

# **“Gender Is the Mood You Feel Yourself; You Can Feel Male or Female, a Little Bit Male and a Little Bit Female, or Neither”. Youths’ Sexual Scripts and (Personal) Gender Identity**

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Abstract: Using Gagnon and Simon’s script theory, the author tries to highlight some processes linked to gender identity and sexuality among young people (18-26 years). In the first section, the article will focus almost exclusively on Gagnon and Simon’s theory and how the concept of script is articulated on the three different levels – the intrapsychic script, the interpersonal script, and the cultural scenario. Then, the second section will outline some personal and interpersonal scripts of the young people interviewed, through which they form their own gender identity. The aim of the article is to bring to light the processes underlying how young people develop their scripts in relation to their own identity, linked to sex, gender and sexual orientation.

Keywords, gender identity, script theory, reflexivity, agency

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## Introduction: a gender norm(al) is pure fiction

Let me think...If I had to explain to a child what gender is, I would say it's something you feel inside. I don't even think you can explain it in words. It's something inborn, it's the way you see yourself, the way you feel comfortable with yourself.

This is how Gabriele, a twenty-one-year-old straight cisgender, would describe gender to a child. For Marcello, on the other hand,

gender is simply a concept created to facilitate bureaucracy; gender serves no purpose other than to define your outward appearance only in physical terms, and says absolutely nothing about you.

Marcello is also a young student, twenty-five years old, cisgender and queer. While Gabriele assigns gender more profoundly individual qualities that are almost undefinable, that escape words, and are positive, Marcello, on the contrary, sees gender as an alienating, social power mechanism. Lucia, a bisexual cisgender girl aged twenty-one, tells that

recently I also started to question what gender is, and I would say that gender is how a person feels and chooses to define themselves. While sex is the way we are born and is a strictly natural thing, not chosen, gender is how a person recognises themselves, they may be male, female or something else which is not a mix of male and female but something else, non-binary gender.

Lucia introduces the difference between sex and gender, assigning a kind of natural existence to the former, independent from an individual's will, while to the second assigns a natural dependence on the individual, as it is the individual who chooses the gender they most recognise themselves in, and gender can reflect one of the two sexes, both or go beyond binary difference.

Lucia, Marcello and Gabriele are part of a non-representative sample of young people (18-27) on which research was conducted on the representations of gender identity in young people. From these first comments, it is quite easy to see how young people's thoughts are complex and articulated, in the same way that the various theoretical and scientific approaches to the study of gender and gender identity are complex and articulated. For example, we can perceive a Foucauldian undertone in Marcello's negative opinion on gender as a bureaucratic construct and control device. This article therefore sets out to offer a careful analysis of the interviews with young males and females, aiming to highlight the *sexual and gender script* articulated on three different and dynamically inter-related levels – cultural scenarios, interpersonal scripts and intrapsychic scripts. The sociological approach underpinning my considerations is therefore that developed by John H. Gagnon and

William Simon who, from the 1970s, outlined the theory of sexual scripts. The choice of taking the perspective of symbolic interactionism as developed by Gagnon and Simon to study the processes through which young people process their own sexual identity, gender and sexuality is due to the fact that I fully agree with the hypothesis according to which “these scripts embody what the intersubjective culture treats as sexuality (cultural scenarios) and what the individual believes to be the domain of sexuality” (Laumann et al., 1994, p. 6). In fact, Gagnon and Simon’s theory “brings together the two levels of meaning (the intersubjective or cultural and the intrapsychic) and links them to a system of interpersonal action” (id., p. 7).

The work is structured as follows. Given that, to paraphrase Michael Kimmel (2007, p. xi), Gagnon and Simon’s arguments are as simple as their implications are vast and complicated, in the following paragraph I will focus almost exclusively on the concept of script and how it is articulated on the three different levels. Then I will try to outline some personal and interpersonal scripts of the young people or emerging adults (Arnett, 2014) interviewed, through which they form their own gender identity.

### **William Simon and John H. Gagnon: the (social) world of (ordinary) sexuality**

We were interested in ordinary people and everyday tasks: how did people get home from work, have dinner, turn on the television, watch the television, have sex together, then go to sleep? And in a way we were the voice of the common man and woman, which is what sociology pretends to be. It’s the story of everyday life. We were in fact the enemies of the traditions that stressed the power of the sexual for purposes of social change or appealing to sexuality as a source of personal or political redemption, or as the primary terrain of social meaning” (Gagnon, 2004, p. 280).

In this part of the interview given in 1998, Gagnon simply sums up not only the underlying question that drove all his research conducted with his colleague Simon but also, implicitly, the ontology within which these are immediately placed. There is nothing magical or enchanting about sexuality, as the world itself is neither magical or enchanted (id., p. 282); nor is sexuality a powerful “psychosexual drive as a fixed biological attribute” (Gagnon & Simon, 2014, p. 6) that holds “priority in causal explanation” (id, p. 273); finally, sexuality is not a social device of power or a text, a discourse. All of Gagnon and Simon’s work aimed to overcome Foucault’s “too texty” model (Gagnon, 2004, p. 280) and Freud’s “drive reduction model” (Gagnon & Simon, 2014, p. 9). Completely distant from the German tradition of Schutzian or Bergerian-Luckmanian constructionism, Gagnon and Simon have always

