Growing Up and Growing Old
A Probing the Boundaries research and publications project.
http://www.inter-disciplinary.net/proing-the-boundaries/

The Making Sense of Hub
‘Times of Our Lives’
Growing Up and Growing Old:
Trajectories of Times and Lives

Edited by
Andrea Nicolas and Ian Flaherty

Inter-Disciplinary Press
Oxford, United Kingdom
Blurred Transitions: Revisiting the Importance of Work and Parenthood for Young Adults in Italy

Valentina Cuzzocrea and Sveva Magaraggia

Abstract
Almost everywhere in Europe, corresponding to transformations in post-industrial societies, transitions from youth to adulthood are becoming prolonged and de-standardised, and welfare measures minimised. This in turn puts pressure on parents and young people. Within the group of Southern European countries, Italy is characterised by low levels of welfare provision and reliance on the family as a form of support. However, young adults in Italy constitute a case in its own right for a particularly delayed transition to adulthood. Not only scholars but also the national and international press heavily attack them with the accusation that they have lost freshness and potential in public life. The question is, then, what conditions allow a young Italian to consider himself/herself an adult in the current cultural and social-political scenario? International sociological literature on life cycle agrees in identifying five thresholds which have to be overcome in order to reach adulthood. Among these, we concentrate on obtaining a stable working position and becoming a parent. Findings from our two different research projects strongly converge in criticising the necessity, for the young adults interviewed, to refer to such thresholds. Within a situation of growing contingency, ‘yo-yo’ modalities have been identified to interpret transitions that are not only prolonged and de-standardised, but also uncertain and reversible. Pushing further in this direction, our interview material suggests that it may be helpful to re-conceptualise the intrinsic value of reflexively ‘passing’ turning points to consider oneself fully adult and to problematise adulthood itself as an unquestionable point of arrival.

Key Words: Transition to adulthood, thresholds, work, parenthood, adulthood.

1. Introducing Transitions and Thresholds
Sociologists encounter problems in their attempt to come to terms with the nature of the relationship between young people and social change, as the transition to adulthood changes more rapidly than the categories that we use to study it. Indeed, corresponding to transformations in modern industrial and post-industrial societies, including the extension of education, the diffusion of birth control devices and the individualisation of social life, also the transitions from youth to adulthood are being prolonged and de-standardised in European societies. Similarly, a common trend can be identified in terms of disinvestment in welfare measures across Europe. This in turn puts pressure on parents and young
people, originating from specific models of welfare state. Italy falls within the category of the southern group of welfare states whose features are low levels of welfare provision and reliance on the family as a form of support.

However, young adults in Italy constitute a case in their own right for a particularly delayed transition to adulthood. Not only scholars but also national and international press heavily attack them with the accusation that they have lost freshness and agency potential in public life. The question is, then, what conditions would allow a young Italian to consider himself/herself an adult in the current cultural and social-political scenario?

International sociological literature on the life-course identifies five thresholds which have to be overcome in order to reach adulthood: completion of education, reaching a relatively stable working position, leaving the family of origin, creating one’s own partnership and becoming parents. This concept of transition has a strong regulatory framework, in which school and work play a decisive role. Indeed, the ‘critical junctures in the life-courses’ that traditionally mark the passage from youth to adulthood, involve a transition along two axes: the first refers to the public sphere and separates the period of education from work. The second relates to the private sphere, which separates life in the family of origin from the new one. The transition from one stage to another would, therefore, imply a definitive abandonment of the first and complete entrance into the second: one leaves education to enter the labour market; similarly, one leaves the family of origin to form one’s own family unit.

This threshold approach does not seem able to grasp the fluidity with which young people in Western and industrialised societies are confronted with in this period of life nowadays, in comparison to a few decades ago. The transition to adulthood no longer seems to be a path characterised by well-defined stages. In fact, discussions about the transition to adulthood often tend to assume specific characteristics with respect to the past and have not yet been fully investigated.

