Article

In Transition . . . Where to? Rethinking Life Stages and Intergenerational Relations of Italian Youth

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Abstract: This article wants to contribute to the ongoing debate within youth studies about the frameworks and concepts that inform research on the meanings of and transitions into adulthood. It aims to contribute to debates about the changing nature of life stages and the need for new conceptual categories and definitions of adulthood and of intergenerational relations. Thus, the first question that drives our reflections is: How do the radical transformations implied in the transition to adulthood pathway change the metaphors used to describe it, the ways of defining adulthood itself, and the scope for mutual recognition amongst different generations? Indeed, intergenerational relationships acquire more complexity in a framework in which a) structural factors like the precarisation of the labour market and the aging population heighten reciprocal interdependence and b) changes in the life-course patterns distance the different generations, especially in terms of biographical sense-making. These theoretical reflections arise from empirical work done in Northern Italy, with thirty-something people who are struggling with a prolonged and de-standardised transition process, negotiating "new adult roles", particularly in the field of parenthood). This complex transition is significant and widespread in Italian context that, as part of the group of Southern welfare states, has low levels of welfare provision and high reliance on the family as a form of support.

Keywords: transition to adulthood; adulthood; generations; Italy

1. Introduction

This article seeks to contribute to the ongoing debates within youth studies about the frameworks and concepts that inform research on meanings of and transitions to adulthood. It reflects on the redefinition of life stages, 'new' patterns of adulthood transitions, and the resignification of intergenerational relations.

The first part of the article is focused on the de-standardisation [1,2] of life courses (the loosening of rules codified and protected by legal mechanisms, or on the weakening of norms of normality applied to behaviours ruled by institutions) and on the consequent transformation of transitions to adulthood. Moreover, it presents the necessity of reflection about the changes on the arrival point of these transitions, namely, the adulthood itself.

The social structures and individual agency involved in the delicate period of transition to adulthood are under evident changes. The regular timing of human events due to stable social structures slowly begins to be more tenuous. Life courses become less predictable, and a growing number of autonomous biographical perspectives [3,4] appear on the public stage. Further, the relevance of the so-called "age norms" [5] in shaping biographies is loosening and modifying the sequence, as well as the cultural meanings, of the various life stages, particularly in regard to the traditional social markers of transitions to adulthood. The optimal age norms refer to the

cultural prescriptions through which the "ideal" moments for different transitions are settled in the common sense (see, for instance, the transitions towards sexuality or parenthood). Traditionally, they represented a crucial element of the discourse on life courses, also because of its strong moral component, that affect the subjective perception of the supposed adequacy of one's own biography [6,7].

Following a reflection about the cultural meanings of adulthood, the article proposes the development of the metaphor used to describe how young men and women become adults in Italy. This new metaphor also accounts for the growing inequalities related to the intergenerational relationship, which the article addresses as both a crucial element for supporting transitions and a context where the changing meanings of adulthood are negotiated.

The research has drawn on empirical work, which shares a focus on the analysis of biographical narratives of so-called "young adults" in northern Italy, namely 'thirty-something' men and women who, at the moment of the interview, were committed to managing the various aspects of their transitions. The first group of 20 biographical interviews was gathered in 2010 with (mostly) middle-class 27 to 39-year-old women and men who were dealing with different and often combined, forms of precarity (from professional to housing). Moreover, to maximise the potential reversibility of life choices, they were selected for not having children. In the analysis of these interviews, particular attention was given to the narrative strategies applied to legitimate and negotiate (both in reflexive and relational terms) the non-standard characteristics of life trajectories, which often overlapped with the struggle for a definition of "new" interpretations about the so-called "adult roles".

Complementary to this, our reflection is also informed by the second group of researchers aimed to understand the meaning that 'new parents' give to motherhood and fatherhood. This focus has been the guideline of two different research projects. The first one, based on 40 narrative interviews conducted in 2008 with fathers and mothers aged between 20 and 37 years, with at least one child under the age of three. The second one carried out between 2015 and 2018, which implied the collection of 10 focus groups with a variety of 'new parents' with identical socio-biographical characteristics, living in the same northern Italian area. All the respondents were selected to guarantee heterogeneity concerning social and economic backgrounds, differentiating mainly for educational levels and types of employment.

2. Transformation of Transition Paths to Adulthood

What is happening to the transitional pathways toward adulthood in Italy? The time span of this transition is very important and delicate, as it is the first time that young boys and girls begin to take on new roles, to move in new contexts, and in very different life domains [8]. The whole transition to adulthood implies a growing opportunity to learn the exercise of choice regarding the type of attachment one wants or manages to build within social institutions.