followed the US position of pragmatism. Particularly, Kenneth Burke and the Chicago School are the two main theoretical frameworks within which Gagnon and Simon developed their sociological theory of sexuality<sup>1</sup>. Following Burke, Gagnon and Simon assumed that the sex dimension “is not viewed as an intrinsically significant aspect of human behaviour; rather, the sexual is viewed as becoming significant either when it is defined as such by collective life” (Simon & Gagnon, 184, p. 54). While Freud chose the sexual element as the one able to explain all the rest, Gagnon and Simon on the contrary claim that sex is “one element in a dynamic network of forces, including gender, class, race/ethnicity, nationality” (Gagnon, 2004, p. 273). Following Gagnon and Simon’s intention to “dépouiller le domaine de la sexualité de son mystère, de son aura et de son exceptionnalité” (Bozon & Giami, 1999, p. 68) leads us to acknowledge a very simple fact, that of the “banalité du ‘fonctionnement sexual normal’” (Giami, 2008, p. 24): there is nothing natural understood as *normal* in sexuality (Plummer, 2010, p. 169). Following the route of de-sacralisation reported by Gagnon and Simon does not only mean stopping considering sexuality as “un objet tabou” (id.) but, in my opinion, it also and above all means not *believing* that it is something permanent, unchangeable and imposed from above; it means stripping sexuality of its transcendental aura that sees it equipped with its own specific universal *essence* that is fixed “over time and across cultures” (DeLamter & Hyde, 1998, p. 16); it means placing sexuality in the immanence of contingent, relative/relational forms it can assume over the social space and time of everyday life (Brickell, 2006; Jackson, 2007). Gagnon and Simon’s stance is that of defining, in an epistemically objective manner, a social fact or reality that is ontologically subjective. Let me explain. The essentialist approach merely assigns an objective, ontological existence to sexuality – ‘I am of one or other sex whatever my subjective experience (i.e., I want the sex I have/don’t have)’. On the contrary, Gagnon and Simon’s powerful intuition was that of assigning sexuality a subjective ontology (my sexuality depends on the subjective experience I have each time) but that is epistemically objective (my sexuality must be recognised as true independently of someone’s feelings and attitudes). In my opinion, the five assumptions underlying the scripting theory outlined by the two sociologists attempt to move in this direction. I will briefly illustrate these ideological underpinnings. The first establishes that “sexuality is not an ‘exemplary function’ or universal phenomenon which is the same in all historical times and cultural spaces” (Gagnon, 2004, p. 133). This first assumption has two consequences: that “sexual” is not simply the answer to an equally universal biological sexual imperative (reproduction)

<sup>1</sup> Not being able here to trace the journey undertaken by Gagnon and Simon, to present Gagnon and Simon’s script theory I refer to the rigorous and enlightening essay by Rinaldi (2017). See also the preface of Jeffrey Escoffier (2004).

and that “sexual” is equal to all other activities in social life – sexual does not have a supra-social origin or a-social nature. The second assumption states that all sexual conduct must be understood as “local phenomena with specific meanings and purposes in particular cultural-historical contexts” (id.). While Gagnon and Simon particularly emphasise and focus on the cultural relativity of sexual conduct, i.e., the fact that sexuality is an expression of a given culture in a given society, we can also go ‘lower’, meaning that we can also include the ‘culture’ not only of a society understood in its ‘macro’ sense but also the social circles each of us belong to and within which we act. As we will see, in fact, the gender fluidity of the people interviewed shows particularly the ability to harmonise their own gender identity according to the social context in which they act, using the cultural and symbolic resources made available to them. The third principle, linked to the previous one, underlines the epistemological aspect of sexuality: “the sciences that studied sexuality are themselves historical cultural products” (id.). Consequently, all the various categories used to explain, for example, various forms of sexual conduct – heterosexuality, homosexuality, etc. – are “common products of the changes in Western life over the last two hundred years” (id., p. 134). Sex research “invents social facts as well as helping to promulgate them” (id.). The same scripting theory invented scripts when it allowed us to acknowledge them. The last two principles relate to the individual, and state that “people learn how to be sexual in a specific culture and in a specific social group within any culture” (id.) – the fourth principle – and “appropriate patterns of reproductive, gender, and sexual conduct are all products of specific cultures and can all be viewed as examples of socially scripted conduct” (id., p. 135) – the fifth and final assumption. In my opinion, the providential and fitting statement by which Cirus Rinaldi condenses the whole extent of Gagnon and Simon’s theory into just a few words highlights all the implications of these two last assumptions: “we are not *merely* sexual, but rather, we *become sexual*” (Rinaldi & Scarcelli, 2016, p. 22). Personally, I would rather reformulate this expression in the following way: that we become (*hetero/homo/trans/a/pan/bi/*)sexual and we become so not all at once<sup>2</sup>; as we will see further on, this is not just a redundant terminological specification. Gagnon and Simon report how gender differences are, incorrectly, perceived as biological differences when, on the other hand “what has been confused in this debate is the difference between reproductive conduct, gender conduct, and sexual conduct” (Gagnon, 2004, p. 135). Conduct linked to reproductive activity reflects, but only *partially* – as the two authors state – the biological differences between men and women. What we must avoid is assuming these

<sup>2</sup> As Gagnon and Simon wrote (2014, p. 33): “it is clear that we do not become sexual all at once”.

biological differences as “biological roots” that determine gender differences – “looking to ‘natural differences’ between women and men for lessons about sexual conduct is an error” (id.).

The *error* is therefore that of “identifier ces scripts qui a favorisé l’hégémonie des modèles biologiques, naturalistes, dans l’explication de nos conduites sexuelles” (Ançant & Desmons, 2017, p. 10). In other words, the *error* is that of assuming that, for example, differences linked to reproductive activity mark normal heterosexual behaviour. When Simon and Gagnon write that

it is our current feeling that the problem of finding out how people become homosexual requires an adequate theory of how they become heterosexual; that is, one cannot explain homosexuality in one way and leave heterosexuality as a large residual category labelled ‘all other’ (Simon & Gagnon, 1967, p. 179).

They “free” homosexuality from the shackles of unnaturalness, because sexuality itself is “freed” from the shackles of “naturalness”. It is not stated that, in nature, there is nothing like sexuality – that would be very pretentious – but it is stated that the naturalness of sexuality does not coincide with or determine its social quality. There is nothing *normal in the sense of normative or regular (in the sense of regularity) in sexuality* as “you don’t have biologically naked sex behaviour, you have socially clothed sexual conduct” (Gagnon, 2004, p. 273). A little later, Gagnon also states:

sex becomes behaviour when we decide to take off the cultural clothing of sexuality, which is its socially ‘natural’ condition, to reveal the unnatural condition of sex as naked behaviour (id.).

That which is sexual cannot emerge if not within and from the social:

without the proper element of a script that defines the situation, names the actors, and plots the behaviour, nothing sexual is likely to happen. One can easily conceive of numerous social situations in which all or almost all of the ingredients of a sexual event are present but that remain non-sexual in that not even sexual arousal occurs (Gagnon & Simon, 2014: p. 17).

