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Coming of Age Outside the Heteronormative Framework

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Presentation Outline

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- Research Design

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- Conclusion

Background

Transitions to Adulthood...

The fragmentation of trajectories and growth of heterogeneity have caused transitions to become less fixed and linear, prolonged and postponed, and with blurred boundaries between adulthood and youthood[1]

In Italy, a familistic model of welfare state ties the support to families of origin, enhancing social differences[2]

Bounded Agency[3]: the attempt to take control and construct coherence above biographies is influenced and limited by structural backgrounds and social environments

[1] Cavalli & Galland 2006; EGRIS 2001; Istat 2016; Lasen 2001; Walther 2006; Wyn and Woodman 2006
[2] Esping-Andersen 1990; Gallie & Paugam 2000
[3] Evans 2002, 2007

Background

... Outside Heteronormativity

The heteronormative organization of society plays a role within the process that characterizes the entry into adulthood[1]

Normative representations of non-heterosexual men and women are produced and reproduced by institutions, culture, and everyday practices.

Italy's institutions are gradually evolving in terms of social recognition, although with differences in terms of territory (both north/south and urban/rural), class, age range[2].

[1] Rich 1980; Richardson; 2000; Warner 1999
[2] Istat 2011

Research Design

The purpose of this study is to **explore** and describe the phenomenon of the **transitions to adulthood** of **LGBQ youth** in Italy.

- What are the axes through which LGBQ transitions to adulthood occur?

- What is the role of non-heteronormative sexual identity in the transition to adulthood?

- To what extent non-heteronormativity may shape specific life patterns?

Research Design

Queer and Intersectional Perspective

Both queer and intersectional theories show a critical edge towards essentialist views on identities and the very existence of established categories based on the multiple social groups within which people are simultaneously positioned in everyday life[1].

In particular, queer theories question the system of knowledge and power related not only to whatever stands out of the heterosexual matrix but also with the normative, dominant regulations of the social world[2]:

⟶ Normative assumptions towards youth transitions

[1] Marchetti 2013; Yuval-Davies 2006
[2] Halperin 1995; Warner 1993;

Methodology

What?

Participant observation
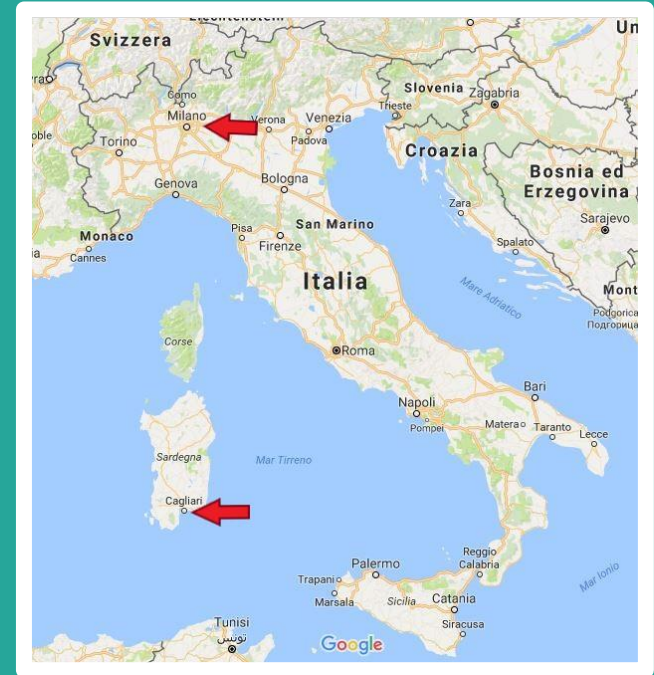Narrative biographical interviews

Where?

The urban areas of Milan (MI) and Cagliari (CA)

Who?

Young adults (27 to 34 years old)
LGBQ self-identified
Completed education - employed

Data Analysis

The first 15 interviews were transcribed, imported and coded using CAQDAS[1]. Thematic analysis was carried out[2] following an inductive, data-driven approach.

Four main themes

- Expression of non-normative subjectivities
- Adult trajectories: shifted or prompted transitions to adulthood?
- Coming out as personal marker
- Identity management strategies at work

[1] NVivo qualitative data analysis Software; QSR International Pty Ltd. Version 11 pro, 2015.
[2] Boyatzis 1998

The expression of a non-heterosexual self

Social recognitions related to the adult status underlie the assumption about how adult people are expected to be, including gender and sexual roles.