More than 40 years ago, the relationship between individuals and institutions in the pathway to adulthood was more linear and unambiguous. Modell and colleagues (1976) wrote a pivotal article for the study of the transition to adulthood in which they pinpoint five thresholds that a young person must go through to become an adult. The "critical life events" [9] that mark this passage imply a transition along two main axes: The first refers to the public sphere and separates the period of education from the working one. The second concerns the private sphere and separates life in the family of origin from the constitution of one's own family [10–12]. The transition from one stage to another implied a definitive abandonment of the first and complete entry into the second [13]; in fact, one came out of education to quickly enter the labour market and left the family of origin to form one's own family. The temporal scanning of these steps is suggested in every society and historical period by norms that determine the most appropriate ages to pass through these five thresholds, as well as the sequence to cross them [14,15].

Therefore, in the past, it was possible to focus on the structural factors of transitions from youth to adult life and to generalise these patterns to whole generations. Nowadays, we have to

favour the meaning that individuals attribute to their transitional paths in light of the constraints and resources they have at their disposal (as framed by the concept of institutionalised individualism by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim [16]). In fact, toward the end of the 90s, the transitions were read as "Bastelbiographie" [17], as biographical projects [18], marked by the loss of centrality of structural factors in favour of biographical factors and choices: the choice biographies as put by Manuela Du Bois Reymond [19].

More recent research speaks about the transition as an "ongoing project" [20] marked by "personal markers of adulthood that are in fact culturally patterned and dependent on social recognition for validation" [21] (p. 519). Some scholars have coined the metaphor of "yoyo transitions" to describe the growing disorder of life course paths [22]. The 'yoyo-isation' of biographies expresses the loss of linearity of the trajectory toward adulthood, also stressing the trait of increasing reversibility of the (previously more definitive) markers of adulthood. Consequently, it seems we are moving from a "transition to" in the direction of a "transition as", setting aside the focus on the "vector" from a departure to arrival to better explore the manifold meanings attached to reversible transitions.

This reconstruction of the main turning points of the debate makes clear which change direction is. We go from structured and linear transitions shaped by institutions (Modell [9]) to a variety of different combinations of structural and subjective-biographical factors. Biographies become projects, made through choices. Like "yoyos" [22], we move from one marker to another, often back and forth. We even begin to signify new episodes as turning points in our pathway. Biographies become reversible; we do not transition to a secure point (adulthood), but we stay in transition, as the attained stages in life are no longer necessarily permanent.

2.1. Transitions in Italy, between Intergenerational Distance and Dependence

Data about Italian transitions to adulthood are very clear: in 2011, 62.3% of Italians aged 18 to 34 were cohabiting with parents [23]. If compared to other EU countries, Italy scores the highest in this life domain [24]. Moreover, the inclination toward marriage is declining, and this event is postponed: in 2016, the average age at the first wedding is 35 years old among men and 32 years old among women [25]. More generally, the postponement regards all traditional "markers of adulthood", which are also more reversible than in the past. For example, to those belonging to the generations born after World War II, by one's 25th birthday, only two out of 10 young men and women had not yet entered into the labour market. However, among those born at the end of the 1980s, this same condition affects three out of 10 young people. At the end of 2018, the employment rate for under 25 people was 58.7%, and the unemployment rate rose to 10.6%, with the youth rate is still increasing, and reaching 32.5% (data available online at: https://www.istat.it/en/archivio/224523).

In 2015, the average age at the birth of the first child was 32.3 for Italian women, and childbearing postponement is significant: the proportion of births to Italian women aged 40 and over exceeded the ones of those aged under 25, namely, 9.3% versus 8.2% [25]. Birth rate decline, which began in 2010, is still underway. In 2017, the average number of children per woman fell to 1.34, compared with 1.46 in 2010. The so-called "traditional family", a formally married couple with at least one child, is no longer the prevailing model since it represents less than one-third of Italian families [26]. New familiar models are spreading, both in terms of singles and non-marital partnerships, as well as intergenerational relationships. The uninterrupted shrinking of birth rates, in addition to the extension of life expectancy (in 2016, it was 80.6 years for men and 85.1 years for women) have changed the "generational weight", with less than 25% of the Italian population under 24 years, while more than 22% is over 65 [26].

In our previous research done on the biographical trajectories of a group of young men and women in northern Italy [27,28], we have argued that today's young adults belong to the first generation in Italy who experience a "crisis of biographical meaning" [29] since their very first steps in socialization. Similar to Bauman's "wanderer" [30], and drawing on Berger and Luckmann, contemporary youth experiences a sense of estrangement resulting from widening options to construct a general meaning

for their biographies. The multiplicity of narrative choices applied to make sense of biographies finds a form of consistency among the choices made in the past and the present, as well as looking to the future, entailing "new" issues in terms of social acknowledgement. This emerges particularly when people try to connect their experiences to a wider framework of meaning through which they can recognise themselves and, above all, be recognised by others. Specimens in this sense are the narratives about the non-linear "anti-careers" of precarious workers.

