



ITALIAN JOURNAL OF SOCIOLOGY OF EDUCATION

Editor-in-Chief: Silvio Scanagatta | ISSN 2035-4983

# Young People between Uncertainty and Agency. An Analysis of the Strategies of Transition to Adulthood in Italy

*Maria Grazia Gambardella\**, *Arianna Mainardi\*\**, *Stefania Voli\*\*\**

## Author information

- \* Department of Sociology and Social Research, University of Milano-Bicocca, Italy.  
Email: [mariagrazia.gambardella@unimib.it](mailto:mariagrazia.gambardella@unimib.it)
- \*\* Department of Sociology and Social Research, University of Milano-Bicocca, Italy.  
Email: [arianna.mainardi@unimib.it](mailto:arianna.mainardi@unimib.it)
- \*\*\* Department of Sociology and Social Research, University of Milano-Bicocca, Italy.  
Email: [stefania.voli@unimib.it](mailto:stefania.voli@unimib.it)

## Article first published online

July 2021

## HOW TO CITE

Gambardella M.G., Mainardi A., Voli S. (2021). Young People between Uncertainty and Agency. An Analysis of the Strategies of Transition to Adulthood in Italy, *Italian Journal of Sociology of Education*, 13(2), 15-38.

DOI: [10.14658/pupj-ijse-2021-2-2](https://doi.org/10.14658/pupj-ijse-2021-2-2)

# Young People between Uncertainty and Agency. An Analysis of the Strategies of Transition to Adulthood in Italy

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*Abstract:* The article presents some of the first results obtained during a qualitative longitudinal research on being young in Italy, begun in 2019, promoted by the Department of Sociology and Social Research of the University of Milano-Bicocca. The paper aims at contributing to the study of the life trajectories of young men and women as they deal with a transition to adulthood that appears suspended, especially in relation to the economic, social and cultural fractures determined by the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. By focusing on life experiences and life courses in Italy, the paper analyses how transition is strongly affected by the geographical, cultural, social and economic contexts in which the biographies of the young people interviewed are immersed. Furthermore, the article explores the subjective meanings they ascribe to those contexts. Firstly, the results show that a common feature of the biographies of the young people we encountered is a perception of uncertainty. More specifically, the paper underlines the ambivalent role that geographical context plays in the narrations and biographies of young people. Especially, when it is characterized by scarcity of resources, and therefore, by the impossibility of recognition and realization of personal aspirations. Lastly, the research shows that the sanitary emergency, with the subsequent containment policies, represents a sudden event that amplifies pre-existing conditions, characteristics, and differences, but at the same time, it triggers novel transformations, at a collective as well as individual level.

Keywords: youth, adulthood, agency, Covid19, uncertainty

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## Introduction

In the last twenty years, numerous studies and researches have attempted to describe the reality of young people nationally and internationally, highlighting the intense individualization and strong biographical and existential uncertainty that characterize it (Cavalli 1985; Cavalli & Galland 1993; Cicchelli, 2013; Furlong & Cartmel, 2007; Walther, Stauber & Pohl, 2013). Scholars are questioning the very nature of youth as a social stage of preparation for adult life, which is increasingly less identified as the natural destination to which young people are headed (du Bois-Reymond, 1998; du Bois-Reymond & Chisholm, 2006).

How do young people react to this state of things? What strategies do they deploy to face the risks and uncertainty of our age? How do they manage to give meaning and continuity to their self-narrations?

The article presents some of the first results emerged from the first wave of interviews in the context of a qualitative longitudinal research on being young in Italy. The three wave longitudinal study started in 2019, and it is promoted by the Department of Sociology and Social Research of the University of Milano-Bicocca.<sup>1</sup> Our aim is to reflect on the life trajectories of young men and women as they deal with a transition to adulthood that appears increasingly dilated, and even suspended, especially in relation to the economic, social and cultural fractures determined by the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. We take into account how the intersection of education level, territorial collocation, and social and cultural capital produces different forms of negotiation in the framework of transition to adulthood (Musumeci, 2020). The description and comparison of the life experiences of young people who grew up in different contexts (South and North; metropolitan and suburban areas; big, medium-sized, and small towns) will enable us to understand which factors structure, without determining them, the trajectories of young Italians.

Applying the life course perspective (Saraceno, 1987), the research tried to combine the micro dimension of the paths chosen by young Italians in their transitions to adulthood with the macro dimension of the social contexts to which they belong. To this end, the researchers centered the analysis on daily life – intended as the space in which subjects build meaning for their actions – using methodological tools that could effectively convey the temporal depths of the biographies (Leccardi, 2009) and the processual nature of the production of meaning that characterize them (Bichi, 2002).

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<sup>1</sup> Our analysis is part of the wider quanti-qualitative longitudinal research on life courses in Italy, carried out by the Department of Sociology and Social Research of the University of Milano-Bicocca within the Department of Excellence project. The qualitative research group is supplied by the Institute for Advanced Study of Social Change (IASSC) and coordinated by Carmen Leccardi. Aside from the article's authors, the group includes: Ilenya Camozzi, Daniela Cherubini, Fabio Gaspani, Barbara Grüning, Sveva Magaraggia, Susy Anny Veloso.

The research group – between October 2019 and June 2020 – conducted 115 semi-narrative interviews with young people aged between 23 and 29 (61 women and 54 men of diverse education levels, social classes, social conditions and cultural backgrounds) residing in the Italian territory.<sup>2</sup> This is a format the group devised mid-research, also as a consequence of the limits and innovation opportunities ‘imposed’ by the pandemic, in which Schütze’s (1977) narrative interview method is connected with the techniques of the semi-structured interview (Bichi, 2007), generating a narration that allows the narrator to expand on the questions within well-defined thematic areas.

The group of interviewees has been constructed as follows: the 21% by identifying the young people – aged between 23 and 29 – within the statistically significant sample of families defined by the quantitative research group involved in a survey associated to the longitudinal project; the 79% by gathering further ‘sample’ with the *snow-ball technique* (while obviously considering the characteristics of the general population on which the research on life courses in Italy was focused).

