

# Psychological and overall well-being of Italian young adults in transition to adulthood: Evidence from a sequential explanatory mixed-methods study

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## Abstract

Transitioning to adulthood is a fundamental yet challenging phase in human development. Despite its relevance, the literature has paid little attention to the impact that transitioning to adulthood has on multiple aspects of individual well-being. This is one of the few attempts that has employed a sequential explanatory mixed-methods study to explore how the path to adulthood impacted on the psychological and overall well-being of Italian young adults. In the quantitative phase, we employed two-step cluster analysis to assign 45 young adults, who had completed the Italian I COPPE scale of multidimensional well-being, to three clusters based on their level of change in psychological and overall well-being. Results from mixed design ANCOVA revealed that participants belonging to the high change cluster showed the highest significant positive change over time with respect to well-being. In the qualitative phase, 17 individuals took part in focalized narrative interviews, which aimed at exploring significant events, barriers, and facilitators, which had impacted on their well-being during the transition to adulthood. The textual material was analysed through the Grounded Theory Methodology. It emerged

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that the state of transition was associated with some triggering events and a temporary negative impact on the interviewees' well-being. However, findings also revealed that people assigned to different clusters had put in place or learned several resources, skills, and coping strategies, which led to different transitional and well-being outcomes.

#### KEYWORDS

grounded theory, mixed-methods, transition to adulthood, well-being

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Subjective well-being is a fundamental human outcome, which invests multiple aspects of an individual's life (Diener, 2000; Diener, Scollon, & Lucas, 2009; Keyes, 2013; Ryff, 1989; Seligman, 2011; Swarbrick, 2006). Following a multidimensional approach (see Arcidiacono & Di Martino, 2016; Sarriera & Bedin, 2017), Prilleltensky (2012), Prilleltensky et al. (2015) have recently identified six main life domains that form a person's well-being (i.e., *interpersonal; community; occupational; physical; psychological; economic* and, *overall well-being*).

Despite its complexity, in the past well-being has been mainly considered a stochastic phenomenon hence unlikely to be permanently affected by changes over the life course (Argyle, 2013). However, recent studies have acknowledged that both life-changing events and different developmental stages are involved in shaping people's experience of the good life (Bornstein, Davidson, Keyes, & Moore, 2003; Luhmann, Hofmann, Eid, & Lucas, 2012). Each life stage poses different challenges and tasks, thus either their success or failure determines people's psychological growth and well-being (Erikson, 1963). Ryff (1995) posited that life experiences and their subjective interpretation are the keys to understand variations in well-being; however, the way that people make sense of these experiences depend on what stage they are in their life (Ryff & Heidrich, 1997).

Amongst the many phases, people will experience over their lifetime, the path to adulthood represents a crucial moment, which greatly impacts on multiple aspects of well-being. In fact, during this time, young people must develop new skills and coping strategies to face unprecedented life challenges and developmental tasks (Lenz, 2001; Roisman, Masten, Coatsworth, & Tellegen, 2004), such as entering the labour market, reaching financial independence, and establishing long-term intimate relationships (Arnett, 2000; Crocetti, Scignaro, Sica, & Magrin, 2012). The primary outcome of young adulthood is the acquisition of autonomy, independence, and a sense of responsibility about personal choices and actions (Arnett, 2000, 2007; Schwartz, Zamboanga, Luyckx, Meca, & Ritchie, 2013). Indeed, young adults value autonomy and relatedness as fundamental needs, which are linked to their psychological well-being (Inguglia, Inguglia, Liga, Lo Coco, & Lo Cricchio, 2014). The new acquired sense of autonomy and independence of young adults decreases feelings of anger and depression—which are common during the adolescent phase (Galambos, Barker, & Krahn, 2006)—and promotes stabler levels of self-esteem (Trzesniewski, Donnellan, & Robins, 2003). Moreover, higher levels of autonomy and subjective well-being are interdependent and reciprocally affected (Chatzisarantis et al., 2019; Melendro, Campos, Rodríguez-Bravo, & Arroyo Resino, 2020).

A sense of optimism also is typical of this period, due to the possibility for young adults to explore the world and envisage new life trajectories (Arnett, 2000; Arnett, 2007; Larson et al., 2002). In fact, this period is characterized by what has been defined as *transitoriness choices* (Cigoli & Scabini, 2006; Côté, 2000), that is not definitive choices with respect to one's future plans, rather an opportunity for experimentation and exploration (Lanz & Tagliabue, 2007).

At the same time, the literature shows that well-being in young people often follows different trajectories. Overall, studies highlight that well-being tends to increase during or after the transition (Asetline & Gore, 1993; Schulenberg, O'Malley, Bachman, & Johnston, 2000). However, more recent investigations are shedding more light on what constitutes a successful transition to adulthood. In their longitudinal study, Schulenberg, Bryant, and O'Malley (2004) showed that young adults' different well-being trajectories depend on how they face developmental tasks across several life domains, such as education, work, financial, romantic relationships, relationships with peers, and avoidance in the use of substances. Although a successful accomplishment in any of those areas determines an overall increase in well-being, the achievement in the working, romantic, peers' relationships, and political-social domains has shown the most significant positive effect on the well-being of young people.

On the other hand, the different paths to adulthood sometimes are fraught with instability and stress due to coping skills and behaviours that were once useful during the previous life stage, and now result inadequate or obsolete. Several challenges also contribute to one's perception of low well-being during the transition, including the difficulties related to one's educational journey, the increasing postponement of important life choices such as marriage and parenthood (Aassve, Arpino, & Billari, 2013) as well as the difficulty of achieving autonomy from family and pursuing an independent life path (Rosina, 2019).

Despite the efforts made by the scholarly literature, there is still a need to better understand (a) how the transition to adulthood affects multiple domains of well-being, (b) which protective and harmful factors and events impact on subjective well-being during this phase, and (c) the impact of past experiences and future prospects on young adult's well-being. With regard to the first two points, several studies have focused on the external factors that play a role in the transition to adulthood across several contexts, including the transition to college (Conley, Kirsch, Dickson, & Bryant, 2014; Wrench, Garrett, & King, 2013); the transition from education into employment (Upadaya & Salmela-Aro, 2017); the role of parental financial support (Curran, Parrott, Ahn, Serido, & Shim, 2018; Kirkpatrick Johnson, 2013); the transition into parenthood (Rindfuss, 1991; Shanahan, 2000) and achieving life goals (Messersmith & Schulenberg, 2010).

