What does being an adult mean? Comparing young people’s and adults’ representations of adulthood

Ilaria Pitti 🌐*

Department of Sociology and Business Law, University of Bologna, Bologna, Italy

ABSTRACT
This article aims at exploring the representations young people and adults attribute to the concept of adulthood in order to analyse the effects these ideas have on their reciprocal perception and recognition. In so doing, it draws upon data collected through a grounded theory study, which has been conducted in Italy involving young people and adults in semi-structured qualitative interviews. Data show that an outdated traditional model is still used by both the samples to determine who is an adult and when the adult status is acquired without discussing its validity in front of a changed social scenario. An evaluative function is added to traditional transitional markers of adulthood, which are used by both young people and adults to accuse each other of being ‘not mature enough’. A discrepancy between the shared ideal representations of adulthood and the actual possibility the two generations have to meet those social expectations in their lives emerge. The implications of these results for youth transitions to adulthood are discussed in the light of the high level of intergenerational inequality characterising the Italian context.

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Introduction

From a sociological perspective, age can be considered as an individual’s ‘ascribed characteristic’, a feature that contributes to defining who a person is, independently from his will (Merico 2004). Age holds this property because of the definitions attributed to it by society, which ties to the temporal substratum an array of meanings, expectations of behaviour, and roles (Neugarten and Datan 1978). In fact, the identification of individuals’ age allows for the definition of their position in relation to historically and socially characterised phases of life (childhood, youth, adulthood, old age), to which each society attributes specific actions, values, expected norms and roles, as well as resources allocation systems and socialisation models.

By virtue of the transformative action that structural forces and individual behaviours operate on every social phenomenon, an increasing weakening of the relation between age, stages of life and adherence to the corresponding traditional standards of behaviour and roles has been highlighted in contemporary Western societies (Mayer 2004; Van de Velde 2015). According to many scholars (Lee 2001; Blatterer 2007; Settersten and Ray...
2010), this process, though involving all stages of the life course, would find a particularly clear manifestation in youth, adulthood, and in the phase of transition between these stages. Without claiming completeness, it is worth recalling that the gradual extension of the educational pathways, the intensified insecurity and fragmentation of work careers, the increased relational instability and other contemporary social transformations have effectively fostered a certain disconnection between age of individuals and correspondence to the traditionally typical norms and roles of youth and adulthood (Blatterer 2010). These processes have blurred the boundaries between these two phases of life and have fostered a convergence – at the same time voluntary and imposed – between young people’s and adults’ models of behaviour (Leccardi and Ruspini 2006; Woodman and Wyn 2014).

In front of this scenario, a growing number of sociological studies have started to analyse how adulthood is perceived by contemporary young generations, through analyses and reflections focused on young people’s representations of adulthood (Pilcher, Williams, and Pole 2003; Blatterer 2007; King 2013), perceptions of contemporary adults (Blatterer 2007, 2010) and expectations about their future as adults (Thomson et al. 2004; Leccardi 2014). Referring to this strand of youth studies and addressing scholars interested in the analysis of the contemporary evolutions of youth understandings of the adult age, the paper proposes an analysis of youth social representations of adulthood, as well as a comparison between young people’s ideas and those of a sample of ‘significant adults’ indicated by the involved young people.

Although a certain interest in adulthood has recently emerged in sociological analyses (Blatterer 2007; Burnett 2010), adults are still often placed in the background of sociological studies on youth, constituting a rarely problematised actor (Saraceno 1984). ‘Sociological analysis’ remains frequently ‘tied to a segmented vision of existence’ (Van de Velde 2015, 9) that does not put in dialogue the transformations affecting the different ages of life, consequently limiting the ability of sociological research to look at young people as individuals who are defined also by the relationships they have (or do not have) with other generations. In order to reach a more complete understanding of young people and of their paths towards adulthood, it appears instead essential to acknowledge that youth transitions to adulthood have an inherently relational nature. Youth transitions are influenced by processes of construction, transformation, negotiation and recognition of the sense of being an adult, involving both young people – meant as those who are living the transition – and adults – meant as those who have achieved the adult status, acquiring a power of recognition over those still in transition (Woodman and Wyn 2014).

Seeking to pay attention to the relational character of the transitions to adulthood and to the processes of co-construction and recognition of the adult status between young people and adults, this article presents a comparative analysis that highlights similarities and discrepancies in the two social representations of adulthood. Moreover, the analysis explores how these ideas affect the two generations’ mutual perceptions as adults and ‘adults-in-becoming’, aiming at connecting the study of the social meaning of the adult age with the analysis of intergenerational relationships in youth transitions.

