Introduction to the Special Section. Mastering Youth Transitions: Italy as a Case for the Contemporary Complexities

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Transitions: History and International developments

Historically youth transitions have been a central feature of how youth studies have conceptualized and theorized the notion of youth (France et al., 2019). As a result, there is a long and illustrious relationship with how transitions construct and define what it means to be young, especially in the global north. This work established not only that youth was defined as 'between' the life course categories of childhood and adulthood, but also suggesting that 'being young' was a dynamic process that was catapulting them towards adulthood. Much of this early work emerged from the UK and Europe and focused on the 'school to work' transitions and relied upon developmental and psychological models that explored integration. As traditional transitional routes were seen to be undermined by growing unemployment, research switched on exploring 'routes' and 'pathways' that related to 'opportunity structures' (see Banks et al., 1992; Wallace & Cross, 1990). At this point, social reproduction became core re-emphasizing the important role that structural factors played in young people's movement into adulthood (Bates & Riseborough, 1991). At this time, the concept of transition was also broadened, giving recognition to the role it plays in housing and domestic arrangements and sexual relationships (Jones, 2009). It is also suggested that as 'school to work' transitions became more complex, linear models became redundant, and there was a growing need to recognize that young people's transitions could be delayed, reconfigured, broken or extended. For example, Walther (2006) showed how different welfare regimes across Europe impacted on the young people's ability to make transitions suggesting that they could and do 'yo-yo' back and forth.

In the late 1990s, with the rise of Beck's individualization theory and a shift towards an interest in individual agency, transitions were seen as more fluid and shaped by 'choice biographies' (Beck, 1990). This theoretical development had a significant influence on transitions research by emphasizing the role of 'choice' and 'agency', suggesting that 'structure' was less of an influence in shaping young people's lives. More recently, there have been claims, within youth studies, that a transitions lens fails to capture the complex lives of the young today (Wyn & Woodman, 2006). It is argued that the transitional approach devalues youth in its own right and defines them around an idealized notion of adulthood. It is also suggested it continues to conceptualize youth as a linear process that still is shaped by either psychological or economic models. Such an approach is then seen to re-enforce a problematized understanding of youth: "current approaches (to transitions research) inevitability identify education, work and family patterns of young people lives as evidence of their faulty, failed transition, measured against the standard of the previous generation" (Wyn & Woodman, 2006, p. 495). This position has then seen, across the globe, a growing body of research that rejects the concept of transitions as a way to understanding the lives of the young. For Wyn and Woodman (2006), a more useful term is that of generations. In a similar vein, the concept of 'belonging' is underpinned by a rejection of the transitional approach. It is suggested that given the 'messiness' of young people's lives and the increasing necessity for the young to be mobile, the ability of the transitional approach to capture the complexity and, most importantly, the nature of relationships is limited. As Wyn argues, belonging "is a product of the relationships between people, place and mobility" (Wyn, 2015, p. 2).

So, the question remains: can approaches that focus on transitions help us understand the lived experiences of young people today? Is it a concept that has lost its value or can it still make an important contribution? Firstly, it is right to acknowledge that explaining the lives of young people purely through a transitional lens is not without limits. Criticism tends to focus on the narrow conceptualization of the youth experience, and its tendency to see life as linear can be a weakness. It is also the case that trying to claim an 'end date' (called full adulthood) has increasingly created problems for a transitional approach, especially in complex times.

Of course, we do have to remember the strength of a transitional approach. For example, much of this research can have significant value in helping us to identify 'winners and loosers', showing the wide range of barriers that can impact on the young. This can be a very productive way of understanding the structural constraints and the limited opportunities that some young people encounter in their everyday lives. For example, recent Australian research on how young people are managing their precarious

situations uses a transitional analysis as a way of showing the challenges young people face in education and the labour market (Foundations of Young Australians, 2018). This helps us to see and understand underlying patterns of inequality. More qualitative approaches can and do also capture the 'lived experience' of transitions in that while many young people may not explicitly talk about their lives in terms of transitions, ideas of gaining independence from their family, leaving home, moving into more secure and well-paid work and having long term relationships or getting married remain critical ambitions for most young people (France et al., 2019).