People often find it difficult to reconstruct their professional trajectories by applying "traditional" criteria of coherence and continuity, such as the correspondence between their educational choices and their forms of employment. This difficulty is further enhanced by the lack of "official" mainstream narratives that would facilitate the social recognition of de-standardised educational and professional life courses. This emerged particularly when the narratives focus on their relationships with people of an older generation, as they struggle to find ways to make their biographies more understandable That is why, to stress the character of the "unspeakableness" of these topics due to the intergenerational distance in terms of cultural representation of the life course, in previous work [31] we have used as the title a catchphrase usually applied to introduce other forms of public coming-out: *How to explain it to my parents*?

Some authors [32,33] contextualise these dynamics in the crisis of the 'Grand Narratives' formerly produced by institutions. Indeed, in the past, institutions (state, family, work, educational system, religion, and so on) had a stronger "grip" on individual trajectories, which was potentially limiting in terms of individual choices, yet it provided easily accessible meanings to individual biographies. In other words, the higher institutional power in terms of structuring biographies was, at least partially, mitigated by the ability to provide mainstream narratives that were easily understood and made sense. It is precisely in the cultural vacuum created by the loss of mainstream narratives to the actual features of the individual biographies that has increased the spread of micro self-narratives– on social media and in the press, by professional CVs, as well as through less "traditional" languages, such as, for instance, tattoos. Concerning this latter point, some specific tattoos styles (e.g., the so-called "nerd tattoos") seem to respond to the cultural "push" toward self-representation through micro-narratives, for their themes and shapes are chosen for their meaning of "connotative signs of the biography, as if the tattooed skin . . . would allow to glimpse something more about the story of those bodies" [34] (p. 105) (see also [35] for a reflection about tattoos as biographical device).

This manifest production of subjective narratives seems to resonate with the individual's increased need for self-reflexivity and, at the same time, for culturally defined phrases by which to communicate their experiences. In other words, being exposed to the "crisis of meaning" prompts young men and women in transition to critically analyse the turning points in their life course to identify a general coherence which, due to the de-standardisation of biographies, is unavailable and, therefore, must be built through the deployment of individual resources. Consequently, a peculiarity shared by many young Italians seems to be the ability/necessity of defining adaptive strategies in coping with the crisis of meaning that hits the society as a whole, but primarily affecting the experiences of those who are developing their social trajectory and whose biographical narratives are still "open". Indeed, the very issue of biographical reversibility and permanent openness crosses, although with different extents, most of the narratives gathered in the research.

This study has observed a range of various biographical experiences (and related narrative "justifications"), from the chaotic coexistence of a 34-year-old woman who declared her inability/impossibility to find coherence among her past, present and future as, "*many different, incoherent little me who sometimes grow-up and sometimes die*", to the story of a 29-year-old PhD student who depicted herself as "*totally soaked in precarity*" because of the necessity to support herself by means of a variety of temporary and disconnected jobs while studying, yet finding in the completion of her PhD, a sound "meaning source" to draw on to construct a general sense of her trajectory.

Looking at Portugal as a "neighbour context" in terms of transition schemes [36], due to common structural and cultural conditions in terms of limited welfare measures, a fragmented labour market

and a "fuzzy" cultural conceptualisation of youth, we can build further insights. Ferreira finds that the current structural conditions are a generational marker that characterises young adults' life courses "so that they are experienced, viewed, and planned in structurally diverse and unequal forms of life when compared to their parents' lives" [37] (p. 137). In supporting this idea, we don't mean to underestimate the persistence of some relevant "normative clocks", which still affect the perception of being (or not) "on time" for the individual biographies. Depending on different cultural contexts and institutional constraints, expectations about the "normal" timing of life paths might be very pervasive, producing a strong pressure on individual choices. Nevertheless, in this paper we give particular attention to the individual agency in coping with the effects of de-standardisation, thus, in managing new biographical patterns, which also include the cultural work of negotiation of the forms of de-synchronisation which attempts to resist the conditioning produced by the predominant "normative clocks". In this view, the extreme labour precariousness is read as the core of a generational conscience, as the consequences of high labour flexibilisation are connected to a wider uncertainty, which connotes the Portuguese young adults' actions, visions, and timescapes.

