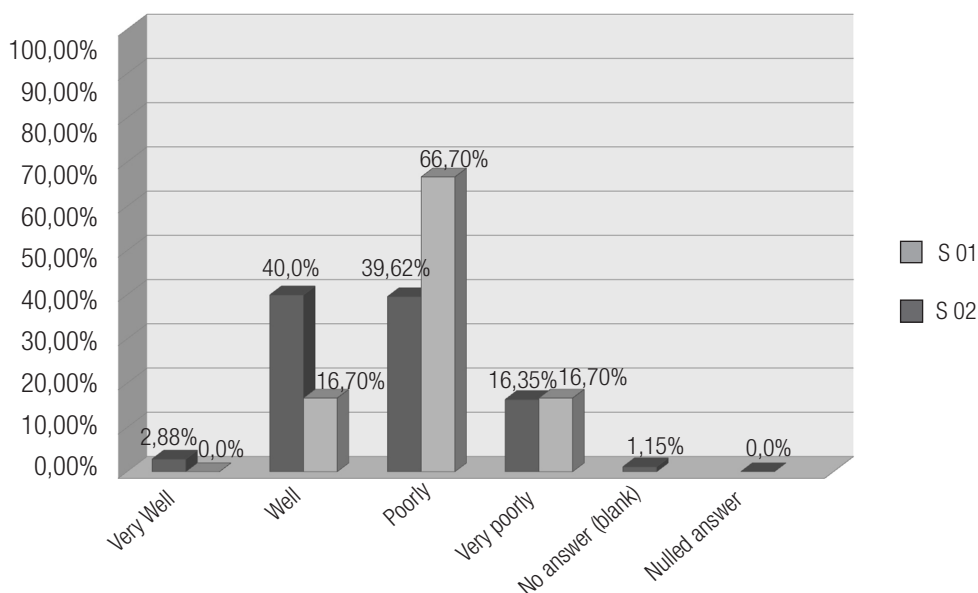
In the discussions on this item in S2, subjects raised themes like politics, environment, education, health and safety, broadly disapproving of the way adults deal with these matters. In two private school groups, students again argued that answers would be different following their considering close-relation adults or adults in general, also mentioning the difficulty to assess the latter. It appears that the more anonymous the adult,

or the more impersonal the behaviours and the abilities at stake, adults will be deemed less capable.

As to the way adults conduct education, S1 subjects' opinion was divided: while 42.8 thought it was well or very well conducted, 56% of the assessments were negative. In S2, only 16.7% of subjects indicated "well" or "very well"; the remaining 83.4% assessed it was poorly or very poorly conducted (Graph 5).



## Today's adults conduct education of the new generations...



**Graph 5** - Comparison between S1 and S2 of the answers on how adults conduct education of the new generations

From S2 discussions again two dimensions emerged, related to the binomial closeness vs impersonality, private vs public, where an affective dimension was linked to the family, and an impersonal one, to school education. In all groups, subjects considered the adults are only concerned with their own children's education, while the country's education issues would be a minor concern.

This trend to negative assessments on adults' performance showed to maintain itself in relation to other domains of the public sphere. Almost all subjects (90%) agreed that adults conduct politics in a poor or very poor way, and not one thought they did very well. Harsh criticism also aimed at the way adults deal with environmental issues (83.5% of "poorly" or "very poorly"). Only adults' performance related