As for the last point, only a few studies have embedded a comprehensive temporal perspective into the impact of past experienced on well-being in transition (see Hoyt, Chase-Lansdale, McDade, & Adam, 2012; Ryff & Heidrich, 1997). Other studies have underlined the effect of positive attitudes towards time on the promotion of psychological well-being (Alansari, Worrell, Rubie-Davies, & Webber, 2013; Andretta, Worrell, & Mello, 2014), particularly in terms of reduction of psychosomatic symptomatology (Konowalczyk, McKay, Wells, & Cole, 2018), rise in academic, social, and emotional self-efficacy (Wells, McKay, Morgan, & Worrell, 2018).

Although we must be grateful to these contributions, we must also acknowledge that most of them focus on isolated aspects of well-being in transition to adulthood. What we need is more studies that address the above points in an integrate and comprehensive manner. This is necessary to better clarify the challenges that young people have to face during this period of life as well as resources, opportunities, skills, and strategies useful to cope with the disruption in the life balance this developmental phase often entails. The next pages will attempt to fill this gap in the literature through a mixed-method study that explored the transition to adulthood of a group of young Italian adults.

## 2 | THE CURRENT STUDY

Given the above theoretical premises, the purpose of the present study is to look at transition to adulthood as a complex and variegated life event, which is both an opportunity for personal growth and a source of distress. The aim is to focus on transition in a broad sense by considering both external and internal determinants of well-being. To this end, the present study aimed at deepening our understanding of what affected the experience of transition in a group of Italian young adults, with a specific focus on their variations in psychological and overall well-being.

We started our study with an analysis of the dataset collected by Di Martino, Di Napoli, Esposito, Prilleltensky, and Arcidiacono (2018) for the adaptation of the Italian I COPPE scale of multidimensional well-being. The I COPPE

scale is an instrument designed to measure people's subjective well-being across seven life domains (i.e., Overall, Interpersonal, Community, Occupational, Physical, Psychological, and Economic well-being) as well as over three time points (e.g., present, past, and future). The scale was originally developed by Prilleltensky et al. (2015) and then adapted to the Italian context (Di Martino, Di Napoli, Esposito, Prilleltensky, & Arcidiacono, 2018; Esposito, Di Napoli, Di Martino, Prilleltensky, & Arcidiacono, 2021).

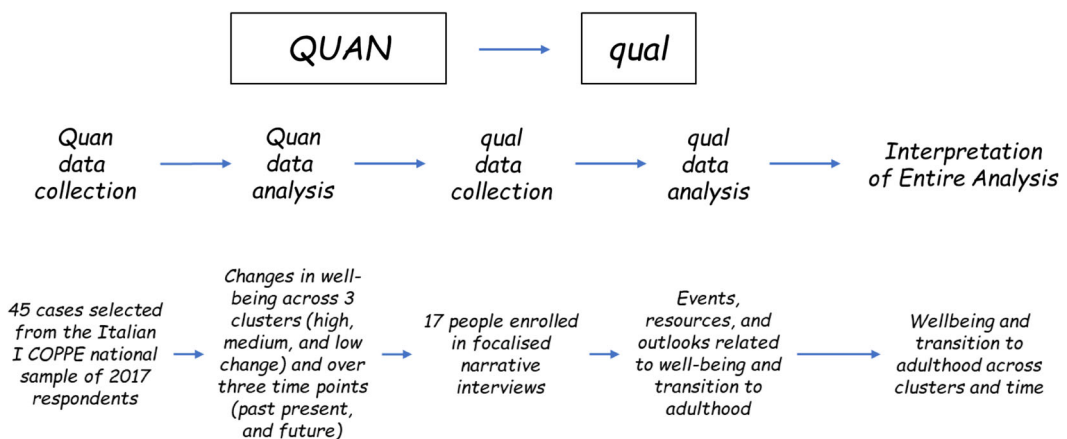
The dataset offers information about the levels of well-being of 2017 Italian citizens across the I COPPE life domains. Furthermore, the dataset is particularly relevant for the present study, in that about 76% of cases are aged between 18 and 35 years. The analysis of the dataset revealed that several participants had reported particularly low levels of past overall and psychological well-being. The same participants, in most cases, had also reported a relatively higher level of present and future well-being, sometimes between 1 and 2 standard deviations above the mean of the main sample. This singularity in well-being variations encouraged further investigations.

Our study pursued two main goals. The first was to categorize observed variations in the participants' well-being into different transitional trajectories with respect to level of change (i.e., low, medium, and high) and time (i.e., past, present and future). The second was to investigate the reasons and events that could justify the reported low level of past well-being as well as the factors that might have determined either an increase in future well-being or a permanence in a state of low well-being.

To meet both objectives, we employed a sequential explanatory mixed-method design, which combines quantitative and qualitative analysis techniques. According to Creswell, Plano, Clark, Gutmann, and Hanson (2003), this type of design is "characterized by the collection and analysis of quantitative data followed by the collection and analysis of qualitative data. Priority is typically given to the quantitative data, and the two methods are integrated during the interpretation phase of the study" (p. 223). Figure 1 helps understand the research process that was undertaken.

## 2.1 | Quantitative strand

The aim of the quantitative phase was to investigate variations amongst a sub-group of participants who had reported low levels of past overall and psychological well-being, compared to a relatively higher level of present and future well-being. To this end, a purposeful sample was derived from the original national sample of 2017 participants who had completed the Italian version of the I COPPE scale of multidimensional well-being (Di Martino, Di



**FIGURE 1** Sequential explanatory mixed-method design (Adapted from Creswell, Plano, Clark, Gutmann, & Hanson, 2003 p. 223)

Napoli, Esposito, Prilleltensky, & Arcidiacono, 2018). Analyses were carried out by means of the IBM SPSS v. 26 package.

As the main criteria to justify the purposefulness of the sample, we employed Cooks' distance (Cook, 1977) to select those outliers of interest for this phase. Given the relatively large sample size, the 4/n criterion was chosen. This highlighted a total of 45 cases, which showed a Cooks distance higher than .001. The demographic characteristics of the subsample are reported in Table 1.