Further, the category of transition to adulthood also produces problematic issues at both the empirical and theoretical levels. On the one hand, we do not know its borders; that is, when it begins and when it ends. We do not know where to start, because for example, in Finland youth policies include boys and girls up to 12 years of age. In Italy, by contrast, longitudinal youth surveys (IARD to name one) consider the age range of 15 to 34 (in the last 30 years, the upper limit has increased from 24 to 34 years). So we can say that, if we take age as a point of reference for the condition referred to as ‘youth,’ its borders are completely fluid. On the other hand, this category risks producing a distortion since, as Raby states, young people are seen as incomplete; they are seen in reference to a positive, complete model (i.e. adult).

In the literature, several categories have been formulated to analyse young peoples’ issues according to the threshold approach. In the late eighties, two Italian sociologists referred to the ‘young-adult’ as an oxymoron that efficaciously renders
the ambivalence of this new ‘in between’ age. The young-adult ideally continues on the path of the ‘early youth,’ extending the period between childhood and adulthood, and ending up changing the meaning of adulthood.

Instead of ‘young-adults’ James Côté uses the term ‘psychological adulthood’ to refer to the pressure towards auto-determination that young people face in the increasingly difficult transition to adulthood. Côté takes the concept of ‘youthhood,’ reading it as a new phase of life during which, through individual efforts, a ‘psychological adulthood’ can be achieved. According to this author, the decline of the importance of the traditional markers associated with the transition has helped to bring out an emotional and cognitive ‘psychological adulthood.’ Jeffrey Arnett introduces the concept of ‘emerging adulthood’ as neither adolescence nor young adulthood; it is theoretically and empirically distinct from both. In this period of life many different directions remain open. Little about the future has been decided, and the range of independent exploration of possibilities is greater than it will ever be at any other period of the life-course. In this theoretical horizon, marriage and parenthood appear to be the ‘real’ markers that determine the completion of the transition.

In a recent international congress, Carles Feixa spoke about ‘adultescente’ (kidult/adultescent), a neologism created by a British company in 1997 in order to define an adult who maintains an adolescent life style. The need to coin a new term indicates the existence of a moral dilemma that young women and men now face, as social change determines the available options and ambiguities, without, till now, being able to offer new categories for structuring the flow of life.

As we can see from these examples, tensions are at stake. For instance, the ‘yo-yo’ approach shows how the simultaneity of various transitions is becoming more and more of a challenge for young people’s agency. It also reflects on the fact that nowadays being adult does not necessarily imply a clear-cut change from the past: you do not stop being something that you were for something else. Rather, being an adult implies dealing with highly contradictory demands, and embracing a ‘nomadic’ status that is made of ‘transitions, successive shifts, and coordinated changes.’

All these approaches show the necessity of breaking away from the rigid dichotomy of youth/adulthood. However, they risk being conservative since they rest on established assumptions about what it means to be adult. So what unites these readings of the ages of life is the idea that, given the social and cultural transformations of recent decades, it is no longer enough simply to contrast two rigid stages. Rather, we should consider other models that take into account the high porosity of boundaries of the stages of life. Stages of life do not appear as part of a linear path which leads to a complete assumption of adult roles; rather, they become periods of experimentation, in which young people are confronted with role models, experiences and different roles, and negotiate spaces in the public sphere of this new social horizon.
The fact that the thresholds that traditionally articulate the transition to adulthood have changed their ritual and symbolic value and that, in parallel, the agency on the time of their acquisition increases (together with the uncertainty about their future results) implies also a profound transformation of the condition of arrival into adulthood. It is therefore not enough, in our view, to focus on the changing ways in which structure affects how young people grow up. Rather, it is necessary to discuss how the norms associated with adulthood are transforming.

2. Problematising the Threshold Approach

As Nicolas and Morgan Brett, amongst others, demonstrate in this book, the issue of a (pre-)defined sequence in growing up and growing old puts into question the boundaries of social construction: this is true with reference to both Western and non-Western people. Whilst we do not refer to cohort, there are some convergent arguments, as transitions do bring about issues of resource allocation, both material and symbolic. Yet, each phase of life has its own challenge. As Morgan Brett suggests, positioning in the life-course might be done according to death and births of close relatives, and the role of feelings and emotions in relating to these is pivotal.