But what happens to a research, and to its goals, methods and design, when the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic seems to shut down every activity? With the beginning of the pandemic and subsequent lockdown, the group had to come to terms with a historical event that could strongly alter its research. This change forced the researchers to redefine the methodological plane, choosing to exploit the potential of remote technology and the digital space (Salganik 2018), building on a previous experience. More than half of the interviews were conducted, between 10 March and 22 June 2020, via digital platforms (to the participants’ request).<sup>3</sup>

As a whole, the thematic areas analyzed through the interviews have been: family relationships; personal relationships; parenthood; work; mobility; Internet and social media use; relationship with politics; relationship with religion; memory (personal, family, and collective); future (personal and collective); existential wellbeing.

All interviews were rigorously transcribed and anonymized. The research team is now proceeding with a thematic analysis and coding, primarily through the use of MAXQDA software. To this end, a database and a tree of

<sup>2</sup> The interviewees reside: in the North-East (15%), in the North-West (24%), in Central Italy (31%), in the South and on the islands (30%). Their education levels are: high school degree (31%), three-year degree (32%), five-year degree (29%), post-graduate degree (4%).

<sup>3</sup> In these cases, the outline of the interviews was modified. In other words, the group elaborated a special ‘Covid outline’. The decision to deepen this dimension, as well as the use of digital tools for conducting interviews remotely, represents the response of the research group to the changed condition of the context. The outbreak of the pandemic, an unforeseeable event of historical importance, directly affected the object of study (the biographical trajectories and transition paths of young people) and therefore required a modification of the initial research plan in terms of both content and methodology.

codes containing approximately fifty thematic codes (corresponding with the thematical areas analyzed) has been created.

Specifically, this article will explore the transformation in work relationships, the meaning attributed to relationships (whether friendship or family relationships), with special attention to the changes introduced by the pandemic emergency. In this sense, the research will center around the strategies for complexity and uncertainty management, and on the negotiations happening in the daily as well as on the planning dimensions, strategies through which the young subjects rebuild a personal relationship with time. What has definitely emerged is that the young men and women we met are producing a reflexive understanding of current changes by organizing themselves with new equipment and social imagination (although they are seldom heard in public debate).

### **Motionless youth?**

Danilo Martuccelli (2009; 2010; 2017) has elaborated on the renewing potential of a sociological theory which, in the last decades, seems to be affected by continual attempts to redefine and reconfigure its functions. These attempts have often determined a hyper-specialization of sociologies characterized by short-sighted empirical scope and a fragmentation in data collection, which have made it impossible to make a comprehensive evaluation considering the objective and subjective dynamics of the processes of deep, and even dramatic transformation pervading modern societies (Crespi, 2017).

Thus, Martuccelli elaborates what he defines as *existential sociology* (2017), a sociology that centers its analyses around the social and historical dimensions of existential trials. Existential sociology especially focuses on young people, who are increasingly engaged with the complex problems that surface in societies that are marred by work precarity as a generalized and permanent state of uncertainty. Young people's subjective viewpoints, definitions, perceptions, and agency strategies, alongside their experiences around social status, unemployment, and solitude, are studied in relation with the historical moment they are living: "without overlooking the analysis of structures, institutional political forms, and material conditions, it is absolutely necessary to pay attention to the social actors' lived experience [young actors, we would say], to the incidence in their relationships with the social reality and with others, to their emotions, and to the fears and aspirations that determine their actions" (Martuccelli, 2017, p. 12). Young people's transition to adulthood can thus be analyzed through the intersection of three dimensions: time (continuity and change), relationships (social, institutional, family, friendship, romantic), and agency.

Those who center their studies around young people's experience, especially those who analyze the processes of transition to adulthood through the lens of life courses (Saraceno, 1987), try to combine the micro-dimension of daily life with the macro-dimension of social context; and to relate the individual dynamics whose keywords are creativity, subjectivity, resilience, with structural processes that are able to produce social inequality (Woodmann & Bennett, 2015). The specificity of the subject allows, or even requires, the use of an all-around sociology, cutting across a whole array of existential dimensions: socialization, family, education, work, culture, religion, politics, personal relationships, parenthood (Cavalli & Leccardi, 2013).

Increasingly characterized by social fragmentation, by multiplication and proliferation of roles, by the crisis of institutional spheres, and by the disappearance of univocal role models, youth is ever more the starting point for analyses aiming to shed light on what is happening within society as a whole; it is also a privileged field of analysis for the study of the ongoing processes of social and cultural change, especially relating to the economic, social and cultural fractures caused by the effects of Covid-19.

This is why there is an increasing need to shift the focus back on the themes of youth identities, which are growingly seen as contingent (Pollock, 2002), and generations (Woodman & Wyn, 2014), since it is becoming clear that youth cannot be simply considered an intra-generational issue – a condition that unites people of similar age and experience – but is also, and not in a marginal way, an intergenerational issue that forces adult and younger generations to explore and question each other, as well as themselves, and also, largely, to compromise on several crucial matters (Besozzi, 2012).

So what are the elements that, today, enable us to define a generation? What events, today, are able to articulate the biographies of young Italians into distinct phases? What events have the power to profoundly mark the lives of those who transit through youth? Can we still look at the stages that determine the entrance into adult life – finishing the education career, entering the workforce, leaving the family, forming one's own family, parenthood – to identify differences between generations?

The life courses of young Italians, as several studies have underlined<sup>4</sup>, are marked by growing complexity and uncertainty, to the point that the very nature of youth as a social phase of preparation to adulthood is being questioned, as adulthood is decreasingly identified as the natural destination to which young people are headed (Rebughini, Colombo & Leonini, 2017; Introini-Pasqualini, 2005; Rampazi, 2010). Its stages, the so-called passage markers, are no longer consequential. Youth keeps fading into adulthood, and at the

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<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, the analyses promoted by Istituto IARD (1984; 1988; 1993; 1997; 2002; 2007) and Istituto Toniolo (Rapporto giovani 2013-2020).

same time, it shies away from it. But adulthood is also losing its sharp borders, its heuristic capacity, giving way to the emergence of new thought circuits centered around the idea of a 'new adulthood': a concept that allows us to trace the biographical itineraries of subjects who are suspended between inner autonomy – a goal they have fully attained – and the elusive economic and social autonomy – which is, for many of them, a far more difficult milestone to reach (Wyn et al., 2020).

