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Beyond the Sex Machine?

Sexual Practices and Masculinity in Adult Men's Heterosexual Accounts

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“The dick doesn't want any thoughts. Thought can give it problems” (Guglielmo, 58 years old)

“Luckily, we don't only fuck with the dick” (Cristoforo, 69 years old)

Are men all the same? Have men changed? In the field of sexuality they still all come from Mars, if we believe to a very successful best-seller teaching men and women how to deal with such a natural truth (Gray 1992). Widespread in popular representations, this notion goes often unchallenged, even in sociological research on sexuality (Plummer 2005).

As a result, how adult men experience sexuality *as men* remain strikingly underinvestigated, in research on heterosexuality and masculinity. These experiences are in fact situated at the intersection of different dimensions of invisibility: masculinity as the invisible side of the gender binary, male sexuality conceived as biologically driven and heterosexuality as its natural form. The two quotations opening this article give us a hint, instead, of the variety of the stories men tell about their heterosexual life: not because they are describing different acts, but because of the meanings they attach to them.

In this article, we will discuss the theoretical and conceptual tools we can build upon in taking a way out of a naturalising gaze of male sexuality. We will then analyse how a sample of Italian men aged between 50-70 years old, self-identifying as heterosexuals, perform their masculinities by accounting for their sexual practices.

The sexual revolution and the emergence of intimacy as a new way of living and conceiving sexuality have represented a challenge for these men, which they have dealt with in different ways. In exploring how they make sense of their sexual biographies, we will focus upon the processes of reproducing, shifting or making a patchwork of old and new sexual practices.

Beyond the naturalising gaze

The naturalisation of male sexual desire and pleasure implies an assumption of consistency between sexuality and gender (Ponse 1978; Richardson 2007), since male heterosexual desire is considered as the natural expression and foundation of masculinity. Different directions of theoretical reflections and research have instead called for the need of and provided important tools for questioning such a monolithic view of male sexuality.

An important acknowledgement of the social construction of sexuality came from feminist research: however, while focusing upon women's sexuality, it often maintained implicit and unquestioned assumptions on the homogeneity of male sexuality (Segal 2007).

Gay, lesbian and queer studies have focused on heterosexuality as a critical object, but thematising it as heterosexism and heteronormativity, for its aspect of boundary-making, they overlooked the complexity and variability of how it is actually performed. This is, on the contrary, at the core of more recent critical perspectives on heterosexuality (Richardson 1996; Jackson 1999) which pointed to the multiplicity of its dimensions (Jackson 2006) and to their contingent and complex intersection with sexuality and gender (Richardson 2007). These perspectives are shaping new fruitful directions for empirical research. An important one explores ordinary or mundane sex, how men and women experience, and make sense, of heterosexuality in everyday life (Jackson 2008; Hockey, Meah and Robinson 2007); however, little of this research has concerned adult men's heterosexual sexual lifeⁱ.

Even in men's studies, male heterosexuality often remains an opaque object. Despite a general growing attention to diversity in masculinities, it tends to be reduced to its institutional and oppressive dimensions, for instance in research on male homophobia (Kimmel 1997) or on male violence against women. Institutionalised heterosexuality is a central feature in Connell's (2005)

definition of hegemonic masculinity, working as a naturalising and normalising frame in relation to which all men are required to position themselves.

When dealing with male heterosexuality, empirical studies have focused in particular on young men. They have investigated the process of becoming heterosexuals, pointing to the crucial role of the school context in reproducing hegemonic masculinity (Redman 2000; Haywood and Mac an Ghail 1997; Kehily 2001), and have explored the plurality of experiences and meanings young men refer to when they talk of their sexualities (Wight 1996; Holland et al. 1998). Other strands of research concern “marginalised” masculinities (Connell 2005) or failures in masculinities and the ways of fixing them, as in the case of medicalised definitions of age-related changes as “sexual dysfunctions” (Tiefer 1994; Potts 2000).

In sum, the processes of ongoing reproduction, and change, of adult masculinities through everyday sexual practices remain largely invisible to research: our attempt is to shed some light upon them.

Changing sexual scripts, changing masculinities?

By referring to “sexual practices”, we distance ourselves from those strands in research on sexuality that focus on “sexual acts”, reducing the variety of heterosexuality to the diversity of sexual repertoires and assuming a consistency between acts and meanings. The interactionist perspective on sexuality developed by Gagnon and Simon (1973) makes it possible to move towards conceiving sexual practices in terms of the “doing” of gender, sexuality and heterosexuality as socially intelligible realities and practical accomplishments (West and Zimmerman 1987; Morgan 2006; Jackson 2006). This doing takes place in everyday interaction and within local “communities of practices”, in relation to which men perform heterosexuality and masculinity. Paechter (2003a, b) proposes to conceive masculinities and femininities as communities that define, and are defined by, more peripheral and more central practices.

Participation in these practices moves from being legitimate but peripheral to full belonging in that community: however, the categorisation of practices as more peripheral or core within a particular community is open to a constant process of renegotiation.

Moreover, Gagnon and Simon provide an interpretive frame to acknowledge the multidimensionality of sexual practices, or what they call sexual conduct, by identifying three levels of sexual scripts: cultural, interpersonal and intrapsychic. Cultural scripts, or scenarios, are narratives providing instructional guides for defining the boundaries of what is sexual and giving resources to make sense of individual experiences. Interpersonal scripts refer to the “shaping of material of relevant cultural scenarios into scripts for context-specific behaviour” (Simon and Gagnon 1986, 99). Emerging from interaction, they provide space for improvisation. At the intrapsychic level, sexual scripts are “the motivational elements that produce arousal or at least a commitment to the activity” (Gagnon and Simon 1973, 14). In this perspective, desire and other sexual feelings do not derive from the inner body, as drives or instincts, but emerge through an interpretive interactional process and are part of the construction of a social self.