More specifically, we find that existent approaches are somewhat conservative in terms of the role played by thresholds and/or markers. Anthropological, sociological and psychological literature tends to underline the role of rites of passage; to name one, the consumption of alcohol, in creating one’s own identity.\textsuperscript{19} We do not deny the meaning of these. Yet, we seek to stress that while we move through the life-course we bring with us something from previous experiences. The concept itself of identity (which derives from Latin \textit{idem}, i.e. ‘the same’) is based on the recognition of a twofold nature: one’s own identity is peculiar and specific, but also based on a subtle repetition of itself.\textsuperscript{20} The threshold approach implies disagreement with these premises, instead emphasising a sharp, clear-cut passage from one defined condition to a subsequent – and different – defined condition.

According to the Oxford Dictionary of English, a ‘marker’ is ‘an object used to indicate a position, place or route;’ it is a ‘distinctive feature or characteristic indicative of a particular quality or condition,’ and is used as a ‘thing serving as a standard of comparison.’ Correspondingly, ‘threshold’ is ‘a strip of wood or stone forming the bottom of a doorway and crossed in entering a house or room.’ Both these meanings underline the definite passage to a subsequent condition. Therefore, the threshold allows a passage from a condition A to a substantially different condition B.

Amongst the various thresholds, we propose concentrating on obtaining a stable working position and becoming a parent, both of which have a strong and complementary significance, as well as covering an important role in literature. We anticipate that the findings from our two respective research projects strongly converge in criticising the necessity for the young adults interviewed to refer to
such thresholds. These elements make them a suitable lens through which to problematise the threshold approach. In particular, why are the thresholds of parenthood and work important?

As a threshold, work belongs primarily to the public sphere. Secondly, given the expansion of higher education and the increasing rate of female employment, work is an increasingly inclusive experience, in the sense that it is experienced by more and more people. Thirdly, given the precarious nature of work conditions, work has lost its potential of granting security once and for all. Thus, it is a reversible marker: one can always lose a position. The threshold of parenthood seems an interesting one to compare and contrast with work. Firstly, it belongs to the private sphere. Secondly, while it used to be an experience that most adult people would encounter at one point in their life, it is becoming an increasingly rare experience, and this would define it as an exclusive marker. Last but not least, becoming a parent is a totally irreversible experience.

3. Discussing the Role of Work as a Threshold

The reasons the literature on transition into adulthood considers a stable working position to be one of the five markers of maturity are found both in its capacity to generate a stable income, and in its potential to support identity formation. There is, therefore, a convergence of two different sorts of elements: one is economic in its nature, and the other is rather more symbolic, as it considers work as a source of identity. A closer look at the literature on the sociology of work as well as empirical findings from a previous piece of research have shown that both these elements are to be called into question.

In the first instance, we should take into consideration that recent transformations in the labour market have completely altered the traditional role of work. We have reason to believe that the situation in Italy is even more dramatic than other European realities. This offered some motivation for Italian sociologists of work to say that we have left behind the so-called ‘Società del Lavoro’ (work-based society, where work is singular and unitary) to embrace the ‘Società dei Lavori’ (jobs-based society, where jobs are plural). This does not mean that there is no work to do, but only that there are fewer jobs associated with the rights typical of welfare states, if not to contractual rights tout court. We often misconceive work; that is, we say ‘work,’ but we mean ‘employment.’ This is a crucial point because the sort of work/employment we mourn is itself confined to a specific historical period, the so-called ‘glorious thirties’ (1945-1975). Employment is only the contractual fact, which guarantees rights and entitles one to have a position in society. Yet, it cannot be said in any sense that before this period people did not work, as in fact work primarily indicates the accomplishment of an activity.

