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Dealing with the Standard Model of (Male) Adulthood: an Ethnography of Marginalised Young Masculinities and Transitions to Adulthood

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Dealing with the Standard Model of (Male) Adulthood: an Ethnography of Marginalised Young Masculinities and Transitions to Adulthood

Ilaria Pitti

Abstract: The article draws on a five-year ethnography conducted on a sample of Italian young male individuals (18-27) participating in the activities of a community of ultras fan to explore how young men sharing disadvantaged social origins and living conditions make sense of their difficulties in reaching the normative ideal set by the “standard model of adulthood” (Lee, 2001). Focusing on homosocial relationships in everyday and private settings, the contribution discusses young men’s elaboration of an alternative model of adult recognition based on masculinity. Analysing the marginalised performance of masculinity (Connell, 1995) that emerges from young men’s attempt to keep together what an adult should be (according to the dominant model of adult recognition and to traditional markers of adulthood) and what their disadvantaged social condition allows them to do, the paper examines the impact of young men’s gender performances on their transitions to adulthood. In so doing, the article contributes at literature on transitions to adulthood exploring how masculinity – a characteristic that is normally an advantaging factor in transitions– amplifies difficulties derived from other categories of exclusion such as age and class.

Keywords: adulthood, masculinity, intersectionality, marginalised masculinities

Introduction

Comparative research on youth has extensively demonstrated that, in the Italian context, adulthood has become a less and less achievable goal for all young people since the '90s and more evidently after the 2008 economic crisis (Mills et al., 2005; Schizzerotto, Trivellato & Sartor, 2011; Cuzzocrea, Bello & Kazepov, 2020). These studies have also highlighted how difficulties are unevenly distributed between different segments of the youth population and that paths towards adulthood have become particularly perilous for young individuals belonging to less protective social backgrounds (Bertolini, 2012; Negri & Filandri, 2010; Tuorto & Impacciatore 2011).

As underlined by Giancola and Salmieri, in Italy it is possible to observe “a class of young adults [that] manages to complete transition to adulthood before turning 39 thanks to a high social background that translates into more possibilities to achieve high educational attainments and to have a job [and] another class of young adults [that] meets difficulties due to the reproduction of [social] inequalities in relation to completing education and entering in the job market” (Giancola & Salmieri, 2016, p. 131). Steadily influencing young people’s educational attainments and their possibility of having a job (Bertolini, 2012), social origins have a higher power in shaping transitions to adulthood in Italy in comparison to other European (and Western) countries (Corijn & Klijzing 2001; Mills et al. 2005; Cuzzocrea, Bello & Kazepov, 2020). Indeed, also the possibilities of achieving housing independence (Mandic, 2008), cohabitation/marriage and parenthood (Buchholz et al., 2009) have been linked to social origins both directly – as an advantaged social background guarantees in itself more possibilities of leaving the family of origins to create one own’s family - and indirectly - as social origins shape educational attainment and occupational opportunities which in turns influence possibilities of housing independence, marriage/cohabitation, and parenthood.

Within this scenario, gender emerges as a factor that generally amplifies young women’s disadvantage (Mencarini & Solera, 2011; Ruspini & Leccardi, 2016; Benasso & Magaraggia, 2019). This can be noticed, for example, considering gender influence on the paths of entering the job market; a step that is both mediated by social origins and a determining factor of one’s capacity to other achieve adulthood thresholds (Giancola & Salmieri, 2016). Although Italian young women invest more in education than their male peers, the possibilities of entering the job market and of obtaining a stable and well-paid job are higher for young men (Filandri & Nazio, 2020) who, overall, enjoy a comparative advantage over women with similar social backgrounds (Struffolino & Borgna, 2021). This justifies the need of a paying attention to the specific vulnerability of Italian young women’s

transitions to adulthood, which are still today largely hindered by gender inequalities and stereotypes.

However, looking closer at the interplay of age, gender, and class, recent studies have also highlighted a slow but steady worsening of Italian young men's occupational attainments in comparison to men of older generations that become more evident when looking at the paths of transitions to adulthood of young men with lower social origins (Schizzerotto, Trivellato & Sartor, 2011). Along to the processes of flexibilization and precarization of the job market that hinder young generations' paths toward adulthood, processes of de-industrialisation and tertiarization of labour, delocalisation of low-skilled jobs, and technological replacement of manual jobs (Silva, 2012; McDowell, 2003; Roberts, 2018) have been identified by literature on young masculinities as key-factors to explain the progressive marginalisation of socio-economically disadvantaged young men's position in the labour market and the emerging slowdown and increased fragility that can be noticed when observing their transitions to adulthood (France & Roberts, 2017).

Against this scenario, the present article asks how young men belonging to families distinguished by a low economic, cultural and social capital and, thus, sharing a disadvantaged social background make sense of the difficulties they experience in their transitions to adulthood. Trying to answer this general research question, the article proposes an in-depth analysis of the discursive and behavioural strategies through which a group of young Italian men navigates a path of transition marked by difficult and unsuccessful attempts to achieve economic and occupational stability, as well as housing independence and cohabitation. Drawing on an ethnography conducted between 2015 and 2020 with a group of young men originally met while realising a study on ultras subcultures, the article analyses how young men use masculinity as a resource to navigate transitions to adulthood, highlighting how the adopted performance of masculinity 'retroact' on their attempts to achieve adulthood and asking whether young men's model of masculinity can be interpreted as an alternative model of adulthood.