As a result, young adults that try to express sexual identities that do not fit with the mainstream may be denied their social status and relegated to a condition of 'never ending youthhood'.

«Taking on gender roles that do not conform to social expectations means <u>to be infantilized</u> [...] at the sound of 'puppy-men' or 'baby' in order to lessen me or trying to convince me that, no matter what, I will always stay one step below»

(*Antonio, bisexual, 30, masseur apprentice, CA*)

«If you stand out of the norm, for any reason whatsoever, and you do not have proper support or, I don't know... [...] Then perhaps this condition gets you down. Or when... <u>the struggle to normalize yourself</u>, I mean, even the way you present yourself to others... <u>you cannot act like a *pink-dressed fairy* anymore</u> because that's what pushes people away! So <u>you have to *suit up*</u>... fit within certain schemes for other people to see you and not get scared away or reject you... because they don't get you and don't know who you are...»

(*Alessandra, lesbian, 28, unemployed, MI*)

Adult trajectories: shifted or prompted adulthood?

A specific intersection between non-heterosexual identities and transitions to adulthood emerges. This may shape alternative patterns.

When stigma or unfriendly social contexts prevent them from imagining or planning their adult self, this process may be actively postponed or put in standby until they feel able to take control of their biographies. As a result of this '*bottleneck effect*'[1], their adulthood is perceived as 'shifted'

[1] Hetherington 1991; Schmidt & Nillson 2006

«It is ironic that I came here, in Milan, for a second degree, to conduct a second teenager lifestyle. I acted as a twenty-something when I came here, much more close to my thirties. And it is interesting how some aspects of my life were filled of that: a shifted adulthood. I still conduct a teenage lifestyle because I didn't when I was one, because my society did not allow me to. [...] As a young man, growing in a shi*ty place, in a profoundly heteronormative society, I wasn't the kind of person the society expected me to be»
(*Ricardo, Queer, 34, graphic designer, MI*)

«What I noticed [...] is that, as a matter of fact, gay and lesbian tend to prolong their adolescence... [...] I don't know, we could actually say that this is a generational issue, because of the fact that we all have quite precarious lives. But perhaps we are a bit more vulnerables to it. If you think that civil partnerships appeared just recently, families are still relatively few... Maybe, although in a situation of general uncertainty, we are more subjects to a prolonged youthhood»
(*Martina, bisexual, 31, freelance copywriter, MI*)

Adult trajectories: shifted or prompted adulthood?

On the other hand, the necessity to pursue a lifestyle that is coherente with one's preferences, despite the context, may **push into independence**, emancipation and eventually into the processes that lead to adulthood.

«I left home when I was 21 and that was my effective entry into adulthood. Also I did that out of necessity. [...] But that was the moment when my self-definition was at its most. Partly because of my acceptance, the acknowledgment that I like women. It was during those two/three years in my twenties that I realized. Then I met this girl whom, like a classic cliché, I went living with after four months. This fact corresponded with my leaving home. And if I may find a moment where I felt the transition to adult life I would say that's the one»

(Lorenza, lesbian, 34, freelance columnist, MI)

«Hadn't I felt this change of preference I would probably have stayed with my parents. Basically, the two things intertwined. As soon as I felt these signals, this need to explore myself, I left home. So... yes, I cannot say no, they concurred a lot! I most certainly did not choose the easiest way. Like... I bought an used car. If I'd stayed at home I would have bought a new one, the one that I liked, because when you have no other expenses... but I have no regrets. I needed peacefulness... I also show to be mature, I made myself responsible... so it went well!»