**TABLE 1** Demographic characteristics of I COPPE sub-sample

Variable	Mean (SD)/frequency count (%)
Age	27.81 (9.79)
Gender	
Male	9 (20%)
Female	36 (80%)
Geographic area	
North	20 (44.4%)
Centre	13 (28.9%)
South	12 (26.7%)
Education	
Middle school	2 (4.4%)
High school	26 (57.8%)
Some un. Degree	11 (24.4%)
PhD/doctorate/specialization	6 (13.3%)
Civil status	
Single	19 (42.2%)
Separated	1 (2.2%)
In a relationship	15 (33.3%)
Married	8 (17.8%)
Other	2 (4.4%)
Occupation (status)	
Unemployed/ never employed	15 (33.3%)
Full-time	8 (17.8%)
Part-time	7 (15.6%)
Other	15 (33.3%)
Occupation (type)	
Managerial/ professional	6 (13.3%)
Employee	5 (11.1%)
Third sector	1 (2.2%)
Student	23 (51.1%)
Other	9 (20%)
Missing	1 (2.2%)
<i>N</i>	45

### 2.1.1 | Cluster analysis

A further inspection of the main variables composing the overall and psychological well-being domains revealed that some cases presented a more pronounced difference in scores between past, present, and future well-being compared to others. This was also coupled with a relatively high level of spread around the mean in both present overall well-being (Mean = 5.75, SD = 2.3) and present psychological well-being (Mean = 5.47, SD = 2.85). This prompted us to analyse changes in temporal scores across sub-groups.

To derive the sub-groups, we employed Two-step cluster analysis with Log-likelihood distance and Akaike's Information Criterion (AIC). Although the algorithm automatically determined 2 clusters as the best solution, the auto-clustering pivot table suggested that a third cluster would further reduce AIC of 3.142 points. Despite the silhouette measure of cohesion shows that a 2 clusters solution has a slightly higher value (0.7) than a 3 clusters solution (0.5), they both reach a good level of cluster quality. However, the 3 clusters solution accounts for a group of middle cases with relatively lower scores in present and future overall and psychological well-being, whereas the 2 clusters solution conflates them in the first cluster. In addition, the 3 clusters solution is more balanced in terms of cluster size. After comparing all the best available information, a choice was made to retain the 3 clusters solution as the best way to explain the data for this study. The chosen 3 clusters were labelled based on their reported low, medium, or high changes from past, to present to future overall and psychological well-being (see Figure 2).

### 2.1.2 | Mixed design ANCOVA

Following the results of cluster analysis, a mixed design ANCOVA was chosen to test the mean difference between past, present, and future overall and psychological well-being across the low, medium, and high change sub-groups whilst controlling for demographic variables.

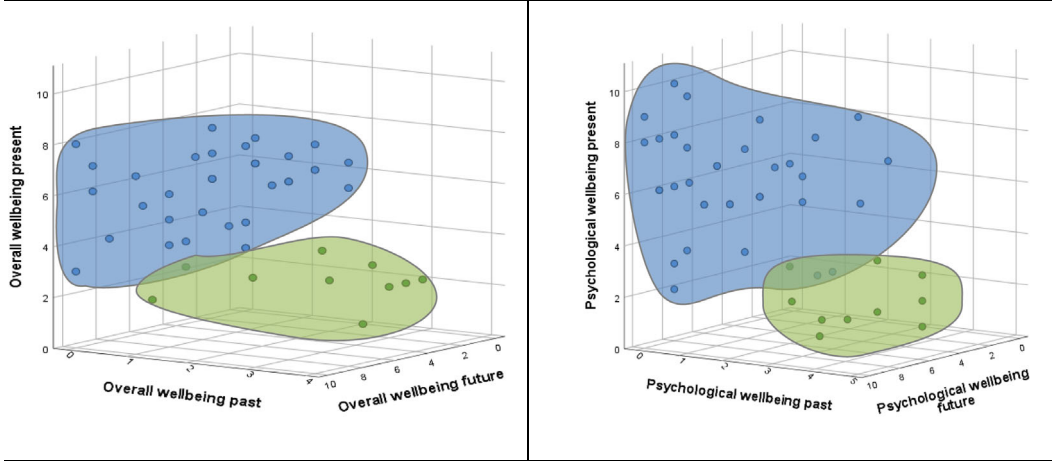
To meet one of the main assumptions of mixed-designed ANCOVA, it was necessary to first test the normality of each sample that was generated by the interaction of the well-being variables with the 3 cluster variables. This entailed examining the normality of 18 sub-samples. Due to the small sample size, a visual inspection of Q-plots, combined with  $z$  values for skewness and kurtosis, was used (Hair, Black, Babin, & Anderson, 2010). The analyses revealed that most samples presented  $z$  values for skewness and kurtosis within the acceptable levels of  $\pm 1.96$  (.05 alpha level), except for present overall well-being in the low change group ( $z = 4.43$ ). The Q plot confirmed the above findings and, in the case of present overall well-being, revealed that the excess kurtosis was primarily due to the presence of one outlier case with score of 0. Its deletion reported the distribution to mesokurtic, with a kurtosis  $z$  value of 0. The deletion of 1 case, also reduced the sample for the repeated measures design to 44 cases.

Having established the normality of the variables employed, we now turn to the main results of mixed design ANCOVA. As Mauchly's test shows that the assumption of sphericity has been violated for the main effect of time,  $\chi^2(2) = 10.17$ ,  $p = .006$ , and variable (i.e., overall and psychological well-being),  $\chi^2(2) = 8.79$ ,  $p = .01$ , subsequent results will be reported with reference to Greenhouse–Geisser correction. In addition to  $F$  values and degrees of freedom and  $p$  value, we will also report 95% confidence intervals as a further indication of statistical significance. Partial eta squared ( $\eta^2_p$ ) was used as an indicator of the magnitude of the results, with the following cut-off point to determine effect size: .02 small, .13 medium, and .26 as large (Cohen, 1988).

Of all the independent variables included in the model, only the effect of cluster was found statistically associated to the dependent variables, with a large effect size,  $F(2, 33) = 67.83$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2_p = .804$ . Similar results were found also for both overall and psychological well-being. In fact, although we can notice some small differences in trajectories (see Figure 3), we found no significant overall difference neither between the mean scores of the two variables,  $F(1, 33) = 1.26$ ,  $p = .27$ ,  $\eta^2_p = .03$ , or for the interaction between variables and time,  $F(3.22, 53.20) = 1.18$ ,  $p = .30$ ,  $\eta^2_p = .03$ , or between variable, time, and cluster,  $F(3.22, 53.20) = 1.006$ ,  $p = .401$ ,  $\eta^2_p = .057$ .