Such an acknowledgement is very relevant because a discussion on transitions to adulthood must consider the progress that the sociology of work – as well as gender studies, for instance – have made in recent years to recognise differences in
the nature of work at any time, for instance, between paid and unpaid work.\textsuperscript{23} A wider international debate on the ‘end of work’ points to the importance of the fact that work has lost the centrality it once had in people’s lives.\textsuperscript{24} In terms of the working and professional path that one can construct, we should bear in mind that the emergence of portfolio careers puts into question vertical progressions. Rather, the professional path is becoming more likely to move across different working groups (however, this does not necessarily involve improvements in the salary levels, promotions, higher visibility, responsibilities and so on). Added to this is the increased possibility of occupying periods of unemployment. As such, the concept of ‘work’ is thus becoming an increasingly unstable indicator to look at ways people currently enact to settle down. Previous research on early career professionals reveals that few feel that they require a ‘job for life’ to go on with a professional life, although this may be especially true for qualified workers.\textsuperscript{25}

Also, we should consider the fact that some jobs might be considered ‘good’ ones in terms of the contents and satisfaction but are actually not very good in terms of the special protection they offer. More generally, it emerges that it is not easy to distinguish, once and for, all a good (or stable) job from one that is not so good. What makes a ‘good’ job is an increasingly doubtful matter. Many empirical pieces of research have shown that the more educated people are, the more likely they are to be oriented towards job satisfaction rather than security. The social status attached to work is not clear. One might be doing an extremely valued activity, but with a very low salary and extremely precariously. Pushing further in this direction, it is useful to unpack the notion of a ‘good job’ as well as work. Again, various dimensions emerge clearly from interviewees’ responses, and questions, such as, ‘What is a good job?’ or ‘What makes a job good?’, gave rise to a variety of interesting responses.

For instance Alessio, an accountant, defines a ‘good job’ as follows:

There are various possible definitions. A good job can be the one that gives you satisfaction on the personal side, because it can be a good job, I don’t know, to be a notary, because it gives you prestige; it can be a good job that gives you economic satisfaction; it can be a pizza-maker who manages to sell 50,000 pizzas per day; this is a good job economically speaking. A good job is the one which gives you the possibility to devote time to your family, your hobbies, your friends, a job that can be managed nicely in terms of hours. It depends on what one is referring to.

On the contrary, Federica, trained as a psychologist, has oriented her career consistently towards HR. She now covers a role in a new economy firm, where she
is responsible for taking care of the young employees. According to her, a ‘good job’ is one that:

… is worth getting up for in the morning, something that satisfies you in terms of internal well-being, in which you can put… your desire to grow up, be properly paid, that enables you to grow as a person and as a professional.

One axis along which an individual’s evaluation of a good job can be measured is the personal (and very variable) estimation of one’s employability in the labour market. Charles Handy, a scholar in the field of business and sociology, clarifies this position well in a few imaginative works. More theoretically, Bauman’s work on ‘liquid modernity’ establishes a link between security and employability.

After all, why is it fruitful to employ the concepts of security in everyday life? The link between employability, security and certainty seemed to be defined by the following relations: if I consider myself employable, that is, if I have qualifications and a vocational portfolio which is flexible enough to adapt itself to a variety of available projects, then I will perceive myself as secure. Secure, in other words, in my capacity to occupy a certain position. If having occupied a certain position I feel secure, I will therefore also feel certain in the continuation of my activity and with regard to my total situation with life. If, on the contrary, in a society that is increasingly organised around projects, I feel unable to adapt my knowledge and competences to a variety of work solutions, I will achieve security only in minimum terms. And as a result, I will feel uncomfortable with my surroundings.

The centrality of the perception of employability to one’s sense of security holds true whether such a perception is high and positive or the opposite: if it is poor, it is very likely to affect negatively security (and therefore certainty) in all its manifestations. As Giulia, an engineer from Cagliari says:

The main problem is programmability, the problem is in relation to future possibilities, to be able to have a minimum of certainty for the future, which does not necessarily mean having a salary at the end of the month, but being sure that in the next six months, in the next year, there will be some money which guarantees the payment of rent, eventually of a mortgage.

Thus, the variety of meanings attached to ‘work’ and related words are extremely rich and expressive and cannot be reduced to the Fordist dimension. Speculating on the representations of security, Du Gay suggests that:

The identity of both labour and capital is invariably represented as stable and unchanging, while lived history is reduced to a series of
‘empirical variations’ on a constant theme. Labour and capital are conceived as having an ‘essential,’ ‘real’ identity that precedes or evades their dominant discursive articulation in any historical or cultural context.28

Work and its associated concepts emerge with infinite nuances in the interviewees’ accounts, in a way that suggests radical re-definitions of the terms used in everyday language. In these experiences there are inevitably intersections of different nuances of ‘work,’ which create a rich variety of experiences in which one departs from the perception of employability to attain security and then certainty.