Assuming the similar situation of concurrent cultural distance and mutual interdependence in the intergenerational dimension, it is particularly interesting to observe in the Italian context, the dynamics which stem from its frame. Specifically, the relation between the so-called 'Baby Boomer' generation and their offspring deserve further analysis, since currently, Italian young men and women in transition often still rely on familial support and, therefore, are not fully acknowledged as "proper" (namely, economically autonomous and culturally self-defining) adults, as the widespread use of the stereotyping labels, such as "bamboccioni" ("mummy's boys") clearly reveals. In 2007, the former Minister of Economy Tommaso Padoa-Schioppa coined this term, which immediately gained large success in the mainstream discourse about over 25 youths cohabiting with their parents. The reference to their strong, almost unbreakable, bond with their mothers explicitly resonates with the representation of their choosiness and laziness, which are deemed as the main reasons for their lack of autonomy.,. However, in exploring this intergenerational relationship, we should favour perspectives that allow us to better grasp its processual and relational characteristics. If not, we risk reproducing a discourse informed by "generationalism" [38], which could enhance the rhetorical emphasis on the asymmetries and power relations involved in a moral language that often tries to identify economic, social, and political injustices and inequalities within the relations between generations [37,39] (p. 142). Moreover, from an empirical standpoint, as well as the cultural representation of the changes in the transition to adulthood claim the necessity of exploring the contexts where the relationships among generations are actually constructed. Moreover, as Furlong, Woodman, and Wyn state, today's young people are equipped differently than their parent's generation, and have

> ... a growing awareness that their parents' experiences cannot be used as a road map, they renegotiate core values in ways that promote reflexive life management and the framing of life as an ongoing project largely devoid of explicit markers. [20] (p. 362)

"Traditional" ways of organising life courses, and, in particular, the transition to adulthood, while remaining predominant at a numeric level, lose ground and seem to have become obsolete and less desirable. Young people in transition and today's adults seem to be trapped between the rigidity of transitional meanings and transition rituals on one side, and the flexibility required by the present on the other, with new inequalities emerging in relation to the different resources to which individuals can apply to self-manage their biographies.

3. Meanings of Adulthood

In trying to make sense of these real "shapeshifting" transformations, social scientists have increasingly focused on the changes in meanings and in practices of "becoming adults" [40], favouring the point of view of young people in transition. Until 10 years ago, social sciences introduced some

additional steps between youth and adulthood. These new stages were the solutions that Youth Studies defined to face structural contemporary dilemmas and to avoid calling into question adulthood itself.

By the end of the 1980s, when the possibility of this new life stage started to take form, Pierpaolo Donati e Eugenia Scabini [41] declared that the term, "young adults" is an oxymoron that effectively enlightens the ambivalence of such an "intermediate" condition. A position that is socially ambiguous, oscillating between being dependence and independence, a situation that tends to be extended for a long time and that implies an extension of the condition of youth.

James Côté employs the term, "psychological adulthood", to refer to the pressure to self-establish that young individuals learn in the more and more difficult transition toward adulthood [42] (p. 29). This is a new stage of life, during which, through personal endeavours, it is possible to achieve "psychological adulthood". Jeffrey Arnett [3,43,44] speaks of "emerging adulthood", characterised by a relative degree of independence, a high level of experimentation of social roles, and by a first, yet meaningful, involvement in a sentimental relationship that implies organisational duties. In the context of emerging adulthood, young people show individualistic indications of maturity (such as, the ability to make independent decisions). All these "intermediate ages" are characterised by the predominance of individual endeavours, a high level of experimentation of the social roles, and by a first, yet meaningful, involvement in sentimental relationships.

The problem is that, in this way, adulthood has been "protected". Since the last definition of a new phase between youth and adulthood was coined, more than 10 years have elapsed. Currently, the kinds of behaviours that have pushed social sciences to invent a new life stage have been divulged and "normalised", becoming a life stage organised and extended, changing one's self-perception. According to this research, however, we should re-conceptualise adulthood completely, rather than invent another "slightly less adult" phase.

The few types of research dealing with the reconceptualisation of adulthood tell us that confronting the traditional markers of transition makes many "young people feeling in constant transition", inadequate as adults, as traditional markers seem unattainable or even undesirable to them [21] (p. 511). The traditional definitions of adulthood [45], full of demands for progress and stability, have become unsustainable, and have put young people in transition and adults themselves in a state of confusion and identity uncertainty [46]. Stability and commitment, if not adapted to the contemporary social horizon, risk becoming nostalgic, rather than realistic goals.

3.1. What Does it Mean to Be an Adult Today?

This is a question that social sciences have begun to answer. The narration of adulthood that prevails in recent research stresses the many characteristics. Derived from therapeutic culture, some authors stress the prevalence of "self-identified transitions" [21,47], which allow the reconstruction of an authentic narration of oneself starting with failures, from discontinuities of the past, such as an addiction (alcohol, drugs, gambling or pornography), depression, or an anxiety or anger crisis. Having healed from these traumas becomes a marker that defines adulthood.

Furthermore, adulthood is described as increasingly fluid: it brings with it tensions and anxieties, as well as uncertainty for the future. At the same time, fluidity is a strategy to protect oneself, a skill that allows you to "navigate at sight". Life projects are made up of micro-goals that can be attained step-by-step, since the long-term "life project" is inevitably compromised. The social acceleration and the climate of uncertainty that characterise the "second modernity" has also changed the temporal structure of identity and has influenced the processes of self-construction. In 2005, this was true for young people, as has been demonstrated by Italian research [48]. Now, it is also true for adulthood.