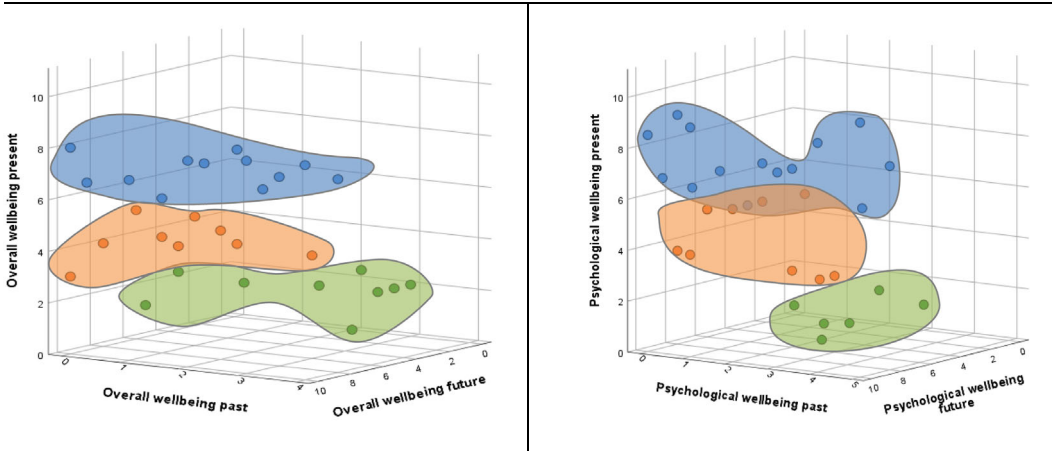
2 cluster solution Overall well-being

- High change n = 35 (77.8%)\*
- Low change n = 10 (22.2%)



3 cluster solution Overall well-being

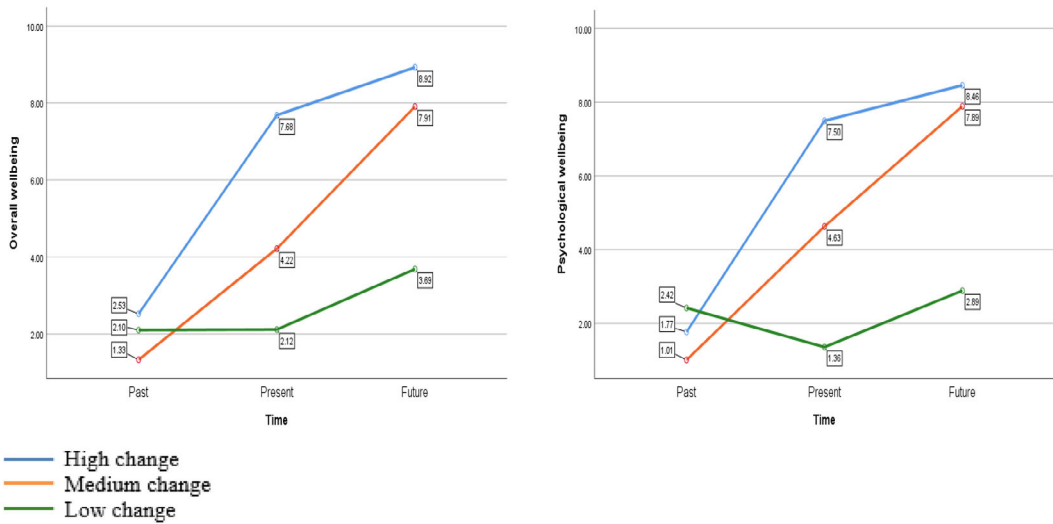
- High change n = 24 (53.3%)
- Medium change n = 12 (26.7%)
- Low change n = 9 (20%)



\* Cluster size and percentage

**FIGURE 2** Scatter plots of 2 and 3 cluster solution for Overall and Psychological well-being

A highly significant result with large effect size was found for both the main effect of time,  $F(1.57, 51.87) = 39.69, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .529$ , and the interaction between time and clusters,  $F(3.14, 51.87) = 31.62, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .657$ . Pairwise comparisons further revealed that, although participants started from not significantly different average levels of past overall and psychological well-being, those belonging to the high change cluster showed the highest significant change from past to present with an average increase of 5.15 points for overall well-being,  $p < .001, 95\% \text{ CI } [5.76, 4.55]$  and a further significant increase of 1.24 points from present to future well-being,  $p = .004, 95\% \text{ CI } [2.06, .42]$ .



**FIGURE 3** Changes in overall and psychological well-being over time and across clusters

A similar change was reported by those belonging to the high change cluster in terms of psychological well-being, with an average increase of 5.72 points from past to present,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI [6.57, 4.88], and a further increase of .96 points from present to future, although in this last case the result is on the verge of statistical significance,  $p = .04$ , 95% CI [1.88, 0.36].

Participants belonging to the medium change cluster also reported a relatively smaller yet steady average increase of 2.88 points in overall well-being from past to present,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI [3.75, 2.01], and a further increase of 3.68 points from present to future,  $p < .001$ , 95% CI [4.87, 2.50].

A different scenario is shown by those who were assigned to the low change cluster. In fact, they reported a slight, – although not significant, decrease of .01 average points from past to present overall well-being,  $p = .977$ , 95% CI [–1.01, 1.04]. However, we still found a small average increase of 1.57 points from present to future well-being, although the  $p$  value close to the 0.05 alpha level and wide range of the confidence intervals,  $p = .029$ , 95% CI [1.175, 2.96] invite caution in interpreting these results. These findings are even more pronounced for psychological well-being; in fact, participants reported a sharper average decrease of 1.06 points from past to present well-being, although again this was not statistically significant,  $p = .144$ , 95% CI [–2.50, .38]. In the same vein, the increase from present to future well-being is of 1.53 average point and not statistically significant,  $p = .57$ , 95% CI [–.47, 3.11].

## 2.2 | Qualitative strand

The quantitative phase highlighted how the 45 young adults assigned to different sub-groups had shown different trajectories with respect to their overall and psychological well-being over time. The qualitative phase set out to explore the reasons and events that could explain those changes. Therefore, we invited for an interview those individuals who, in the I COPPE study (Di Martino, Di Napoli, Esposito, Prilleltensky, & Arcidiacono, 2018), had given their legal consent to be re-contacted for follow-up studies.