Social representations are here understood as cognitive systems, with their own logics and languages, through which individuals and social groups build and give meaning to reality (Farr and Moscovici 1984; Jodelet 1989). Even though inspired by Durkheim’s concept of collective representations, social representations are not invariable ideas
(such as myths, religions, morals, science) having the function of maintaining a given social order, but a form of dynamic, socially developed and shared knowledge, which contributes to the construction of reality and guides individual behaviour (Harré 1984). Therefore, the analysis of social representations of adulthood makes it possible to explore the permanence and the evolution of socially shared ideas on the adult age in individuals and social groups. In this study, a distinction between the interviewees’ ideal (what adulthood should be) and descriptive (what actually adulthood is in today’s society) representations of adulthood is proposed. This distinction intends to pay attention to both the narrative and the evaluative function of social representations (Moliner 1995), examining whether, and to what extent, the interviewees’ words reveal a change in contemporary ideas of adulthood and how this change is judged.

The research highlights that both the samples acknowledge a profound transformation in the contemporary practices of adulthood, but share an outdated model concerning what an adult should be on an ideal level. Moreover, the comparison between the representations of adulthood of the two samples shows how the inability of young and adult respondents to contextualise the other generation’s lifestyle in the contemporary social scenario generates difficulties in terms of mutual recognition.

This article adopts the following structure: first, the background, aims, methodology, and context of the research are outlined. Following this, the main findings of the study are presented, drawing upon participants’ accounts. Lastly, some potential implications of the debated issues on the intergenerational dynamics of recognition and youth transitions to adulthood are discussed.

**Research background, aims and methodology**

The empirical research presented in this article consists of a grounded theory study (Glaser and Strauss 1967) conducted in Italy (Bologna) in 2013, which considers young individuals and adults in a series of semi-structured interviews.

For the purposes of this analysis, it worth recalling that, in comparison with many of their peers living in other Western countries, young Italians have to deal with a deeply ‘unwelcoming’ scenario, which has affected the complexity and linearity of their paths of growth, especially – but not exclusively – on the economic and work side. Diffused and prolonged unemployment, difficult transitions into the job market, slow exits from the family of origin, asymmetries between educational levels and employment opportunities, as well as the permanence of a familial and low-protective welfare system undermine the possibilities of achieving an economic and existential autonomy for many young individuals in Italy (Negri and Filandri 2010; Blossfeld et al. 2011). All this influences youth capacity to reach those thresholds that are commonly acknowledged as symbols of adulthood and makes youth transitions among the most prolonged in the European context (Cicchelli 2001). Although Italian young people have been placed in a disadvantaged social position since at least the early ’90s, many recent analysis (Balduzzi and Rosina 2010; Schizzerotto, Trivellato, and Sartor 2011) have confirmed that the distance in terms of well-being between generations has been progressively exacerbated by the financial and economic crisis that started in 2008, whose direct and indirect effects have affected younger generations in a deeper way in comparison with adult and old generations. These intergenerational disparities have fostered the development of a creeping
intergenerational conflict that, at the time when this research has been conducted, has sometimes found explicit expressions also in the public and political arenas (Sgritta 2014). A paradoxical situation that sees many young Italians largely dependent from those adults that are more and more indicated as being responsible for the current difficult conditions young generations are experiencing is thus recognisable in the country (Balduzzi and Rosina 2010).

Compared to the delineated national scenery, although Bologna is one of the wealthiest Italian cities, it is interesting to underline how the conditions of its young people are not so different from those of many young individuals in other parts of the country, if analysed in an intergenerational perspective. Young people in Bologna certainly have the benefit of an advantaged position in comparison to many other Italian young people, thanks to the resilience of the regional job market and to the robustness of the local welfare system. However, the same disparities between young people and adults registered at the national level, emerge at the local level, considering, for example, employment rates, income levels, and housing independence (Rettaroli and Zurla 2013). In this perspective, Bologna can thus be considered a territory able to account – albeit with its specificity – of some general, national trends.

The empirical research has seen the involvement of a sample of 32 young individuals whose main socio-demographic characteristics are synthetically reported in Table 1, and a sample of 18 significant adults² who have been indicated by the young interviewees and whose significant socio-demographic characteristics are presented in Table 2.

Although only 18 interviews with adults were conducted,³ all 32 young respondents have indicated a significant adult who, in 27 out of 32 cases, is one of their parents, confirming an undeniable centrality of parental figures in youth pathways of growth in comparison with other adults. In line with other studies (Albert and Ferring 2013; Nilsen and Brannen 2014), the analysis of the data suggests that the young interviewees have very