Youth has lost its concrete grip on the endpoint represented by the entrance into adult age. But at the same time, adult career models – the actual finishing line of the transition – have been profoundly transformed, challenging the association between adult role models and dimensions such as self stability and self integrity (Saraceno, 1987). The openness to change and crisis, the ability to question even crucial aspects of identity, appear today to emphasize transformation, rather than stability, in adulthood.

### ***Dealing with a structural uncertainty: the Italian context***

In the last forty years, in Italy, many of the prerogatives of youth have progressively faded. What has been waning for our youth is not so much the availability of material resources, as much as the ability to conquer autonomy, be granted the same rights (and obligations) as adults and late adults, and fully participating in active life according to one's personal inclinations and competences.

Unlike their parents and grandparents, young people find themselves making their first meaningful life experiences in a context marked by profound change, in which the institutional and cultural certainties that had supported the search for identity of previous generations are dissolving.

For instance, considering the role of work, we can see that certain factors – such as flexibility and deregulation – are currently hindering the structuring of a coherent self-narration, since the latter is inseparable from the idea of duration (Rampazi, 2002).

Outside, or amassed in marginal areas of the market, young people see their demand for identity lose an important lieu of channeling.<sup>5</sup> And the generation that has been most impacted and threatened by an unprecedented level of

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<sup>5</sup> As demonstrated by the studies on transition carried out by Istituto IARD between 1983 and 2004, work progressively loses its function as the final, irreversible stage for those who exit the educational circuit, coming to represent an experiential space that identifies short timeframes and occasional conditions interspersed by moments of inactivity (Chiesi 2002). An increasingly pervasive work precarity – the product of a bad interpretation of the flexibility principle on the corporations' part – has thus seeped into some of the emerging traits of youth culture – traits that were favored presentism and the reversibility of choices (Buzzi, 1997), resulting in an existential precarity that has profoundly affected the process of transition to adult roles. The following economic and financial crisis has only exacerbated the phenomenon of precarity, which has grown to a considerable extent in diffusion and intensity (Rosina, 2020).

precarity, especially in Italy, is also the most educated generation in history, whose work experience is characterized by forms of precarious multi-activity, which was previously typical mostly of female work (Rampazi, 2010), within societies whose workforce is aging and which are unable to offer attractive, highly qualified, well-paid full-time jobs. This generation's experience is painfully distinguished by the confluence of excellent education and terrible work prospects. A new social figure is forming: the futureless graduate, representing the generation of precarity.

According to Ocse (2019), Italian graduates aged between 25 and 34 earn only 10% more than their degreeless peers. In England, the economic value of a degree is 35%; in France, almost 45%. The Italian job market penalizes youth, favoring adults and late adults (Piazza, 2019), even with equal degrees.

Vocation seems to be a luxury of a bygone time; rather than work through which to find realization, young people look for a job that enables them to survive. In this sense, Beck (2016) has spoken of a 'less generation', or a generation of manufactured uncertainties – a generation that must, first and foremost, accept what appears to be a material regression compared to previous decades.

Accordingly, the data from the 7<sup>th</sup> AdEPP report (Associazione degli Enti Previdenziali Privati) in relation to 2016 incomes show a huge age gap. While the average income in the 50-60 and 60-70 age ranges is considerably over €45.000, it is more than halved for the 30-40 range, barely reaching €20.000 (the average yearly income for the 20-30 range is as low as €12.000).

A further factor of imbalance is, naturally, the geographical one: the current employment rate among people aged 25 to 34 is 76.4% in the Northern regions, 68.5% in the Central regions, and 46.7% in the South. Gender is another source of inequality, as women have an employment rate of 54.9%, while 72.6% of their male peers are employed (Istat, 2020).

Since flexibility essentially concerns the younger segment of the workforce, and pre-existing permanent jobs are being progressively replaced by atypical contractual forms, the new generations are more exposed to economic fluctuations: they struggle to enter the job market, and once they do, they have to settle for precarious and temporary positions, a condition they have a hard time leaving to get to one of greater stability. The most widespread job condition is in fact the indefinite permanence in a definite position (pun intended) (Buzzi, 2013).

As underlined by Leonini (2020) and Seghezzi (2020), the pandemic did not actually generate a crisis, so much as it intensified and highlighted areas of criticality the Italian job market had known for at least forty years: a job market with frayed foundations, in which the low quality of many of the jobs held by young people results in precarious work conditions, lack of

juridical and social protections, and limited opportunities for formation and career advancement.

The pandemic hit an already struggling country, but most of all, it fell on a generation of men and women that were already, to a large extent, financially dependent on their parents. And this is not only true for people under 25, but also for those aged 30-34, an age range in which they should already be independent from their families and engaged in the realization of their own life projects (Rosina, 2020).

Youth unemployment in Europe, which was under 15% shortly before the pandemic, had risen to 17.6% by August 2020, and to 32.1% in Italy. As evidenced by the Eurostat “COVID-19” report (2020), the people most hit are those in search of employment, those who are employed with a fixed-term contract, those who are employed in the most severely hit areas (such as food service, entertainment, hospitality, and tourism), those who did not have a solid position in the job market due to their young age and thus lost their financial autonomy, those who did have a job but had not yet structured a life project, those who returned to their hometowns thanks to forms of smart working.