The clear dichotomy between youth and adulthood is more and more eroded [27,28,49]. The characteristic traits of young age become necessary strategies even in adulthood. The boundaries between the different ages of life become more porous. For example, the institution that guaranteed the possibility of autonomy and design typical of adulthood and permanent work, today is unable to provide the same stability. Adulthood becomes an "interactional milestone" [21,47], and as a

consequence, today's adults need "a witness" to validate their own adulthood, precisely because they no longer have solid markers to cling to. Measuring "progress" through the achievement of external markers is dangerous, and to measure one's movement, we need privileged trusted witnesses. Centring one's sense of self, one's adult being, on the acquisition of traditional markers would leave many young people in transition and adults in a state of "perpetual research".

From this first attempt to collect various research on adulthood, it seems that the link between institutional forces and individual results is not well highlighted, and that the role that structural forces have in creating the condition of some vulnerable young people [8] needs further investigation. In a neoliberal horizon, the individualisation of responsibility must be scrutinised, and social structure and intergenerational bonds must be made part of the picture. Indeed, comparative research on the transition pathway clearly shows how various structural conditions significantly impact how young men and women become adult [5,50]. Once again, this shows how important it is to heed social structure and inequalities. As Lee stresses,

> [W]hile individual factors play an important role in shaping the transition to adulthood, focusing on institutions can help highlight structural mechanisms that may be operating to constrain or encourage individual development during the transition period. [8] (p. 714)

4. Intergenerational Ties

Intergenerational relationships have become even more crucial than in the past, both for economic and cultural reasons. The limited economic power of younger generations, especially in Mediterranean countries, entails an increased relevance of the "hidden economy of kinship" [51] or, more generally, of intergenerational solidarity [52] as a precondition of sustainable transitions to adulthood. Concerning the latter, the intergenerational dimension is one of the main fields where the new social statuses related to adulthood are negotiated. Moreover, as Woodman suggests, "tools from the sociology of generations help attune scholars to the dynamic refiguring of key social divisions over time [...] through the intersection of structural change and the reworking of culture" [53] (p. 2).

Indeed, the development of new biographical patterns also entails the need for their legitimation, both in the public and private sphere, involving different generations and their different cultural understandings of adulthood in the process of change.

Evocatively, this happens during an era of a potentially increased intergenerational distance in terms of biographicity [54,55], as the "process through which individuals repeatedly shape and reshape their lives to meet their own needs and desires in response to the conditions of life in late modernity" [54] (p. 7). Specifically, we focus on the strong diversity of life transitions experienced by different generations of current Italian young men and women and their parents. Drawing on Mannheim's perspective about generations [56], diverse scholars have questioned the possibility to find "generational markers" through which to highlight the cultural distance between these generations.

First, the issue of generational order [57,58] might help. Indeed, since its introduction within the frame of childhood studies, the concept of generational order has allowed researchers to observe agency in children's behaviours, thus, overcoming the traditional reading of children as passive actors who are simply adapting to the adults' social order. Likewise, we should consider a generational order perspective in relation to other life ages, as it allows us to further stress how life ages are not "discrete-states" within linear biographical trajectories. Rather, they are culturally defined categories, also resulting from an intergenerational negotiation.

Second, as already mentioned, the mainstream narratives about intergenerational inequalities in Italian society tend to merely emphasise the leading role of the Baby Boomers to the detriment of younger generations. Certainly, the Italian Baby Boomers' generation was able to exploit the neoliberal wave and the economic boom to acquire economic, political, and cultural power, while the younger generations struggle with very limited social protection and opportunities for upward mobility. This situation finds empirical evidence at the macro level.

High youth unemployment rates and the high average age of the Italian ruling class, clearly demonstrates such an intergenerational gap. However, on the one hand, these data are more often referred to as age cohorts, rather than social generations (as defined by Mannheim [56]), and on the other, when scholars try to analyse them, they tend to blur the multidirectional and relational micro-dimension of the practices and relationships [59], which are produced within the process of generationing, namely, the result of the interaction between contextual and fixed traits (such as historical, cultural and social events and experiences) and a cultural process of identity formation developed over time (including narratives, performances and rituals) [60] (Available online: https://cyberpsychology.eu/article/view/4269/3308).

At a micro level, there have been research studies deepening the complexity of intergenerational relationships, from which we can take a cue from fostering "new" approaches to the analysis of the intergenerational issues in Italy. For example, in recent research in North American, McDaniel, et al. [59] showed how the 2008 financial market crisis has affected future representations and planning perspectives of 'late' adults. This refers to the already retired Baby Boomers, who were not directly undermined by the crisis, while they still experienced a mirrored uncertainty due to the precariousness lived by their adult sons. As a consequence, both the generations appear stuck in a condition of permanent transition, as they both feel the cultural pressure toward traditional age statuses that are no longer achievable.