On the basis of research on male heterosexuality, we can identify four idealtypical scripts framing men’s sexual experiences.

According to the *predatory script*, sex as naturally driven is aimed at confirming masculinity by the recognition from the homosocial environment. Male peer groups and male adults as a reference group exercise pressure on young men to lose their virginity and to chase after women as prey. Sex is something active men do to passive women, and it is centred on sexual intercourse, within which male orgasm is taken for granted, while female orgasm is a means to assert male potency.

The *respectability script* entails a clear definition of differentiated sexual and gender expectations: men are active and biologically driven, women are passive and led by feelings. It stresses values of respect and responsibility within a normative script of “settling down”: job, marriage, childbirth. Sex is primarily aimed at reproduction and at couple maintenance. While

women are gatekeepers for the control of men's drives, men must restrain their desire for sexual variety not to offend their wives (like avoiding oral sex) and must be in control, by using for instance coitus interruptus. Women's desire and pleasure remain under-thematised, their role being reduced to "let go" or to "give in".

The *permissive script* locates sex within the individual, disconnecting it from a relationship. In terms of differences from the predatory discourse, sexual interaction is valued in itself, as a pleasure and self-expressive means. Women (ideally) have as legitimate access to sex and pleasure as men do. This requires competences from men, who are supposed to be trained in sexual knowledge and skills.

In the *intimacy script*, sex is detached from reproduction and is mainly interpreted as a way of creating and maintaining a sense of emotional closeness and of mutual disclosure within the couple. This entails symmetry between partners and ongoing negotiation of rules. The couple is a contingent construction, requiring sexual and emotional labour skills from both men and women (Giddens 1992; Jamieson 1998). Making this work visible opens up spaces for conceiving male desire itself as a contingent construction, being negotiated in heterosexual interaction.

These scripts are multidimensional: they include elements of cultural scenarios (like the notion of gender complementarity or of gender symmetry), of interpersonal scripts (whether men are supposed to take the sexual initiative or to negotiate it with the partner) and of intrapsychic ones (male desire can be conceived as biologically driven or context-dependent).

Historical research has revealed the connection of these scripts with constructions of hegemonic masculinities (Connell 2005). In particular, the respectability script has emerged, in combination with the predatory script in the double standard, as an aspect of bourgeois masculinity, while the exclusive adoption of a predatory sexuality all along the life course became associated with working class men and other marginalised masculinities (Mosse 1984; McLaren 1997).

The sexual revolution, and second wave feminism, are considered as historical turning points towards the diffusion of new sexual scripts, those that tend to be more permissive or based on

intimacy. However, this shift has been thematised and researched in particular with regard to women's sexuality, while we know less about how it impinged upon men (Segal 2007; Mundy 2006). Several authors have pointed to a change of male sexuality on a quantitative level, because of a larger number of women sexually available, but not on a qualitative one, as a redefinition according to the new sexual scripts adopted by women (Ehrenreich, Hess and Jacobs 1986).

A recent strand of research on "new masculinities", especially focused on media representations, outlines spaces for integration of the new permissive and intimacy scripts into a construction of masculinities which is described as a fluid and hybrid *bricolage* rather than a consistent model inscribed within a specific script (Beynon 2002). Lack of research on everyday male heterosexual practices, however, leaves the question open about whether the changes described at the level of media representations have any correspondence with how men experience and make sense of their masculinities.

Sexual scripting as accounting practice

Such an investigation about stability and change in scripts on male sexuality must avoid the risk of reducing the concept of script to a fixed set of instructions and motives for behaviour, as Jackson and Scott (2007) have warned. We can therefore refer to the concept of "scripting" (Gagnon and Simon 2003) as a process embedded in everyday social practices, and interpret it as an "accounting practice".

In an interactionist perspective, the notion of account has been developed to refer to justifications or excuses for undesirable or unexpected occurrences, which break the taken-for-granted nature of social life. Simultaneously, this notion offers a means of weaving together disparate social events within a consistent, meaningful frame. The focus has then gradually moved to accounting as a regular day-to-day practice of reproducing social reality while making sense of it (Orbuch

1997). Drawing on ethnomethodology, this is also the perspective through which West and Zimmerman have interpreted the processes of “doing gender”: as they have recently remarked, “the key to understanding gender’s doing is [...] accountability to sex category membership” (2009, 116).

As an everyday practice, accounting is embedded in local contexts of production. Simon and Gagnon (1986) argue that, in more stable and traditional social settings, the way people make their sexual practices accountable, that is meaningful to themselves and to others, are more implicitly embedded in the practices themselves, while in social settings characterised by greater conflicts and complexity, the reflexive and interpretive processes of heterosexuality tend to become more evident.

More explicit processes of accounting can be triggered not only by the complexity of the social setting, but also by specific situations which are experienced as disruptive of a taken-for-granted reality. In this respect, the exploration that Garfinkel (1967) carried out in his work on Agnes shows the heuristic advantage of looking at a breaching experience in order to uncover the doing of gender as an everyday accomplishment.