(Alessandra, bisexual, 31, employee, CA)

Coming out as a personal marker

The coming out is often perceived by the subjects as a crucial turning point

It may influence not only the adult self-definition but also become a personal marker towards adulthood[1], influencing the planning of the future actions,

[1] Silva 2012

«An essential step from the youth to the adult phase was definitely telling F. about me. He followed me through all of my steps... we went through everything together, this was the only missing piece. More than having a releasing effect on me it felt like a rite of passage... this became more public and I certainly stopped hiding. Of course I'm not showing it off but I feel much more confident. It was a process that let all of my fears and doubts fade away»
(Roberto, gay, 34, waiter, CA)

«My coming out was among the moments of entry into adulthood that brought into question a lot of aspects and relationships with the significant persons of my life. I wouldn't want to hinge on it but they really were among my most significant moments»
(Lorenza, lesbian, 34, freelance columnist, MI)

What I'm saying is: I don't know whether in a future I could live with that. I mean... Now we've been seeing each other for eight months, I'm ok if none of her colleagues know she has a girlfriend. [...] She is very discreet and I get that but I'm not sure about the future. If this leads to living together I want a full acknowledgment by the outside world!»
(Alessandra, bisexual, 31, employee, CA)

Coming out as a personal marker

As a result of the process of coming out and of the increasing visibility within the society, this self-acceptance may influence the process of definition that characterizes youth transitions

Even though they share the same feeling of uncertainty of their heterosexual peers, is it possible that this dimension may constitute an anchor upon which to build some sort of new orientation to the future?

«That's how my adulting process started and continues even now... still persists this idea of <u>"what will the rest of my life be like?"</u>... Sooner or later people start saying "that's my life"... Not because they say "I've accomplished something", not because they say "awesome, that's what I wanted!"... but because they say "well... now I have children, a mortgage, a well-paid job"... Now I have some sort of *sop*... [...] In the meantime I have found love. And it is interesting how, from being something within a temporary phase this generated a whole new direction... I mean... <u>*a whole new life direction*... within three years a new life project! A new "the rest of my life"...</u>»
(*Ricardo, queer, 34, graphic designer, MI*)

«Now I live differently... I have been together with my partner for nine years now, we exchange views a lot... I see new situations, at work, with my friends. For me <u>that's *normal*</u>. But if I could come back I wouldn't... I've been through a lot but still I could never have imagined me being 34 and having this conversation... I thought that this would never happen, that it was just a temporary phase of my life. But it is exactly my life!»
(*Cristiano, gay, 34, Maitre, CA*)

Identity management strategies at work

Perceived or anticipated stigma may affect how people relate to their work spheres. This includes how they negotiate their sexual identity at work[1] but also how the social context influences their career aspirations[2]

[1]Ward & Winstanley 2005
[2]Parnell, Lease & Green 2012; Schneider & Dimito 2010

«In my previous occupations I used to hide [...] or I pretended to be straight, aware that it was wrong... I used to stay silent in order not to expose myself. Whereas where I am now I do speak... not because I want to expose myself but because I couldn't care less! [...] It's awesome, it's been three years since I've been doing like this... I easily came out with all of my colleagues»

(*Roberto, gay, 34, waiter, CA*)

«This doesn't make me feel good... I mean, I am not that discreet, I feel like I am playing a part I don't belong to. [...] I remember telling myself: within my thirties I want a stable occupation, in this company if I'm able to. I succeeded but right now I don't know if I see myself here in the future. Now it is convenient but I may one day be sick of it and find another job, not without some difficulties considered that we're in Sardinia. [...] One thing is for sure: I will not tolerate anymore interferences in my personal life. I wouldn't bear any discrimination or comment because this came really close to work harassment»

(*Alessandra, bisexual, 31, employee, CA*)

Conclusion

Between resistance and ordinariness

Social representations of adulthood are «based primarily upon the experiences of white, heterosexual, middle-class males; on experiences, that is, that were lived in mainstream families and reproduced in mainstream culture, whatever the extant inequalities»[1]

This model may interact with those not squared with these ideals of proper adult citizenship, employability, personhood, discouraging deviations from its standards[2]

[1] Blatterer 2007:15
[2] Seidman 2002; Torkelson 2012

Conclusion

Between resistance and ordinariness

Non-heterosexual subjectivities emerge as a resistance, in reaction to the social pressure to homologation[1], when pursuing voluntary acts of distancing themselves from pre-determined social roles which, in any case, they need to deal with.

Normality
- external pressure to homologation
- the need to feel ordinary[2]

To what extent social legitimation is related to compliance with the ideal of a good citizenship[3], in terms of institutionalised gender structure and private/public domains?

[1] Honneth 1992; Martuccelli 2002
[2] Coleman-Fountain 2014
[3] Bell & Binnie 2000; Bertone, 2013; Richardson 2005, 2017

... Thank you for listening!