All sexuality is forged by scripts, not only perverse sexuality, as on the other hand Freud stated (Gagnon & Simon, 2014), following scripts as the so-called normal one is the result of sexual development driven by natural impulses. And sexuality is neither the body – with its actions, its desires – of individuals (Gagnon, 2004, p. 136) in the same way that there are no sexualities – in the sense of ways of being sexual or practising one’s (own) sexuality – that are natural and others unnatural, normal and others abnormal, but there are “many ways to become, to be, to act, to feel sexual. There is no one human sexuality, but rather a wide variety of sexuality” (Gagnon, 1977, Preface). Talking of human *sexuality* does not mean talking of natural sexuality,

i.e., assigning one form or another behind the label of ‘human’, i.e., ‘natural’, i.e., ‘deriving from some biological essence’. If we want to talk about some form of *human* sexuality then we have to assign sexuality that specifically human quality that derives from *our* ability to create shared meanings, symbols, *sense*. With this understanding, therefore, Burke was applied by Gagnon and Simon (Plummer, 2017), leading them to develop the underlying foundation of their theory – the *script*. By script, they mean “the organization of mutually shared conventions that allows two or more actors to participate in a complex act involving mutual dependence” (Gagnon & Simon, 2014, p. 18). The social element is the script: “you are always enacting a script [...]. And in a way there is only the social” (Gagnon, 2004, p. 283). Our being ‘born’ sexual is turned into becoming sexual thanks to scripts, because “scripts are involved in learning the meaning of internal states, organizing the sequences of specifically sexual acts, decoding novel situations, setting the limits on sexual responses and linking meanings from non-sexual aspects of life to specifically sexual experiences” (Gagnon & Simon, 2014, p. 17). Everything that has to do with the sphere of being sexual, i.e., having a sex, becomes being sexual only through sexual scripts. For instance, Gagnon writes that “the script is what connects feelings of desire and pleasure or disgust and disintegration with the bodily activities associated with physical touching and physical signs of arousal” (Gagnon, 2004, p. 136). If Simon and Gagnon cannot be attributed the paternity of the ‘social constructionist’ approach to sexuality (Plummer, 1996), we must however well understand what we mean by the assumption that “sexuality for humans [...] is social and symbolic through and through” (id., p. xi; 2017, p. xii). What Gagnon and Simon primarily achieve is the de-naturalizing and de-essentializing of sexuality, and in their opinion, this passage coincides with the post-modernization of sex (Gagnon, 1973, p. 26 et seq.). The essay entitled “The postmodernization of sex” by Simon (1996) is, in this sense, a small yet masterful exercise in the sociological reading of the sex-gender bond. The post-modernization of sex coincides with the denaturalization of sex. Here, without going into the details of the dense and, still today, more than ever current passages, I will go straight to the point that I wish to focus on in Simon’s contribution. Having made gender the discriminating element in the explanation of sexual behaviour – from Freud onwards –, Simon notes, was a serious error that led to the creation of ‘normal’ heterosexuality, ‘normal’ homosexuality which, however, are expressed in “living forms” that are so rare that these few can be displayed “in museums of natural history” (id., p. 35). Simon’s wit however leads me to wonder: who is the normal heterosexual (Fidolini, 2016; 2019)? Who is the normal homosexual (Whittier & Melendez, 2004; Schwartz, 2007)? Simon offers a very important distinction, in the passage from a paradigmatic to a post-paradigmatic social order:

the response of a self-conscious post-modernism recognizes that there is a fundamental difference between individuals who live identical or nearly identical lives and who experience that fact and those who live identical or nearly identical lives and do not experience that fact: lives may be patterned and still be experienced as invented (Simon, 1996, p. 38).

The difference lies in the mutual conditioning between the three different levels of scripts, which I will introduce with yet another reference to the process being analysed, that of the denaturalization of the sex. This process

does not require an abandonment of all we have learned about the stabilities and varieties of the biological substratum, but it does require the effort of going beyond that and examining what can only be understood in terms of individuals situated in specific points of time and social space: individuals with and within history (id, p. 30).

As Simon explains a few pages earlier, the problem is not “*what we think about the sexual*” but rather “*how we think about the sexual, not a matter of explanation, but one of understanding*” (id., p. 26). What is the point of knowing all about sex and sexuality if we do not know *how to understand it, and how to link it to our identity*? Simon and Gagnon do not refer to an isolated, monad, self-referential individual; Simon and Gagnon refer to an individual who is well-rooted in society and in time, reflexive and aware of their social-being. And the sexual, and the origins of sexual desire, depend on their social-being. De-naturalizing the sexual means stopping viewing the sexual as a “matter of organs, orifices, and phylogenetic legacies” (id., p. 27). Remaining anchored to the naturalization of sex, for example, prevents the “recognition of the existence of a plurality of heterosexualities” (id.). But are there many ways of being heterosexual in addition to simply heterosexual (Gagnon, 1977, p. 165 et seq.)? As a first response, I would like to introduce the concept of scripts, as we can state that the existence of a plurality of heterosexualities depends on a plurality of scripts.

Generally, the concept of ‘script’ brings to mind that of a plan or scheme, as it allows us to organise many varying symbolic and non-verbal element within a unit, to obtain a structure of the sexual action, i.e., “an organized and time-bound sequence of conduct through which persons both envisage future behaviour and check on the quality of ongoing conduct” (Gagnon, 2004, p. 61). The script has a strong ‘regulatory’ or ‘normative’ power, in the sense that it can

name the actors, describe their qualities, indicate the motives for behaviour of the participants, and set the sequences of appropriate activities, both verbal and non-verbal, that should take place to conclude behaviour successfully and allow transitions into new activities (id.).



Scripts therefore work on several levels – symbolic, cognitive, cultural and social –, they are a sort of matrix for coordinating the resources and constraints that belong to the various ontological layers of reality. Even if, as Simon and Gagnon state, “scripts are essentially a metaphor for conceptualizing the production of behavior within social life” (Simon & Gagnon, 1986, p. 98), scripts are much more than a simple metaphor by virtue of the fact that they underlie the social experience of the individual. Simon and Gagnon outline three separate levels of script: cultural scenarios, interpersonal scripts and intrapsychic scripts.