Specifically, the overall aim of the qualitative phase was to investigate: (a) the events and/or life circumstances responsible for past low levels of well-being; (b) internal and/or external resources used to increase present and future well-being in the high and medium change group; (c) obstacles that hindered present and future well-being,



particularly in the low change group; and (d) outlooks and attitude towards the future and its relationship to well-being.

### 2.2.1 | Method

**Participants.** Forty-five respondents selected during the quantitative phase were all invited to take part in the qualitative phase. Seventeen people accepted to be involved, amongst these, we analysed data only from 14 interviewees, who were at the time aged between 18 and 35 years. The three interviewees who were excluded presented characteristics that placed them out of the transition to adulthood phase.

**Methods and procedures.** Focalized open/interview (Arcidiacono, 2012; Schütze, 1983) was chosen as main method of data collection. This type of interview is based on a dialogical approach, which does not rely on pre-determined questions, rather a guide outlining the issues to be addressed. The research team considered this method useful to give interviewees enough freedom to share their life stories, whilst being able to narrow down the narrative to specific areas. The grid of focalized narrative interview included the following areas to explore:

- a. The event and life circumstances that accounted for the reported low level of past well-being;
- b. What caused well-being to change after the event;
- c. Resources and strategies adopted to increase and maintain present well-being; and
- d. Life vision developed after the event and its impact on future well-being.

A telephone interview was chosen as the elected instrument of data collection in order to reach geographically widespread people (Novick, 2008), since the interviewees lived in different Italian regions. A female experienced senior researcher in qualitative interviews, with a background in clinical psychology and psychotherapy conducted the interviews. Clinical competence was considered an important skill in cases interviewees might disclose sensitive issues and/or challenging stories. Most people were first contacted directly via telephone, whereas an email was sent to those who had provided only their e-mail address. During the first contact, the researcher described the overall project, outlined the aims and scopes of the interview, and offered general instructions on how the interview would be conducted. Prior to the interviews, people were asked to provide informed consent, which was collected through email, along with proof of identity. The telephone interviews lasted on average 30–40 minutes. Interviews were collected during December 2016 and September 2017. This relatively wide temporal range is due to some hard-to-reach respondents, with limited availability and some cases of people who rescheduled the interview multiple times.

### 2.2.2 | Data analysis

Interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed verbatim. The textual material was analysed by means of the Grounded Theory Methodology (GTM) (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), using ATLAS.ti 8.0 (Muhr, 2017). Since Grounded Theory is a strongly inductive method useful to derive conceptual categories from the data, it was deemed a good choice for this kind of qualitative study. In fact, researchers needed a method to deepen the antecedents behind changes in the participants' perception of well-being in absence of pre-defined specific hypotheses about the issues to investigate. Based on Corbin and Strauss's recommendations (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), the interviews were analysed following three coding steps: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. This last coding generates what is known as core category, which is a category that connects all other macro-categories into a theoretical framework.

As good practice in GTM, the process of data analysis starts after the first interviews are collected. This is aimed at shaping subsequent interview questions in the light of the acquired data. A reflexivity-based iterative process

throughout the collection, analysis, and interpretation of the qualitative material was adopted. For instance, the heterogeneity of the research team—particularly in terms of age/life stage and shared experiences such as of moving away from hometown during their own transition to adulthood—was used as a resource to better interpret the content of the interviews.

In addition, towards the end of the analytical phase, an independent coder separately analysed the data, reaching similar conclusions. Whenever discrepancies were found, they were discussed with the research team and integrated into the analysis of the data.

### 2.2.3 | Results

The analysis of the textual material generated 133 codes, which were collated into 9 categories that formed the following 4 macro-categories: *Dreaming a new life*; *Reality check*; *Resources*, and *A new sense of self*. In addition, the data analysis identified a core category labelled *Life planning and struggles in transition to adulthood* (see Table 2).

#### *Dreaming a new life*

This macro-category describes the interviewees' life circumstances before they experienced a decrease of their past well-being. This macro-category comprises those categories related to the choice that young adults had to make to pursue their life dreams. Moving out of their family home is one of the most common amongst them. Some interviewees even made the decision to move away from their hometown in the hope of placing a physical distance between them and their past. This phase is characterized by enthusiasm and the desire for self-experimentation and most of all by the confidence that they will accomplish their life dreams.

... I moved to Milan when I was 19. because I wanted it that way... My dream was to study photography (female, 23 years, medium change, student worker part time).

Some interviewees had planned this move for a long time. Pursuing further education and career were often given as main reasons.

... After I graduated from high school, I made up my mind to move away [...] I always wanted to leave (female, 19 years, high change, student).

However, many interviews showed that some triggering events or critical circumstances were the main driver behind that choice. Amongst the events that constitute the trigger, we found sentimental reasons, such as the end of a romantic relationship or friendship.

When I finished high school, I made up my mind to move away. At the time, I had just broken up with my partner, after we had been together for 3 years, he cheated on me... (female, 19 years, high change, student).

For other interviewees, the trigger lied in a more general feeling of exasperation with their context of belonging, such as their family or hometown, which they perceived as too narrow-minded and judgmental, and therefore limiting their attempts to self-realization.

... I do not feel comfortable amongst people here in Salerno... people's way of life was crushing me down... that's why I had to move away. You will not find good people here!! Plus, I had some bad time with friends too, I felt so disappointed... (female, 28 years, high change, unemployed).

As touched upon, the trigger initially was not mentioned during the interviews; however, after its emergence it became clear that it constituted one of the crucial factors for moving away.

### *Reality check*

This macro-category describes the obstacles that young adults encountered on their journey to self-realization as well as all those unexpected events that created instability in their lives. These are elements that strongly contribute to explain the reported low level of past well-being. Overall, feelings of disappointment, uncertainty, and confusion pervade the segments of the interviews related to this macro-category.

For many young adults who shared the experience of moving away from their hometown, having to adapt to a new environment was accounted for as one of the main reasons for their decline in past well-being. In this case, adaptation must be understood in a very broad sense, spanning from adjusting to the climate, social life, and even the physical characteristics of the new place. As one of the interviewees has put it:

... It's been really hard to get settled on living on my own. I realized that I was quite narrowminded. First, I did not particularly like the Austrian-styled buildings... then I learned how to connect with this type of architecture and to appreciate the history behind it. I did a great job, all things considered... (female, 19 years high change, student).