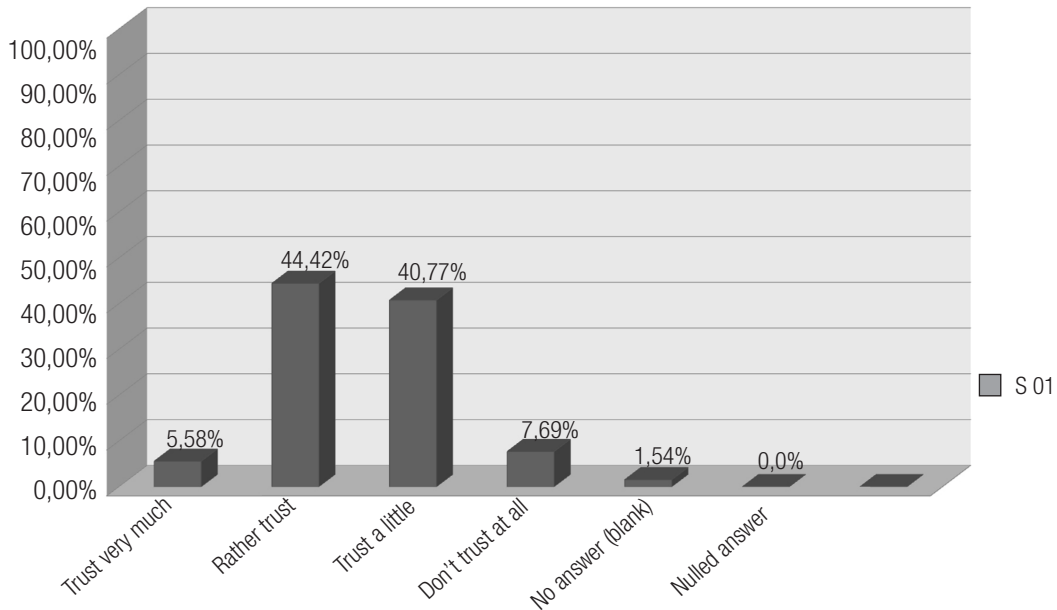
to the media got less negative assessments (42.7%).

Summing up the analysis so far, we may remark that in no domain of the public sphere results were predominantly positive: opinions were either divided, or pointed to almost youth's unanimity, in assessing that adults are not capable of directing most domains of the public sphere.

Trust on the elders' behaviour and in their own society plays an important role in preparing the youth for their future roles in an ever expanding public world. Several theories and even common sense ratify this assumption, which renders these data worrying, to say the least.

In S1 we inquired on the degree of confidence subjects had in adults; their hesitation in answering positively is evident in the answers distribution (Graph 6).

## How much do you trust today's adults?



**Graph 6** Distribution of S1 subjects' answers on how much they trust their elders

It is noticeable that youth are quite divided as to their trust in today's adults. Although the numbers of subjects who trust, or rather trust, their elders are similar, it is significant that only 5.6% trust very much, and that those who trust a little, or simply don't trust them amount to nearly half (48.5%) of the youth inquired.

We believe these answers are consistent with answers to the questions previously discussed. Adults are seen as responsible and rather wise people, but do not deserve much trust; the apparent contradiction may be explained by the difference the youth establish between private and public spheres, between close relationships and public behaviour. It seems teenagers tend to favour or value the former rather than the latter, and

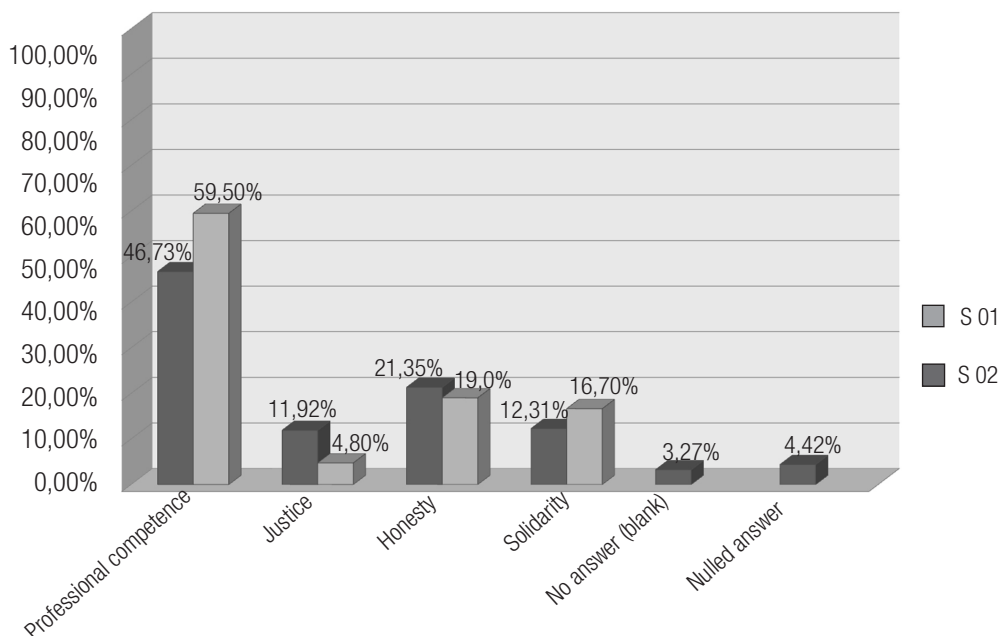
their answers on trust in adults may reflect these differences.