Another aspect deserving some attention is the fact that workplaces are not neutral, rational entities, yet each organisation has its own characteristics that affect the grade of control that a person is able to develop over his or her own working position. In interviewees’ accounts, in many cases the branch specificities of each profession and their own specific precariousness seem to absorb most of the energies of employees, in a way that make organisations’ needs take precedence over personal inclinations.29 Status and position are repeatedly negotiated through everyday practices, but in a fairly implicit form, so that it is very difficult to conceptualise one’s position, to understand what one can and cannot do, or can and cannot achieve, and in which time-frame. As a young professional in Human Resources states:

Variations [in my career] depend […] on top management; […] at times the managing director saw my role in a certain way and therefore I played it in that way. Other times different managing directors asked me for another kind of intervention, and I adopted it. But in the end it depended […] on the standpoint of the one who ruled the company.

This is to say that many companies are very de-structured and it is very difficult to predict how a person is going to find his or her own role and positions within it in a few years time.

Another inconsistency with the predominant model of threshold is the fact that certain careers, like for instance positions of self-employment, cannot ever be considered secure, because, in this context, building a career means getting more clients. All these emerging results indicate that there is a strong subjective element to be considered, and this should remind us of what sociologists of the Chicago School first pointed out, that is, a career does not necessarily follow a path of vertical progression within the boundaries of an organisation. It should instead be regarded as a much wider phenomenon in its own right, as a term indeed used with wider meaning. In fact, anyone who works has a career. In concluding these remarks on the role and significance of work, it is important to note that all these
elements suggest to us that employment transitions are not clear-cut. This is not only because of the current economic situation and the low wage of new entrants which renders early career professionals not entirely economically independent (or economically independent only in certain periods of the year), but also – and perhaps more importantly – because the role and significance of work has changed. What we seek from work has changed, and similarly, what the world of work is able to offer to us has changed, too. In particular, it becomes extremely difficult to identify when a job position has the characteristics to guarantee an income and define one’s working identity. In this sense, entering the world of work does not mean leaving behind the economic insecurity and the search for one’s self that is more characteristic of a younger youth.

4. Discussing the Role of Parenthood as a Threshold

The last marker of the transition to adulthood regards the family building process. This assumes as centrally significant the abandonment of the family of origin and the creation of one’s own family. However, nowadays neither the practice nor the meanings of family are self-evident within male and female life-courses. In fact, alongside the transformations in forms of work required by the market, there are changes in patterns of family formation and a reduction in the stability of households, with a consequent reduction in the protective role of the family of procreation. As highlighted, for instance by Giddens, among all the transformations that are taking place in the contemporary world, none seems to be more important than those related to intimacy: sexuality, love, marriage and family. The elements of this ongoing change are the weakening of the model that had previously colonised the collective imaginary and dominated the official statistics: the nuclear family, composed of married couples and children born of their legitimate union. This weakening has been interpreted as a radical transformation of the family, which has now become a shell institution. In the middle of the industrial society, for example, a young woman’s entrance to adulthood corresponded to the acquisition of the role of wife and mother, and marriage was no doubt a crucial threshold of this transition. Nowadays, however, the conjugal union loses this aura of sacredness. Its meaning changes, and as it is no longer the major rite of passage between youth and adulthood; it no longer legitimates access to sex and procreation. The model of the family crumbles, and the social horizon on which family and couple relationships are based becomes increasingly differentiated. Becoming and being a mother or a father is in turn affected by these changes.

Such acknowledgements from the sociology of family life are especially relevant to our discussion, and we have to consider how these transformations address our discussion on the transition to adulthood. So, if we try to understand parenting in the light of the entire life-course of the agents, it becomes clear that the experiences of this last step to adulthood are diverse and heterogeneous.
Empirical findings from previous interdisciplinary pieces of research show that young men and women perceive the formation of a family as a choice entailing risks that they themselves have to face. Young people’s choices and projects are more frequently becoming embedded in informal networks (mainly families and peer groups). Intergenerational relationships, for example, instead of becoming looser, are in fact getting tighter when young people become parents. In countries like Italy, with low levels of welfare provision, the former generation has to supply support to neo-parents, both in an economic and relational sense (i.e. help in the caring activities). The expectant/neo-parents have to look for this intergenerational solidarity in order to deal with the paradox inherent in making plans and projects nowadays.