Moreover, the data resulting from this research resonates with the ones described by Facchini and Rampazi [61] in their pre-crisis analysis of Italian late adults' perceptions of the future. As the authors write, the age at which those in late adulthood will have to deal with their children leaving the parental home and becoming independent of the family of origin is coming later. This makes some events that are important for the parents' personal choices unpredictable. [. . .] It is of course true that the fact of feeling they are the parents of children who are eternally 'young' contributes to delaying the moment in which individuals start to mature a sense of their own ageing. In this way, a sort of suspension comes about within the flow of time [61] (p. 357).

One may assume how this condition has become more and more serious in the past five years.

There have also been studies [62] that explain how parents apply specific discursive tactics to pretend that the permanent economic support they provide to their adult children is in fact, a random gift or a loan. This explains how an actual private welfare measure is defined by narratives, showing how the issue of dependency is hardly accepted by either parent or their adult offspring, even at a symbolical level.

Moreover, as a very relevant scope of generationing practice and intergenerational relationships, the phenomenon of the prolonged cohabitation of Italian young adults with their parents is worth analysing. Indeed, this widespread condition is constantly recalled by the mainstream representations focusing on the supposed laziness of an "unfulfilled" generation, as the definition of "choosy" shows (in 2012, the former Labour Minister, Elsa Fornero, told students "*not to be too choosy*" when looking for a job. This label completely ignores the high youth unemployment rates that characterise Italy). Aside from the fact that these representations tend not to consider the structural conditions which may force young adults to stay in their childhood bedrooms. Such readings reproduce the stereotypical view of a static duality between the never-ending adulthood of the parents and the unsolved transition of their sons/daughters. Conversely, cohabitation is a context where we can also observe the interdependence between generations and the unfolding of generationing practices or, in other words, the relational practices by which generations are done (and undone). In fact, it represents a crucial environment where both parents and sons/daughters negotiate their statuses through their daily interactions [63,64], potentially changing the generational order and, more specifically, defining new ways of being adult.

Overcoming a normative/moralistic approach to the analysis of intergenerational relationships, which, as pointed out by Barabaschi [65], has polarised the readings between the positive pole of "solidarity" and the negative effect of "conflict", we should thus, also consider the ambivalence and mutuality in the intergenerational dimension.

For example, for new parents interviewed in our research, intergenerational support is crucial and, at the same time, troublesome. They need strong intergenerational practical and economical support to deal with the leaks of the welfare state and to juggle between tight time schedules that both caring and working demand. However, at the same time, to make informed parenting choices, they need to distance themselves from the educational models of the previous generation and defend a personal autonomy that they need to negotiate new family borders. As a new father, a 35-year-old stressed that

> *Grandparents have been helpful, even if there is that inevitable risk of affectionate expansion that grandparents have. [...] You need to keep an eye on it, it's a big risk for the couple [...] more than anything else they tend to carry on their conception of child education, but really things have changed a bit.*

It is therefore important to explore the ways in which legitimation of the new life ages are negotiated among generations, otherwise, "car sharing" threatens to remain a hardly understandable practice for the parents, and a barely sustainable tactic for their adult sons. Taking into consideration these debates about transition trajectories, how would a new metaphor to describe the changes in the transition to adulthood look like?

5. Time for a New Spatial Metaphor?

Metaphors in youth sociology have been widely used and play a central role in shaping our theoretical imaginary. They are dynamic tools "which are capable of informing our knowledge of new or unfamiliar circumstances" [66] (p. 2). The two main types of metaphors concerning the transition to adulthood draw on the spatial dimension (the transitioning from one age to the other) or on the relational dimension (the belonging or not belonging).

Indeed, the most famous elaboration on the spatial metaphor (for an overview of the evolution of spatial metaphors see Furlong [66]) is the one proposed in 1997 to explain the changes that the transition pathway was undergoing [67], that is, young people use cars and not trains to move along the transitional pathway. In the past, when finishing school, young people would jump on a train, and the destination would depend on their social class, gender, and/or ethnicity. The chances to influence these paths were limited to choosing the station where to get off or to moving from second to first class. However, by the end of the 20th century, young people travelled by car, driving it personally. This meant increasing the possibility to choose one's own routes and speed, and, at the same time, increasing the risk of going in the wrong direction [67]. Young individuals were always obliged to construct their own itinerary, but the characteristics and the power of the car are now determined by structural factors.