### Table 1. Main characteristics of the youth sample.

| Characteristic                        | Youth sample’s characterisation |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Age                                   | The interviewees are aged between 18 and 24. The average age in the youth sample is 21. |
| Gender                                | The sample is composed by 16 females and 16 males. |
| Ethnic background                      | All the young interviewees were born and grew up in Italy. 6 of the young respondents are second generation migrants (Albania, Romania, China, and Morocco). |
| Housing status at the time of the interview | 19 interviewees live with their families of origins. 12 young individuals are living with friends and/or roommates. 1 interviewee is living with his partner. None of them is living alone. All those who do not live with their family are renting the house where they stay. |
| Relational and family status at the time of the interview | 15 interviewees consider themselves singles, 8 consider themselves in a stable relationship, 9 say they are living a ‘complicate’ or ‘unstable’ relationship. None of the interviewees is married. None of the interviewees has children. |
| Educational status and level at the time of the interview | Each interviewee has completed the lower secondary school. 27 young individuals have also completed the upper secondary school. 4 young interviewees are still at the upper secondary school, while 16 are university students. |
| Occupational status at the time of the interview | Considering the 12 young interviewees who consider to have completed their studies, 10 are working and 2 are unemployed. Considering the 20 young people who are still studying, 8 are also working in seasonal or part-time jobs, but their main activity is studying. |
limited relationships with adults other than their parents in their daily life and that they perceive these relationships as not so meaningful.

In the first phase of the empirical research, young people have been involved in individual, qualitative, semi-structured interviews, where themes such as relationships with adults and representations of adulthood are talked about in depth. In the second phase of the project, significant adults have been interviewed as well, with the goal of investigating how intergenerational relationships influence youth representations and practices of adulthood. Table 3 shows a limited sample of questions that have been proposed to the interviewees to explore their ideas on adulthood and to distinguish the different levels of their representations.

Before moving forward with the presentation of the results, it seems appropriate to specify that this contribution does not have the ambition and possibility to

### Table 2. Main characteristics of the adult sample

| Characteristic                  | Adult sample’s characterisation |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| **Age**                         | The interviewees are aged between 40 and 60. The average age in the adult sample is 49.5. |
| **Gender**                      | The sample is composed by 7 females and 11 males. |
| **Ethnic background**           | The sample includes 2 adults having migrant origins (Albania). |
| **Relationship with the interviewed young individual** | In the vast majority of the cases (13 cases on 18) there is a parental relationship between the interviewees. In the remaining 5 cases, the significant adult is another family member (2), a teacher (2) or a sport coach (1). |
| **Housing status at the time of the interview** | 2 adult interviewees are living alone, 11 are living with their family of destination, 4 are living with both their family of origin and their family of destination in the same house, 1 is returned living with his family of origin after divorcing. The vast majority of the interviewees (13) own the house where they are living. |
| **Relational and family status at the time of the interview** | 12 interviewees are married (first or second marriage), 3 interviewees are in a stable cohabitation with their partner, 3 interviewees are single. 16 out of 18 interviewees have children. |
| **Educational level**           | 5 adult interviewees have a lower secondary school certificate, 7 have obtained a high school diploma and 6 have a university degree. |
| **Occupational status at the time of the interview** | Just 1 of the interviewees is unemployed. 15 of them have a stable job, 2 of them a short-term contract. 14 of the interviewees are working full time, 3 are working part-time. |

*a* This table presents the main characteristic of the 18 interviewed adults and not of the whole set of 32 significant adults indicated by the young interviewees.

*b* By family of origin I intend the family in which people were born and grew up (parents and siblings), while by family of destination I consider the new family they create themselves (e.g. partner and children).

### Table 3. Ideal and descriptive representations and examples of related questions.

| Dimensions                      | Questions (examples) |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------|
| **Ideal representations**       | If I say ‘adult’ what comes to your mind? What adjectives do you attach to the word ‘adult’? Every society has a series of unwritten rules that tell us how certain things should be. These unwritten rules tell us, for example, that a teacher should be competent or that a soldier should be brave. These unwritten rules also exist with respect to how an adult should be. Thinking about these unwritten rules, could you tell me how should an adult be? I ask you to focus on what an adult should be, not on what adults really are and not on what you’d like them to be. Do you like today’s adults or not? What do you like and what do you like of them? Ideally, how would you like them to be? Thinking about your ideal adult, how would you like him to be? |
| **Descriptive representations** | Concerning what you see in your daily life, can you tell how adults really are? (Through specific questions, examples referring to people with whom the interviewee relates have been solicited). |
comprehensively address all the nuances detectable through the analysis of the materials in relation to the main relevant distinctive features of the two samples (i.e. gender, educational level, status of employment, and ethnic background).

This article focuses primarily on some general trends emerging among the young and adult interviewees, believing that exactly their recurrence within two highly internally differentiated samples makes them particularly relevant for the issues discussed in this paper. However, some specific influences of these differences are highlighted in the presentation of the results.

Portrayals of adulthood: young people’s and adults’ representations of adulthood

What should an adult be?

With the goal of investigating the representation of adulthood, interviewees have been asked to think about the meanings that get attributed to adulthood.

From an overall analysis of the interviews, several themes and ways in which young individuals and adults conceptualise adulthood emerge. However, when it comes to define what adults are meant to be, two main categories are particularly recurring: responsibility and independence (Du Bois-Reymond 1998; Blatterer 2007; Pasqualini 2012).