As it emerges from previous research, radically different ways of acquiring the role of parent will emerge if we look at parenthood in relation to, on the one hand, the duration of the pathway to adulthood (and thus, albeit indirectly, age) along with, on the other hand, the degree (or lack) of linearity with which the different stages of the transition are achieved (acquisition of the markers). In other words, looking at the transition to parenthood in a temporal perspective allows us to conceive of it not only as the marker that signals the end of youth, but also as a more complex and variegated experience of life, capable of re-signifying the very concept of adulthood. So for example, if we compare early and late parenthood, we may see two different ways of performing parenthood:

**Early parenthood – ‘fast track’ parents.** The first type of parents, the ones who experience early parenthood, i.e. those who bring their first child into the world having experienced what the literature refers to as a straight and fast transition path, can be called ‘fast track’ parents, which leads them to be ahead of the average Italian parents. Parents who arrive early at the decision to have a child often do not see this as a socially recognised choice: to become a parent under a certain age tends to be interpreted, in the Italian context, less as a choice than as an unintended occurrence. These young mothers and fathers must face a common sense that has evolved over time with changing procreative behaviour, which does not deem ‘reasonable’ a parenting pattern that thirty years ago would have not have attracted any kind of astonishment. As Adri, a twenty-three year old fast track mother, states:

And it is clear that for everyone it just happened, since the fact that we have wanted the baby is our business, it is not that the others are obliged to know, not just because ... because then there’s always someone who says to you, because one thing is if it happens, another if you’re looking for the baby. If it happens, they say ‘Oh well, poor thing.’ But if you look for it then there are those who begin to say ‘eh, but you could wait.’
A consequence of what is perceived as a lack of recognition is that many early parents do not use public services for maternity and paternity (such as childbirth classes, counselling, etc.) because they do not feel accepted and understood due to their age. Moreover, looking at their parenthood performance, they seem to be less involved in the process of semi-professionalisation that is deemed to be invested in Western parents nowadays. Learning to come to terms with the loss of self-evidence of the transition to parenthood takes place by looking for references and information, comparing one’s own attitudes, practices and desires with other young parents, forming reassuring networks and using the internet, and reading books and magazines about upbringing practices. This process of semi-professionalisation adds to, or even substitutes for, the traditional and professional support systems. However, it is seen in the literature as not unequivocally positive, as it unsettles inexperienced parents and might even increase their feelings of inadequacy. 38

Late parenthood – ‘slow track’ parents. The second type is that of ‘late’ mothers and fathers or ‘slow trackers,’ i.e. those who become parents over the average age, having slowly reached the different stages, of which procreation is the last one.39 These mothers and fathers can rely on a support network (i.e. family of origin and peer group) that is much more involved than in the case of parents of the first type. From the point of view of the meaning that the men and women of this second group attribute to parenthood, the ‘slow trackers’ seem to be much more apprehensive towards the children. For instance, they adhere strictly to paediatrician instructions, and seem to surround the long awaited event of the birth of the first child with many precautions and concerns. These are mothers and fathers who live out the respective roles of motherhood and fatherhood in a highly ‘professional’ way, investing a lot in their child. As a result, they stress that through the relationship with the newborn, they found a sense of life and a rhythm that had been lost. For instance, this emerged from the experiences of Cinzia, a 35 old ‘slow-track’ mother:

In reality I have noticed, before expecting Jacopo, that these working rhythms were significantly wearing out the relationship between us. [...] When I became pregnant, however, there was quite a whip of energy into our relationship. But not as much as for our son, rather we just realised that we had neglected our relationship. Until then, this was not evident in some ways.

The experience of pregnancy ‘forces’ these couples to pay more attention to privacy, to distract attention away from the employment sphere, on which both have invested heavily.