Belonging is a relational metaphor, and has been proposed by Cuervo and Wyn in 2014 [68], and more generally has taken shape in the longitudinal studies on youth. A young men or woman can belong to three dimensions: place, people and times. The first dimension, belonging to a place, can open up the sense of rootedness, of home, of attachment, of the ongoing project that entails a sense of future and that one needs to develop in order to belong to a place [69]; the second dimension, the belonging to people that matter, gives space to the ties with family, friends, neighbours and other members of a community, enabling us to give importance to the complex inter- and infra-generational relationships; the third dimension, the belonging to a generation enables us to analyse the belonging to social, economic, political, cultural and ecological currents of a specific generation, so to include the macro level that shapes the space in which young people negotiate their lives.

This approach puts at the forefront the "understanding of the ways in which relationships with others, with institutions and with places are implicated in the processes understood as transitions" [68] (p. 906). We feel it's time to extend further the spatial metaphor, but in doing so trying also to give visibility to the relational dimension and trying a) not to leave out of the picture "the overlapping structures and sets of relationships which create meaning for young people and that play a crucial role

in their decision-making about education and work" [68] (p. 905) and family; b) to use the concept of bounded agency [70], so to put at the centre the situatedness of the subjects.

At the beginning of the 21st century, one could state that structural factors (first of all social class) do not only determine the destinations and the type of car available, but also the kind of means of transportation one could have to travel. Today, besides people who travel using their own private car, there are people who must use public transport (those who are marginalised and do not possess [class] resources to transform risks into opportunities) and others who use car sharing – an innovative minority rich in resources. Indeed, our researches show how, on the one hand, the educational inflation and the general precarisation of the labour market are increasingly shrinking the possibility to afford a private car, even among higher educated people. On the other hand, though, these latter are the ones who seem more able to find innovative coping solutions like car sharing, by drawing on their cultural and social capitals.

Car sharing is a spatial metaphor that focuses primarily on the relational dimension and that exemplifies the characteristics of the transitions to adulthood of a growing minority of young men and women, as it illustrates the innovative strategies that young people design in negotiating constraints and opportunities. The access is limited by class and place of residence, as it is available mainly in large urban centres, and only to those who have connections to access the sharing system, skills, adequate technological instruments and money to recharge the cars.

This mobility depends a great deal on other people and, at the same time, connects you to other people, so the strategic importance of relational interdependence is growing, although, from an individualistic perspective. This resonates with the concept of collaborative individualisation [71], which helps us in recognising young people's experiences, "the frequent overlap or intersection of . . . (experimental) pathways or lifestyles [. . .]" [71] (p. 140), also taking into consideration "the transience of these intersections, which may only last for as long as all parties involved benefit from the alliance". Furthermore, this concept also emphasises the necessity of commitment to innovative, sometimes unorthodox, solutions to the socio-economic crisis and its impacts, as well as trust among those producing, delivering and benefitting from those solutions [ibid em].

The skills that enable young men and women to be active in the transition path are flexibility of thought and ductility, as greater mobility is granted to those who are able to rapidly shift to a plan B in order to react to unexpected events and to those who are able to use other means of transport. The men and women we have interviewed often speak about unpredicted episodes and turning points when they needed to revise their choices and plans (in occasion, for instance, of a structural reform which changes the educational requirements for accessing specific employments, as well as in relation to the instability of the cohabitation solutions applied in order to afford a flat, but the list of unforeseen factors could be extended much further).

To react to these events and to manage reversibility entails, in most of the cases, expensive efforts in terms of applied resources, and still the personal resources were often not enough. In fact, we have found a form of substantial inequality between those who could also rely on their networks while revising their plans, and those who, on the contrary, had limited networks and thus were forced to more passively adapt to the changes, often by renouncing to something they aimed to instead of finding an alternative path to reach it.

Thus, returning to the metaphor, the possibility to use a bike, public transport, or even a privately-owned car depends on the social and economic contingencies of their present, unbounded agency. In a society where change is very quick, ductility and adaptability are skills to be developed; it is the rigidity of thought, more than the absence of means, that keeps you standing still, with no means of transportation (and thus, with no possibility to move between markers). The competences registered almost fifteen years ago in a research on young people now also defines adult agency:

> the skill to accept fragmentation and the uncertainty of the environment as a non- removable datum, to be transformed into a resource thanks to a constant practice of awareness and reflexivity. [72] (p. 57)

This is a very stressful condition, as "standing still inevitably becomes a form of falling down" [73] (p. 155). Being in constant movement is stressful, and precarity is consuming and exhausting [74].

The shift from property to practices of exchange and sharing implies huge changes. Not being able to count on a permanent job meant to get used to moments of unemployment or, on the contrary, of multiple employment. So, one does not possess a means of transportation but there are many other ones available, and being on foot is therefore not surprising, being without a car has become quite normal, a condition that people try to actively dominate through the development of specific competences, through being on the net, through a new mapping of the city and through supportive inter and infra-generational relationships.