### Adults' values

In order to inquire on adults' values in youth's view, we were grounded by the literature on contemporaneity and its ideals to design the questions and anticipate possible answers. We then decided to ask initially which would be, at their eyes, adults' greatest virtue, offering the choice of three moral virtues – honesty, solidarity, justice – and a pragmatical one, professional competence.

In both S1 (46.7%) and S2 (59.5%), the youth found professional competence to be adults' greatest virtue (Graph 7).

## Among the following, wich do you think is adult's grestest virtue?



**Graph 7** Comparison between S1 and S2 subjects' answers on adults' greatest virtue

It is striking that the most valued virtue be not a moral one – which is consistent with adults having not been well assessed on their ethical behaviour. In S2 discussions, all private school groups mentioned difficulty in choosing any of the four options, suggesting none would characterise today's adults, and that professional competence would have been chosen by elimination. Besides, for two private, and one public, school groups, professional competence would be associated with adults' interest in their income.

Let's examine the remaining alternatives. It is worth remarking that, unlike all previously discussed questions, for this one the percentage of null and blank answers is the highest found (7.7%, seconded only by the question on adults'

faults, dealt with below), reflecting the above mentioned difficulty to answer.

Concerning honesty, comments in one private school S2 discussion group suggested that the choice of "honesty" or "solidarity" might simply reflect the *desire* that adults be honest or solidary, suggesting that such desires would just point to adults' lack of these virtues. In two private school S2 groups, students said they would have marked "honesty" or "solidarity" only if thinking in their families, not in adults in general.

As to justice (answered by S1 11.9%, and S2 4.8%), S2 public school students talked of lack of justice, reporting prejudice they felt due to social class (when searching for jobs) and to skin colour; they also mentioned rich people's frequent impunity from crimes.

Nevertheless, justice is the main reference in moral development theoretical approach.

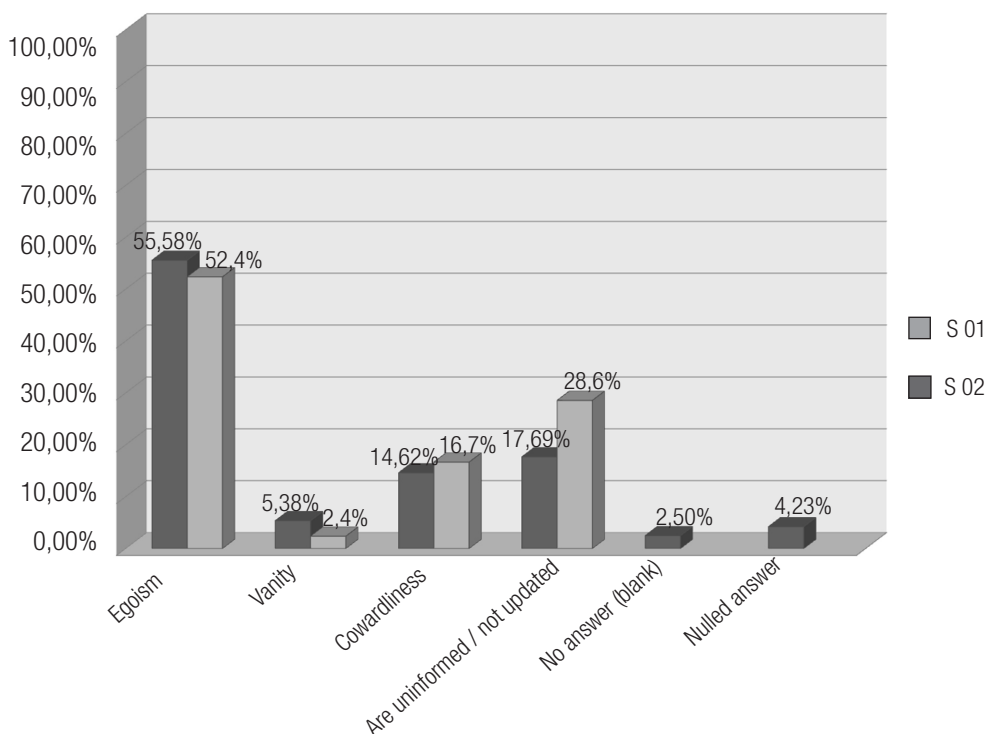
In another study by Yves de La Taille and Elizabeth Harkot-de-La-Taille (2005) with young people, justice was pointed out as the most important virtue. The survey inquired on the importance they assigned to virtues – professional competence, honesty, tolerance, and justice – and the latter was chosen by 44.5% of the interviewed youth.