Although moving away had an initial negative impact on the interviewees' well-being, it seemed it had even stronger negative consequences on those who had to move back home, after they had spent some time living independently. Returning home was experienced as a difficult moment of readjustment to one's place of origin, but above all it meant a setback to a condition of dependence from family, which moving away had replaced with a sense of independence and autonomy.

Going back home to live with my parents was a challenge, I had to make adjustments... It was 2015 and at the time I was jobless. Having to depend on my family again at my age really took the toll on me... (female, 28 years, medium change, unemployed).

For those interviewees who managed to keep their independence, the main difficulty was managing their new life both in organizational and economical terms. Particularly in the latter case, having to be responsible for their own maintenance and being economically self-sufficient – which was often critical for their career education – was a particularly hard task.

I spent 6 months in 2015 in a living nightmare! ... only when I got a job I started to breathe again (female, 26 years, medium change, student-worker part time).

Achieving good organizational and management skills goes beyond financial independence. More broadly the young adults interviewed felt the need to demonstrate to themselves and to their family to be self-sufficient hence fully independent. In fact, some interviewees chose only to partially involve their family in their journey to independence. As we shall better see in the next macro-category, interviewees tended to seek family more for psychological rather than economic support.

...Those who live with their parents have an easy life ... they always have someone to rely on... whereas I live far from home and it's all on my shoulders. Living away from home has been challenging, in a way that I would not even have dreamed of... (female, 24 years, medium change, student).

**TABLE 2** Codes, categories, macro-categories, core category

Codes <sup>a</sup>	Categories	Macro - categories	Core category
Achieving own myself balance			
Realization of a dream	Desired personal planning		
Opportunity to build new bonds and new spaces		Desire for what i wanted to be	
Initial pleasure in the mobility: Feeling free	The choices to realize own personal planning		
Intention to mobility			
Moment of change			
Difficulty integrating in the city of origin	Trigger		
Family event that influenced the choice of mobility			
Re-adaptation of own projects	Re- planning of his/her own life and project		
New work reference points		Reality check	
Sense of confusion			
Sense of loneliness	Psychological and overall malaise		
Insecurity			Life planning and struggles in transition to adulthood
Regret			
Introspective travel			
Find strength in itself	Self-reflection		
Music as an instrument for a personal journey of reflection			
Family support for reassurance	Support of interpersonal system		
Support from friends		Resources to re-establishing conditions of well-being	
Psychological support	External support		
Be positive			
Be more flexible: New self-acquisition	Personal change		
Acquiring new self-knowledge		New sense of self	

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Codes <sup>a</sup>	Categories	Macro - categories	Core category
Awareness of a personal and family history that is not easy	New way of establishing relationship		
Positive change in family ties after the mobility			

<sup>a</sup>In order not to overload the table only some illustrative codes of the categories have been included.

Other interviewees reported failing to accomplish their original life plans as main reason for their decline in well-being. In particular, some who had moved away to pursue further education and had failed to meet their target, reported strong feelings of failure, which were also mixed with shame and guilt for having let down those significant ones such as family, friends, and schoolteachers, who had supported their choice.

... That's when I realized how much my schoolteachers were counting on me... I felt a failure because I could not' get into the school of dentistry... That was a big disappointment for me and for all those who had put their faith in me... (female, 19 years, high change, student).

Even those interviewees who managed to meet their educational target, had found it somehow challenging to adjust to university life.

... It all started on my first year at university ... my biggest problem was that I could not' focus on my education. For months, I did not' manage to pass my modules ... (interviewed female, 19 years, low change, student).

Lastly, some interviewees—particularly those assigned to the medium change group—identified problems around intimate relationship as the main cause of their past low well-being. In this case, mourning and marital breakdown were the main causes reported.

... In 2015 I went through a separation and that made me quite depressed ... me and my husband went through some hard times and eventually we could not' find a reason to be together anymore, that's why we separated. This had some negative impact on the rest of my family too... (female, 28 years, medium change, employee).

This macro-category also describes the resilience and capacity for reorganization that some of the interviewees managed to develop to face the difficulties in fulfilling their life plans. For example, some committed themselves to finding a job.

... I started to work in 2014 so I could still live here... during that time, despite that I had to balance work and education. (female, 23 years, medium change, student-worker).

### Resources

The macro-category describes the resources that the interviewees used for coping with the negative impact of the reality check and increase their level of present well-being. The interviewees drew from two kind of resources and, in some cases, from a combination of them. Those who used internal resources relied on introspection, self-

awareness, and self-care; those who preferred external resources turned to family, friends, and partner as well as professional psychological support such as counselling or psychotherapy.

At least half of the interviewees—particularly those who moved away—drew from internal resources such as self-care and self-determination.

...I rely on myself... I study on my own and I put a lot into it and I find in myself what's helpful. (female, 26 years, medium change, unemployed).

Some interviewees found in their family an important external source of support. In this case, family acted as a form of reassurance, as it guaranteed not judgmental acceptance whenever the interviewee had experienced failures or setbacks.

Once I heard my father crying once over the phone because he was worried for me ... that's when I realized that he was there for me and the fact he was worried for me made me realize that he loved me and that made me feel better ... (female, 26 years, medium change, student).

A few interviewees found exclusive support in their peer group of friends or romantic partner. This resource was used particularly when the young adult did not intend to give their family further worries or in case of a conflictual relationship with the family.

I relied on a close friend of mine, that was my shoulder to cry on whenever things got difficult for me. She's the one I trust because she understands how I feel even if I do not' say a word (female, 19 years, low change, student).

In their attempt to overcome the obstacles encountered during their journey, some interviewees decided to seek psychological counselling or psychotherapeutic support. This usually acted as a further resource to establish a deeper contact with themselves, discover other resources, and overcome internal resistances.

... First of all myself... the I met three times with a psychologist... someone who was not family with whom I could speak out my sorrows and problems... (female, 25 years, medium change, student).

#### *A new sense of self*

This macro-category captures the extent to which the interviewees developed a new identity, following the events that negatively impacted on their well-being as well as their outlook towards the future. Most of the interviewees—particularly the high change group—acquired more self-awareness and a renewed attitude towards life, which contributed towards developing more realistic life plans.