That said, the value of transitions as an approach to youth studies needs to continually show its value beyond the simple models that have gone before. Previous studies show that, if combined with other frameworks of analysis, a transitional approach continues to offer new and innovative ways to understand young people's lives. For example, Furlong (2015) argues that maybe we need to rethink the idea of 'transition' and replace it with the notion of 'transformations', recognizing that transitions imply a move from one state to another, suggesting time one is very distinct from time two. He suggests that transformational can 'highlight multiple, ongoing, change and recognizes the prevalence of non-linear pathways set within a broader discourse of a modernization (Furlong, 2015, p. 19). Alternatively, research shows that combining approaches can enhance our understanding of young people's lives. Hollands (2015), for example, shows how night-life studies of young people's cultural practice can also be seen to hold key aspects of transition in its social practice. Similarly, Harris (2015) shows how citizenship and cultural studies can and do bring added value to our understanding of young people's transitions towards adulthood. Helping to capture some of the more complex ways that young people are becoming 'adult citizens'.

This special section aims to continue and contribute to the reimagining of transitions in a complex and ever-changing world. What is interesting to note is that social acceleration processes have an impact on people's lives. This impact involves many aspects of personal and social life, and, compared to the previous era, the speed of these changes has visibly increased. What emerge from current debate on youth is the pressure to be part of a mechanism that predisposes people to be constantly active, without having the possibility to stop and reflect, or simply to enjoy the moment they are living.

The specific case of Italian youth transitions

Empirical and theoretical studies show that youth transitions have tended to occur later than the previous generation and to be more multifaceted. More individualized analyses point to individualization, destandardization, and second demographic transitions as suitable processes for interpreting

today's youth transitions. The emphasis has been placed on the existence of a common pattern in the demographic and social events defining these transitions, which researchers describe as complex, delayed, and prolonged. As said before, some authors used the "yo-yo transitions" metaphor in order to define the loss of sequentiality in life course trajectories. Like the toy "yo-yo", some phases become reversible (e.g., leaving the family home), the order of marker events loses its fixity (with the only exception for the arrival of children, a non-reversible event even though it may be accompanied by an eventual return to the family home of origin; see Giancola & Salmieri 2016). This reversibility of transitions leads to their de-standardization, making it impossible to define the exact point at which to place "adulthood" (as a status but also as a self-perception). Some scholars introduce the concept of a 'delay syndrome' (for a review see Mastropierro, 2019), but this approach is linked to a normative reading of transition processes, whereas what we are witnessing is a true reconfiguration of transition models. In this sense, the postponement regards all traditional "markers of adulthood", which are also more reversible than in the past, configuring the previously cited de-standardization of life courses (Magaraggia & Benasso, 2019).

In this sense, Italy is a particularly relevant case as it shows the multifaceted and complex reality with which young people have to cope nowadays when imagining and planning their future (Maestripieri, 2020). Data about Italian transitions to adulthood are very evident. After the recovery in 2015-2017, the last two years showed a slowdown in the growth of GDP per capita, more pronounced in 2019 (+ 0.4%). The added value per employed person decreased by 0.4% and highlighted a more sustained dynamic of the labour factor than production. The evolution of the economic situation is still characterized by significant levels of non-regular occupation. Looking at the last unemployment data (Istat, March 2021), the number of employed persons increased, while a decline was recorded for both inactive and unemployed people. In the last month, the drop of unemployed people (-0.8%, -19 thousand) involved men and over25; for women and people aged 15-24, an increase was registered. The unemployment rate declined to 10.1% (-0.1 p.p.), whereas the youth rate rose to 33.0% (+1.1 p.p.).