Still another study (LA TAILLE, 2009b) came to similar findings, of which two are here underlined. In a list of 10 virtues, justice was the second most important for youth, preceded by humility. And the two virtues pointed out by youth that today’s adults most

lacked were precisely humility and justice, the two at the top of the virtues ranking. According to La Taille (2009a), that which is most valued is what is deemed missing, rather than what is thought to exist, or be present. This reasoning might be applied to honesty and solidarity, alternatives chosen, according to S2 subjects, due to the desire that they were today’s adults’ virtues.

Having inquired on adults’ virtues, the next question in the survey was on their faults. Again, the choice presented included one pragmatic option (in S1, “are not updated”; in S2, “uninformed”) and three options of behaviour contrary to morals – egoism, vanity, and cowardliness.

### Among the following, which do you think is adult’s greatest fault?



**Graph 8** - Comparison between S1 and S2 subjects’ answers on adults’ greatest fault

In both surveys, egoism was the most chosen option (55.6% in S1, 52.4% in S2), followed by lack of information (Graph 8).

In S2 group discussions, it became clear that, in students' view, adults would be concerned solely with the private sphere (family, friends). They want to be self-sufficient, live a good life, not minding the others. A process of individualisation would then be taking place, since people think only in themselves. In two private school groups, egoism was associated to capitalism.

The image of a self-centred adult, concerned solely with his or her own interests, was recurrent, both implicitly and explicitly, in group discussions. Such image is in accordance with contemporary ideals, turned to conscience expansion and personal growth, of individual concern with the body. Authors usually compare the political and cultural upraise of the 1960s to the current scenario, pointing to an increasing unconcern with public matters. For instance, according to Lipovetsky (2005, p.32),

...depoliticisation and 'de-unionalisation' have reached unprecedented proportions, revolutionary hope and student unrest have disappeared, counterculture is exhausted, causes are scarce that may still mobilise energies in the long term.

The students have also argued that such defect might be due to aging. Young adults would be keen on making changes, but, as they grew older, they would lose such impetus, having to work to survive. Work is seen as something that takes a lot of room in adults' lives, demanding such an amount of their time that they become unable to attempt changes in their current reality. Present youth, then, would be destined to be in the future just like the present adult generation.

As to the second most indicated fault, lack of information was mentioned in the discussions of one private school and all public school groups, being often associated to

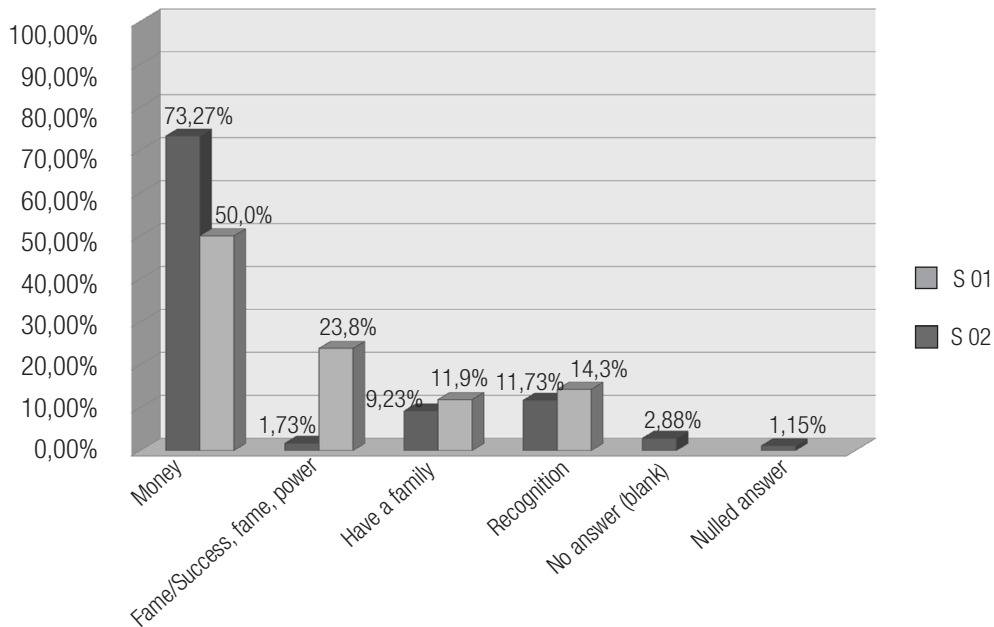
concern with the public sphere – a concern that certainly includes an ethical dimension. For the students, lack of knowledge or information would make still worse the already egoistic society. Lack of information would be linked to education, politics, and government; the media would also exhibit lack of responsibility toward the population, by broadcasting only that which brings them large audiences and benefit (instead of useful information and knowledge). In addition, lack of information was also associated to unawareness of one's rights.