Let us briefly look at the key characteristics of each of these levels – macro/meso/micro – of scripts. The cultural scenarios provide the *culture*, i.e., the institutional and collective forms governing the assignment and performance of roles. We can therefore assign cultural scenarios a kind of time 0 in relation to individual action – a relative, not ontological priority – in the sense that the individual inevitably finds themselves, from birth, set within a *culture* that governs “the understanding that make role entry, performance, and/or exit plausible for both self and others: providing the who and what of both past and future without which the present remains uncertain and fragile! (id., p. 98). Here too, there are many examples that explain this apparently banal point. Every one of us is born with a sex, but in which way does our sex, for example, affect the first clothes we wear or the colour of our bedroom or the toys we are given? In this phase of life, *others* – first and foremost our parents – ‘activate’ the powers of cultural scenarios. That is to say, the exercise of the powers of socio-cultural structures – as a morphogenetic realist would say (Archer, 1995) – is never direct but is always mediated by people’s agency – otherwise, if there were no other people, we would have to refer to some impersonal social force or automatism. Indeed, Gagnon and Simon have a clear idea of this point, i.e., that the power of cultural scenarios is not to pre-determine but to condition individual agency:

the very possibility or, in some cases, the necessity for creating *interpersonal scripts* transforms the social actor from being exclusively an actor trained in his or her role(s) and adds to his/her burdens the task of being a partial scriptwriter or adaptor as he/she becomes involved in shaping the materials of relevant cultural scenarios into scripts for context-specific behaviour (id.).

The individual is not the mere executor of the script they receive from the cultural scenario; according to Gagnon and Simon’s perspective, the individual is an ‘author’, in the sense that:

interpersonal scripting, representing the actor’s response to the external world, draws heavily upon cultural scenarios, involving symbolic elements expressive of such scenario (id., p. 106).

The interpersonal script is not the ‘reciting’ of the roles we receive from the (cultural) scenarios. In fact, in my opinion, the interpersonal script is characterised by the tension between the individual’s personal identity and social identity – a latent tension in Gagnon and Simon’s theory. I will go back to these considerations immediately after presenting the third and last level of script, the intrapsychic, which – citing the fair definition offered by Rinaldi (2017, p. 11) – represents the world of the individual’s desires (Plante, 2007; Trachman, 2017). Here, however, I would like to underline precisely the intra-personal dimension of this script – a dimension that is far from some form of solipsism or introspection. Intrapsychic scripting concerns the self, engaged in an intense and profound “internal dialogue [...] that creates *fantasy*” (Simon & Gagnon, 1986, p. 99, my emphasis). Fantasy as understood by the two authors is simply the ability, or rather, the effort made by individuals to realise their own “many-layered and sometimes multivoiced wishes” through “the symbolic reorganization of reality” (id.). The transition from the paradigmatic society – characterised by the strong pervasiveness of highly rigid social roles to which individuals had to adapt and the fantasy used to change them in the light of their own desires was not permitted – to the post-paradigmatic society – characterised, on the contrary, by a strong individual fantasy used to re-process the scripts and social roles – therefore marks the assertion of intrapsychic scripting as a historical necessity (id., p. 100), as it is the private world of wishes and desires – i.e., the self and its desires and the constant striving to assert their own personal identity – that is central, while, and correlated to this, the cultural scenario “loses its coercive powers [...], its predictability and frequently becomes merely a legitimating reference or explanation begging employment” (id., p. 103). In this way, however, and this should in my opinion to be underlined, in the post-paradigmatic society, Gagnon and Simon implicitly assign interpersonal scripts the *cultural function*, i.e. that of ‘institutionalising’ the symbolic representations which, in the paradigmatic social order, were performed by culture and the institutions. Now I will strive to verify how and, above all if, interpersonal scripts are able to do this.

Overall,

the power of sexual scripts [...] is tied to the extra-sexual significances of confirming identities and making them congruent with appropriate relationships. Where identity is for the moment confirmed and relationships stabilized, the meanings and uses of the sexual must shift in a very basic way. Almost inevitably, for any there is a shift from the sexuality feeding off the excitement of uncertainty to a sexuality of reassurance. The stabilizing of identities and relationships tends to stabilize the structuring of interpersonal scripts (id., p. 117-8).

The interpersonal script is used to create consensus of the role that each of us, actors, play during our interaction with others and, if it works, then it means that the script has positively achieved the integration of mutual expectations (the normative dimension) and who we want to be (the identity dimension): “interpersonal scripts represent the mechanism through which appropriate identities are made congruent with desired expectations” (id., p. 99; Belluzzo & Rinaldi, 2018).

However, if cultural scenarios no longer act as a guide for the various actors in the choice of which role to play, as the prescriptive order is in crisis and no longer has the power to pre-determine the courses of action, i.e., the socialisation of roles is no longer particularly pervasive and powerful and the internalisation of the role is challenged by the “internal rehearsal” (Simon & Gagnon, 1986, p. 99) then, in my opinion, it is a sign that personal identity ‘overrides’ social identity. In paradigmatic societies, social identity moulds, contains and strongly governs personal identity; in post-paradigmatic societies, on the other hand, the self “is created in the practice of asking: Which of these outcomes do I want?” (id., p. 100).

The cultural scenario sets the rules for impersonating or performing the roles. In societies characterised by a ‘high’ naturalization of sex, there is a strong and coercive coincidence between sex and gender. If you want to be a male, you have to be a man (to paraphrase Fidolini, 2019). Interpersonal scripts offer individuals social roles to be played in interactions: “If I want to be a ‘male’ with you, then I have to be that male that society tells me to impersonate”. This is the moment in which we are social actors, and the social role – and therefore the social identity – affects the personality. In a nutshell: if I am gay and I like playing football, but I don’t want to play on the gay team, do I say so or not, in view of the fact that the culture does not want ‘queers’ in football? As for my personal identity, do I want to invest in and reveal who am I, in my role as a footballer?

Finally, intrapsychic scripts. This is the time to respond to the questions posed above. It is the time in which we have to ask ‘am I/do I feel/want to be that male that the culture tells me to be in my interactions with others?’

A kind of time sequencing emerges between the three different levels of script, as they are “dynamically interactive” (Gagnon, 2004, p. 140). It is important to underline this dynamic sequence to fully understand the fact that, as Rinaldi correctly concluded (2017) – the script is an element that emerges from interaction.