Both for young people and adults, the former of these two attributes – responsibility – qualifies an adult as an individual who is able to take care of others as well as to take on responsibilities related to others, being relatives, colleagues, fellow citizens or the entire world. While adult interviewees define the concept of ‘responsibility’ mainly referring to a dimension of willingness (being responsible as being willing to take care of something), for the young interviewees, being responsible is not primarily a matter of will, but it refers to the possibility of being recognised as able to be deal with a certain duty by those around you.

Being adult is a matter of responsibility, on two levels. It means being able to give attentions to and take care of something or somebody, accomplish a task that has been assigned to you, but also being considered a responsible person by the people around you, being considered able to do it. (Diego, Male, 21)

An adult is meant to be, first of all, a responsible and mature person. An adult is, also by law, someone who is responsible for his actions and for the consequences of his behaviours. Being an adult is ideally being able to think and consider the effects, that what you do has (an effect) on you and on the others. Then, it can be argued if this is still what we see, but this is still ideally what it should be. (Roberto, Male, 43)

In relation to the second attribute – independence –, adulthood is seen as very much different from youth because it is characterised by an increased autonomy and freedom of choice.

Freedom is not the correct term […] an adult should be an individual who can do whatever he wants, while respecting others, of course […] Independent, an adult should be first of all independent. (Alberto, Male, 24)

I think independence and responsibility are the main characteristics of the adult par excellence. Adults are asked to be responsible and independent. If you don’t have one of these
characteristics you are like a child […] Independence is about taking decisions and choosing without the need of asking the consent to someone else. (Carla, Female, 53)

According to young interviewees, independence is represented by an array of dynamics and behaviours that span from being able to autonomously decide to get a tattoo ‘without the need to justify the decision to my mother’ (Giulia, Female, 19), to being able and choose to live alone. Often, young interviewees talk about independence in relation to lifestyles and consumption, as well as to a selection of other concrete actions that are encapsulated by economic independence (e.g. buy a car, travel, rent an apartment), while adults frequently refer to more abstract choices concerning both their public and private life (e.g. deciding to change job or to end a relationship because they were no longer satisfied).

It is interesting to underline that young and adult women – especially the more educated ones – particularly emphasise the independence dimension as a fundamental element of the adult status. Female interviewees frequently explicitly highlight a desire to distance themselves from a traditional model that sees women (economically) dependent on men, and they think it is still inexplicably accepted by many women in Italy. Through their stories and opinions, the female interviewees thus give voice to both the on-going process of emancipation involving Italian women and its many limits.

An adult has to be independent, autonomous, not dependent on anyone. In my family, a classic Southern family, my mother doesn’t work and asks for money from my father even to buy a t-shirt. This is inconceivable to me, really. Today adult women should be autonomous as men are: we are no more in the nineteenth century! (Giulia, Female, 19)

The value of being independent is still underestimated by many women in Italy. Many of us just aspire to the security of a husband who earns enough for the whole family. Many don’t understand that counting on your own resources makes you safer (Paola, Female, 52).

As highlighted by other researches (Du Bois-Reymond 1998; Pasqualini 2012; Cuzzocrea and Magaraggia 2013), the roles connected to the adult status coincide, for both young people and adults, with two rather traditional adult roles. In young people’s words, the concept of responsibility is frequently associated to the archetypal parental figure, while independence is often understood as a characteristic trait of the (stable) worker.

Being responsible, I mean, responsible as parents are for their children. Adults should always act like parents also when they don’t have children or when they are not doing something exactly for or with their children. I mean, they should be paternal, which in a certain sense, means taking care, being responsible of what is around you. (Luca, Male, 23)

If I think of independence, I think of work. To be independent, and thus to be adult, you have to get a job, so you can rent a house, maybe buy it, pay for your things (Riccardo, Male, 19).

Similarly, also among the adult interviewees, parents are thought of as the emblematic incarnation of somebody who takes care of others and can be responsible for them, while the idea of true and full independence is connected to the figure of a worker able to maintain himself economically.

There is nothing more responsible and more adult than a parent. Responsibility is to act like you father or your mother would. Being an adult is to act like your father or your mother would. (Giovanni, Male, 50)
I think an adult should be an independent person. I mean, I refer not only to an economic independence, which is however important as a pre-condition [...]. I refer to a mental independence, to the freedom to act according to my own ideas. [...] However, as I was saying, to be independent in relation to your actions and choices, you must be independent to a certain degree also on an economic side. Having a job, ideally a job paid enough to not just survive and a stable job that allows you to make project about your future, is necessary for being free in this sense. (Gloria, Female, 42)

The analysis highlights that respondents tend to assign ‘responsibility’ to the domain of care and ‘independence’ to the terrain of work, struggling to reflect upon the relationships between these two elements. This appears especially true for the young people who seem to underestimate, for example, the negative impact that private responsibilities sometimes have on the possibility to obtain, maintain and consolidate an economic independence, especially among women. It seems possible that this could be determined by the fact that the sample is largely composed of young people who still have to perform few duties of care and have rarely experienced (and thus reflected upon) difficulties of balance between private life and study/work.