Significant inequalities, which pile up on previous inequalities, affect our country. And, as Istat warned in its yearly report, Covid-19 may end up exacerbating these equalities, widening the existing gaps, and creating a ‘social stairway’ in which climbing down will be easier than climbing up; resizing expectations and hierarchies between needs and desires; producing social polarization between those who own economic, human, and relational capital, and “*having not*”. Whereas, at the beginning of 2020, young Italians seemed inclined to undertake some of the projects typically defining the transition to the adult stage – over 30% foresaw moving out on their own or starting a cohabitation; 24% planned getting married; 27% wanted to have children; 52% wanted to find a new job – these plans have now been forsaken: 55% of thirty-year-olds related feeling more at risk, on the work front, than they did before the crisis; 60% of them think their future plans are compromised (Rapporto Giovani, 2020).

According to a recent Nomisma report (July 2020), at the end of the lockdown, last May, 1 in 5 30-year-olds lamented the deterioration of their occupational situation, and 44% of people under 40 were struggling with at least three categories of expenses (bills, rent, loan instalments). As observed by Nomisma, over 3 million Italians struggled with family finances during the lockdown. Rent is the most sensitive area: at the beginning of May, one third of tenants (33%) reported being in difficulty over the payment of their monthly fees. 40% were forced to scale back on food expenses.

The data collected by the Osservatorio Giovani of Istituto Toniolo (2020) show that over 55% of thirty-year-olds reported feeling more at risk, job-

wise, than they did before the crisis; 60% of them think their future plans are compromised (Rapporto Giovani, 2020).

Naturally, gender differences are once again on the rise. Women, especially younger women from the South, are still more exposed to low-quality labor, which is associated with high rates of irregular employment, lower-than-average retribution, high risk of job loss, and high levels of occupational segregation. These women represent a structurally weak segment of the job market, one that is even more exposed, in the specific situation that followed the diffusion of the epidemic, due to the difficulty of accessing social safety nets and to the impossibility of formally justifying their movements during the lockdown.

This situation is further aggravated by the difficulty of reconciling lifetimes. The offer of early infancy services is poor and unequally distributed across the Italian territory, it penalizes women – discouraging them from taking advantage of the services – and the children of less wealthy families, who do not go to nursery school because it is expensive or unavailable.

All of these factors make biographical construction increasingly difficult, and impose a high degree of personal responsibility. Young people are increasingly forced to build a personal identity for themselves instead of receiving it from society through traditional socialization agencies.

What could be considered the heart of biographical narrations until a few decades ago – the mid-term and long-term life plan – is now a commodity that young people are increasingly forced to give up, as they are called to face biographical options that are contradictory and hard to attain. Their lives are moving through a plurality of parallel universes in which choices are too often reversible and biographies can hardly be brought into unity (Quarta, 2018; Rampazi, 2010).

In their daily lives, however, not only vulnerability, precarity and presentification are on the rise – as is too often remarked. As noted by Bourdieu (1979) – as well as Melucci (2000) and Martuccelli (2010) – the unequal circulation of material and symbolic goods does not produce closed and unchanging cultural universes that imprison the actors, but an arena of fluid resources which the actors themselves exploit in creative and changing ways in their strategies of social relocation. Not only, then, do young people cope with uncertainty with ‘adaptive’ behaviors, but also with ‘resistential’ actions. They seem to react to uncertainty with a sort of virtuous mobilization, challenging themselves and striving to use their resources in the best possible way.

As several studies have shown, and as confirmed by our interviews, strategies of action are also deployed: practices aimed at rebuilding forms of control on lifetimes, at recomposing the institutional and biographical fragmentation (Leccardi, 2009; 2011). Furthermore, although young people find

themselves facing growing social inequalities, their biographies underline the presence of a reserve of agency that fosters, on a daily basis, adaptive or resistential behaviors in the face of failures and delays, sometimes stimulating innovation and the transformation of constraints into resources.

The reference to practices, then, appears to be a fruitful direction that enables us to observe the ways in which a subject (young or otherwise) manages to utilize the social, cultural, and political resources that are available to him or her (Merico, 2010). Highlighting the capability of action of young subjectivities in daily life becomes the cornerstone for a redefinition of the concepts of youth and adulthood.

### **Transition strategies and relationship with the territory: the interviews**

For the young men and women interviewed, the relationship with the territories they grew up and live in appears to be a key element in building a reflexive relationship with themselves and a relationship with the social world. While relationship with the territory inevitably places individuals in the 'here and now', contributing to generate the resources through which they project themselves into the different aspects of life – such as work, personal relationships, and the construction of a value world – this relationship is dynamically negotiated to expand the realm of possibility and build a relationship with the future. In these narrations, some points emerge as fundamental to imagining one's life path: mobility, leaving the parental home, the choice of an education and occupation. However, these crucial points narrow and widen elastically, sometimes resulting in unexpected and uncommon synopses resulting from the interrelation of the individual plane of life choices with the structural plane in which these experiences are immersed.

In light of this scenario, which is the core of the argument that will be presented in this paragraph, a few specific dimensions can help comprehend the specificity of the Italian case in its complexity and multiformity. In these dimensions, the characteristics of the different Italian territories – for instance, the relationship between urban, provincial and rural areas, which is marred by the unequal distribution of certain resources; or the relationship between North and South, which corresponds to a mobility flow tied to educational and occupational ambitions – play a vital role in redefining the transition to adulthood for young people, as well as the meanings and possibilities associated with this transition. This role is often ambiguous and can generate unforeseen outcomes.

The most closely observed dimensions expressly concerning the relationship with the territory will then be: a) the ones related to occupation-related

expectations – expectations around which strong tension is apparent in the biographies; b) those reflecting the reorganization of personal relationships in the different experiences of those who prioritize mobility as opposed to those who choose to remain tied to the place where they grew up (mobility and immobility – which is rarely a final decision); c) the pandemic emergency, as described by the interviewees' subjective interpretations of the sudden and growing uncertainty that affects the resources and possibilities that are available to them.

As a whole, these dimensions enable us to compare different territorial situations within the Italian reality from the viewpoint of the participants of the interview, in which the subjects outline the limits and possibilities of every localized experience and territorial resources intersect with other cultural, social, economic, and structural dimensions.