The paper is structured as following. The next paragraph introduces the theoretical framework of the paper presenting the concepts of "standard model of adulthood" (Lee, 2001) and "marginalised masculinities" (Connell, 1995) and the benefits of their combined application to the analysis of young men's transitions to adulthood. The research is then presented paying particular attention to the discussion of the case's relevance for the analysis of disadvantaged young men's transitions. The following paragraphs are dedicated to the analysis and explore marginalised young men's strategic use of masculinity to navigate transitions to adulthood. Conclusions discusses the implication of the emerging results for the analysis of youth transitions to adulthood.

Analysing masculinity in transitions to adulthood

Understanding youth as a 'phase' that develops in the attempt to achieve the *ad quem* term of adulthood (Martelli, 2013; Pitti, 2017; Benasso & Magaraggia, 2019), the transitions models largely reflect a common understanding of what youth is and should be: a preparatory and transitory phase aimed at achieving a 'final goal' represented by the adult status (Smelser & Erikson, 1980). Particularly since the '80, the development of the transition to adulthood perspective has contributed at problematising youth as a phase of the life course by showing how young people's paths have become increasingly individualised and de-standardised due to the crisis of modern institutions (e.g., the wage labour market, the nuclear family), as well as cultural changes (Corijn & Klijzing, 2001; Mills et al., 2005; Furstemberg, 2008;).

In this context, however, the final term of the transition – that is adulthood – has remained largely unproblematised. Amongst other, Smelser and Erikson (1980) have argued that adulthood is the only phase of life that is "left almost unexplored" (Smelser & Erikson, 1980, p. 13) by social sciences, while Blatterer has suggested that adulthood represents an always present and an always under-analysed default category in studies on life cycle. As argued by Saraceno (1984), what social sciences name as "adult" is often a "generic subject" (1984, p. 54) untouched by social changes which embodies an ideal positive condition distinguished by maturity, balance, autonomy, independence, choice; a status to which anyone should aspire.

The consolidation of adulthood as a default category (Blatterer, 2010b) would have been fostered by modern changes in education and work: the exclusion from the world of work of young people – through the creation and diffusion of educational institutions – and of the elderly – through retirement – played a central role in separating adulthood from other stages of life and in placing the adult condition at the centre of the life course. Since modernity, youth and old age began to be defined in relation to adulthood intended as an ideal status to be achieved (by young people) or to be maintained as long as possible (by old people). Conceptualised as a positive condition, adulthood started to be progressively recognised as the stage of life in which the subject becomes 'ripe', overcomes the turbulences of youth, is in full strength and has reached a status of complete balance that find expressions in personal virtues of creativity, generosity, responsibility and solidarity (Erikson, 1959; Levinson, 1978).

In the aftermaths of World War II, this state of complete balance became to be associated with the achievement of certain concrete goals and practices that allow to socially distinguish adults from the rest of the population. These representations and practices can be summarized in what Lee (2001)

has named as the “standard model of adulthood”. The standard model of adulthood consists of “a series of practical requirements and behaviours represented by the traditional markers of the transition to adulthood” (Pilcher, Williams & Pole 2003, p. 86): the completion of studies, the entry into the world of work, the transition from the family of origin to the “procreation family” (Eisenstadt, 1971, p. 30) through marriage and children. These markers define a paradigm that, according to Lee (2001) originated and consolidated with modernity and, specifically, during the historical period that goes from the World War II to early 1970s where “flexibility was still a very distant reality [and] becoming an adult was a matter of undergoing a life course that resembled a march through the institutions of marriage, procreation and work” (Blatterer, 2005, p.27). In this perspective, between the 1950s and 1970s, the standard model of adulthood was so concretely tangible and easily achievable for a good part of the population of Western countries that it became a consolidated social convention; something that we came to consider normal and normative.

In truth, the standard model of adulthood has never been “a normal experience” for most young people. From the very beginning the model has been elaborated having in mind the experience of middle-class, white young men and the resulting ideals has been an achievable standard only for this group of the youth population (Levinson, 1978; Côté, 2000; Harris, 2004; Woodman & Wyn, 2015; Ruspini & Leccardi, 2016). The markers defining the standard model of adulthood were consequently corresponding with the socially accepted idea of what an adult man should be and the resulting model of adult recognition – the normative standard against which all young people are asked to grow up – “has as its latent subject the male breadwinner” (Blatterer, 2005, p.122).

The appreciation of the fact that the standard model of adulthood was first and foremost a model of manhood – fostered amongst others by the studies of Levinson (1978) on men’s and women’s adulthood - has inspired a critical reflection in youth studies on what happens when young women’s trajectories are shaped accordingly and evaluated in relation to standard that was not developed for them (Harris, 2004). However, while the fact of ‘being women’ is recurrently presented as a relevant factor to explain why young women experience more difficulties in achieving the standard model of adulthood, masculinity is assumed to always be a facilitating factor in paths of transitions to adulthood (Kimmel, 2008) and young men’s problems in reaching the thresholds of the standard model of adulthood are rarely analysed as the result of also their male identity (Risman, 2018).