The survey next inquired what youth thought were adults' highest expectations in life, offering four alternative answers: *money*, given its role in the capitalist consumer society; *fame* (or *success*, *fame*, *power* in S2), which is too often present in common sense discourse and in that of scholars, when debating on the society of the spectacle; *recognition* or public acknowledgment of one's merits, which counteracts the superficial aspect of fame; and, within the private sphere, *have a family*.

*Money* was by far the most frequent (and obvious) answer in both groups (73.3% in S1, 50.0% in S2). It reflects the way our society is structured: money provides access to what people value, pervading social relations, future expectancies, possibilities of choice. In S2, subjects (23.8%) also pinpointed *Success/fame/power*, practically not chosen in S1 (Graph 9), probably due to the difference in the terms used. However, as S2 group discussions were to show, the choice of *success/fame/power* was after all linked to money.

All group discussions underlined the importance of earning money. In our capitalist society, according to them, one must have an income – it is a human need. People study so they can have a profession, earn money, buy a house, provide for the family, pay the bills. A few students observed that money (extra money, over the necessary) was noxious when viewed solely as a means to acquire status and power.

## Among the following, wich do you think are adults' highest expectations in life?



**Graph 9** - Comparison between S1 and S2 subjects' answers on adults' highest expectations in life

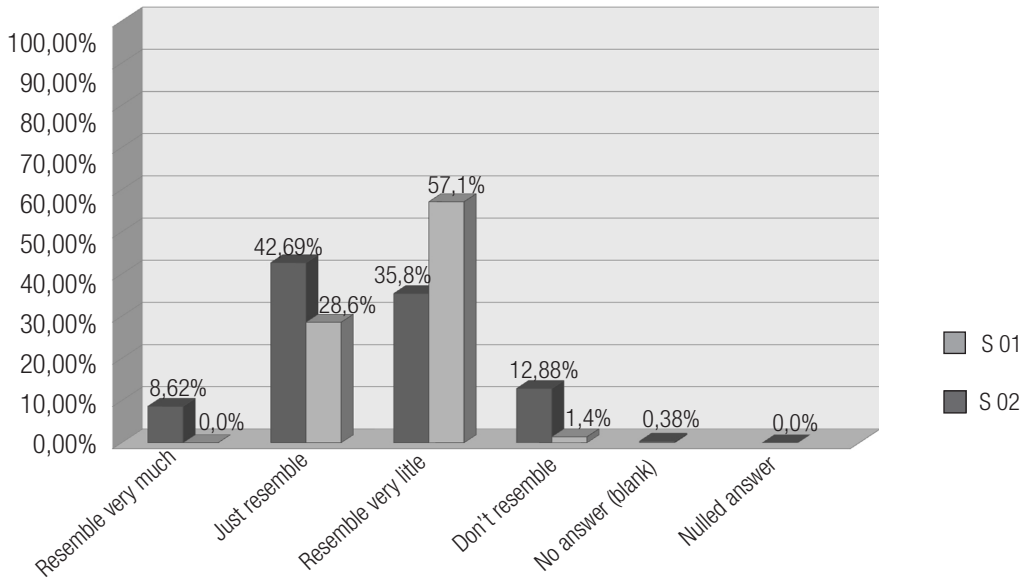
S1 included in addition a question on what youth thought adults *feared most* – and 61% of the answers were “unemployment”. To fear unemployment is compatible with current discourse both by the media and by scholars who analyse the structure of our society (e.g. BAUMAN, 1998). Students' answers were compatible both with these analyses and with the answer that money is adults' greatest aspiration.