The importance of focusing upon how individuals account for transgressions and digressions from the boundaries of socially expected behaviour has also been pointed out as a useful tool to unveil the naturalness of heterosexuality as an organising principle of social life (Hockey, Meah and Robinson 2007). Accounts of these experiences, in fact, shed more light on how actors relate sexual practices and the construction of gendered selves within a heterosexual frame.

In biographical accounts, these transgressions and digressions should not only be identified as “fateful moments” (Giddens 1991), since they are also part of the mundane aspects of life (Hockey, Meah and Robinson 2007; Thomson et al. 2002).

Researching adult men’s heterosexual biographies

Adult men's accounts of their sexual biographies are explored here on the basis of 36 in-depth interviews with Italian men aged between 50-70, all of whom self-identified as not being gay, bisexuals or queerⁱⁱ.

These data are part of two larger research projects on sexuality in Italy. The first project, carried out in 2005-07, investigated Italian people's sexual attitudes and behaviour through a survey of a national sample of 3000 men and women aged 18-70, and by in-depth biographical interviews with 150 men and women aged 18-70 in four local areas of North-Western, North-Eastern, Central and Southern Italy.ⁱⁱⁱ The second is a follow-up research project on experiences of sexuality during midlife, carried out in 2007-08 through in-depth biographical interviews with 60 men and women aged 50-70 in Piedmont and 9 focus groups, 6 with women and 3 with men. In both projects, the equal number of men and women interviewed were selected through a purposive snowball sampling method, seeking as much variations as possible in relation to some key sociodemographic variables (education, marital and relational status, religious identification).

Due to the overlapping of these two samples, the majority of our 36 interviewees (24) live in North-Western Italy. However, since this area of Italy experienced mass migration from other parts of the country, several of them (7) were socialised in other areas, especially in the South. All interviews were conducted by members of the research teams, mostly (23) by a male interviewer.

The cohorts of men that we analyse here experienced a strong normative definition and a process of homogenisation of timings and life course patterns.

Gender asymmetry was strongly entrenched in Italian social structure in their youth and, for some of them, in their adult years too. As regards legal regulation, until the Seventies family law was defined under the fascist civil code: divorce was introduced in 1970, and parity for spouses in 1975; until 1968 there was a differential treatment of extramarital relations (men's being considered as a legitimate cause for separation only if resulting in public scandal); honour crime

was abolished in 1981 (Pocar and Ronfani 2003). From the 1950s and well into the 1970s, social rules supported a normative transition to adulthood consisting, for men, in the sequence of their first job, lifelong marriage and childbirth. As regards sexuality, there were expectations about experimentation before marriage, compulsory marriage if the partner became pregnant, and the legitimate possibility of sex outside marriage. In historical and contemporary research on male intimate relations, a pluralism of models has been related to class differences (McLaren 1997, Wight 1996), but in our cohorts of men we find a sort of homogeneity in the reference model, the breadwinner-housewife bourgeois family, although not always corresponding to actual family practices.

However, these are also cohorts which crossed great social transformations, linked to the 60s economic boom, including the so-called “sexual revolution”, in different periods of their lives, before or after having accomplished the transition to adulthood.

Finally, these men experienced changes in their sexuality at the intersection of life course and ageing, while at the same time witnessing a transformation of representations and norms about ageing (Featherstone and Wernick 1995; Gullette 2004) which outlines two cultural scenarios. On the one hand, there is the idea that old age is the time of sexual retirement as part of a more general social marginalisation. An emerging, and contrasting, view of male sexuality in old age is the myth of the “sexy oldie”, underpinned by the medicalisation and commodification of ageing (Gott 2005). Old men are expected to be “forever functional” (Marshall and Katz 2002): age-related changes in sexuality are reduced to problems to be fixed, and a strongly biologised notion of male sexuality is reasserted. Masculinity is thereby constructed as strongly dependent on being able to perform sexual intercourse (Loe 2004).

In the biographical interviews, we asked men to tell their stories following some open questions about the main events regarding sexuality in their life course. The semi-structured interview guide investigated accounts of the social context of their sexual socialisation and main “key heterosexual moments” (Hockey, Meah, Robinson 2007), including first intercourse, important

relationships, marriages, breaks of marriages, and parenthood. We also asked about other main life course experiences regarding transition to adulthood (moving from the family of origin, studying, military service, the first job) and working careers, in order to grasp the conditions of production of the accounts for sexual experiences.

Looking at men's socialisation, we aimed at identifying the cultural scenarios characterising their cohorts, and at analysing how they interpreted them. Asking interviewees to focus on the sexual connotations of key heterosexual moments has allowed us to identify the variable and shifting boundaries of what men defined as sexual (for instance, non-genital versus genital contact).

Another way to explore these boundaries was to invite the interviewees to recall what they considered their first sexual experiences: some men showed uncertainty in replying to this question, revealing the implicit presence of a strong normative heterosexual scripting by focusing on the first sexual intercourse as a socially defined threshold to adulthood. They therefore described their sexual experiences as steps of a social learning process along a progressive and cumulative itinerary towards "real sex" and adult heterosexual masculinity.

We also paid attention to what was said as well as to what was not mentioned because it could not be said, being outside the boundaries of heterosexuality (Hockey, Meah and Robinson 2007). For instance, if framed within the notion of sexual retirement, decline of desire due to ageing could be explicitly thematised, while it tended to become invisible if our interviewees referred to the new imperative of the forever functional man.

A central element of our analysis was looking at more explicit processes of accounting, in order to explore how interviewees restore the consistency of their sexual biographies and thereby their sense of being heterosexual men.