Data also shows a substantial equivalence of the ideas of adulthood shared by young people and adults, both defining it in terms of responsibility and independence, and commonly identifying it with the figures of the parent and the stable worker. Considering that, as previously mentioned, young people have mainly chosen one of their parents as significant adults, this convergence between the two generations is certainly influenced also by processes of intra-family transmission of perspectives about what an adult should be and testifies the permanence of a set of highly traditional ideas on adulthood within the Italian family and society (Leccardi 2014). As I am going to discuss later, these ideas acquire a deep significance in the processes of recognition of the adult status when they persist in a context marked by increasing difficulties in achieving and maintaining a working and existential stability for the young people, such as the Italian one.

**What actually is an adult?**

If the opinions expressed by the two generations do not differ regarding the definition of what an adult should be, the same cannot be stated about their points of view on what an adult actually is.

Concerning the descriptive level of the representations of adulthood, the analysis of interviews conducted with the youth sample points out the widespread idea that the adults of today are different from those of the past, as well as a basically pessimistic interpretation of this transformation. Young people believe changes in adulthood practices manifest themselves especially in a loss of competence in adults to be guiding and teaching role models. When asked what, according to them, would be the defining traits that separate young individuals from adults today, many interviewees answered ‘nothing really’ or ‘maybe just white hair’ (Alessandro, Male, 23). Though discerning that ‘not all adults are equal’ (Sabrina, Female, 18), young people tend to describe the members of the adult generation as individuals who ‘do not really behave like adults’ (Sabrina, Female, 18) and who cannot hence be considered as role models for their own growth.
I think today’s adults do not really behave like adults. I mean, not like an adult should ideally behave. Not all adults are equal, some of them are still, let’s say, ‘normal’ adults […], but many are no more ‘normal’ […] They act as if they were still young, children, which is not completely bad, nor completely good, but it changes everything, makes everything more confused (Sabrina, Female, 18).

When you face a problem, you cannot say ‘let’s think what an adult would do’ because they are so similar to us, or even more childish than us that you cannot imitate them (Alessandro, Male, 23).

Adults get often accused of lacking what, historically, has been described as the main characteristic of adults: maturity (Erikson 1959; Saraceno 1984; Burnett 2010). Expressions of adult immaturity are found on an array of different levels and contexts. In numerous cases their ‘excessively youthful’ lifestyle is mentioned, specifically in relation to their consumerist or affective choices, which are seen as characteristics of younger cohorts instead, and hence not suitable for adults. Frequently, these are the very attitudes young individual’s comments spark from, which underline the older generation’s tendency toward a ‘youthful adulthood’ (Dal Lago and Molinari 2002; Blatterer 2010) that extends beyond the pragmatic behavioural sphere to a deeper identity realm. The process of semantic expansion of youth – which according to Blatterer (2010, 69) would make youth a ‘lifestyle for all ages’, ‘rather than a life-stage’ – emerges in the interviewees’ words.

There’s nothing wrong with staying young and staying in good physical shape, but some other things I don’t understand, some excesses I really don’t get. I mean, there’s a difference between going to the club with your girlfriends and podium dancing, between dressing up and showing off to attract attention. When I see adult women who behave like teenagers I wonder what kind of mothers they can be, and I worry for their kids (Bianca, Female, 23),

They don’t understand they have grown up, that they should behave like adults … which doesn’t mean they should devote their lives to gardening and gaze at construction sites all day like old people do, but instead that they should understand it’s time to stop acting, getting dressed or getting drunk like they still were 18 years old … that time is gone and they should accept it (Marco, Male, 22).

Beyond these considerations on the ‘material’ aspects of youthful adulthood, a smaller group of young individuals, most often the older and the more educated ones, further explain the increasing lack of distinction between youth and adulthood by mentioning different processes responsible for the precarious quality of modern existence which, although with lighter effects, involve also adults.

Nowadays everything is so precarious. I find it difficult to talk about adulthood. I mean, unless we decide that anybody who’s older than a certain age is to be considered adult, personally I can’t easily point at a defining difference between us and them: we are all more or less temporary or occasional workers, we all have messed up relational situations (Luca, Male, 23).

Transformations of the adult lifestyle, as effectively summarised by one of the young interviewees, would make contemporary adults ‘less adult’ (Elena, Female, 23) than the ‘real adults’ (Elena, Female, 23) which are usually identified with the grandparent generation. Another young interviewee talks, more specifically, about a ‘humanisation’ of the perception of adulthood, which becomes less distant from youth, but at the same time loses part of its capacity of being a role model for youth (Nilsen and Brannen 2014).
There are the ‘real adults’, that is those of the generation of my grandparents and adults that are ‘less adult’, like many of the generation of my parents. It is easy to say what are the differences between a young person and my grandfather, while is more difficult to point out the differences between the same young person and my mother (Elena, Female, 23).