Gagnon and Simon describe interaction between the three levels as follows:

at the interface of culture and mental life the individual is audience, critic, and reviser as the materials of cultural scenarios are imported into intrapsychic scripts. At the interface between interaction and

mental life, the individual is actor, critic, and playwright. In the private world of mental life, the individual also acts as fantasist, memorialist, and utopian (or dystopian), working with the materials of interaction and culture to create innovative alternatives to the given cultural scenarios and contemporary patterns of interaction. Some individuals attempt to make manifest these new combinations of meaning and action by creating new forms of cultural through interaction. It is important to note that there is no direct interface between culture and interaction; these effects are entirely mediated by mental life (or the intrapsychic) (Gagnon, 2004, p. 141).

The individual, with their *agency* and reflexivity, lies in the interface between culture and mind, personality, and in the interface between the social and personality. This person is not however simply a passive receiver of culture, with its prescriptions, rules, schemes, nor a solipsistic being. On the contrary, they are a critical individual, an innovator, a creative re-elaborator, intent on seeking and achieving new cultural models and social interactions in order to pursue their own projects. This is an individual with *reflexivity*, i.e., the ability to reflect on the many possibilities of action in the light of others and the constitution of the self (id, p. 278). On one hand, culture and personality are *mediated* by the individual, just as, on the other hand, the social and personality are too. Whereas, culture and social are not directly mediated by the individual but by the personality. But what does 'mediated' mean? For Gagnon and Simon, the lynchpin of the interplay between the three different levels is that the power of cultural scenarios, just like that of the methods of interaction, is mediated, i.e., activated, passing through people – not some impersonal and social force. As Gagnon and Simon say, the person is the result of a continuous and profound interior dialogue, of a person with reflexivity, i.e., the need to “to continually link and adjust and transform and stabilize the interpersonal and the cultural while maintaining the plausibility of the self” (id.). It is important to understand the social extent of the intrapsychic script, as, for Gagnon and Simon, it does not have a solipsistic, psychological nature but a social one, i.e., it is relational and the result of the constant reflexive interior dialogue (Ferrero Camoletto & Bertone, 2016; Whittier & Simon, 2001) where reflexivity is understood as the construction of the self and how this occurs in relations with others.

### **The sample**

In the previous pages we have sought to account for the extremely current contribution of Gagnon and Simon's theory of sexual scripts. Now, continuing the article, through the analysis of the interviews, we will seek to bring to light the processes underlying how young people or, rather, emerging

adults (Arnett, 2014)<sup>3</sup> develop their scripts in relation to their own identity, linked to sex, gender and sexual orientation. The emerging adults, making up the unity of analysis on which the research was conducted, are aged between 18 and 27, of both sexes and with a range of sexual orientations (i.e., the literal definition of sexual orientation expressed by each person interviewed). The main pertinent characteristics for the discussion here are given in table 1. The sample is formed exclusively of students enrolled in university courses in Bologna and most are from Northern Italy (ten from the North, two from the Centre and seven from the South). The interviews were conducted between September and December 2020.

Table 1: Non-representative sample of the research, by age, sex, sexual orientation and gender.

Name	Age	Sex	Sexual orientation	Gender
Federica	27	Female	Cisgender	Female
Giusi	26	Male	Homosexual	Male
Gregorio	21	Male	Heterosexual	Male
Claudia	21	Female	Heterosexual	Female
Valentina	21	Female	Heterosexual	Female
Giovanna	21	Female	Heterosexual	Female
Agnese	20	Female	Bisexual/Queer	Female
Matteo	21	Male	Gay	Male
Giulietta	20	Female	Lesbian	Female
Piera	20	Female	Homosexual in reflection	Female
Elisabetta	22	Female	Heterosexual	Female
Susanna	21	Female	Heterosexual	Female
Greta	22	Female	Homosexual	Female
Gabriele	21	Male	Heterosexual	Male
Lucia	21	Female	Bisexual	Female
Roberta	22	Female	Heterosexual	Female
Simona	23	Female	Queer	Female
Marcello	25	Male	Gay	Cisgender
Marica	19	Female	Heterosexual	Female

<sup>3</sup> Jeffrey J. Arnett identifies the 18-25/28 age group as the specific phase of emerging adulthood. It is true that Arnett, as he himself states (2014, p. 7), sometimes uses 18-25 to refer to emerging adulthood and sometimes 18-29. However, as he states, 18-29 can be legitimately used to refer to emerging adults (id.). For an in-depth presentation of Arnett's theory refer to Guizzardi (2007, pp. 61 et seq.).

The semi-structured interviews lasted an average of 150 minutes and were conducted using VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) technologies (Skype and Teams) due to the restrictions linked to the Covid-19 pandemic (Lobe et al., 2020), and were audio-recorded with the informed consent of the interviewees. Aside from very few problems caused by the technology (Nind et al., 2021), the analyses of the text, as we will see below, confirm the usefulness of the digital audio/visual tool used to conduct the interviews (Sullivan, 2012; Thunberg & Arnell, 2021).

The sample was formed in two ways: initially, by disseminating the request for participation in the interviews to hundreds of students attending various university courses at the University of Bologna to recruit the ‘first’ people, and then the sample was extended *avalanche-style* (Corbetta, 1999) thanks to the contacts indicated, case by case, by the persons interviewed.

### “Gender is how a person feels”

The theory of sexual scripts – among the many theories that each of us chooses to follow – can tell us – citing and reformulating the lovely expression offered by Rinaldi and Grassi (2019, p. 89) – how each of us learns to not be heterosexual, or learns to be so, or more generally, learns to be (hetero/homo/bi/pan/a/trans/...)sexual. Now, in the following part, I will focus especially on how, in this process, the young people build or form or outline their own sexual, as well as gender, identity. For this purpose, I felt it was useful to follow the advice given by the two scholars who, for the first time, applied ethnomethodology to gender studies, Suzanne J. Kessler and Wendy McKenna (1978, p. 9), which is to say: “the only way to ascertain someone’s identity is to ask her/him”. Thus, the interviews with the young people involved in the research begin precisely with this question: what is gender and what is your gender? Here, therefore, the script is not limited only to sexual practice but – following Fidolini (2017) – it is assumed as an analytical operator able to narrate the persons’ interior conversation in relation to their gender and sexual identity which, however, is reflected in the interpersonal dimension and in their position within a broader scenario of cultural and social meanings (Ferrero Camoletto & Bertone, 2016; Bertone & Ferrero Camoletto, 2019).