In some cases, the most naturalised aspects of male heterosexuality became an object of scrutiny and reflexivity by the interviewees themselves, in giving accounts of "breaching experiences": failures, transgressions, contradictions and in general what they perceived as needing an explicit accounting for.

However, given that many aspects of sexual experience (especially men's) tend to be naturalised and therefore taken for granted, we triggered more reflexive accounts by "breaching experiments" (Garfinkel 1967), for instance by asking to explain what they meant by referring to expressions like "normal" or "natural" in describing their practices.

Accounts are produced as meaningful not only for the speaker, but also for an actual and/or potential audience. As the interview is a specific context of account production, whether it is perceived as a homosocial male context or a heterosexual scene can therefore be influential. This is apparent in some interviews when, in the interaction with a male interviewer, men seemed to assume a shared gender-specific sympathetic understanding, using jokes and slang terms preserving, and reasserting, the taken-for-grantedness of a common ground of heterosexual masculinity.

If the interviewer is the actual audience, interviewees often referred to different and more or less outspoken communities of practices in relation to which the accounts were produced, and thereby the meaning of how being a heterosexual man was negotiated. Very often such a community is represented by the male peer group; the other recurring one is the heterosexual couple. We have therefore explored the multiple strategies by which men produced accounts that can be meaningful for the different communities they referred to.

Male sexualities in practice: accounting for permanence and change

Socialisation and life course patterns

Almost all the men in our cohorts underwent a similar process of socialisation, centred upon a predatory script in adolescence, as a legitimate sexual experimentation phase, and the expectation to move to the respectability script in adulthood, as a replacement or within a double standard. The respectability script in particular was strongly embodied in and supported by a

religious cultural scenario which also impinged upon the men who didn't develop a personal religious identification.

A distinctive trait of the social contexts in which this socialisation took place was their gender segregation, also in the school system, entailing high social control on sexual interaction with women. This segregation supported a social, and also spatial, distinction between available loose women and respectable ones:

“I still remember the priest preaching from the pulpit asking the girls not to go to the ballroom when there was the local festival. Because dancing was something sinful, something dangerous for their... how can I put it? For their integrity, for their reputation” (Cesare, 60)

We find instead only few interviewees who experienced their sexual initiation in a more permissive context in which the boundaries between loose and good girls seemed more blurred. Besides having experienced a different socialisation, some men could often draw upon socioeconomic and cultural resources which allowed them to manage the variety of available sexual scripts in a more complex way.

In this heavily gender-segregated world, the homosocial context of the male peer group emerges as the crucial community of practices in which sexual socialisation took place. “Homosociality shapes the sexual relations in which these men engage, the meanings given to their sexual involvements, and the development of narratives about them”: this statement, that Flood (2008, 339) refers to some young Australian men, also fully applies to the youthful years of our interviewees.

The peer group was the main, if not exclusive, source of information in times where silence within the family covered the taken-for-grantedness of the male sexual drive. Ideal-typical and hyperbolic sexual stories, as well as jokes, shared with male friends provided frames for interpreting and measuring experiences

The peer group was also a context in which the first heterosexual experiences were materially shared, so that their individual meaning was constructed through interaction: young men learnt

how to achieve pleasure properly, but also what could be defined as pleasurable (Jackson and Scott 2007). This is apparent in narratives about group masturbation and collective pornography consumption:

“since you didn’t receive any sexual education, slowly you discovered the various steps of sexuality. For instance, with my peer group one of the aspects that changed the situation were the older guys, the more experienced ones, especially from the working-class areas, who brought the first pornographic magazines, then you discovered naked women, then later you discovered intercourse. These magazines [...] were like relics handed down by the older boys, and there was even a mechanism by which not everybody could see them. The one who had them was the boss, the leader, and if he let you see them it meant that you were part of the group, then you discovered many things. Moreover, from the older boys’ stories, the experiences that the older ones told and boasted about, you put together all the pieces and slowly you built up your understanding” (Paolo, 53)

The homosocial environment pressured young men to conform to a normative timing of sexual experiences, in particular of the first intercourse, as the way to assert their masculinity. This often took the form of being brought to a sex worker by older friends or adult men (including the father or older brothers), described as “a sort of local tradition” by one of the ten interviewees experiencing such a sexual initiation.

In their sexual and relational experiences, most of the men in our sample comply with the normative timing expected according to the prevailing scripts of their context of socialisation. In this respect, we can identify three life course patterns, all including a lifelong or long-lasting marriage:

- a) *experienced monogamy* (11 men), including men who had sexual experiences with other women before, but not during marriage;
- b) *double standard* (9 men), including men who had sexual experiences with other women before, but also during marriage.

c) *pure monogamy* (4 men), including men who had first intercourse with their wife, before or after marriage, and remained faithful during a lifelong marriage.

Not all men followed this expected timing. Some of them (10 men) had two or more long-lasting relationships (not necessarily marriages), in some cases with other sexual experiences between or during them: we refer to this pattern as *serial partnership* .

Finally, we have grouped under a residual category, *polyamory* (2 men) those men who had many sexual partners but neither long-lasting relationships nor experiences of cohabitation.

In analysing men's accounts, however, we do not find an automatic correspondence between similar life course patterns and the adoption of similar scripts. Moreover, the level of consistency in biographical accounts does not necessarily depend on what are commonly perceived as discontinuities in the life course (typically, break up of marriage), but rather on how these events are interpreted. The variable nature and meaning of breaching experiences will emerge in the following exploration of how our interviewees make sense of their sexual biographies.