The interviewees reported experiencing a process of personal change and in some cases even the acquisition of new ways of establishing relationships with significant others. Moreover, many of the interviewees shared a consolidation of their sense of independence and autonomy. Some managed to learn from those past experiences that had negatively impacted on their well-being, how to be more flexible in planning their future. In fact, flexibility and organizational skills are reported as fundamental to cope with life adversities.

... Now I know better, I'm actually still trying not to be so self-conscious... I'm trying to take things easier ... to get over things (male, 25 years, medium change, student).

Increased self-confidence and self-awareness are further achievements gained after learning from past challenges.

...This journey has helped me to trust myself more. If you do not trust yourself, you really cannot get anywhere ... (female, 23 years, high change, student worker).

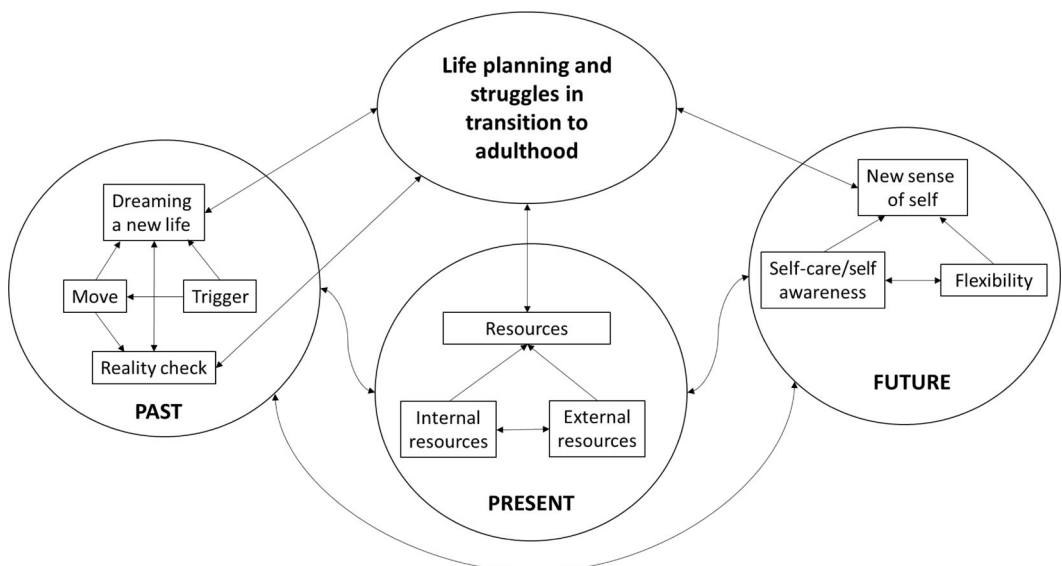
Unlike the other macro-categories described above, in which no relevant differences were found between those previously assigned to the low, medium, and high change group, this macro-category highlights a strong difference amongst the participants. We intend to describe these in more detail in the next paragraph. For now, we should like to mention that those who were assigned to the high change group developed a new self-orientated attitude towards the future, which features increased self-awareness, autonomy, and self-control. This future orientation underlines the profound positive effect that past negative experience had on their identity. The medium change, instead, expressed an attitude more centred around living in the present, reducing ambitions towards future projects. Last, the position towards the future assumed by the low change interviewee is a vague sense of hope that future circumstances will improve.

#### *Life planning and struggles in transition to adulthood*

This category constitutes the core category since it expresses the interviewees' capacity to re-organize and redesign future plans in light of their transition to adulthood. This core category also explains the change in well-being that the young interviewees experienced on their journey to adulthood. Low levels of past well-being coincided in many cases with feelings of failure, confusion, and uncertainty, which were generated by events and circumstances that stood in the way of the originally idealized life plan.

Accepting failure and moving forward despite adversities, led to an increase in present well-being. In that regard, internal and external resources, helped young people to find reassurance and acceptance of their failures. Amongst them, family acted as a powerful dispenser of psychological and interpersonal support, particularly whenever it did not take away the interviewees' sense of agency in coping with their life challenges. In fact, those who resisted the temptation to return home or ask for financial help, found a confirmation of their capacity to be independent and autonomous thereby feeling more capable to pursue their life plans.

Newly acquired skills then replaced the past sense of uncertainty and disappointment. Flexibility and self-confidence represent the greatest acquisitions in this phase, along with a positive orientation towards the future as a source of increasing well-being (Figure 4).



**FIGURE 4** Relationship between categories, macro-categories, and the core category

### 3 | DISCUSSION

The results of the qualitative study helped better understand the reasons behind changes in well-being levels that were investigated in the quantitative phase. The analysis of interviews uncovered that the main factors associated to low past well-being were related to elements that are central to the path to adulthood. In addition, it highlighted what resources were used to increase present levels of well-being, and the attitudes and outlooks young adults developed regarding their future well-being.

Many respondents shared the experience of moving away from one's hometown. The young adults interviewed were mostly students who moved from the South to the North of Italy. Although they overtly reported that their reason was to pursue their career or further education, the interviews uncovered that in many cases their underlying trigger was to free themselves from an environment that they perceived as limiting their self-actualisation.

The interviewees described an initial enthusiasm and optimism about the future, which then turned into a sense of uncertainty and confusion when they encountered obstacles that hindered the accomplishment of their life projects. Indeed, most of them had to redesign their life plans to adapt them to new conditions (Alfieri, Rosina, Sironi, Marta, & Marzana, 2015; Rosina, 2019). Several authors have highlighted the sense of instability and uncertainty that characterizes the transition to adulthood due to the poor job opportunities offered particularly by the Southern Italian context as well as disillusionment towards the value of academic training (Crocetti et al., 2015; Crocetti, Scrignaro, Sica, & Magrin, 2012; Leccardi, 2017; Rebughini, Colombo, & Leonini, 2017).

An interesting aspect is that our interviewees preferred to seek psychological and interpersonal rather than economic support. This reflects the young adults' attempts to maintain a positive bond with their family, whilst still preserving their strive for independence and autonomy. The literature on young people's well-being has dedicated much attention to family bonds as an important factor (Milevsky, 2005). Healthy family relationships contribute to high self-image, self-esteem (Alfieri et al., 2018; Roberts & Bengtson, 1996; Shaw, Krause, Chatters, Connell, & Ingersoll-Dayton, 2004), quality of life (Flouri, 2004), educational and occupational attainment (Di Rago & Vaillant, 2007), and decrease the risk of future psychological distress (Milevsky, 2005) and suicidal behaviour (Heider et al., 2007).