Let us read some of the definitions proposed by the young people interviewed:

for me, nothing is purely male or purely female. Having a gender that can change over time (*Matteo*)

it’s how a person feels, how they identify themselves, it’s something personal, independent of their sex (*Gregorio*)

it's something you feel inside. I don't think you can explain it in words. It's something inborn, the way you see yourself and feel comfortable with yourself (*Gabriele*)

the personal sense of self and the practice of this personal sense of self (*Federica*)

it's the way a person feels – male or female or non-binary (*Linda*)

it's your own way of being, feeling, relating to others, it keeps you together and unites the body to the identity and your relations with other people (*Simona*).

As we can easily see, for these young people, gender is a property or quality belonging to the most intimate and profound sphere of the self, but which does not derive from (i.e., it does not coincide with) the sexual properties of the body. For them, the issue is not the male or female identity but it is how they express and live the experience of gender identification *tout court* which may concern one of the two sides of the distinction or both, or may be something that goes beyond – non-binary gender. All the young people in the non-representative sample of the research are biologically of the sex they were born with, developing *positive*, *reflexive* and *critical* intrapsychic scripts that agree with their assigned gender. For example, Matteo states that he is “at ease with ‘him’ if we talk of pronouns, but I have never associated myself with male things. I am happy to be referred to as male but, at the same time, I would not say that I do things that society expects from a man and why I have to do them”. Other interviewees like Marcello and Federica express something similar:

I feel cisgender but I don't have any characteristics except a beard and other male physical signs. I don't like football, when I was young, I played with both male toys and my sisters' barbie dolls (*Marcello*)

biologically, I am female, and I also recognise this in the personal identity that I feel I have (*Federica*).

These are positive scripts, as Giovanna's simple statement that “I have always felt comfortable in my gender” can be extended to everyone. Our own gender is therefore a visceral, profound feeling, a wilful expression, not an ephemeral, contingent emotion. They are reflexive and critical scripts as, if on one hand, our own sex and gender are ‘taken as assumptions’, on the other hand, however, young people are not a simple epiphenomenon of the gender they assign to their identity. Let's read some of the thoughts on this matter:

I am male because objectively I am male, and I start from this assumption, but it is an interior issue. As a male, I do nothing, or rather I don't do things because I am male but because I like doing them, that's it. Good grief! In many of the things I do, I don't feel male according to the classical idea of a male. I really like wearing second-hand, vintage clothes from the '80s and '90s, I pay attention to how I dress and people often ask me, 'Are you gay?'. I hate football (*Gabriele*)

I simply act as I want to, how I see myself as a person. I like to be elegant; would you associate elegance with being male or female? (*Matteo*)

It happened over time. I have always felt female, and I think I will always feel female. I have long hair because I like it, not because it's a sign of being female. I thought about cutting my hair, shaving it, but I think I would look bad with short hair, but I wouldn't be less female (*Giulietta*)

I feel good, great, in the female gender, but with the characteristics I give it. My gender mustn't be made of characteristics or things that society says are or must be female. I like things that are catalogued as reserved for males, but that I relate to. I relate to the female gender but for how I think female is. My femininity is what I put into everything I do, my being Susanna, but I couldn't say anything precise. The same things that for me are female, can be said by another person, who on the contrary identifies with the male gender or something else (*Susanna*).

For these young people, their gender identity is not a consequence of the gender assigned by their birth sex but it is the expression of who they are as a person, with their own interests, tastes, worries, etc. and belonging to a specific generational cohort (Bitterman & Hess, 2021), and this expression must be accepted and confirmed socially. This is explained very well by one episode told by Greta. Greta is a girl who has always been "aware of being a woman", and has always appreciated this and demonstrated "what I am". From when she was a child, "they told me I was a tomboy" because she liked male pastimes, particularly playing football. As Greta was intrigued by the fact that many of her peers were going to catechism, she asked her parents if she could also attend the course – but her experience lasted only one day. As soon as the priest saw her playing football with the boys, "he took me by the arm and led me away, saying 'You're a girl, you don't play football'. That was the end of catechism for me!". Simona also said that she was quite the tomboy when she was young, always playing with her brother and his toys, or playing football, but rarely with dolls. Now, however, Simona feels "very much a woman, and very feminine". Contrary to Simona and Greta,



Elisabetta confided that she has always been very feminine, even as a child: “I used to wear a bikini even when I was 3, and at 7 I always wore pink”. The story Giusi told about his name is very interesting, as it can be understood as either a male or female name. While young, the misunderstanding caused by his name annoyed him, as he grew not only was Giusi “reconciled” to it but “I play a lot with my name, which is misleading. When I send an e-mail, for example, I never specify that I am male. I like playing on this ambiguity”. But this *strategy* Giusi uses to exploit the ambiguity of his name is driven by the fact that sometimes, in certain contexts, Giusi feels “the need to de-construct masculinity”. It should be underlined that Giusi achieves this de-struction of models which, he defines, as toxic masculinity, without assuming feminine traits or attitudes, but using the simplest element which *introduces him to others, defining him at the same time*, i.e., his given name. In the family context, on the other hand, Giusi is well aware of playing the role of “man of the house”- and also how “people, after my grandfather died, tell me” – and without any discontent as it is not a role with “patriarchal authority”. Giusi explains it is simply a question of doing “male things, like going to the dump, driving the car” because he is the only male in a family of mainly female figures (mother, grandmother, great-grandmother and aunt).