Reproducing

Even when biographies appear strongly consistent and conforming to a single script, or a normative sequence of scripts, this is the outcome of an ongoing process of scripting. This process emerges from men's accounts, where we see how potentially breaching experiences get integrated within a strong sense of biographical continuity.

Men who only had one sexual partner in their life course tend to provide such linear narratives of their lives, referring to the respectability script. Casimiro (62, pure monogamy) describes himself as smoothly carrying on his sexual life throughout a sequence of taken for granted phases. At 18 he gains a stable job as a manual worker and he meets his future wife in the local church community. After military service, he marries at 22, having his first "real sex" experience after marriage:

“it was not possible before. On my side, there was respect for her, although I would have liked it, but not so much as to... On her side, she was very strict, because she came from a very Catholic family [...] with right rules”.

In the description of his first sexual intercourse, as throughout his narrative, we find a strong emphasis on sexuality as a “normal” aspect of adult heterosexual life:

“The first time we had sex was when we married, during the first wedding night. It was very good, a little fast, then done again 2-3 times during the night. [...] We were both scared and ashamed, then it happened and we started our life together. [...] We did it normally, nothing strange [...] then things have always been normal. ‘Til now it runs normally, as ever. [...] It was something normal, that must occur in a husband and wife’s life”.

Other aspects of sexual experience are accounted for as consistent elements of a respectable marriage. Experiences like making pressure upon his wife to have sex, or to comply with his preferences, are framed within the notions of women’s passive role and of men’s pleasurable right to possess their bodies.

“About having sex with my wife, the pleasure is to feel her in my arms, to caress her all along her body, to kiss her, to play with her ears even though she doesn’t want this. This is the pleasure: to feel that she’s mine”.

Fully inscribed in the respectability script, Casimiro’s accounts show a tension with a predatory notion of male sexuality, a tension which becomes evident in his neutralising strategies about the possibility of extramarital sexual relations. Desire itself for such experiences is evoked as a natural drive, while being feared as dangerous and disruptive of an adult masculinity defined by self-control and exclusive possession of one’s wife.

“All women would suit me! [laughing]. I think of them, I imagine them and all the rest, but [...] I don’t even try to get close to them because I don’t know what could happen”.

“I get jealous for the exuberance of my friends towards my wife [...] my behaviour towards the other women, my friends’ wives, is that I control myself, although I think about it, but I control myself! [...] I don’t like it, everyone...has their possession”.

We see instead many of the men with a “double standard” life course composing predatory and respectability scripts in a socially expected pattern of coexistence and complementarity, without any sense of conflict. One of them is Guido (65), who starts describing the cultural script of his socialisation as follows: *“When you marry, then you can have sex, at that time this was the rule. We are from another generation, and the world was like this”*. Here, he takes the double standard so much for granted that he clearly, although implicitly, refers this statement to women, finding no contradiction with the legitimate, and naturalised, male possibility of sexual experimentation before and outside marriage. He himself started his sexual life with a prostitute: *“it was something... like the cock. And what does the cock do? [...] Zac! He jumps on the hen and he immediately gets off. [...] I was satisfied about the experience”*.

He then recalls the transition to marriage, and to respectable sexuality, in strongly normalised terms:

“we talked with my parents and we sought to combine an approach between them and her parents, we got engaged, and then we married and we started to have children. One child a year”

“certain things with the wife... you don’t want to do things that are a little... excessive, do you?”

Because the wife is something that you own, do you understand?”

Extramarital sex is legitimised instead by conceiving it as only the physical outlet of a biological need, therefore not questioning respect for the wife:

“[that woman] provoked me and I did not hesitate in having sex with her, but this doesn’t mean that if you have sex with another woman you leave the wife, does it? It was an occasional thing, that goes, you catch it and it slides away”

Guido’s use of impersonal language and his repeated call for the male interviewer to confirm a shared male view of sexuality shows that he assumes a monolithic masculinity as the taken for granted community of practices in relation to which he defines himself as a heterosexual man.

We often find in experienced monogamous men similar levels of consistency in their biographies, which they organise as a sequence of predatory sex in youth and a move to respectability in adulthood.

The story of Guglielmo (58, serial partnership) is instead an interesting case showing how a consistent biography can also be reproduced by neutralising what is socially defined as a highly disruptive experience, namely breakup of marriage. Guglielmo interprets all his sexual biography through the predatory script, emphasising the mechanical working of male sexuality:

“The first time I went with a hooker it was because I had been dating a woman. I went out for dinner and all that... It was a path that was popular at that time... In order to obtain what you wanted and have sex with her, you invited her, you took her out for dinner... the flowers... And then there was the game at dinner... those foolish things you could say [...] but you held out because you thought that she would have given in. And then, after dinner, I had sex with that woman and it was absolutely unsatisfying. Then I went out and look for a hooker, and I screwed the hooker... And obviously this was again unsatisfying, obviously, then I went home and I had a wank”

In this conception of sexuality, what he recalls as a breaching experience is not failing in marriage, but failing in sexual performance, when he could not get an erection in the last period of his first marriage. However, he accounts for it as being the woman's fault, and therefore not questioning his sense of masculinity. Downplaying the respectable side of marriage, he thus legitimates his decision to leave his wife by referring to *her* failure in continuing to be an appealing prey:

“If you see a naked women, showing her tits, obviously you get the idea...[...] If on the contrary you see a woman in pyjamas, you already have little desire and then it's all gone.”