As to our initial question, on how youth morally judge today's adults, we found a rather negative assessment of adults' behaviour and attributes, mainly of public sphere adults. Such assessment is of great relevance, as underlined above, for it

might allow for an insight on how young people construct their life project, as well as on how they picture themselves in the future. We have thus also inquired on these issues.

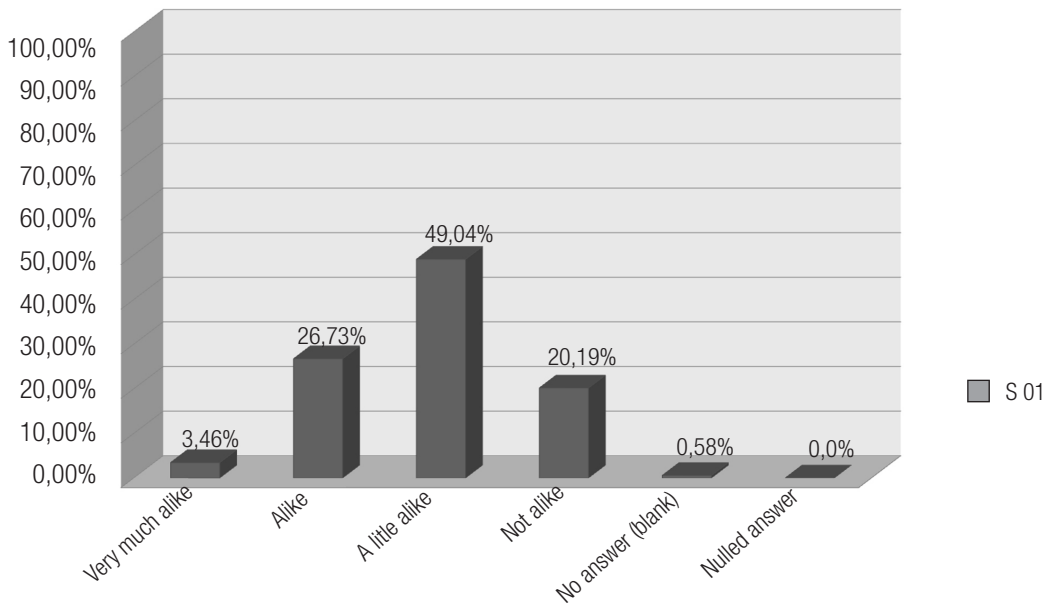
In S1, we asked two questions: how much youth expected to resemble today's adults in the future; and how similar they thought theirs and adults' life prospects were. Both questions are closely linked; common sense tells us that admiration for adults' present life course should lead to the desire of having a similar life, and, conversely, dislike of adults' way of life should imply having a different life project. However, this is not so, according to their answers.

### How much do your life prospects resemble today's adults' life course?



**Graph 10** - Comparison between S1 and S2 subjects' answers on the resemblance of their life prospects to adults' present life course

### When you become an adult, you would like to be... today's adults



**Gráfico 11** – Distribuição de respostas entre os jovens sobre quanto parecido gostariam de ser com os adultos de hoje

Graph 11 shows that over 30% of S1 subjects expected to be alike or quite alike today's adults, while 20% of them – an expressive proportion – did definitely not intend to resemble today's adults. However, over 51% of S1 subjects (Graph 10) believe their life projects to be similar, or very similar, to today's adults' life course. The desire to be like present-time adults is lesser than the perceived similarity of both age groups' way of life.

In S2 discussions, again the private/public issue arose: some subjects stated that, when considering closer adults, their life prospects would be similar to their current life, but in relation to adults in general, their answers would switch to "resemble very little". In S2, most subjects (57%, Graph 10) answered their expected future life bears little resemblance to that of today's adults. But during discussions they did not seem to be quite convinced of that. In all discussion groups, their life projects are similar to adults' life as far as having a job and a family (and, to a lesser extent, earning money) is concerned.

For several subjects, it is hard to imagine an alternative lifestyle; the ones mentioned, jokingly, were presented as utterly not feasible: "it would be something like, say, going to live in the woods, hunting to eat"... One statement attempts to clarify the issue:

'Don't resemble' might be revolutionary. [But] I think that, even if we know what is wrong, or that much of which is there might be improved, our life, my life, will probably be the same as my parents', or my friends parents' today. [...] Most different would be, for instance, to donate blood...