Indeed, despite adulthood and manhood have been intertwined since the development of the standard model of adulthood, youth studies have – so far – paid little attention at this relationship when it comes to young

men (Roberts, 2018). Young men's difficulties in measuring up with the expectations of the standard model of adulthood are, in fact, analysed first and foremost in terms of socio-economic, educational or racial/ethnic disadvantage; marginally considering the interplay between these characteristics and their performed gender identity (McDowell, 2003; Ciccone, 2009; Roberts, 2018). Indeed, when disadvantaged young men's experience difficulties in finding a job, encounter problems in completing studies or do not leave their parents' house, at the centre of the analysis is often their social background rather than the interplay between their social origins, age, and gender (Fagiani & Ruspini, 2011)¹. In youth studies, explanations of young men's difficulties in coping with the standard model of adulthood tend to largely exclude masculinity as a factor that requires to be explicitly and systematically analysed. This perspective, beyond abiding to a monistic approach that does not recognize how different categories of disadvantage constitute each other (Crenshaw, 2017), takes for granted the natural, normal and unproblematic nature of manhood (Della Puppa, 2014; Fidolini, 2019).

While maintaining that masculinity is not *per se* a disadvantaging factor in a model of transition to adulthood that has been elaborated having in mind the male experience, this article argues that a closer look at the role of masculinity in youth transition can help youth scholars in shedding light on the experiences of transitions of those groups of young men who, almost paradoxically, are marginalised in a system that should advantage them (Roberts, 2018).

In this perspective, the concepts of "hegemonic" and "marginalised masculinity" become theoretically central in this analysis. From the 1980s onward, the development of men's studies has brought new awareness on masculinity, which is today recognised as plural phenomenon composed of different cultural and historical variants. In particular, Connell's concept of "hegemonic masculinity" (Connell, 1995) has shed light on the existence, within each society, of models of masculinity that enjoy more symbolic power than others. Hegemonic masculinity, rather than representing the most common form of masculinity within a given society (or social setting within society) represents a normative standard that only a minority of men can enact. It embodied the most honoured way of being a man and, as a normative standard, it requires all other men to position themselves in relation to it (Fidolini, 2019; Fagiani & Ruspini, 2011). As Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) discuss hegemonic masculinities, although emulated by a minority, embody the most revered ways of being a man in a society, while

¹ In the Italian context, the work of Della Puppa (2014) and Fidolini (2019) represent an exceptional attempt to analyse this interplay in relation to the paths towards adulthood of young migrants.

gender performances who depart from this hegemonic ideal are placed in lower masculine positions. Although characteristics of hegemonic masculinities are context-dependent and vary from society to society, domination is usually fostered through the “crosscutting influence of race, class, and sexuality” (Banerjee, 2014, p. 3). For what specifically concerns Western societies, the most common model of hegemonic masculinity is, in fact, that of the white, heterosexual, middle-class men (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014).

According to Connell, non-hegemonic masculinities can be clustered in three main kinds of relationships with the hegemonic model. Many men who cannot aspire to full hegemony develop relationships of complicity with the hegemonic ideals and (passively) accept the hegemonic model benefiting “the advantage men in general gain from the overall subordination of women” (Connell, 1995, p. 79). Connell names these “complicit masculinities”. Other masculinities – “subordinated masculinities” - express qualities that are opposite of those defining the hegemonic model and are, thus, actively and strongly condemned, stigmatised and sanctioned. This is, for example, the case of gay masculinities. Finally, marginalised masculinities correspond to those models of manhood distinguishing groups of men that cannot aspire to hegemony because they lack some characteristics - such as whiteness, economic resources or cultural status - that ensure institutional, social and political recognition within a given context. Marginalised masculinities are proper of men that are ‘outcasts’ or men who enjoy “disadvantaged unequal membership” in a given context (Cheng, 1999, p. 295).

While hegemonic masculinity “sets up a positive relationship with complicit masculinity” and “simultaneously [constructs] a negative relation with subordinate masculinity” (Lusher, 2007, p. 402), its relationship with marginalised masculinities is more nuanced and complex. Marginalised masculinities cannot aspire to hegemony, yet they are socialised to the model and constantly encouraged at trying to reach a standard they will actually never be able to achieve. This is because marginalised men’s attempt to emulate hegemony are necessary for the very permanence of hegemony: by trying and failing, marginalised masculinities confirm the strength of the culturally dominating model of manhood. Consequently, what peculiarly distinguishes marginalised masculinities is their condition of being neither an outsider nor an insider (Aboim, 2010): “marginalisation” does not correspond neither to complete subordination (as in the case of subordinated masculinities) nor to full integration (as marginalised masculinities may display and enjoy masculine power in certain contexts but are always ultimately compared to the hegemonic norms and image).

The application of Connell’s theory to the analysis of young men’s transitions to adulthood is useful to highlight how masculinity – combined with other characteristics – can become an element of disadvantage within a

model of adult recognition (such as that of the standard model of adulthood) that still largely benefit young men over young women.

First, the concept of marginalised masculinities is useful to understand difficulties in transitions to adulthood as intersectional phenomena. On the one hand, this concept considers marginalisation as the result of structural social and economic relationships that negatively affect specific groups of men. Marginalised masculinities, in fact, correspond to models of manhood adopted by men who experience, for example, high levels of poverty, low educational attainments or poor access to welfare and who, more generally, lack of access to social, economic and cultural opportunities that are considered relevant in a given context. Marginalised masculinity thus describes the position of young men experiencing a high level of social exclusion. On the other hand, the concept of marginalised masculinities allows us to conceptualise marginalisation also as the result of the lack of social recognition enjoyed by the versions of manhood in which socially excluded men invest. In this perspective, the unequal membership enjoyed by certain groups of men in society is not only produced by social exclusion at the socio-economic level but is also reproduced in the process of making masculinities as the performance of a non-hegemonic model of manhood will further preclude access to resources and power to these men. In this light, masculinity can be recognised as another resource through which marginalization takes place.