As highlighted by the words of C. – who is about to begin an Erasmus experience in Spain – thinking about ourselves implies having a relationship with the places where we grew up, and redefining this relationship through fears and concerns that do not, however, completely undermine the journey towards autonomy:

Then I thought: “Maybe this is where I’m supposed to be, my home...”

After all, I live in a small town in the North. I thought: “This is my place, I will never leave again.” But after the first week, which was a bit like that, but mainly for the language, since I hadn’t yet started university and all that (...) Let’s say I became much more independent after this experience.

(C., 23, female, student, small town in Northern Italy)

### ***Occupational trajectories, expectations and negotiations***

Work is a crucial area for biographical and subjectivity construction, and perhaps the one in which the link between the individual plane, the surrounding structural context, and the resources this link provides for the subject is most apparent.

Living in a suburban area can impact the paths of transition to adulthood in a wholly different way. These paths seem to be the result of the intertwinement between the opportunities expressed by the territories themselves and individual educational/occupational choices. From a more general standpoint, these suburban realities are seen as preferable due to the lower cost of living and the proximity (if desired) to family and friends. But the difference in the availability of work opportunities is the true defining factor when it comes to biographical paths. The young interviewees' own words showcase a multiplicity of viewpoints and strategies stemming from different levels of immersion in and negotiation with their original contexts. G.'s words – 26 years old, she comes from a suburban area in the North-Western

part of the country, where she works (precariously) as an elementary school teacher and lives with her family – exhibits complete self-referentiality in relation to a wider reflection on the occupational crisis. In this particular case, a deep immersion in a provincial context seems to favour the adoption of an individual point of view, which does not take into account the macro level. As the case of G. shows, delimiting the field of one's actions and analyses to the micro – the individual level – is a possible strategy to be on the self side in front of possible uncertainty (which the external complexity represents).

So far, I've pretty much always worked. There's so much talk of this employment precarity and so on, but I have personally never experienced it, so I sometimes wonder if it's even real after all... What I see is schools need a huge number of teachers. (...) It makes you think, "What's all that fuss about the lack of jobs?" I have these thoughts because personally, I have this viewpoint, because I am in this situation. (G., 26, female, elementary school teacher, small town in the North-West)

Hence, in some cases, the choice not to relocate from small towns to bigger cities is a choice of economic autonomy, a way to build a personal path of progressive independence from the family. To P., the goal of securing a job that affords her a certain level of independence prevails over the option of continuing her education and moving to another city, although the mobility choice is seen as a common, relatable goal among her own generation: "*moving to a big city, like many of my girlfriends did...*". Generally speaking, the most practised choice among interviewees is that of mobility, which, if acted for study purposes, prolongs the attainment of autonomy from the family of origin, at least in economic terms. Conversely, in this case the strategy of managing uncertainty equals supporting the objective of greater autonomy from the provincial context. Furthermore, the desire for autonomy as a self-realization project appears to be the consequence of socialization to the values of a small mountain town in Northern Italy:

As I was saying, I basically grew up in the mountains, since my town is at 1000 meters [above sea level] and has 1000 inhabitants, so it's a tiny community really, and I guess that makes you grow up attached to the old values, as in being more work-oriented and, you know, family-oriented. This led me to – I mean, instead of thinking about studying or moving to a big city, like many of my girlfriends did – it led me to think, "No, I want to get a job, I want to have my own money, build my own life little by little." (P., 29, female, healthcare assistant, small town in the North-East)

Other experiences highlight the twist work introduces in biographies, especially in terms of mobility, reflexivity, and intersubjectivity. In E.'s case, for instance, the adult world's gaze (especially her mother's) highlights the

lack of possibilities that characterizes suburban areas (as opposed to big cities), which end up not being on par with young men and women's, as well as their parents' expectations, and most of all with the investment, financial and otherwise, in terms of education and work experiences. Thus, the suburban context appears inadequate to guarantee the desired linearity between education and professional ambitions. In E.'s account, the strategy that intervenes to support her projects, and to enter into the job market, becomes that of letting others speak (adults), letting their words justify and guide a choice of mobility:

[My mother] is the first to tell me, "It's pointless for you to have taken that course, it was expensive... you've done a lot already, also internship-wise." Oftentimes, when my teacher asked me for a favor, I would help him out so I would get noticed by professionals in my region or outside. "You've done so much," he told me, "What are you staying here for, there's practically nothing for you here."  
(E., 23, female, aspiring make-up artist, metropolitan area, Central Italy)

At the same time, this imagined linearity between expectations, educational paths and work trajectories can be denied by the interviewees' own experiences. The failure to reach one's goals, in V.'s story, is consciously related with the transformation and precarization of work, in this case in the medical field. The decision – or more appropriately, the necessity – to change majors due to the lack of jobs – which required relocation in the interviewee's case – resulted from the confrontation with a changed occupational system that offers less security and possibilities to newcomers. The structural dimensions of the work system, then, produce a misalignment between aspirations and outcomes, which young men and women have to deal with individually, as V.'s lived experience shows:

I. Yeah, I had different expectations.  
R. Do you feel like sharing?  
I. There's not much to share, really. Let's just say I had a project, I wanted to specialize, but then things changed a lot during my study years, as in, when I took the admission test, specialization was a given, like, it was normal to specialize after you finished.  
(V., 28, female, medical doctor under training, medium-sized town, Northern Italy)

Territory can also play an essential role in supporting or undermining one's confidence in their ambitions. In the story of L., who lives in a small suburban town in one of the main islands of Italy, her work projects are heavily influenced by the local economic context, in which the lack of resources results in a lack of openness towards what is deemed as 'luxury' services.

So, actually, I had a project for this year, but it's going to be hard – I wanted to live off make up, that's it... but I don't think it's viable, because it's not as simple as... it's not a basic commodity, so it's expensive... I mean, people are not too inclined, especially here, to spend on treatments that are considered luxury treatments, as I said, and thus are expensive.