In addition to this difficulty in entering the labour market, there is a worrying situation about education. In 2018, in Italy the percentage of students who do not reach the minimum level of scientific competence (low performer) reached 25.9%, sharp below the OECD average (22%). Concerning reading and mathematics skills, the shares of low performers were close to the OECD average. In 2019 the percentage of young people between 18 and 24 years old who have not completed their education was 13.5%, decreasing from 2017-2018. In 2019, only 27.6% of young people aged 30-34 had a tertiary degree (33.8% of women and 21.6% of men), stable compared to 2018. The level

remains sharp below the European average (41.3%). During the lockdown months, ISTAT estimated that around three million students aged between 6 and 17 had difficulty following lessons in distance learning mode, mainly due to the lack or inadequacy of IT devices in their families. This situation is accentuated in the South, where it affects about 20% of minors.

The situation is also worrying for university graduates. Italy (in this case, the data are pre-pandemic) ranks among the last places, with one of the lowest graduation rates in Europe, at 27.8% in 2018, against a European average of 40.7%, and an employment rate of recent graduates of 56.5% in 2018 (against a European average of 81.6%), higher only than that of Greece. The situation has certainly not improved in recent pandemic months.

Certainly, the expansion of participation in the educational system is an element of democratization. This expansion sees a growing presence of women (even in the Italian educational system; De Vita & Giancola, 2017) and a strong inclusion of individuals from the lower-middle classes (more at the secondary level than at the higher education level; Benadusi & Giancola, 2021). At the same time, great inequalities remain, especially in the Italian educational system. What can be observed in the Italian case is a combination of (relative) expansion and permanence of inequalities in school track choice at the upper secondary level, in access to university and in the attainment of tertiary education qualifications (Giancola & Salmieri, 2020). The attainment of a high level of education is, therefore, a pivotal element with respect to the possibilities of social mobility (Buchholz et al., 2008), but it is also a stable element over time of social inequality of opportunity. From a cultural point of view, it should also be considered that as individual possession of educational credentials increases, so do expectations regarding the quality of the desired job, in terms of sector and level of placement as well as salary.)

One of the indirect effects of the greater individual investment is the prolongation of the time taken to pass through the education phase, which induces a shift forward in the average age with respect to the exit from the state of dependence on the family of origin. In the Italian case, the intertwining of the weight of social origin in the acquisition of medium-high levels of education and a considerable postponement of the acquisition of the status of independence should be emphasized. The labour market itself seems, at least in the first phases after the completion of studies, to provide a poor economic pay-off for the investment in education (both in terms of contractual stability and income from work; Ballarino et al., 2016).

Finally, if we then look at another marker, the only irreversible one, the data tell us that the mean age of women in the European Union (EU) on giving birth to their first child has gradually increased from 28.8 years in 2013 to 29.3 years in 2018. The mean age has increased in all EU Member States over this period, though to varying degrees, in Italy is around 31.2 in 2018.

Even before the entire trajectory of life can be accomplished, leaving the parental home and starting a family represents today, more than ever, a pre-condition for social differentiation, since, compared to the not too distant past, the *puerocentric* culture now dominant pushes for a careful evaluation of the direct and indirect economic and temporal costs that the presence of a child involves (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1996). In this sense, in addition to education, systems of values and expectations, and the labour market, the role of public and social policies that should support the process of autonomy, as an outcome of the transition process, is added as an element of increasing complexity (Beller & Hout, 2006). In Italy, however, the importance of the combination of educational level and occupation with respect to neo-local living and parenting is very strong (also in a comparative perspective; Giancola & Salmieri, 2016). In Italy, therefore, 'becoming an adult' (in the sense of achieving a status of independence and autonomy, beyond the obsolete five-step model) depends significantly on work opportunities, which in turn are mediated by social origin and level of education in a complex interweaving of factors.

The contributions in this issue

Stemming from these data and considerations, this special issue of IJSE aims at investigating the multifaced nature of youth transitions, using the Italian setting as fertile ground. Its main goal is to bring together research and analyses on educations policies, experiences and interventions dealing with life transitions and adulthood by collecting contributions that examine the situation in Italy, comparing it with other similar or contrasting settings to delineate the state of the art and research gaps on youth transition studies in a controversial high-speed society.