Secondly, the concept of marginalised masculinities allows to recognise disadvantaged young men's transitions to adulthood as the result of an interaction between them and the socially accepted/dominant definitions of what an adult man should be. In Connell's perspective, in fact, marginalised masculinities are configurations of practices which picks up themes of the dominant idea of masculinity in the society at large but reworks them in a context of lack of resources (Connell, 1995; Cheng, 1999). While being inspired by the hegemonic model, marginalised masculinities are intrinsically doomed to 'failure', lacking the resources and characteristics needed to achieve and perform the ideal model. However, their very struggle to achieve an unachievable standard reinforces the value of the hegemonic model. Looking at disadvantaged young men's biographies from this point of view, it is possible to analyse how masculinity, sustaining the standard model of adulthood, keeps in place a system of unequal competition where some young men are socialized to fight for a standard from which they are *de facto* excluded.

Thirdly, in consideration of the discussed connections between manhood and adulthood, analysing the gender performances that socially disadvantaged men elaborate in relation to the hegemonic model of manhood can potentially shed light also on alternative models of male adulthood (Della

Puppa, 2014; Della Puppa & Miele, 2015). The application of the concepts of hegemonic and marginalised masculinities to the analysis of youth transitions allows, from this point of view, to recognise disadvantaged young men's gender performances as core elements of models of male adulthood that develops from a condition of marginality and to explore these models' positioning in relation to the normative ideal set by the standard model of adulthood.

Presentation of the case study and methodology

The present article is based on a qualitative research conducted between 2015 and 2020 in Bologna (Italy) on a group of 20 Italian young men aged, at the beginning of this study, between 18 and 27 years old. The young men participating in this research shared a low social background: most of their parents did not complete high school and were low-skilled workers in factories or unemployed surviving by gimmicks. Young men's family histories were also frequently marked by their parents' absence (1/3 of the participants lived with only one parent at the time of the research) and problems with law. This disadvantage social background was mirrored in young men's own living condition: the inability to achieve traditional markers of adulthood was a common experience for the participants in this study whose social origins resulted in very marginalised youth experiences. The observed young men were largely blocked in their transitions to adulthood: a quarter of the boys dropped out from school before completing education, about a third of them had been unemployed for the whole duration of the study while the others navigated those years jumping between unstable contracts, low-skilled jobs (e.g., car-washing; food delivery) and informal work (e.g., dog-sitting, day labour in construction sites). All of them were living with their parents as they could not afford to pay a rent and the few of them being in a stable relationship did not move into cohabitation, got married or become parent during the considered timespan.

The materials considered in this article consist of fieldnotes from participant observations and in-depth interviews. I entered the field in September 2015, while I was conducting research on youth unconventional practices of participation as part of the research activities of the Horizon 2020 project "Partispace" (Walther et al., 2020) and of the Marie Curie project "Youth-blocs" (Pitti, 2018).

All the young men involved in this study were and are members of an ultras group, that is a community professional fans of the local football team and I was introduced to them by a common friend. Since 2015, I have regularly participated in the group activities, spending over 1200 hours in the field and conducting a total of 23 in-depth interviews. At the begin-

ning of the research, my attention was largely attracted by the collective behaviours that these young men performed as professional football fans during the matches. However, the intensive presence in the fieldwork has later allowed me to expand my study beyond the analysis of the group's collective behaviours developing more intimate and daily relationships with the young men and observing them beyond their ultras role.

Focusing almost exclusively on ultras' collective behaviours during the matches rather than on the participants' everyday life, previous research on ultras communities has largely taken for granted the youthful, masculine and class-based nature of these groups. According to Marchi (2015), these studies have often analysed ultras as 'anomalies' within society, forgetting to recognise them for being - first and foremost - groups of young men. Leaning on this perspective, in this research I have attempted to 'use' the considered ultras group as an amplifying glass through which analyse how disadvantaged young men navigate together their transitions to adulthood and manhood.

As many ultras communities the observed group represented a "preserve" for young men sharing disadvantaged social origins (Elias & Dunning, 1986) and the fieldwork has allowed me to explore how they have collectively interpreted their transitions to adulthood and how they have re-elaborated the difficulties they have encountered within their homosocial relationships (Ferrero Camoletto & Bertone, 2016). Indeed, observations have been largely conducted outside the football arena, in private settings such as family dinners, birthday parties and holidays. This has given me the opportunity to follow the young men during the key phase of life in which they are expected to abandon youth to reach adulthood.

While this article does not consider literature on ultras subcultures as an analytical perspective, the present study develops from the acknowledgment of the homogeneous phenomenology of ultras communities' demographics in terms of age, gender, and class (Dal Lago, 1990). In Italy, ultras groups emerged during the 1970s when Italian football clubs started to offer seats in the popular stadium section behind the goal (in Italian: *curva*) at a discounted ticket price. From this moment, young men who, before, could not afford to enter the stadium began to occupy this section of the arena and to get organised in communities (Dal Lago & De Biasi, 1994) which, from their development, have attracted mainly - when not exclusively - young men sharing a working-class to lower-middle class background (Marchi, 2015). In terms of age and gender, ultras communities' composition has been mainly explained by the kind of collective activities that ultras subcultures perform during and around the matches (i.e., choreographies during matches with flags, banners and smoke-bombs, fights with police and other ultras groups) that, requiring physical strength and attitudes of defiance

towards authorities, would attract and facilitate the participation of young men over young women and older men. This fighting culture has also been identified by several scholars (Dal Lago & De Biasi, 1994; Doidge, Koszakowski & Mintert, 2020) as a key factor to explain ultras communities' homogeneous composition in terms of class background². This homogeneity is also reinforced by the processes of 'recruitment' of new members which often occur through friendship networks and peer-to-peer contacts in the everyday contexts of school, neighbourhoods and workplaces (Marchi, 2015).