(L., 25, female, bachelor, make up student, small town, main islands)

Along with the degree of resource availability in the places where the subjects live, the subject's different wishes also play a role in orienting their work experiences, contributing to question the hierarchical relation between urban and suburban centers.

As the collected interviews show, the non-linearity of the entrance into the job market, as a whole, has an immediate impact on the transition to adulthood: the subject's experiences frequently show a misalignment between educational and occupational paths, as well as a great amount of experimentation involving different work experiences, all of them characterized by precarity. In summary, work seems to be the realm that most chiefly orients life choices (also, and especially, in terms of mobility), generates expectations and fears, harnesses passions. It is the ground on which strategies for connecting one's own path with the surrounding macro context take shape, and also one of the realms in which young people's narrations most show a tension between obsolete and alternative work models due to the lack of social recognition of these alternatives.

From this point of view, some biographies show a concrete capacity to come to terms with the limits of the context, and to modify their path on the basis of this awareness.

### ***Interpersonal relationships***

The research underlines at least two features that equally characterize the collected biographies. While there is an 'ecologic specificity' to young people's friendships, as well as a context-based influence on the creation or interruption of these relationships (Allen, 1981) (and, consequently, more fluidity to them, which also derives from the widespread openness to mobility [Schneider & Stevenson, 1999]), many interviewees highlight the importance and durability of longtime friendships begun in the territories where they were born and where they grew up. These friendships are challenged by study- and work-related mobility, and this tension imposes a reorganization of them. The adjustment of relationships to distance – aided by an intensive use of technology – seems to characterize many of the examined biographical paths. The subjects invest time and energy into the maintenance of the relationships deemed as closest, and the strength of those relationships comes from that very investment (every time they reunite is like the first time, or as if they had met the day before, thus, seeing each other every day has no value in and of itself, it is not a

prerequisite for the existence of a relationship). The interviews outline a wide range of options when it comes to relationship management. Friendship clearly emerges as a value, a non-negotiable part of life, the link between personal and collective dimension, as well as a space in which strategies of transition to adulthood are created through sharing, listening, and recognition.

Living in a different place from one's hometown further strengthens this value, not only for longtime friendships but also for the relationships that are forged in the new places of residence. In this latter case (whereas in the former, oftentimes, 'being there' is enough), the bond is confirmed and substantiated by the sharing of concrete experiences (cohabitation, politics, attending university).

Distance also strengthened [the bond] because, back when we lived in the same town, we would always do the same things, it was kind of a routine, but now that we are not here as often there's a bit more variety, like it's an opportunity to get together, so we might as well do something nicer, we go to Milan more often – which we didn't use to do, even if we went out every night, we wouldn't go to Milan, we'd go to Monza, but now, since I only visit so many times a year, we do something different, that's it.

(S., 25, female, works and trains as a speech therapist, medium-sized town, Northern Italy, metropolitan area, Center)

At the same time, choosing to remain in a suburban area means being the observer of the others' mobility, and thus, potentially, 'running out' of relationships. In this case, the individuals' emotional and psychological resources concur to reach a different elaboration of that loss and rarefaction of contact, which is no longer a daily occurrence.

R. How important are your friends, your peers, in your daily life?

I. Well, I'm a rather solitary person. I have few close friends, and I don't even see them every day, since a few of them moved quite... not even that far away, but you know, they moved for work. I'm not a very clingy person, I don't need to hear from my girlfriends every day, and furthermore, as I said, I have few of them. They are definitely important to me, but I don't need their presence every day.

(L., 25, female, high school graduate, make up student, small town, main islands)

Those who do not move – and live in suburban areas in which relocating for work is not necessary or desired – can benefit from longtime relationships that persist through time and are based on proximity, and thus, on greater simplicity. In these cases, the long life of those friendships is presented as a merit.

Work itself is an element that reduces the frequency of encounters with friends. For some of the interviewees, these are the relationships that end up

being sacrificed – due to lack of time – to romantic relationships, while the places and modalities of sharing change: daily contexts (university, work) facilitate contacts, trumping modes of relationship based more on the conviviality or fortuitousness of leisure time, which are characterized in the interviews as belonging to former times of greater lightheartedness and less responsibility.

So yeah, friends have – not really a marginal role, but time for friends has drastically reduced over the years, the time I could dedicate to them. Which in fact is time to dedicate to myself, but we have ways to share time in other situations, you know, university, work, and even outside of these spaces, with some difficulty. The purely ludic and recreational moments have definitely reduced.

(S., 29, male, student and waiter, metropolitan area, Center)

It is also interesting to note that the importance of friendship is often proportional to the degree in which it is understood through the categories of family: friends are seen as ‘brothers/sisters’, a second family. They are described as essential inasmuch as they can share daily micro-practices or leisure-time passions that restore a sense of identity that is characterized as opposed to the realms of ‘duty’ (such as work): music, sport, hobbies. This strong emotional sharing can even end up orienting the individual’s choices regarding, for instance, a mobility project (staying where one’s martial arts team is based, or in the city where their friends live). Leaving the parents’ home and starting forms of cohabitation (or living on one’s own) are also part of this framework. This does not necessarily imply financial independence: students who move to attend university are often economically supported by their parents, sometimes holding jobs that are insufficient to make them completely independent, while those who are precariously employed do not attain full autonomy and are sometimes forced to return to their parents’ homes.

The importance of the *adult gaze* (Martelli Pitti, 2014) is confirmed by many studies on young people, which underline the ambivalence at play in the processes of negotiation of visibility, agibility and recognition between younger people and the ‘adult’ generations. In this framework, the act of leaving home, with the consequent interruption of daily relationships, is seen in many interviews as conducive to an improvement of family relationships, regardless of where the subjects grew up.

We are even closer now than before, it’s a good thing, perhaps leaving home helped. I didn’t have a good relationship with my mother, it was always a very conflicted one, but when I left home, distance allowed for more distension, and not seeing each other every day, like we used to, also had a big impact.