The transition is individualised and yet shared, as during trips people are faced with strangers with whom they share the travel route and destination; they share the burden and the expenses. In addition to the economic advantage, there is also an important interpersonal exchange, as people mutually witness their efforts and strategies. Sharing allows us to be in the world in a more ecological and sustainable way, and to increase support networks, even if it obliges you, at the same time, to be highly organised and never able to fully relax.

Before this, with a privately-owned car, one could choose the place and time of departure and foresee the time of arrival. One had the feeling to be able to stick to the plan of the trip, to have more control over it. Now, every setback could turn into a misadventure. Expectations have now changed, the duration and transition routes are by definition unforeseeable, impossible to be completely planned, they do not depend on one's will, but on one's skill to adapt, on one's travel mates and on the availability of the means of transportation.

For longer transitions or for emergencies, you have to know that your parents are more than happy to lend you their car. Intergenerational support becomes crucial. As already shown by previous research, having some control over time depends on the resources that one can access, and the intergenerational support is paramount for the transition toward autonomy [75]. Thus, in the context of the Italian welfare, families often work as a "parachute", which supports young people in handling their de-standardised transitions. Most of our interviewees declared to rely on different and pivotal forms of material support from their parents (specimen in this sense is the recurrent necessity to use the parents' resources as a formal guarantee in order to get a mortgage). Although the pivotal role of families as (almost) unique form of private welfare in supporting youths' transition is increasingly taken for granted, it is important to question its long-term sustainability, especially against the background of the further reduction of the social protection system faced nowadays.

Hence, the relevance of the generational interdependency and, more generally, the changes in life transitions, also increase the need for mutual understanding and recognition. Relating to this latter point, the experiences observed through our research show a constant friction between the process of legitimation of the "experimental" interpretations of adult roles, and the cultural pushes toward traditional patterns, which, at least at a cultural level, seem to affect the visions and the expectations of older generations.

6. Conclusions

We are witnessing a prolongation and a de-standardisation of the transition to adulthood, a shift toward a mosaic of reversible transitions, often characterised by the simultaneous presence of characteristic features of adulthood and youth. The transition milestones are more and more independent one from the other, while in the past they were almost synonyms (finishing school meant finding a job and marrying meant becoming parents). Today, as never before, to be in transition forces young people to develop unusual skills and at the same time offers them the possibility to reshape also the "place of arrival" (adulthood), re-defining their self-projections as adults.

This article suggests a new metaphor that may help us visualise these transformations, and urges a redefinition of the point of arrival, namely adulthood itself. This new spatial metaphor focuses on the relational dimension of social actors, and stresses how transition pathways tend to become

increasingly individualised and yet shared. Looking at practices we can find several examples of this new patterns of sharing.

For example, we can understand how co-working spaces mean more than sharing workrooms, as they become contexts where commune projects involving different expertise take shape. Another example comes from the forms of house sharing, which seems to change in a similar way, including the cohabitation of single/divorced parents and their children with friends, which changes the patterns of household intimacy construction. Going back to the central metaphor of this article, car sharing practices are often more than a mere common use of a means of transportation, but they also resonate with a shared attention for eco-sustainability and ethical consumption, being more a relevant component of particular lifestyles. Again, we find continuity with Cuzzocrea and Collins's insights about the will of youths to be "full agents" of their own destiny, while sharing their paths with "like-minded others in order to ensure support and motivation are close at hand" [71] (p. 148).

Furthermore, the article has focused on the intergenerational dimension, with particular regard to family relationship, due to their economic and cultural relevance in the Italian context. Aiming to propose a metaphor able to represent the changes in transitions and, above all, the cultural understanding of "new" adulthood, we have inevitably tackled the issue of its negotiation among different generations. In this context we have found a certain lack of literature, both at Italian and international level. Concerning this latter point, Wyn et al. have highlighted a general under-investigation of the "lived nature of relationships between young people and families" [76] (p. 4), accounting for it as a consequence of the dominance of the individualisation paradigm in youth studies, in addition to the tendency to look at the intergenerational family relationships mostly in terms of transmission of cultural capital, as in Bourdieu [77]. Instead, as the authors suggest, it is also in relation to the individualisation process that the transition to adulthood has been changing, making the individual bond with institutions such as the family more complex, extended and unpredictable.

It appears significant to look beyond the understanding of "youth-as-becoming-adult" [75] and focus on the transition toward the achievement of independence, since becoming independent is seldom a definitive condition in the contemporary socio-economical frame of the Italian society. Thus, we suggest further empirical work and reflection about the intergenerational relationships as "places where young people already enact and perform citizenship" [76] (p. 10), as "family is a critical site for both social connection and civic engagement" [ibid em]. In our view, this also requires for further analysis of the negotiation of the changed nature and representations of adulthood, as forms of framing of the "new" citizenships and as a context of potential reduction (or on the contrary reproduction) of inequalities.

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