They truly have transformed, and I don’t know if it is because we have grown up and become ‘bigger’, or because they ‘shrunk’. I mean I don’t know if it’s normal, when you grow up, to see adults as more human, or if they really have lost something. Maybe it’s both (Stella, Female, 21).

Today it is difficult to say who is adult and who isn’t. I think it was easier in the past: adults had a stable job, young people not yet; adults had children, young people not yet. It was simpler. (Elena, Female, 23).

This ‘reduced adulthood’ generates conflicting sentiments among young generations. If for some this is a characteristic that enables and fosters relations and that makes young individuals freer, for the majority of the interviewees it seems to increase uncertainty, which is motivated by the feeling of having ‘neither the back covered nor reference points’ (Michele, Male, 18).

The analysis of the data seems thus to suggest that young people appear sometimes aware of how the mutated cultural and material context imposes and allows individuals to achieve adulthood in alternative ways and that ‘nobody can be adult like in the old days anymore’ (Alessandro, Male, 23). From their points of view, however, a pessimistic attitude on the matter prevails: the most diffused idea among young generations is that, when considering pros and cons, the latter is currently winning. A certain ‘bewildernement’ emerges among the young interviewees in front of a scenario in which the adults seem to have ‘evaporated’ and in which the demise of the classic ways of being and becoming adults has not yet been replaced by a clear definition of new ‘scripts to adulthood’ that young generations can refer to.

I don’t really look for role models in adults. […] In some cases, I think it is because I know they have grown up and they still are living in different conditions in comparison with us. I mean, it is not the same growing up in the ’60s or ’70s with a rather good economy and growing up today. […] Also, today they are living better than we do. They have better jobs than us, they earn more than us, and so on […]. In other cases, most often I would say, it is because they seem to be lost as we are. (Alessandro, Male, 23).

My role models … I think my grandmother and some older friends […] people I know who are 30–35. […] Not my parents or better not their generation. I mean, there is nothing wrong with them but they didn’t fight to get what they have. They have lived on the fat of the land (Michele, Male, 18).

Considering their own circumstances of ‘adults in transition’, this context leads many young individuals to believe they have been ‘robbed of something’. This feeling of being lost is particularly emphasised by the young interviewees who have not yet completed their studies and who thus have to deal with a higher degree of uncertainty.

If previously they gave you a dress and then they closed the closet, now they tell you ‘you’re free to dress like you wish,’ only to find out the closet is empty. The only thing that you have earned from this newfound freedom is a key. (Daniela, Female, 24)
As part of the research also the significant adults were asked about their opinions on the characteristics of today’s adults. As young people do, also the interviewed adults state that contemporary adults have changed, but contrary to young people they mostly seems to interpret this evolution in positive terms. On the adult side the transformation of the characteristics of adulthood is usually welcomed with optimism, being perceived as a possibility to have a social identity not just confined to the ‘adult roles’ of parent, partner and worker (Cuzzocrea and Magaraggia 2013).

I think at the time of my parents, starting work and having a family implied a far bigger change in someone’s habits. Today you can still have time for yourself even if you have a family, you can still have your hobbies. There is less pressure to change completely yourself when you get adult (Graziano, Male, 51).

This is especially true for the female respondents, whose words testify an on-going process of transformation of the role of women in the Italian society. Despite the persistence of major discrepancies in the conditions and possibilities of life of men and women, new possibilities of a combination between the traditional roles of wife and mother and women’s own subjectivity have emerged (Da Roit and Naldini 2010).

Compared with my parents I have a less heavy life, our generation is far less suffocated by being just worker, parents and partner. I still see my friends each Wednesday; I go to a pilates class twice a week. My mother didn’t! She couldn’t! She was just my mother and my father’s wife. (Sandra, Female, 45)

Moreover, although even among the adults the awareness and the complaint about a progressive infantilisation of their peers emerge, this group of interviewees generally support the idea that it is a marginal phenomenon.

Adults who act like children exist, and maybe it’s true that there are much more than there were in the past, but adults who act like children are a minority, although a very visible minority since they are usually in very visible positions, like television and so on, or because their behaviours are particularly ‘garish’ (Marcello, Male, 47).

Beyond a few exceptions, the interviewed adults describe their generation as still able to be a point of reference for young people, a normative and educational pole in youth’s paths of growth. However, they acknowledge that this role is accomplished in different and, according to their opinions, more positive ways with respect to those typical of the past. Comparing themselves to their parents, the adults emphasise their desire to avoid a distant and authoritarian role in relation to young people, and to their children, aiming to maintain a dialogue as equal as possible.