In accordance with this frame, the authors were asked to take into account multiple factors that configure obstacles or facilitating elements, regulating or de-standardizing elements, structural and individual dimensions that together contribute to redefining the idea of transition to adulthood. In their contribution, in fact, authors applied the analytical approach of intersectionality, which has gained momentum in the last years for its heuristic power in understanding the complexity of inequalities lives by individuals in the post-modern society. With the concept of intersectionality, scholars highlight the interrelation between different axes of inequalities (such as gender, age, migrant and ethnic background, locality, etc.) and the multiplicative and cumulative impact that intersections have in the condition of disadvantage lived by the individuals (Maestripieri, 2021).

The intersectionality theory was born within the social rights movements in the United States in the '70s/'80s to define the particular condition of black

women emarginated by feminists (because of their blackness) and by black people (because of their femininity). Experiences shaped by the co-presence of two factors of disadvantage were neither represented in the social rights movements. Thus, an intersectional perspective stresses the multiplicative effect for an individual of the co-presence of several disadvantages (Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 1983; Creenshaw, 1989; 1991). As age, class, gender, and ethnicity (etc.) constitute different systems of inequalities, a person may experience contradictory patterns of domination and subordination, depending on his or her position in that specific system of inequality. In the intersectionality theory, identity is not the sum of discrete attributes, for instance "class + gender + age", but the product of a subjective dynamic of identity formation, triggered by the multiplication "class x gender x age" (Levine-Rasky, 2011). Multiple inequalities are lived by those who are at the intersections: the contributions in this issue show in practice the heuristic capacity of such an analytical framework both in qualitative and quantitative studies when applied to a complex social phenomenon, such as the Covid19 pandemics (Maestripieri, 2021).

This Special Issue begins precisely with a set of articles discussing the transformations in both the ways people transition to adulthood and how they live the adult condition itself, even if in the middle of pandemic. In order to have an overall synoptic picture of the essays, we propose the following table that highlights the singularities and recurrences with respect to the general outline of the special section.

Maria Grazia Gambardella, Arianna Mainardi, Stefania Voli show a qualitative longitudinal research started in 2019, promoted by the Department of Sociology and Social Research of the University of Milan Bicocca, on being young in Italy. In particular, the paper will focus on how the differences, due to differentiated territorial contexts of Italy, produce different forms of negotiation of the transition to adulthood. The comparison between the life experiences of young people growing up in different contexts, in the South and North of Italy, leads to an understanding of the factors that shape, even without fully determining, the trajectories of young people. There is also special attention paid to 'Covid effects' on transition. With the onset of the pandemic and the consequent lockdown, in fact, the research had to deal with a historical event capable of creating a deep temporal fracture and to strongly affect daily life and shape one's way of living one's own daily space, of working, of maintaining relationships. Not being able to do things that until yesterday seemed granted (such as going to university) means having to deal with new and more challenging forms of uncertainty. Overall, the paper's goal is to pinpoint the changing meanings that youth attribute to the processes of socio-cultural change that are taking place.

Authors	Key research question	Key concepts and theory	Methods	Key contributions over youth transitions
Gambardella, Mainardi, Voli	How do young people face youth as a social stage of preparation for adult life? What strategies do they deploy to face the risks and uncertainty of the pandemic present? How do they manage to give meaning and continuity to their self-narrations?	Existential sociology (Martucelli, 2017) applied to the transition to adulthood under a life-course perspective (Saraceno, 1987).	Qualitative longitudinal study based on 115 semi-narrative interviews with young people aged 23-29 in Italy. Fieldwork: October 2019 – June 2020.	Life trajectories of young women and men are suspended due to the effects of Covid19, but the extent and the type of the suspension depend on the geographical context in which they live.
Giardiello, Capobianco	The paper aims at analyzing the transition of young Italians by focusing on the change process triggered by an experience of transnational mobility.	Bourdesian approach to change in the transition process analyzed through the analytical lens of intersectionality.	51 in-depths narrative interviews with young Italians living in London, aged 18-35 years. Fieldwork: 2019	Results questions the paradigm of linear and sequential transitions to adulthood. Paths of change are also dynamically interrelated to the intersections between different axes of power.
Masoni, Villa	This article aims to analyze experiences, perceptions and coping strategies of young in the context of the crisis, within an analytical framework aiming to combine micro and macro aspects of their transitions.	The paper explores factors of inclusion and exclusion associated with the Polanyan scheme of social integration.	32 life history semi-structured interviews with young people (aged 18-34) in the province of Massa-Carrara (Tuscany, Italy). Young are selected among those who began looking for job around 2007/2008 economic crisis.	Transitions to adulthood appear complexes, with only a fraction of interviewees able to address own expectations of autonomy.