On the contrary, speaking about his latest partner, he defines her as playing the seductive role as a prey adequately, activating his sex machine:

“I always tell her ‘slut’. In fact she is a slut... it is normal. [...] She teases me, to such a level that at the beginning in the car she put her hand on my dick [...] Then she says that she wants to play,

but obviously if she puts her hand on my dick it gets hard. It's obvious that it gets hard, what do you expect? And then if it gets hard, what do I do? I use it. [...] Basically, stimulation, reaction”.

In producing a biographical consistency, however, these men have to manage not only what they perceive as potentially disruptive individual experiences, but also the change of cultural scenarios with the emergence of intimacy and gender symmetry as frames for understanding sexuality. They actually often feel the need to make sense of their distance from these new frames, and a common strategy is referring to their generation as different from that of their children. What they often need to neutralise in the sexual experiences of their children's generation seems to be the collapsing of the distinction between loose and respectable women, a distinction upon which they have built the legitimacy of their sexual life.

Shifting

While the men we have mentioned above keep conforming to the scripts they were socialised in, others speak about a re-socialisation to the new emerging scripts.

Giovanni (50, experienced monogamy) describes his sexual initiation in terms of a typical predatory script: *“I had at least one clear idea about women: that I didn't dislike them and that I would have liked to use them, but I was afraid of getting involved and trapped”.*

However, in his narrative he often takes an ironical distancing from it, describing himself as inexperienced and only partially adequate compared to his male peers. In these ironical accounts, he acknowledges the importance of interaction with women, and in particular his present wife, for negotiating a different approach to sexuality. .

Thirteen years younger than him, the wife is described as belonging to a generation that was socialised within a different cultural scenario. Through the relationship with her, he comes to conceive the couple as the outcome of an ongoing process of construction: *“We got together [with my wife], and this is where usually films end, but life begins. And you have to work really hard to try to become a couple”.* In order to manage this difficult task, both he and his wife start psychotherapy. This was the main context of production and support for his shift, and for reinterpreting his whole biography: psychotherapy provides him with an interpretive frame to

redefine his past predatory experiences as due to psychological immaturity and his present life in a couple, framed in the intimacy vocabulary, as a more mature achievement.

“I had just discovered sex: after 20 years starving...I arrived and said: “does it work like that? Gosh, it’s so good!”. But probably there was nothing more, so as soon as you release your animal instinct, let’s say animal...First, desire to fled. Second, probably there were various psychological problems that I was towing”.

“Sometimes my wife and I look at each other and wonder: ‘But are we normal?’ since we have sex once a month... But it seems to me that when we do it... I can’t remember having done it so well in the past. [...] In my opinion, as regards the quality... we know each other... we cuddle ourselves... we pet.. we look for things... we give time to ourselves [...] while in the past I was more a bad boy... I jumped immediately to conclusions”

However, Giovanni presents his move to intimacy as an individual path towards awareness and not as a common experience shared with other men and related to a broader cultural change (Bird 1996). Therefore, the intimacy script allows him to redefine his sexual positioning in couple interaction, but not to construct a sense of self based on a new model of masculinity: he only distances himself from a masculinity which he keeps defining as predatory.

For some of our interviewees, the sexual revolution has been an important *collective* biographical experience breaking the taken for grantedness of sexual scripts: this is particularly true for those, like Paolo (56, double standard), who took an active part in the student movement. Paolo describes this experience as the source of a real shift from a socialisation he shares with the men of his cohort to the adoption of a permissive script and subsequently one of intimacy. The impact of the sexual revolution, however, appears mediated by his relations with women embodying new sexual expectations. These experiences trigger a questioning not only of the meanings of sexuality, but also of masculinity itself: in this respect, he enacts changes in other dimensions of his heterosexual life, like taking parental leave.

Relying on a sexual revolution and feminist vocabulary, he openly questions a phallic notion of masculinity, as when he accounts for his resistance in accepting his wife's sexual experiences outside the couple:

“One says ‘My wife had an affair with another man’ [...] we immediately think that she goes with another guy because you are worse at making love, this is the phallic conception of men. It is not like that [...] it is something so much deeper. Men on the contrary had a more simplified view, they saw it as something diminishing their own sexuality. Many of them did not accept it. It is a characteristic trait of this generation of mine which had male-chauvinist fathers and a phallic education”.

By taking distance from the other men, he acknowledges that the meaning he gives to his own sexuality has not been constructed through a collective production of new meanings of masculinity shared in a male community of practices, but within the couple:

“I’ve been very lucky as my wife has led in the sexuality game, in the sense that she has educated me not to expect... because the man has the absolute expectation that the woman is always ready [...] Sexuality is not only sexual intercourse, and this is very difficult to understand [...] And it must be the woman who helps you understand it. [...] I must say that from a sexual point of view she has won in our relationship”.

Paolo's story seems an emblematic, if exceptional, case showing how the changes brought about by the sexual revolution, based on a collective redefinition of female sexuality and femininity, even when activating a change in how men experienced sexuality, lacked a corresponding collective redefinition of masculinity.

Patchworking

Rather than reproduction or shifting, in many men's stories we find a process of patchworking,^{iv} with the adoption of elements of intimacy together with elements of previous scripts. We have explored how these men deal with the tensions of different notions of heterosexuality and masculinity entailed by these different scripts.

Sometimes, some elements of the new vocabularies of permissive and intimate sexuality are simply integrated within old frames. This is the case of how Lucio (66, pure monogamy) talks about his violent sexual practices with his wife:

“I like tough sex, sadomasochistic, if it is accepted by both, if it is a little like an erotic play” [...] “on my side, on our side, a little bit of sadomasochism, but the light version... when you see that she submits herself to... well, submit... she says I do that because I want to please you... It is not something she really would like to do...”