Another strategy developed from an intrapsychic script is that of Simona, and is mirrored in interpersonal scripts in a very specific context. Simona, who as mentioned above, feels a woman and ‘feels good in her woman’s body’ even though alternating them with moments in which she adopts behaviour that is “socially recognised” as male with those “socially recognised” as female. To confirm her identity “as a woman and a gender fluid”, and have it confirmed by others, during occasions “in society that would demand more femininity” she tends not to appear in feminine clothes, such as a wedding she would attend with her partner. Her partner would have worn a dress, while Simona tells that “I will never wear a dress, a skirt or heels to this wedding, but I will wear trousers, a shirt and a jacket. I already know this before I decide what to wear. Because I feel more at ease that way. Because in society I feel more at ease in my more fluid side, and less canonically feminine”. What emerges from the people interviewed is a transversal and clear critical “positioning” towards what is – to cite an expression by Stevi Jackson (2006) – regulated on both side of prescribed heterosexuality – sexuality and gender. Gender as *the* division brought about by society and *the* distinction brought about by culture relating to the masculine/feminine-male/female differentiation is the concept of gender which, critically, the young people interviewed not only reject but criticise, above all where interpersonal or cultural scripts rule (Ruspini, 2015; Waling, 2019). It is, for example, the unceasing ‘work’ Gabriele tries to do on his father. Very often, together with his sister, Gabriele fights the division of labour that his father,

on the other hand, takes for granted, such as cooking, cleaning, clearing the table – “for him, this is simply woman’s work, it’s not because he’s bad but because ...”. This is also the case of Federica, who can’t bear the compliments and kindness she receives simply because she’s a “well-dressed, pretty girl”. In these young people’s representations, gender is certainly the categorisation imposed by society and culture in terms of the binary distinction between males and females – they do not deny that gender works as this kind of device. But it is not the true essence of gender, gender cannot be catalogued, distinguished, differentiated or submitted to hierarchy, because, for them, their gender identity is their being masculine and/or feminine or something other than masculine or feminine, not by contrast or as the other side of the distinction. Gender identity cannot be the epiphenomenon of the socialisation process to dominant patriarchal models (to cite Ciccone, 2012, p. 18). In other words, gender is not the distinction of gender – only gender or the quality of the way in which ‘we do things’. In the words of Matteo:

The imagery of toxic masculinity is ridiculous. There are many stereotypes even among gays. You’re having sex with a man – and there’s nothing more gay than having sex with another man – and you say: ‘No, I don’t do passive’ because you associate passive with being female.

Gender cannot be a differential (Grassi, 2019) or a ‘generator’ of asymmetries; gender identity cannot be built through socialisation to difference and the juxtaposition with the other (gender) (Rinaldi, 2015).

### **“I thought I was straight, but now I have a girlfriend”**

I never thought about my sexual orientation, I thought I was straight, but now I have a girlfriend. I thought about it, but I have never found an answer other than ‘I like boys’. Perhaps because I was always used to that, perhaps because in my family homosexual couples are frowned upon. Then I met \*\*\* and with her I felt the same things I felt with a boy. I never asked many questions. It was all very natural, and I carried on like it was very natural. I don’t need a label, I liked boys; now I have a girlfriend, and that’s OK.

Lucia defines herself as bisexual, but only to answer the question as she tries to escape labels, the socio-cultural classifications of the various gender identities and those linked to her own sexuality. As we can see in the table above, completely randomly, the sample is divided almost half and half between those who state they are heterosexual (10 interviewees) and those who do not state they are heterosexual (9 interviewees). The ‘semantics’ of becoming reflexively and critically sexual, rather than being (born) sexual latently characterises intrapsychic scripts through which the young people

become so, semantics characterised also by another element, that of relativity in the sense of queerness (Romania, 2013; Hammack et al., 2019). Giovanna, for example, has always “been attracted to boys” and precisely for this reason, from when she has been attracted exclusively to the other sex, “I have never even thought about going with a girl or not. Of course, I have some good friends and we hug and kiss each other, that’s what girls do. But this has never made me doubt my sexual orientation”. This interpersonal script that involves the manifestation of displays of affection among friends was also followed by Federica, when she was at high school. Let’s read what Federica had to say:

*interviewer:* when did you realise you were heterosexual?

*Federica:* I had had my first boyfriends and dates, almost through a sense of duty, that’s not very nice to say but I wasn’t interested at high school. I had a boyfriend at infant school (*she laughs*) and we’re still friends; but I didn’t have one at primary school. But I did at high school. But it was only when I was around 18 that I really started to have an interest in someone else.

*interviewer:* have you always taken your heterosexuality for granted?

*Federica:* no, not at all. I questioned it. But I’ve never had...experiences with other girls. But at high school all the girls kiss each other and do stupid stuff. But if the boys did it, then they would be treated very badly.

The list of boyfriends Federica draws up laughing in fact reveals that, while on one hand, it was partly the product of strong socialisation typical of certain cultural scenarios, on the other Federica has thought critically about her sexual identity in order to confirm (or not) that which, before, could have been the result of strong conditioning by cultural scripts.

Gabriele describes a similar intrapsychic script:

I have never said ‘yes, I am a heterosexual male’, as it’s something innate, I have never said at any given time ‘yes, I am male’. But I have wondered ‘but is this really me?’ and I mean this not in terms of gender but sexual orientation. I have never said ‘yes, I am straight’ only because that’s what I felt inside. But there was a moment when I said ‘Maybe, I am not something else because I have never felt the curiosity’. At a party or two I did kiss the odd boy, because I let myself go, but it was never anything serious. I say I am straight, but as I’ve never been all the way with another boy then I can never say that I am 100% straight because every now and again that curiosity comes out.

Curiosity not understood, in my opinion, as the simple expression of some spur-of-the-moment, superficial whim but as a more profound propensity to search for one’s own gender identity linked to sexual orientation. Like others in the sample, Gabriele does not wish to identify himself as het-

erosexual even though he has had (in reality or as a potential occurrence) homosexual relations (Hoburg et al, 2004; Ward, 2015) but his (hetero/homo) sexual identity, which belongs to the personal identity, depends on the (hetero/homo)sexual practices of the given time (Kuperberg & Walker, 2018):

I have always rather doubted my sexual orientation, I don't exclude anything. But I don't need to identify myself in one sexual orientation or another, it's not important to me. I am attracted to both males and females. So far, I have only had relations with boys, but I also am also equally attracted to girls (*Agnese*)

As I grew up, I realised that many of the things I did or watched when I was younger were due to the fact of being bisexual. I began to be aware of my tastes in 2016, when a girl, who is now my friend, came onto me and we hitched up. I said: 'Oh well, perhaps I like it, let's give it a try'. Before her, I had already had a boyfriend, and after her I had another one, and now I have a girlfriend (*Linda*)

I am homosexual in reflection; I don't define myself as a lesbian because that term gets on my nerves. It's a term I use to joke with my friends, but it does annoy me a bit. Perhaps because when I was young, I asked my mum what it meant and she told me it was a bad word. Given that the meaning of lesbian is 'homosexual', then I prefer to use the term homosexual. 'In reflection' because in the past few years I have begun to realise that I don't want to exclude other possibilities, even though I haven't had experiences with girls yet, only with boys (*Piera*)

When I told you I am straight, I'm straight because I have always been straight, but not if in future I meet the love of my life, who may be a woman (*Susanna*)

I feel queer because it allows me to avoid definition, to not label myself. Today, at the moment, I feel lesbian. But in the past, I have been attracted to men and I know that it could happen again in future, as it's already happened in the past (*Simona*).