Mesa	What is the impact of the pandemics on the life markers of transition to adulthood? To what extent the abandonment of the plans is associated with negative moods?	A procedural approach to transition to adult life (Walther 2012, Besozzi 2009) is assumed against the de-standardization perspective (Brannen and Nilsen 2005, Brückner e Mayer 2005).	Online representative survey on 6.000 young people (aged 18-34) in five European countries (Italy, Spain, UK, France and Germany). Fieldwork: end of March and beginning of April 2020.	Emotional states play a synergic role in life decisions; a significant proportion of young people have to deal with the emotional costs of plan's abandonment and failure.
Pitti	To what extent disadvantaged young men use masculinity to cope with a failed transition to the standard model of male adulthood?	A combined theoretical perspective with the standard model of adulthood (Lee, 2001) and marginalized masculinity (Connell, 1995).	20 in-depth interviews with young men living in Bologna (Italy), within a five-years' ethnographic research. Fieldwork: 2015-2020.	Failures of transitioning to adulthood are understandable in a complex framework determined by age, gender and class-based identities.
Russo, Minello	To what extent the precariousness that characterize the beginning of the academic career impacts on life-projects, such as family planning?	Age is an academically constructed discourse (Bozzon et al., 2020) and a self-constructed representation (Rubin et al, 2006).	15 virtual in-depth interviews with young female researchers (over 35 years old) who decided to become mothers. Fieldwork: September 2020 and November 2020.	Academic mothers have to cope with the contradictions of being young researchers and geriatric mothers, increasingly making complex to identify when their transition to adulthood (as economic independence and definitive social role) ends.
Spanò, Domecka	How the intersecting dimensions of gender, class and ethnicity/race shape youth lives? How young people can manage to cope with the structural disadvantage they face in their transition to adulthood process?	Living intersectionality approach (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016; Amelina & Lutz, 2019) and agential process of doing intersectionality (Lutz, 2014; Lépinard, 2014).	78 autobiographical interviews conducted with young people in Naples (aged 21-31). Fieldwork: 2010-2020.	Structural factors and individual reflexivity shape the transitions to adulthood. But the impact of the intersecting axes of inequalities can be mitigated by the agential capacity of the individual and the support of significant others.

For Giardiello and Capobianco, in the perspective of sociological classics, social change is one of the main issues of the theory of modernization. They offer a contribution to the theoretical and empirical study of the link between youth mobility, transition and social change through the development of a new conceptual framework based on the intertwining of Bourdieu's theory and intersectionality. The study revealed the presence of an exploratory dynamic of the young Italian's habitus, characterized by the search for autonomy and independence, which translates into a shift from the «sedentary» to the mobility field. The research shows that if mobility represents the field in which, due to the effect of different variables, a transformation of the habitus of young Italians is generated (more open to diversity, willing to get involved, more confident in their abilities), it is also evident how it determines an individual change that does not affect the change in the Italian social structure. The change in the habitus of young Italians is not capitalized in a structural change as it is not perceived or evaluated as a collective strategy to be used to generate dynamics of change in one's country of origin.