I think it is a change of perspective. We had fathers that behaved like ‘teacher’: my father was so rigid, so distant from me, he always had lessons to impose. I don’t want to be that for my children. I want to be an adviser, more than a teacher. I have experiences, but I don’t know everything yet and so I can suggest, not teach. (Giovanni, Male, 50)

Adults seem therefore to agree on the idea that today adults are different from the past, but they usually propose a positive interpretation of this transformation, which would enable an open dialogue with the young people. However their description of themselves interestingly glimpses the same trends of infantilisation that young people underline and negatively interpret in their descriptions of contemporary adults.
About my experience as daughter, I can say that my mother and I used to live in two separate worlds. When I was teenager, I would have never used my mother’s clothes or talked with her about my love stories, I would have never thought to go to the movie theatre with her, while me and my daughter, we do this, we share a lot. (Marta, Female, 42)

Indeed, when asked about the characteristics that would be able to distinguish young people from adults, also the adult interviewees express difficulties in identifying proper differences, making reference, once again, to the abstract concept of maturity.

It’s a matter of maturity, you know what I mean. It is difficult, maybe impossible to define what it means to be ‘mature’. You’re mature, you become mature. It’s something you gain with experience (Serena, Female, 45).

Being mature or immature is usually presented as an abstract characteristic, which seems to be acquired ‘naturally’ and almost suddenly through a broadly outlined path of growth. However, adults also attach to the abstract concept of ‘maturity’, very concrete symbols, status, roles, and behaviours referring to traditional markers of adulthood.

When explicitly asked, adults tend to clearly label some behaviours and conditions as ‘mature’ and some others as ‘typically juvenile’, thus resting the evaluation of their children’s as well as other young individual’s level of maturity on these labels.

The classic markers of adulthood are still commonly used as ‘measuring tape’ of adulthood despite their reduced accessibility due to the aforementioned lack of receptivity of the labour market and poor protectiveness of national welfare. Adults seem to not acknowledge the better possibilities and conditions of life they experience in relation to the younger cohort of the population.

Yes, he works, temporary jobs though, nothing serious yet, he doesn’t have a real job, he doesn’t have an adult job. (Giovanni, Male, 50)

Are you asking me if I think she is mature? Well, she is a very polite and caring girl, she is doing well at the university, but I don’t know what will happen when she finishes her studies. She doesn’t have a job yet, she changes boyfriend often, she doesn’t have a relationship oriented to the future, aimed at creating something. So, she is mature, but not mature enough to be considered ‘adult’. (Marta, Female, 42).

These expressions do not seem to account for the intense evolution the context, within which young Italians are called to manage their transitions, has gone through: by labelling some of these behaviours as ‘non adult’, adults inscribe young individuals into a potentially eternal ‘immature’ condition, failing to realise these frequently are merely reactions to material and cultural needs imposed by contemporary society. Indeed, in adults’ words, young people are commonly presented as immature, not yet ‘ready’ and there is a widespread tendency for adults to outline the generation that follows them as composed by ‘mature kids, just not mature enough yet’. On a more general level, an outdated traditional model is still used by both the samples to determine who is an adult and when the adult status is acquired without discussing its validity in front of a changed socio-historical scenario.

Real adults: dynamics of recognition and transitions to adulthood

The aim of this last paragraph is to debate what consequences the representations of adulthood emerging among the interviewees have on the intergenerational relationships
between young people and adults in terms of mutual perception and recognition, as well as to consider their potential implications on youth transitions to adulthood.

As for the discrepancies between the different levels of representations of adulthood, the analysis of the words of the young and adult interviewees has underlined a detachment between the ideal and the descriptive level. Indeed, concerning what an adult should be or is meant to be, both the samples involved in this study conceive adulthood in rather ‘traditional’ terms. Concerning ideal representations of adulthood, the interviewees refer to a social construction which associates the adult status to classic character traits of the adult (responsibility and independence), which in turn are connected to classic adult roles, rituals, and symbols (such as parenting, marrying, having a stable job). The characteristics and roles that young and adult interviewees connect to adulthood appear to still refer to what Lee (2001) has described as a ‘standard model of adulthood’: a set of ‘repertoires of behaviour’ consisting in the traditional markers of the passage to the adult condition (conclusion of the educational path, achievement and consolidation of a stable position in the job market, transition from the ‘family of origin’ to the ‘family of destination’ by marriage and parenting). On the descriptive level, however, both the adults’ and young individuals’ ideas on what contemporary adulthood actually is acknowledge a profound transformation of contemporary adults, which are distancing themselves from the traditional ways of living adulthood in response, or thanks to, a changed social scenario. As highlighted by Blatterer’s research on youth representations of adulthood (2007, 2010), the permanence of a traditional image of adulthood on the ideal level and the emergence of a ‘new adulthood’ in the description of the practices suggest that the changes the mutated contemporary social context has implied and allowed on the practices level, have not yet gone hand in hand with an evolution of the ‘common sense’ in relation to what adults are meant to be or should ideally be. From the analysed data, it emerges that ‘traditional norms about adulthood remain largely robust [despite] the context for the practical realisation of these norms has changed’ (Blatterer 2010, 64).