Before proceeding with the analysis of the data, it is important to note that I undertook this research as a woman and, in consideration of the topic of this article, a brief reflection on the gendered nature of the research practice is needed. In fact, researching masculinity implies to understand that gender is always 'at play' in the research process itself and to reflect on how the researchers' and the participants' gender identities are enacted in the fieldwork. Discussing the main difficulties emerging when women research men, Walby (2011) has highlighted how the research process is both facilitated and hindered by the gender relationships at play. On the one hand, participants' disclosure can be enhanced as opening with women is perceived as less threatening for their masculine status and the interview can be interpreted as an occasion for flirting. On the other hand, male participants can feel the need to re-affirm their status in a situation where the female researcher has an agenda-setting power by enacting machismo. These challenges have certainly characterised the first phase of the study as participants' position toward me was marked by both suspiciousness and interest. However, after a while, the young men have accustomed to my presence and have started to trust me: although, due to my gender, I have never been considered a friend, I have progressively gained more access to the field.

The incorporation of adulthood into manhood

Considering the traditional markers that define the standard model of adulthood, the young men involved in the present study experienced uncompleted or poorly completed transitions. As mentioned before, the observed group was largely composed by low-educated young people having

² In terms of class background, many studies on ultras communities (Dal Lago, 1990) have argued that Italian ultras represent an interclass phenomenon which involves workers as much as businessmen, lawyers, and professors. This idea, which is often reported by ultras themselves, is not confirmed by in-depth qualitative analysis on ultras groups (Doidge, Koszakowski & Mintert, 2020) and appears largely based on a confusion between the *curva* and the ultras. Actually, ultras comprise just a minor part of the supporters who sit in the *curva* and while in the *curva* is possible to find also supporters with high socio-economic statuses, they rarely participate in the day-to-day activities of ultras groups.

major difficulties in entering the job market and in achieving economic independence. These living conditions also limited their opportunities to leave the family of origins, cohabit with their partners and have children.

Against this scenario, masculinity – ‘being a man’ – became a tool used by the young men to justify their worth to themselves and to collectively make sense of their condition. Studies of marginalised masculinities suggest that marginalised men’s gender performances represent attempts to claim for membership and belonging (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014; Della Puppa, 2014; Fidinini, 2019). In a similar manner, the observed young men used masculinity as a ‘proxy for adulthood’ and established their male identity as an alternative standard to assert their maturity also as adults. The following quote shows, for example, how being a man becomes a sufficient factor to claim the adult status when the socially defined markers are yet to be achieved.

I live with my mother and my older sister. Now I do not have a job... I am just helping out at home. [...] I am not feeling comfortable like this but, you know, I am still the man here... Like, you know, since my father died, the adult, the one in charge of this family is me (Maurizio, 27, Interview, 2017).

The incorporation of adulthood into manhood allows the young men to elaborate their own model of adult recognition to achieve – at least in their inner group – an adult status they could not obtain otherwise. In this model of recognition, the adult status was granted on the basis of the correct execution of a specific gender performance (that will be introduced in the next paragraph) rather than on age or the achievement of traditional markers of adulthood. Being 10 years older than the others or having achieved some of the traditional markers of adulthood (i.e., some of the young men had, for example, a job and others not) were not relevant factors in determining the achievement of the adult status. The passage from the condition of *cinno* (kid/boy) to the condition of *uomo* (man) was based mainly on the evaluation – on behalf of the group – of one’s level of manhood.

Alessandro describes Mario and Luca respectively as a “good kid” and as a “man”. Mario and Luca are both 21 and their living conditions are similar: they are temporarily working in the same carwash and live with their parents. According to Alessandro, however, between the two there is “an abyss”. Luca is “strong, courageous, a *proper* man” while Mario “needs to grow up” (Fieldnotes, June 2016).

In analysing these materials, it must be considered that having children is commonly recognised as an ‘irreversible’ threshold of adulthood and as a marker that, alone, is sufficient to grant recognition as adult to a young individual (Corijn & Klijzing, 2001; Mills et al., 2005). As none of the young men had children at the time in which this study was conducted, it is not possi-

ble to evaluate if becoming father would have been considered a sufficient element to, for example, recognise as *'uomo'* a member who did not adhere to the performance of masculinity defined by the group. However, in young men's discourses on fatherhood, the execution of a correct performance of masculinity emerged as necessary also to be recognised as good fathers. On the basis of a model of adult recognition in which manhood validates adulthood and not vice versa, traditional markers of adulthood needed to be achieved in a 'manly way' to obtain the young men's symbolic validation (Thébaud, 2010).

As suggested also by Connell's (1995) and Kimmel (2018) observations on dynamics of validation and stigmatisation in homosocial interactions, the dichotomy 'man vs kid' was commonly used by the young men to validate or dismiss other members' gender performances. Young men who failed to adhere to the performance of masculinity suggested by the group were stigmatised as 'children' and 'boys'. For the purpose of this article, it is interesting to underline that young men rarely used the word *'giovane/i'* (young person/people) to define themselves or the others and that, in their own model of adult recognition, there seemed to be no space for 'youth'.