(A., 28, male, artist, medium-sized town in the North-East, metropolitan area, Northern Italy)

Relationships with parents are for the most part non-conflictual, but they are marked by strong ambivalence: the stories often describe economic dependence, sometimes they relate a strong desire for autonomy, but overall, they reinforce the importance of emotional bonds in coping with daily life – not only from a material standpoint.

However, those very emotional bonds must also be battled to defend personal choices and their right to be legitimized. Where conflict does happen, it is characterized by the lack of recognition that stems from the discrepancy between the parents' linear life paths and their children's unmet expectations around life planning.

### ***Facing the pandemic***

The picture resulting from the field work is composite and varied. The interviews clearly show that transitions to adulthood (the plural form is intended) are made through negotiations, crowded with relationships, and nurtured by a reflexive attitude. They confirm that there is no linearity to this path, and they also show that its end point is not obvious: work, the construction of emotional attachments, and living projects are not univocal. The interviewees' words showcase a wide range of different, and even mutually exclusive possibilities, which generate diverse paths, roles, and relationships. Structural dimensions – e.g. work precarity, the unequal distribution of resources across different territories – and new ambitions and expectations – e.g. rediscovering a passion that had been neglected out of 'duty' – both play a role in this dynamic. At any rate, they show awareness of one's context and how it affects the construction of biographical paths.

In this sense, the sudden and unexpected introduction of the public security measures related to the Covid-19 pandemic has been a great device, an incubator of reflections around work, projects (and thus, the future), and wishes. Not only did the forced break of quarantine put a halt to daily life for all of us, it also hampered some projects of transition to adulthood. In A.'s words, regarding a 'more traditional' life project such as marriage and couple cohabitation, one is forced to come to terms with a short-term future that must be redefined:

And then there's the wedding, too. We were planning our wedding for May 30, but we had to push it back to September, which was obviously a hassle, but even more than that, it inevitably gives you a sense of injustice, because the wedding was all planned, all we did was change the date. Our relocation was also delayed. We had already started moving, we had begun setting up our home...

(A., 29, male, engineer in layoff due to Covid, born in a medium-sized town in the Center-South, metropolitan area in Central Italy)

The sanitary emergency implies a rise in uncertainty in a wider, more structural sense that is not limited to personal projects. In response to this, on the one hand, the people interviewed seem to be willing to modify (not renounce) their plans, welcoming change and accepting to enter an unknown time stream; on the other hand, a fear of the future emerges. In S.'s eyes, the conditions created by the first phase of the pandemic result in the necessary questioning of his projects, such as leaving the family circuit and relocating from Southern to Northern Italy.

I'm trying to clear my head as a way to kill time. I'm focusing on my hobbies right now. (...) I don't know if I should go to Rome, or to Milan. (...) My idea when I came back from Liverpool was to get back here, relax for a week and then travel to various cities and visit some universities as well, like, spend the weekend and check the situation there, talk to the students, see what job opportunities there are, but none of this was possible given the current state of affairs, so I ended up staying here, and I don't know about my major now... I might even end up taking it here, even if there are less career opportunities than... I don't know why but there are less here compared to Central or Northern Italy.

(S., 26, male, student, temporarily living with his family in a medium-sized town on a main island due to Covid)

However, the postponement of some life projects is matched by unprecedented opportunities for re-projecting within the framework of a new temporality in which the present dimension is the one most densely lived (in the expectation of an indefinite future). D., for instance, found inspiration in this new daily dimension, and rebuilt a relationship with herself from the vantage point of a less agitated living pace:

I took it really well. Perhaps because I've been lucky with my job, since I was offered an open-ended contract 10 days before the quarantine started. That gave me a lot of security. Many of my co-workers, unfortunately, were laid off. I know I am lucky compared to many others, this probably made my life easier during this period. Aside from that, I took the quarantine as a moment of self-reflection, of inspiration. I rediscovered myself, in a way. I'm always so busy, always out, never taking a break, but that was a moment in which I said to myself, "You have to take a break, you can't make four appointments in one day."

(D., 27, female, office worker, metropolitan area in Northern Italy)

Rethinking daily routines and redefining everyday priorities invites the possibility to focus on a dilated present. Without romanticizing a complicated time in which many interviewees had to cope with job losses and layoffs

– a condition that amplifies the feeling of uncertainty and makes it difficult to devise strategies to manage it – the new meaning attributed to the everyday dimension does affect wider mechanisms, and not only contingent ones, opening up new spaces for the construction of subjectivity. This is what seems to emerge through the words of G., who is able to resume what she previously did not have the time to learn, and to reconsider her past choices, dedicating herself to something for which she feels a desire:

Let's say the industrial design I studied is not really that much of a passion for me compared to, say, fine arts, which is what I'm finding myself doing now that I have the time, and I haven't even learned that, but I just feel like doing it, you know.  
(G., 24, female, artisan, small center in Northern Italy)

Interestingly, this new relationship with time enables the subjects to escape the 'anxiety' – which often follows them as students, future workers, and young adults – that comes from feeling forced to perform and respond to external pressure from the adult world. A pressure that is exacerbated by the lack of recognition from the institutions and the adult world. Broadly speaking, in the face of adults' (especially parents') expectations on their future (especially at work), the participants highlight the need to live in the present moment and postpone more defined and definitive projects to the end of the study career. A request for additional time, motivated by the multiplicity of choices that arise in the path towards adulthood, is more consistent than in previous generations.