The roles, symbols and behaviours associated with a typically modern social construction of adulthood (Lee 2001; Blatterer 2010; James 2011) are used to identify who is adult and who is not by both the samples. On the youth side, the detachment of the contemporary adults from the traditional ways of living and acting the adult role is used to accuse the adult generation of being too childish and unable to constitute an adequate role model to follow. On the adult side, the missed adoption on the part of young people of the classic behaviours associated to the adult status is instead proposed as a valid reason to not recognise them as ‘fully mature’. In other words, an evaluative function is added to the notion of adulthood based upon classic transitional markers, which is then used by both young people and adults as an argument to accuse each other of being ‘not mature enough’. Interviewees sometimes express awareness concerning the many social transformations that have contributed to changing the traditional ways of being adult, and refer to them to deny or justify their own generation’s alleged lack of maturity. However, these same transformations are not usually taken in consideration when the other generation’s level of maturity is judged.

The existing relationship between the two generations involved in this study appears thus to feature an ambivalent tone, at the root of which is the discrepancy between the shared ideal representations of adulthood and the actual possibility the two generations
have to meet those social expectations in their lives. This discrepancy, coupling with the specific characteristics of the Italian contexts in terms of intergenerational inequalities, seems able to determine many potential effects on youth transitions to the adult condition, especially if – as it is the case of the young interviewees of this research – these transitions occur in a particularly adverse social scenario.

In the contemporary context, the actual possibilities to reach and maintain the traditional markers of adulthood have reduced for both the young and the adult generation. As suggested by many scholars, this appears to be largely determined by the complex effects of the labour market deregulation promoted from the ‘90s onwards (Barbieri and Scherer 2009), as well as of cultural processes of individualisation (Lash 2014). On the one side, these changes have sometimes granted individuals with an increased possibility of agency and freedom of choice in their own lives. On the other side, and much more frequently, they have fostered a general increase of uncertainty on the occupational level and in the existential sphere. For what specifically concerns the topics and the context of the presented research, opportunities and uncertainties are not democratically distributed among the two generations in the Italian context. Labour market deregulation in Italy has been implemented in a ‘targeted’ way (Esping-Adersen and Regini 2000) that has deeply impacted on young new entrants, while leaving the existing contracts generally untouched. Due to a welfare system that largely links the access to social protections to steady employment, this has also affected youth enjoyment of social entitlements, as well as hindered or delayed the possibility to set up a new family for many young Italians. Exacerbated by the consequences of the economic crisis and the austerity measures later implemented, this scenario has negatively impacted more on young Italians’ possibility to correspond to the standard model of adulthood than on adults’. In the Italian context, intergenerational inequalities generally allow the adult generation to enjoy the opportunity of a ‘youthful adulthood’ emerging from contemporary cultural transformations, while having to deal with fewer insecurities at the occupational and economic level (Sgritta 2014). In the tableau outlined by the research, young people have to deal with higher and increasing difficulties in achieving normative goals that are no more practicable in contemporary society. Moreover, they are supposed to pursue these objectives in relation to an adult generation they perceive as a ‘faded role model’ and a ‘cumbersome competitor’. In this perspective, the detachment between the ideal and descriptive representations of adulthood, combined with a social context marked by high levels of intergenerational inequality, appears able to turn transitions to adulthood into a sort of potential ‘endless wandering’.

Concerning sociological analysis on youth, in line with other studies and reflections (Furlong, Wyn, and Woodman 2011; Woodman and Wyn 2014), the results presented in this paper underline the growing need to rethink the transition to adulthood approach, paying more attention to the emerging ways in which the goal of these transitions is socially defined.

Notes
1. The concept of ‘significant adult’ is borrowed from Mead and Stryker’s studies (Mead 1967; Stryker 1967) on the ‘significant Others’ and used to define adults who have played a special role in the personal development of young people.
2. In this research, the assessment of the relevance of a given adult for a young individual has been attributed to the young interviewees themselves who have been asked to identify a person they think has played a primary role in their development.

3. It has not been possible to interview 14 significant adults indicated by young people because they were: disinterested in taking part in the study (6); unable to take part to the study because imprisoned at the time of the conduction of the study (1); living outside Italy or in areas of the country particularly difficult to reach (3); or unable to communicate in Italian, French or English (4).

4. Concerns about the ‘excessively youthful’ lifestyle of contemporary adult generation are particularly expressed by the young people having a migrant family background. These young individuals frequently refer to the differences between their parents – who are usually described as very ‘old-fashioned’ – and the ‘other adults’ to underline a general ‘infantilisation’ of the Italian adults.

5. A more critical perspective on this point is sometimes expressed by those working-class adult interviewees who are presumably less likely to benefit from the process of emancipation from the traditional model of adulthood in comparison with their more advantaged peers.

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ORCID
Ilaria Pitti http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6270-501X

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