The young men get annoyed when I use the adjective "young" to refer to them. [...] Giovanni tells me that, in their vocabulary, saying to one of them that he is young is like suggesting he is a kid (Fieldnotes, December 2015).

In this model of recognition, the passage from childhood to adulthood is quick and requires almost no preparation. Indeed, young men substitute adulthood with masculinity because they perceive the latter as status that they somewhat already possess. From their point of view, manhood is a 'natural characteristic' that they did not have to fight for; something they were born with. As a consequence, manhood was understood as a resource that needed to be 'nurtured' rather than 'acquired'.

I: Is it sufficient to be a male to be a man?

D: Yes and no. You need to work [on yourself] to be a man, but you have already everything you need to be a man. It's not like you have to buy a house or have kids to be a man. You are born with everything you need, then is your choice to act like a man or not, but you have everything.

(Daniele, 25, Interview, 2019).

However, the symbolic absence of the intermediate phase of youth in the model of adult recognition elaborated by the young men must also be interpreted as a proof of the rigidity of the criteria they use to determine who can claim to be an adult and who cannot. If adulthood is the higher status and if this higher status can be achieved through the correct performance of mas-

culinity, the system of recognition structured around the rigid dichotomy 'adulthood/in vs childhood/out' does not foresee neither liminal statuses of preparation nor 'warnings' for incorrect performances.

Elements of a marginalised model of masculinity

Against this scenario, it becomes relevant to explore upon what specific model of masculinity the young men structure their system of recognition of the adult status.

Over the past few decades, while the concept of masculinity has been explored to understand the tensions and anxieties that men face in relation to work, family, romantic relationships and other life domains, scholars have sought strategies to analyse masculinity without reifying it in static sex-appropriate and personality traits. In doing so, men's studies have progressively focused their analysis on "manhood acts" (Kimmel, 2008; Schrock & Schwalbe 2009), that is on practices that men enact to claim their membership/identity as men, to be approved as a man by other men, and to resist being subordinated by other men (Ferrero Camoletto & Bertone, 2016). Observing masculinity through manhood acts means understanding that – despite men's perceptions – masculinity never just a quality that men have for the simple fact of being born with certain physical attributes, but a social identity that needs to be "established and upheld in interaction [with other men]" by mastering "a set of conventional signifying practices" (Schrock & Schwalbe, 2009, p. 279). By considering the participants' manhood acts in homosocial relationships within the group, it was thus possible to understand what does 'being a man' concretely meant for them and, due to the previously highlighted substitution of adulthood with manhood, to also explore what 'being an adult' was according to them.

Heterosexuality and the performance of a macho identity emerged as basic traits of the performances of masculinity elaborated by the young men. The constant demonstration of one's ability to conquer women represented an easy and effective strategy to increase one status in the group as shown by the following fieldnote.

A classic Monday's ritual in the group is discussing the weekend's sexual conquests and Luca has always an "heroic adventure" to tell. [...] Despite being one of the youngest in the group, Luca is treated like an adult by the other young men who admire him also for this success with women who, for the young men, are hard-to-get prizes [...] Juri summarises the groups' perspective on women saying that "women are harder to get than jobs. Even an idiot can get a stupid job... to get a woman, there is no job centre... it is just you and you need to be strong, smart... solid as a rock... a man" (Fieldnotes, September 2016).

This understanding of manhood, and thus adulthood, as emphasised virility was accompanied by a valorisation of physical strength. This could be demonstrated and was evaluated either through the display of the muscularity of the body – often enhanced through tattoos - or through one’s capacity to hold big quantity of drugs and alcohol.

What matters to be recognised as a “*uomo*” in the group emerges also by looking at young men’s use of their money. [...] Gym, drugs and alcohol account for a large part of their monthly expenses. [...] Moreover, they appear to be constantly saving money for the next tattoo [...] (Fieldnote, October 2018).

Virtues of constancy, stoicism, strength are expressed through bodies, which are always pushed to their limits. Those who do sport, lift weights to exhaustion. [...] When using alcohol and drugs, one cannot stop until he is completely wasted. [...] Tattoos need to be big and possibly in positions that are considered to be painful such as the chest (Fieldnote, December 2018)

Finally, committing small and big deviant behaviours (e.g., skipping school, using and selling drug) and defying authorities (e.g., parents, teachers, law officers) represented other common manhood acts used by the young people to present themselves as men to their peer.

For the young men, being a real man means first of all defying rules, any rule. As summarised by Marco “being man is to have no masters”. The more a boy is able to demonstrate he does not care of the rules defined by “authorities” (being teachers at schools, boss at work, parents at house or girlfriend in a relationship), the more his masculine status increases. (Fieldnotes, July 2017)

The words used by the young men to explain why these manhood acts are so important in their definition of ‘man’ further stress the previously outlined process of incorporation of adulthood within masculinity as they connect emphasised virility, physical strength and defiance of law to qualities of independence, maturity, autonomy that are commonly associated with adulthood. Not surprisingly, “*non fare il cinno*” [“do not act like a child”] was the expression used to sanction those who do not adjust to their performances of masculinity.

When Marcello (21) refuses to consume drugs or alcohol because he does not want to risk his driver licence [which is necessary for its new job], the rest of the group says he is acting like a *cinno*, that is in a non-mature and infantile manner. Marcello is accused to lack of independence and autonomy because, they say, “he is not thinking with his head”. Claudio (21) says to his friend that he needs to “man up” and stop listening to what his parents tell him to do. (Fieldnotes, July 2017)

An alternative model of adulthood?