But this 'exceptional' moment, in M.'s words, gives rise to the possibility to investigate what used to be considered 'normal', and to question it, imagining existence models that are more sustainable for our wellbeing:

I think the lockdown was a positive event in this sense, because it made us stop for a moment, as in, it completely overturned our lives, our daily routines, the ordinariness and frenzy of our daily existences, it made us actually stop and think that sometimes we, I think we all worry about the future, about having to become something, or find a job, or start a family.  
(M., 23, male, student, metropolitan area, Southern Italy)

The emergency prompted by the pandemic confirms and emphasizes the differences between territories and the complexity of the relationship between young people's biographies and the resources that are available to them. The interviewees actively build strategies to manage the growing uncertainty, reflexively negotiating their relationship with time and opening unprecedented spaces for subjectivization that redefine their relationship with the present as well as mid- and long-term planning. In this framework, in line with the longitudinal research, it will be important to reassess these

changes in the future, and determine if they will have become structural features, or if they will have remained temporary and contingent elements.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, we tried to explore, empirically and theoretically, the complexity of the phenomenon of ‘transition to adulthood’ in young Italians. By focusing our attention on life experiences and life courses (Saraceno, 1987), we were able to see how this experience is strongly affected by the geographical, cultural, social and economic contexts in which the biographies of the young people interviewed are immersed, and to observe the subjective meanings they ascribe to those contexts. In line with the studies that in the past decade have highlighted the further complexification of the relation between youth and adulthood (more precisely, of what was traditionally associated with these two categories) due to the rise of uncertainty and precarization (Rebughini, Colombo & Leonini, 2017), the results of our research show, in the first place, that a common feature of the biographies of the young people we encountered is a perception of uncertainty. This perception largely results from their relationship with the job market – and therefore, with the complex process of reaching autonomy. The traditional definition of what is meant by ‘transition to adulthood’ is refused in its singular sense and multiplied to account for individual experiences, whose fundamental variables are personal backgrounds (social, familial, cultural, and territorial). The experience of leaving the parents’ home, as reported by some interviews (along with the high degree of independence and self-management capacity that leaving home requires), questions the traditional concept of autonomy (which is mostly understood in its material sense, as the ability to produce economic value) which overlaps with the category of ‘adult’. Moreover, at an empirical level, the present work has tried to contribute to the debate on these themes by showing the high degree at which territory affects opportunities, resources, relationships, prospects and ambitions in the subjective experiences of the interviewees, and that, at the same time, the variety of the experiences related by the interviews force us to steer clear of polarized approaches (North/South, urban/suburban), mobilizing factors that are central to the relation between the individual plane of life choices and the structural and collective plane in which these choices take place.

In a broader sense, within this framework of change, the research does however suggest a further element to reflection. The elements that have traditionally characterized the entrance into adulthood – financial stability, relational stability, autonomous housing (despite a general acknowledgment of attachment to the original family), the construction of one’s own family – do not seem to be called into question. Reaching these stages – in this specif-

ic order – continuously appears, in the subjects' narrations, as an indicator of self-realization and biographical transition, and so does, conversely, the fear of future discrepancy between projectuality and realization. Finally, the interviews highlight the importance of friendship among peers as a space for recognition and exchange, as well as subjectivation and construction of alternative relational models.

Secondly, then, the paper underlines the fact that, in this back-and-forth movement between confirmation and negation of the traditional markers of transition to adulthood, geographical context plays a role in the narrations and biographies of young people, especially when it is characterized by scarcity of resources, and therefore, by the impossibility of recognition and realization of personal aspirations: the insufficiency of opportunities explicates the fear of social immobility and of a delayed entrance into the workforce. However, the interviewees also shed light on the polyvalency of what young people interpret as opportunity: in some cases, rather than work ambitions, relationships (family and friendship) are the deciding factor to orient life choices (for instance, the choice to remain close to home, which is, for some, more of a 'non-choice', a condition that is simply never questioned).

Lastly, the research shows that the sanitary emergency, with the subsequent containment policies, represents a sudden event that amplifies pre-existing conditions, characteristics, and differences, but at the same time, it triggers novel transformations, at a collective as well as individual level.

Specifically, what we are able to see through the interviews is that these tensions show up at a subjective level, where they clash with the resources deployed by young people to confront this emergency. Here, the research highlights the presence of a twofold tension, which is particularly tied to the specific relationship the individuals build with time: on the one hand, there is an increase of work-related uncertainty, and therefore, of uncertainty around the full realization of autonomy, which is associated with increased fear of the future; on the other hand, the forced transformations of the daily dimension allow young people to give new meaning to the present, free from pressure and tension, and build a new relationship with themselves. It then appears that new strategies are being devised on the plane of daily life, strategies that enable young people to not only control the amplification of uncertainty (Leccardi, 2009) but also build new spaces for subjectivation. This is because, when the macro level presents excessive anomalies and complexity, acting in the micro, in everyday life, is a strategy used by many of the young people interviewed.

In this sense, it will be useful to observe the future developments of longitudinal research, in order to comprehend the eventual consolidation of these strategies through time<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the aim of the research is to engage all youth encountered to participate in three interviews, conducted annually over the three-year period 2019-2022.

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DICHIARAZIONE SOSTITUTIVA DI CERTIFICAZIONE  
SULLA DISTRIBUZIONE DEL LAVORO DI RICERCA

La sottoscritta Maria Grazia Gambardella,  
nata a Nocera Inferiore (SA) il 23/07/1974 e residente in via Giuseppe Ugolini 19, 20125,  
Milano,

la sottoscritta Arianna Mainardi,  
Nata a Milano il 20/04/1982 e residente in Via Ugo Bassi 24, 20159, Milano;

la sottoscritta Stefania Voli,  
Nata a Cuneo il 20/11/1979 e residente in Via Livio Zambecari 18, 40134, Bologna

In relazione al capitolo

Gambardella, M. G., Mainardi, A., & Voli, S. (2021). «Young People Between Uncertainty and Agency. An Analysis of the Strategies of Transition to Adulthood in Italy». Italian Journal of Sociology of Education, 15-38. Doi 10.14658/pupj-ijse-2021-2-2

Dichiarano

che, pur essendo frutto di un lavoro comune, è opera di:

Maria Grazia Gambardella: Motionless Youth?, Dealing with a Structural Uncertainty: the Italian Context;

Arianna Mainardi per la seguente parte: Transition Strategies and Relationship with the Territory: the Interviews; Occupational Trajectories, Expectations and Negotiations;

Stefania Voli per la seguente parte: Interpersonal Relationships; Facing the Pandemic.

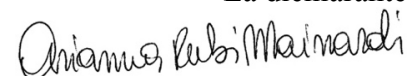
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