Although political change is briefly mentioned (as well as charity, perhaps pointing to solidarity), these options look too remote: for the young subjects, it seems inevitable that their lives will be similar to those of their close-relationship adults'. Some teenagers argued that it might indeed be almost impossible to avoid

adults' lifestyle concerning family and work, but, provided youth kept their current mental dispositions, they might operate some minor changes.

There is a possible explanation for the apparent paradox. The option for an alternative lifestyle requires that it may be first conceived of. In the 1960s and 1970s, for instance, questioning and criticism on current values – which were ultimately adults' values – were available for the youth of the time, who were thus able to conceive of, even if in an idealised way, alternative lifestyles of their own.

Current works often point to today's youth apathy, or scarce engagement in world issues, especially when compared to previous generations. We might wonder, though, whether this would be really peculiar to youth or, conversely, an attribute of the whole contemporary society: if the latter reflects what Lipovetsky (2005) calls the post-modern desert – an indifference, a retreat of the public sphere – what else could we expect from our youth?

Going back to our starting point, we realise that understanding youth's assessment of today's adults is in fact understanding youth's own ethical perspectives, since their prospects are closely linked to their adult references. Hence it is not surprising that, in spite of their criticism of adults, youth do not see themselves as much different from them in the future. The present distance felt between public and private domains leads to the distinction they establish between trustworthy and untrustworthy adults, as well as to the difficulty, if not impossibility, of their viewing themselves as possible agents of change in the public world.

## **Conclusion**

This study inquired on how youth judge adults concerning their moral criteria. Results showed that only private sphere adults, affectively invested, are positively assessed.

Contemporary people may experience a cleavage between public and private worlds,



though in some domains this division is not very clear. The public sphere – that of citizenship, based on impersonal laws, valid in principle for all – would be the equivalent of life spent outside the family and other close relationships, which make up the private sphere, based on affection and intimacy. Two further related contemporary features might be added: a certain disinvestment in the public sphere, and the corresponding perception of its association with unsafety, aggressivity. The disinvestment in the public sphere, highlighted when we compare current times to the cultural and political unrest of the 1960s', is related to a simultaneous movement of superinvestment in the self, with interests focussing on fitness, health, a good financial situation, vacation plans..., that is to say, a life with no ideals or transcending goals.

On the other hand, our intimist societies favour closeness and warmth, while impersonality lies at the negative tip of the values hierarchy. An example of this is the success of television programs such as the reality show, wherein themes like cooking, travelling, dreams, projects are shown through getting close to daily life, to 'true' emotions, to the participants' intimacy. The other side of the coin of this "ideology of intimacy" (SENNETT, 1988) is the ever increasing difficulty for the individual to perform social roles and deal with social life, since impersonal barriers and rules are precisely that which characterises the transition from the family to the public sphere.

This study results allow for concluding on youth's mistrusting adults' morality. Most subjects don't consider adults to be ethical people, and in general criticise the way they conduct the public sphere (the world, politics, environment). Youth don't ascribe moral virtues to adults, having chosen adults' professional skills as their greatest virtue by elimination; egoism is adults' greatest fault, associated to

their being solely concerned with the private sphere. The students were divided as to wisdom and confidence attributed to adults; the latter are assessed as responsible people only when responsibility is linked to the private realm. However, results also allow for inferring that negative assessments, or mistrust in adults, follow a criterion: adults' degree of closeness to youth, evidencing the division youth establish between private and public sphere adults. Furthermore, this study subjects showed that, in spite of their criticism of adults, and their little desire to resemble adults, they find it hard to imagine a different life course from that of today's adults.

Nowadays relationships between youngsters and elders seem to become determined by affective links rather than by social conventions. Current expanded freedom may lead to greater flexibility, but this also generates uncertainty, in as much as parents and their children must rely on their own resources, in view of lesser support by the social environment.

Current trends in society, to the privatisation of social relations and to the decline of the public sphere, are evidenced by the present study, seemingly leading to a cleavage where, on the one hand, the "public adult" arises, mirroring the external world, seen as unreliable, dishonest, hence disinvested, and, on the other, the "private adult", representing the family as the realm of reassurance and safety.

School has a role to play therein, given its responsibility for youth at the brink of their turning into adults. Its educational task appears even harder, as much as youth tend not to trust adults, all the more so if these are *anonymous*. Having in mind that youth's development – as well as their building a worthy life project – depends on social environment, one wonders what their socialisation process will be like, when so little safety is perceived in the public realm.

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