Table 3 further combines the temporal perspective (columns) with the three clusters (rows) identified in the quantitative phase.

Starting from the low change group, some negative experience or trauma, were recognized as responsible for past low levels of well-being. This condition caused an interruption in one's present life plans. Instead, the medium and high change group experienced a clash between an originally idealized life plan and the difficulties posed by the real world, which caused a decrease of well-being in the past. Enough flexibility to redesign their life plans combined with internal and external resources helped them to re-establish a good level well-being in the present.

A further interesting difference between the three groups lies in their orientation towards the future. Those who were assigned to the high change group, developed a future self, characterized by self-care, self-awareness, autonomy, and self-control. This future new orientation shows quite clearly how their past life experiences had been integrated into their new identity.

The medium change group developed a living in the present attitude, which shows acquired flexibility yet also a reduction of ambition towards future projects. This result is in line with Cuzzocrea's (2019) flexi-lives approach, which helps to overcome structural insecurity and captures the sense of work and the sense of youth.

Last, the position assumed by the low changed group is hope that future circumstances will improve. However, in this case, there is no reference to internal resources or skills that could be used to cope with future challenges. This kind of attitude is close to what Bernardo (2010) has described as external locus-of-hope, that is hope that relies on "significant others [such as family, peers, and supernatural/spiritual beings or forces] and external forces as agents of goal-attainment cognitions" (p. 945). In our case the feeling is of an even vaguer sense of hope, which is unaccounted by any specific external agent, and therefore it could be defined as a generalized external locus-of-hope.

Last, one of the most relevant elements that emerged from the data analysis is that preserving and pursuing life plans is an essential condition for restoring well-being, after facing the challenging of transition. At the same time, these act a



**TABLE 3** Changes in well-being related to clusters and time

Cluster/ Group	Past	Present	Future
Low change	Past negative experiences or trauma caused a lowering of well-being and hindered life planning.	Life planning interrupted	Generalized external locus-of-hope.
Medium change	Dreaming a new life versus reality check	Redesign life plans considering changed conditions. Use of internal and external resources	Living more in the present and being less ambitious
High change	Dreaming a new life versus reality check	Redesign life plans considering changed conditions. Use of internal and external resources	Self-care, self-awareness, autonomy and self-control.

strive for pursuing well-being in the immediate future. Studies have highlighted how committing to a purpose in youth and emerging adulthood is associated with higher levels of happiness and emotional stability (Kiang & Fuligni, 2010), and with greater life satisfaction (Bronk, Hill, Lapsley, Talib, & Finch, 2009). In the same vein, purpose commitment has been found to be one of the strongest predictors of well-being, in that it significantly promotes life satisfaction and positive affect whilst reducing negative affect (Sumner, Burrow, & Hill, 2015). In our study, it emerged that the capacity of planning the future is central to developing self-confidence and emancipation. This is in turn impacted by the support that the immediate interpersonal system, primarily the family, is able to offer young adults.

#### 4 | LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

Since our study has employed a mixed-methods design, there are both quantitative and qualitative limitations and future recommendations to consider. From a quantitative point of view, although the findings derived from this study are embedded in a temporal perspective, they are still based on cross-sectional evidence. Future investigations should adopt a longitudinal design to track young people during and potentially after their transition to adulthood. In addition, a larger sample of respondents, particularly in the low and medium change cluster, would provide stronger statistical evidence of changes in well-being across groups and time.

Qualitative findings have highlighted some of the difficulties and struggles that young people are likely to experience during transition to adulthood and that the temporary decline in well-being these can cause. Future studies need to further investigate the different paths on the journey to adulthood. In that regard, more data are needed to explain the causes behind people's reported levels of well-being (i.e., low, medium, and high) in relation to transition.

Last, we should bear in mind that this study has focused on a specific group of Italian young adults who had experienced a temporary decline in well-being during their transition to adulthood. International studies could shed more light on whether this phenomenon is shared by other cultures or whether our findings are specific to the Italian context.

#### 5 | CONCLUSION

Our study is one of the few rare attempts to explore the impact that transitioning to adulthood has on multiple aspects of well-being. In addition, it is a good example of how combining both quantitative and qualitative methods can shed more light on unexplored aspects of life transitions.

Our findings show that this challenging developmental phase is likely to create a temporary discontinuity in the life of young individuals, with consequent negative impact on their well-being. They also show that leaving one's

family and sometimes even moving away from one's hometown to pursue life plans—two often common experiences faced by young adults in transition—are likely to bring about challenges and adversities. Young adults in transition are asked to redesign their original, often idealized, life plans in the light of more realistic conditions and opportunities offered by the new context. In that regard, a successful transition is characterized by the capacity to overcome the challenges that this developmental stage poses by being flexible enough to reshape life plans. Another key aspect of a successful transition is to be able to draw on internal and external resources—particularly family supports—whilst preserving one's sense of autonomy and independence.

In terms of social impact, it is interesting to note the positive effect that life plans and future outlooks have on becoming adults. In fact, the most recent literature on youth (Colombo & Rebughini, 2019) warns us about the risk of presentification (Leccardi, 2006), that is a particular lifestyle—which is becoming common amongst young adults—that is grounded in living in a constant present, without any aspiration or interest for the future. This research shows that the effectiveness of life planning and a flexible attitude towards the future might lead to a successful transition to adulthood, thereby acting as a possible antidote to presentification. In our study, we were able to uncover future planning, motivation, and effective action as key elements for a successful transition to adulthood. This notion is helpful for designing interventions and strategies to promote healthy transitions, although strengths are further to consider in comparison with concurrent individual and social factors.

This last point is particularly relevant also for social policies, since our study offers useful insights into both facilitators and threats involved in the transitioning to adulthood. In a world where young people are facing unprecedented life challenges and displaying unrecorded malaise including suicide, substance abuse, depression, anxiety, and eating disorders (McNamara, 2000), we believe this study has the potential to raise the attention of academics, policy makers, and mental health professionals on preventative measures and best practices to support young people during their transition to adulthood.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

## ETHICS APPROVAL

The study protocol was approved by the ethics committee of the University of Naples Federico II.

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