The solution to the problem of identity, one's own sexual identity, is not based on some form of social consensus (cultural models internalised through socialisation) (Gusmeroli & Trappolin, 2021) or on values. The solution, as described by most of the sample, is the *story (or biography)* that everyone builds in the time and space of interaction, and which is our identity, who we are/what we would like to be: "I am straight because that's how I am now" – Susanna's words are very clear.

Matteo tells of the first time he said he was queer: "at 15, I was texting with some female friends. I hadn't even thought about saying it before. Perhaps after I was 18, I told myself, but I wasn't worried. Then, when I said it

for the first time, I was shaking, but after that I told everyone, even people I didn't know". The important thing is to start saying it. But if it is someone else who says it before you, that's not right. Or if, for example, the family history is not favourable to identities other than those built within the framework of heterosexuality and heteronormativity, then people avoid revealing their identity. This is the story of Marcello. Marcello is queer only in the groups of friends he frequents away from home, not in the family where there is a strong "Catholic" education, anchored to the "male-female, marriage" model, "all the rest is wrong, go to hell"...and so even I judged myself as wrong". When asked, "do you fear being judged if you tell your parents, your grandparents, your siblings?", Marcello replies: "Absolutely! I don't want them to have a heart attack, more than anything else". Only Marcello's sister knows he's queer. For Marcello, one strong element of discomfort and suffering was caused by the many complaints by his flatmates that he "never brought a girl home": "I knew I was queer, but I didn't accept it, and the fact that other people said it when I didn't want to hear...it annoyed me that the others opened a door that I kept closed", that they *anticipated* the construction of his story, his biography.

The feminist interactionist Jackson deems that "sexual selfhood entails more than our identities or 'orientation': it is not reducible to the gender of those we desire" (Jackson, 2007, p. 6). The tormented affair, as defined by Greta herself, through which the girl went before accepting herself as a homosexual clearly outlines the point underlined by Jackson. Greta tells:

I had a lot of trouble accepting myself, first of all. My first doubts came at middle school. But I managed to crush the thought and hide it away in a corner of my mind. Then, at high school, because everyone had a boyfriend, I made more effort to fit in with the general thought, and I too flirted with the boys, it cost me a lot to say 'that boy is really hot'. Until, after high school, I went to England to learn English, as an au pair in a family. There I met loads of people from all over the world. My perception of sexuality has changed hugely: there was much more freedom and far fewer stereotypes. There, I began to think, working on that idea that I had put to one side. Towards the end of 2019, I couldn't keep this thing hidden any more, and I said to myself: 'Greta, you have to face up to this fact'.

And from that moment on, Greta has been at peace with herself and her identity. The distinction between the intrapsychic script through which Greta tries to deny, at first, and the social scenario in which the girl lives has a strong normative and moral impact<sup>4</sup>. Her worries linked to her own

<sup>4</sup> I refer to the recent research on contemporary #homosexuals by Corbisiero and Monaco (2021) for an accurate analysis of how different social circles (real and virtual) can become precious resources or tough barriers in young people's coming out process.

non-(hetero)normative sexual identity concerned above all her inability to disregard social expectations such as giving her parents a grandchild:

I was frightened of everything being homosexual represented, how it would have influenced my life, from saying that perhaps I won't be able to give my parents grandchildren to knowing that people would start to see me differently.

Within a cultural scenario that confirms the heteronormative and heterosexual order, sexual identities of men and women develop within the framework of heterosexuality and according to an existentialist logic of genders – Greta fears she won't be able to give her parents grandchildren because only heterosexual woman can do that. An intrapsychic script that accepts its own homosexuality is in conflict with interpersonal scripts and cultural scenarios that, on the contrary, reassert the heteronormative order. Taking part, on the other hand, in “freer” and, to cite the vocabulary used by Gagnon and Simon, post-paradigmatic contexts, Greta is able to ‘naturalize’, i.e., ‘normalize’ her sexuality (Doan & Mize, 2020).

**To conclude: “I feel female, not because I like pink but because that’s how I feel inside”**

The research presented and discussed in these pages certainly has a number of limits (the sample is not representative of the whole young population, the people who told me their stories have a medium-high cultural status, they share a *certain* representation of inclusive, egalitarian and emancipating genders and sexualities, none of them are LGBT\* activists). Using Gagnon and Simon's script theory, I have sought to highlight some processes linked to gender identity and sexuality among young people in the phase of emerging adulthood (Norona et al., 2015). A post-modern perspective of the study of the ‘sexual’ and gender – Simon wrote in 1996 (p. 38) – requires and, at the same time, offers, a conceptual approach that can mirror collective and individual experiences according to a method that necessarily recognises their imperfect and contingent being. Gender has nothing fixed or static, it is rather a process and a relative quality (Wickes & Emmison, 2007) – unless it is assumed only as that deriving from the physiological traits of the body or as ‘legal gender’ (Lindqvist et al., 2021). While admitting the possibility of thinking of gender also in structural terms (Risman, 2004), here I have aimed to focus on the (inter)personal dimension of gender, as it is represented and thought of in the personal scripts of the people interviewed. For the young people interviewed, gender, in the sense of gender identity, is something that comes from deep down inside them (Rust, 1993): their gender identity is the representation of how they feel they are, it is not merely a question of

‘doing’ gender (West & Zimmerman 1987; 2009) but of ‘being (my) gender’ – (following the proposal of Nentwich & Kelan, 2014). Our young men and women’s gender identity is the result of a profound and continuing reflexive interior conversation, through which their male or female ‘nature’ is reworked in the light of their (more) fundamental attention to who they want to be through their social interactions. The various ‘strategies’ adopted, depending on the context – more or less formal, more or less familiar –, reflect their preoccupation with being believed by others for what they want to be.

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