Lucio uses terms like “somasochism” and “erotic play”, which should entail a consensual couple arrangement, while integrating them into a predatory script, that informs his whole biography and is recalled here by the way he describes his wife’s undesired submission. This mimetic use of new scripts in accounting for sexual interaction has been discussed in research about younger cohorts of men, who appear much more aware of the need to legitimate their behaviour by drawing upon the language of intimacy (Flood 2008).

Lucio has mainly come into contact with some elements of the changing cultural scenario through media representations. We find a greater use of elements of the intimacy script when they are mediated by local contexts of interaction, primarily the couple, but also experiences of collective reflexivity like self-help or couple therapy groups.

After more than twenty years of marriage, Edoardo (53, experienced monogamy) joined a religious group organising week-end meetings in which couples share and discuss their experiences: this was crucial in re-framing how he conceives his relations, including sexual practices, with his wife: *“we have discovered ourselves as a couple”*. Within the intimacy script, he adopts a wider understanding of what sex is, decentring it from the marital duty of the coital imperative.

“especially after such a week-end [...] I have found the pleasure, but really the joy, of exchanging a caress, a kiss with my wife more freely [...]if I could go back in time, those encounters which were done like that, how can I say, just because we had to stay together [...] It is not that we didn’t

do that with pleasure, but there was the duty that the wife had to give in to her husband, the husband had to give a performance, but there was not the calmness and awareness of today”

This reframing, however, seems to be strongly connected to the process of ageing and its impact on sexual performance: in this way, Edoardo neutralises the potential disruptive impact on masculinity of a failure in being able to perform intercourse.

“I believe that sex is not only intercourse in itself, sex is the whole, or maybe more today because the sexual release is decreasing from the point of view of physical endurance: holding hands and keeping eye contact are also sexual expressions, I mean, fundamental, it is the complicity to say ‘we would feel like to have an encounter but there are not the conditions or there is not the strength”

At the same time, in Edoardo’s accounts we find elements of permanence of the scripts he was socialised in, in particular when he talks about his wife faking orgasm as something questioning his sense of masculinity: *“I as a man, when I am with a woman from the sexual point of view, I don’t feel I am a man if I can’t satisfy her”*. We see him sharing a notion of women’s orgasm as a matter of men’s skills in controlling women’s sexuality, rather than recognising the importance of sexual pleasure for women themselves (Duncombe and Marsden 1996; Jackson and Scott 2008).

Rodolfo (50, serial partnership) considers himself a latecomer, starting to have sex in his mid-thirties and engaging in a stable relationship with a migrant woman only a few years ago.

Before, he experienced different communities of practices (the male homosocial one and a relationship with a demanding partner) without being able to live up to their requirements. He therefore moved to engaging with a woman who is available to perform, together with him, a respectability script: embodying the position of the sexually inexperienced and naïve, *“very virgin”*, she allows him, for the first time, to take a leading position as a man.

“We are very close physically, also because she is... [...] In their culture it is the man who leads, like in dancing. [...] the women, at least I see her, they do not take the initiative. They leave the

man to do that... [...] Not being an extra-expert, I am happy with that, that is I am quite relaxed. I don't feel I must do who knows what"

However, the other communities of practices remain still very present in Rodolfo's biography, especially when he accounts for sexual experiences possibly implying his failure as a man. Recalling his experience of not being ready to take advantage of an available woman, he evokes the predatory gaze of the homosocial community, here represented by a male friend:

"I'm not so reactive, I didn't expect she would have liked to have sex with me [...] Maybe many men say: 'you ought to go with this woman' [...] my friend, who liked her, always blames me telling me that I should have taken advantage from the situation. But I say...I didn't feel like that evening"

Another kind of breaching experience concerns his failures in performing sexual intercourse, which he frames differently in relation to the present respectable partner and the previous active, requiring one interpreting a permissive script.

[I remember that other woman with whom I had a relationship, she was much more strict. I mean, if it happened, she insulted me, because it seemed that I did not desire her. I mean, you need to consider the moment, the whole, one is not Superman, no. This girl instead [...] she is much quieter, because she considers that in love, in the relationship, this is one of the things... It is not the thing. Therefore, it can happen"

It seems to be especially in the last relationship that Rodolfo finds interpretive resources, and an interactional context for enacting them, that open up the possibility for a wider understanding of sexuality and a context-dependent notion of male desire.

Rodolfo constructs a continuity of definition of himself as a man throughout his biography, while interpreting it through different scripts in relation to specific communities of practices. In other stories, references to varying relational contexts, in particular experiences with different partners, rather take the form of a swinging between different scripts.

In all his forms, however, the patchworking that we have seen appears paradigmatic in showing the interweaving of continuity and change in the ways social and cultural transformations have been faced by our cohorts of men.