So far, this analysis has analysed the observed young men's performances of masculinity as an effect of or a response to the difficulties they experience in becoming adults due to their disadvantaged social origins. This paragraph's ambition is to explore the mechanism through which this performance of masculinity 'acts back' on young men's transitions, exacerbating their difficulties in dealing with the standard model of male adulthood. This analysis does not want to suggest that changing their performance of masculinity or reaching hegemonic masculinity would facilitate young men's transitions to adulthood but to highlight how gender becomes a resource through which social marginalisation takes place. In so doing, the paragraph also reflects on the positioning of the model of adult recognition in relation to the standard model of adulthood asking whether young men's performances of masculinity can be recognised as an alternative model of male adulthood.

The effects that the young men's performances of masculinities have had on their transitions to adulthood were fairly frequently in the course of the fieldwork and assumed two main forms. In some cases, disadvantage emerged as an effect of the prejudices that others attached on the young men because of their way of being men. As shown by the following quote, preconceptions were frequently triggered by the kind of masculinity the young men invested in, producing further negative effects on their attempts to deal with dominant ideas of adulthood.

I: Why do you think you are having so many difficulties in finding a job?

S: Ahh... It's because of my character! I am...too much man [*troppo uomo*]!

I: What do you mean exactly?

S: I am stubborn, and very proud, I do not bow to everything a boss says... and this create problems. Not just at work... with girls too. [Laughing] My ex-boss and my ex-girlfriend would complain with me about the same things!

(Sebastiano, 28, Interview, 2015).

In other cases, however, the retroactive effect of masculinity emerged by a more subtle mechanism occurring in the interactions between the young men. In homosocial relationships within the group, masculinity was often strategically used to dismiss the relevance of those traditional markers of adulthood that most of the group's members were unable to achieve. Markers such as finishing school, finding a stable job, leaving the parents' house, getting into a stable relationship and having children were, in fact, frequent-

ly diminished in their capacity to define what a man is and, thus, also what an adult is.

Sandro tells me he would like, one day, to go back to school to get a diploma. He tells me he wants to “demonstrate the kind of man I am to his girlfriend” who he is very in love with and wants to marry soon. Listening to our conversation, Mario intervenes saying he cannot tell if it is “more gay” Sandro’s desire to “get trapped” in marriage or his ambition to become a “loser bookworm” (Fieldnotes, March 2018).

As the above fieldnote shows, the expression of ambitions for the standard model of adulthood was often regulated by the group through homophobic jokes. In fact, heteronormativity was used as a mean to control men’s behaviours not only for what concerns deviations in gender performances and sexual behaviours (see previous paragraph), but also in relation to potential deviation from the group’s own model of adult recognition. As a consequence of this model, the achievement and preservation of manhood was, in fact, prioritised by the young men even when it meant losing the possibility to achieve traditional markers of adulthood. The following quote highlights how occasions to reach the normative ideal of adulthood were actively abandoned by the young men if they implied a risk of diminishment of their male identity.

Cristian works in a call centre since almost one year and he is liking the job. However, he is not getting enough money to leave his parents’ place, which he has repeatedly said he wants to leave as soon as possible. [...] He informs the boys that he has not accepted the promotion proposed by his boss. [...] He refused because he realised that in the other office he would be “under a woman and a boy [*un cinno*]” while in the current office he is “the man” (Fieldnotes, April 2019).

It must be noted that what could probably appears as pure example of self-sabotage, was strongly defended by the young men as a legitimate demonstration of adulthood. Indeed, while commenting on Cristian’s choice, the other boys expressed the following opinions:

Davide approves Cristian’s choice saying: “It does not worth to lose one’s dignity for what... 100 euros more? It does not change anything...it is not like you suddenly get your dream house and your dream life”. [...] Tommaso, following on Davide’s argument, adds: “you know what you need to get your dream house and your dream life Cristian? You need a dream family!” and, laughing, he adds: “you are born poor, and you will die poor, Cristian... at least keeps your balls!” (Fieldnotes, April 2019).

While these words and, more generally, the development of an alternative model of adult recognition testify young men’s awareness of the unequal

nature of the standard model of male adulthood in relation to their social position, this awareness did not translate into a full-fledged critique of the idea of adulthood that the standard model suggests. Rather than completely adopting the alternative model of male adulthood that ruled in their homosocial relationships, young men seemed to ‘juggle’ between the ideas of adulthood elaborated in their inner group and the normative ideal dominating their surroundings. Conscious of the limited applicability of their alternative model of adult recognition, young men’s tended to lie on their job, financial situation or relationship status with people external to the group.

Walking with Giulio, we meet a middle-aged man who knew with his father. [...] The man asks Giulio how he is doing, and Giulio replies that he is working full time and finally living alone. He is lying. [...] “I don’t like when people stick their nose in my business” he tells me as soon as we are alone. (Fieldnotes, June 2018).

Also relationships with young people external to the group were a common source of discomfort for the young men because they forced them to deal with the limits of their alternative model of recognition. Consequently, they were often avoided.

Andrea does not like his girlfriend’s friends, but this evening has not found a good excuse and has to attend a dinner with them. [...] He insistently asks some of his friends to join and while explaining why he does not want to go alone he says that they only talk about their new jobs, their new houses, their holidays abroad. “Like if this sh*t makes them more than me, more than us” he adds. (Fieldnotes, May 2016).