Masoni and Villa discuss the life courses of young people towards autonomy and adulthood with the aim of identifying possible transition patterns between education and work in a context of prolonged crisis: the Province of Massa-Carrara (Tuscany). They provide few insights on the local context and the main characteristics that make this territory one of the most affected by the subsequent economic crises, as well as by long processes of deindustrialization, withdrawal of state holdings in the industrial sector (the cases of Dalmine, Enichem, Farmoplant) and little innovation. On the other hand, they have tried to identify possible patterns of transition, as well as their regularities, similarities and differences. The young informants perceive their pathways as turbulent, endless, made of continuous steps back and forth between work and education, dependency and autonomy. Indeed, fragmentation and precariousness of job situations mark almost all the stories and make even more difficult to use the term transition and to identify any sort of 'initial labor market position'. Even the relatively better placed young people in apprenticeship express feelings of temporariness and uncertainty. At the same time, education and qualification do not seem as important as usually supposed up to the point that it appears quite difficult to identify any regularity with regard to the mechanisms of work entry. For future research, it seems important to go deeper into the role of education, labor and social policy in the light of the current transformations and possible impacts of the incoming ecological, technological and health transitions. In particular, to analyze the process character of school-to-work transitions, it also seems especially important to observe well beyond the traditional and formalized education and work activities and making use of a multilevel and intersec-

tional analysis that include a combination of comparative and context-based approaches.

Mesa, in his study, intends to investigate the emotional impact on young people in the five countries resulting from the choice to postpone the implementation of some resolutions concerning one's work and family career due to the Pandemic. The questions refer to the main life markers: leaving the family of origin, cohabitation, marriage, the choice of having a child, looking for a job or changing the current job. Compared to other countries, young Italians together with Spaniards show higher levels of renunciation of planned projects both in the context of family and work careers. The intensity of negative moods (frustration, anxiety, discomfort, disorientation, etc.) grows passing from those who do not have short-term change plans, to those who have them and intend to carry them out as planned, to those who have had to temporally review their programs to those who have abandoned them. The results show the presence of a significant segment of young people who live their life conditions with a certain serenity without any immediate plans to change the status quo. Secondly, the growing tension of those involved in change projects that they perceive to be at high risk in the current context, especially in some countries and in certain socio-economic conditions, emerges.

In Pitti's article, we find an interplay of age, gender, class and place. The paper explores young Italian working-class men's strategies of transitions through the theoretical lenses of youth studies and masculinities studies and, more specifically, combining Lee's concept of 'standard model of adulthood' and Connell's concept of 'marginalized masculinity'. Drawing on a qualitative research (participant observations and in-depth interviews) conducted on 20 working-class young men in the city of Bologna (Italy) between 2015 and 2020, the paper considers the participants' failed attempts to achieve the standard model of (male) adulthood to analyze how marginalized young men's navigate transitions to adulthood and manhood, and how they make sense of their difficulties. In the case of the observed young people, their failed attempts to achieve standard adulthood emerge, in fact, also as failed attempts to achieve an ideal of manhood and vice versa.

Russo and Minello investigate how both perceived job insecurity and precarious employment contracts impact on the timing of Italian female researchers' first childbirth, ultimately influencing their fertility, and how this delay dialectically interplays with the representation of early career researchers as 'ageless' or 'forever young'. Considering both age and gender as crucial dimensions in shaping the narratives that surround academic precariat and justify 'flexpotation', the exploitation of a casual workforce. Authors shows us a gendered division, being women more involved in fixed-term

contract than man and more likely to remain on such contracts and that the growing labor market insecurity affects mainly young cohorts.

The last article, wrote by Domencka and Spanò, is an immersion in the intersectionality approach. Through the analysis of 80 autobiographical narrative interviews conducted with young people of different gender, class and ethnic background, living in a fragile territory, collected in various research projects carried out in the South of Italy in the last decade, they demonstrate, firstly, how intersectional and biographical perspectives can be combined, and secondly, how important it is to look at intersectionality both from the structural and agential perspective while explaining the ways youth transitions develop in the contemporary Italian context. In conclusion, all of this is reflected in terms of indefiniteness and blurriness in the self-definition of what it means to be an adult (especially for the generation born from the late 1970s onward). Having skipped the five-stage model (which is, in any case, a theoretical abstraction with normative/value implications and social expectations), the transition is pluralized (and, thus, it is more appropriate to speak of transitions in the plural and from a non-sequential perspective). The essays in this special issue of IJSE clearly show the game of constraints and expectations mentioned above, but they also show new forms of subjectivity that are being constructed and that are difficult to capture and model. In this sense, the essays show the richness and multiple implications of the trajectories of transition and subjectification (without denying the strong elements of production and reproduction of old and new inequalities).

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