Discussion

By assuming the relations between gender and sexuality as a matter of empirical enquiry, we have looked at middle-aged men's accounts about their everyday sexual practices as a way to investigate the complex and variable ways by which they do their heterosexual masculinities. As we have seen, most of the men of our cohorts were socialised into sexual scripts entailing a naturalised view of male sexuality which assumes a consistency between gender and sexuality. In these scripts, sexual practices are crucial in the construction of masculinity, and intercourse is the central practice of adult sexuality. This definition of what is at the core or peripheral in performing masculinity was produced and reproduced by a strongly homosocial community of practices, within a gender segregated social context. In these conditions, the meanings of sexuality and gender that these men were supposed to play out in heterosexual interactions were the ones produced in their homosocial context. This leaves little room for negotiating timing in sexual experiences and re-scripting gender in the heterosexual couple, which works as a mirror that tends to reproduce, without questioning it, the homosocial gaze on sexuality and masculinity: the male in the head, as Holland *et al.* (1998) have called it. These men, however, also came across important structural transformations in gender segregation and women's social positions, as well as changes in the cultural scenarios regarding sexuality, with the emergence of the new permissive and intimacy scripts. Intimacy in particular opens up the possibility of experiencing the couple as a context of production and negotiation of meanings on sexuality and on gender. As a consequence, male homosociality can lose at least part of its centrality in the definition of these meanings.

In this article we have explored how our interviewees have faced such changes in making sense of their biographies.

Many men substantially neutralise them, providing very consistent biographies based on the reproduction of predatory and respectability scripts. In their accounts, sexuality, conceived as possession of a woman's body primarily through intercourse, remains a site of construction of masculinity in relation to a homosocial community (Flood 2008).

Other men partially frame their biographies within the intimacy script, enacting a move towards broader understandings of sexuality, less centred upon intercourse. In some cases, this move is accompanied by a loosening of the connection between sexuality and the definition of masculinity. Their accounting for their sexual desire as context-dependent, produced in heterosexual interactions, appears in particular as a key step towards dismantling the naturalised notion of man as a sex machine. Most of the "patchworking" men identify the couple as the main experience providing them interpretive resources and an interactional context for embodying new meanings for sexual practices, while male homosociality remains the central community of practices for the definition of masculinity.

For some men, framing their sexual biographies within the intimacy script seems to work as a neutralisation of the male gaze in defining their masculinity, in particular in relation to what are perceived as "breaching experiences". In this way Rodolfo can interpret his failure in living up to the ideal of the "always ready" man as the expression of a richer and more complex sexuality; thereby, he escapes the risk of being positioned within a subordinated masculinity. In Edoardo's account we find a similar mechanism allowing him to neutralise the potentially disruptive effects of age-related sexual changes on masculinity: tenderness and cuddling gain a central sexual meaning in accounting for the fading of his sexual strength and endurance.

Even when we find a full shift towards intimacy for making sense of a whole biography, however, this doesn't necessarily imply an overall questioning of masculinity. In the case of Giovanni, in fact, it remains an individual change framed within a therapeutic discourse. On the

contrary, Paolo identifies in the sexual revolution a historical opportunity for a collective change of male sexuality. Access to this opportunity is however, again, mediated by women: what actually triggers and supports a process of redefinition is facing women developing a public discourse on sexuality and gender, challenging men's position not only in the arena of sexuality. Paolo himself connects his changes in sexuality to a broader transformation in performing masculinity, boasting about having taken parental leave and full care responsibility for his children.

Reflecting on those years of change, he acknowledges, on the contrary, the lack of a homosocial community in which men's intimate practices could, and can, be shared and become meaningful for the construction of masculinity. He admits the difficulty of imagining and enacting an "intimate masculinity", a task in which, in his opinion, most of the men of his age have failed. Notwithstanding his privileged position in directly experiencing the attempts of his generation to change the meaning of sexual relations, he thus confirms a substantially monolithic view of men as a homosocial community, which he shares with the other men of our sample. In fact, in their accounts we did not find any reference to either the presence or to the possibility of multiple local male homosocial communities. Some of them recognise the existence of male homosocial spaces bearing shared different meanings of heterosexuality, but they place them in the generation of their children, in which they cannot identify.

The changes we have seen in our cohorts might just be the starting point for greater transformations that we can actually find in the next generations. But middle-aged men also represent an interesting case because in their accounts we can see more evidently mechanisms of resistance to and neutralisation of the new scripts, and their implications for masculinity, that might be present, but less visible, in the younger generations who are socialised to use of the intimacy script as the expected frame for accounting for adult sexual life.

The permanence of the male sexual drive discourse requires an ongoing work of reproduction in relation to a demanding homosocial community, but it provides middle-aged men, but also

younger ones (Holland et al. 1998), with a foundation for a masculinity grounded in nature, allowing them to neutralise any attempt to question it by other scripts.

Even moves towards intimacy, with its requirement of gender symmetry, can be disempowered by decentering sexuality in the definition of masculinity without questioning other aspects of this definition. By constructing intimacy as a private practice, heterosexual interaction is acknowledged as a context of production of meanings in the sphere of sexuality, meanings that are separated out from their possible implications, and enactment, in other spheres of men's life. Our research seems to point out that a further step towards fully empowering the potential of the intimacy script would require male communities of practices defining "intimate practices", and their implications for broader changes in doing gender, as the core for a redefinition of masculinity.

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ⁱ In order to simplify the text, in exploring heterosexuality through sexual practices we will use the term "sexual" to focus upon the practical enactment of sex, and the term "heterosexual" to emphasise the interconnections between sexuality and gender.

ⁱⁱ Being naturalised and taken for granted, heterosexuality is an element of identity only in terms of definition of external boundaries.

ⁱⁱⁱ The interviews for this research include an oversampling of young people, due to the merging of the data from a local research carried out in Piedmont in 2006-07.

^{iv} The image of the "patchwork" was used in Italian feminist scholarship for describing the complex and multiple arrangements through which women weave together, in their caregiving work, the requirements of public services, the labour market and family life (Balbo 1987).