Andrea’s words show that young men combine an acute critique of the standard model of adulthood with the defence of a performance of masculinity that penalises them in their possibility to achieve the normative ideal of adulthood. Leaning on Willis (1977), it is possible to understand their attitude towards the standard model of adulthood as an example of “partial penetration” of their disadvantaged position in the systems of recognition defined by the standard model of male adulthood. Analysing why working-class boys end up in working-class job, Willis noted that “social agents are not passive bearers of ideology, but active appropriators who reproduce existing structures only through struggle, contestation and a partial penetration of those structures” (Willis, 1977, p. 175). According to Willis, while being sometimes able to see through the structural inequalities of society and understanding “their position in the social whole”, disadvantage social agents are also subjected to “blocks diversions and ideological effects” (Willis, 1977, p. 175) which confuse and impede their full rebellion to their disadvantage.

Conclusions

This article has attempted to shed light on the strategies of navigation of transitions to adulthood elaborated by marginalised young masculinities in their homosocial relationships. If analysed through the lenses of the standard model of adulthood, the live paths of the young men involved in this study tell stories whose complexity cannot be fully understood without considering young individuals' age, gender, and class-based identities as inextricably linked projects. The present analysis has sought to highlight how masculinity – a characteristic that frequently is an advantaging factor in transitions to adulthood – can exacerbate difficulties in transition to adulthood determined by social origins. In so doing, looking at the intersections of age, class, and gender the article has explored the process through which young men transform masculinity in an alternative model of adult recognition, shedding light on the work of 'bricolage' that marginalised young masculinities engage with in trying to keep together what society say an adult man should be and what they can actually do considering the constraints set by their social origins (Della Puppa, 2014).

The article's findings sustain a two-fold reflection concerning the study of youth transitions to adulthood.

On a first level, they invite for a deeper application of gender studies' conceptualisations within the analysis of youth transitions (Roberts, 2018; Risman, 2018; Ferrero Camoletto & Bertone, 2016). While literature on young people's paths towards adulthood has vastly acknowledged the fact that gender shapes young individuals' trajectories and achievements, existing studies tends to often interpret gender only as an ascribed characteristic that 'externally' influence young people's destiny. A fuller application of gender studies' conceptualisations to the analysis of young people's transitions to adulthood implies recognising gender identities also as 'resources' that young people activate in their transitions and acknowledging that young people's use of this resources has consequences on their paths. Looking at young men's transitions to adulthood through these conceptual lenses, implies conceiving masculinity as "the discursive position available through gender relations that [men] are encouraged to inhabit and use" and to acknowledge that "its use will be informed by the network of social positions of class, gender, sexuality, region, age and race which ensure that it will be taken up (and resisted) in different ways" (Skegg, 1997, p. 10). This perspective not only invites for a more nuanced consideration of the implications that gender has for different young individuals' transitions to adulthood by recognising that certain performances of masculinity can be disadvantaging in specific conditions, but it also suggests to look at young people's gender performances as a form of "embodied cultural capital" (McCall, 1992, p. 7;

Skeggs, 1997, 2004) that – in line with Bourdieu’s conceptualisations (Bourdieu, 1984) – is both shaped by and able to shape their living conditions.

On a second level, this article’s findings have also implications for conceptualisations of adulthood. As discussed in the introduction, the standard model of adulthood represents a generalised normative ideal (Lee, 2001; Crawford, 2007) that sets an unachievable standard for many young individuals. Yet existing studies on youth transitions and youth policies largely reproduce this idea of adulthood as an unproblematised social phenomenon and indiscriminately apply the markers set by the standard model of adulthood to measure when a transition is completed and successful. The in-depth intersectional analyses of transitions toward adulthood sheds light on the fact that young people do not grow up towards the neutral, gender-less, and class-less “generic subject” (Saraceno, 1984, p.54) that literature call ‘adult’. Rather, different young individuals ‘do adulthood’ differently through gendered and class-dependent practices. In this perspective, this article’s findings invite for an analysis of adulthood as a social phenomenon that is expressed through a plurality of configurations of practices (Connell, 1995). Borrowing gender studies’ analytical lenses and vocabulary, this conceptualisation of adulthood facilitates the recognition of the context-specific nature of adulthood by acknowledging that ‘being an adult’ has different meaning in different societies and communities (Blatterer, 2010) and, in so doing, it also recognises the meaningfulness of the different ‘performances of adulthood’ that young people elaborate from the specific intersections of age, gender, class and other factors they inhabit. Moreover, thinking of adulthood as a configuration of practices allows to conceptualise the standard model of adulthood as a ‘discursive position’ that young individuals are encouraged to inhabit through the adoption of a symbolically legitimated performance against which all other performances of adulthood are hierarchically ordered. In this perspective, this conceptualisation opens possibilities thinking of marginalised youth transitions not as mere ‘collateral effects’ of the standard model of adulthood, but as inherently structural characteristics essential for the symbolic validation of a normative model. Thinking of adulthood as a configuration of practices means, in other words, recognising that by creating ‘hegemonic adulthood’, the standard model of adulthood, also creates the basis of dynamics of complicity, marginalisation, and subordination emerging in young individuals’ attempts to take up or resist the normative ideal. In conclusions, applying to adulthood the conceptual lenses that have allowed gender studies to problematise the apparent neutrality of masculinity and femininity, this perspective could help researchers to avoid the reproduction, within studies of youth transitions, of those abstract and unquestioned representations of the adult stage that have contributed at reifying traditional markers of adulthood into a normative standard.

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