If we look at non-linear transitions to adulthood, we see even more diverse experiences of becoming and being a parent: the ‘yo-yo mothers and fathers’ and
‘young mothers and fathers’ may be considered as the real innovative groups within this typology.

Through the materials analysed in this empirical research, a first working definition of these two types has emerged, referring to those who assume the parental role having passed just some of the canonical markers to adulthood.40 In practice, the young men and women of these two types become parents while they are still struggling with definitions of their adult identity. This sudden and radical biographical restructuration regards those who, given their age, had not yet begun to problematise the transition, as Eros, a twenty-two years old young father explains:

We decided to use the saved money for buying a house and not to get married, however, because when you go to the bank and you are not married it is difficult. It is true that we are a young couple, and then I was a barman, so I had to look for another job: I became a clerk. We lived for a couple of months with my friend, and she came only on weekends. Then I moved out from my friend’s house [...] and then we went with my family. I went back home, for three – four months; in the meantime she was with her mother and at the eighth month she moved in my parents’ house. The last month of pregnancy and the first two after the birth of Alessia we stayed there, also because it is our first experience. [...] And then my mom showed what to do, it’s normal, she did teach her a bit. Apart from the fact that we did not know where to go and [...] however, since she came to my parents’ house, after three months we were in our own house.

These are situations that involve a particularly difficult passage as in one moment at least two markers of the transition are completed: the creation of an autonomous nuclear family, and procreation, each of which are rich with their own kinds of difficulties.

Also for the ‘non-linear’ mothers and fathers aged at or above the national average, the transition to parenthood involves a biographical reorganisation. They have to face a less radical form of discontinuity, although not without their own obstacles. As Enrico, a thirty-one year old father says:

Well, first of all you have to know the respective parents, which is not a small thing, then you have to go and live together, which isn’t another small thing, and then you have to prepare the home for the child ... Reallocate again my work-position, as before I had to travel abroad, I changed my tasks for something that keeps me here in Milan and I can stay home every night.
Couples of ‘young mothers and young fathers’ and ‘yo-yo mothers and fathers,’ unlike other parents, not infrequently after the birth of a child reside in the home of their family of origin. The support provided by the family of origin is very consistent also in terms of time. Indeed, these two types of parents are not supported by their peer group (existing ones are mostly still tied to the stage of youth). In contrast, parents with a linear pathway behind them have to face less radical changes and difficulties.

In sum, the long wave of changes that are investing life-courses also has a considerable impact on how they perceive of themselves as parents and on how men and women perform parenthood, and thus become adults. These experiences show that there is no clear-cut definition of traditional youth boundaries. This does not mean, however, that we cannot consider them (full) adults.

5. Discussion

The discussion of the role of work and parenthood has shown so far that the traditional meaning attached to these as markers of the transition from youth to adulthood are changing. First and foremost, this is due to the different ways and strategies through which people reach the markers studied, at least if compared to some decades ago. A consequence of increased complexity and variety in these is that the threshold approach has lost its ability to grasp social behaviours, and it has become out-dated and anachronistic. Such a normative transition model does not seem able to grasp anymore the new practices that young adults ‘do,’ to paraphrase an expression widely used in gender studies, in the contemporary social horizon. The representations of how we become adult and of adulthood itself risk losing their link to practices enacted every day.

Reasoning based on a threshold approach implies a too rigid dichotomy: on the one hand, the contraposition between ideal-typical concepts of youth and adulthood; and on the other hand, definitive breaks that the five markers would cause in one’s life conditions. Our empirical pieces of research have instead shown that the ways in which young adults deal with work and parenthood are more flexible and dialectic than this, as we have discussed in the preceding paragraphs. Therefore, one may want to push further in the direction of producing other models, which might in turn be more capable of taking into account the high porosity of the boundaries of different stages of life. They do not appear as part of a linear path which leads to a complete assumption of adult roles; rather they become periods of experimentation, in which young people are confronted with role models and new experiences, and negotiate their own space in the public sphere.

It is within this context that our empirical pieces of research suggest different ways of becoming parents, as well as different ways of constructing a meaningful graduate career path. All of these, in their increasing complexity, do involve ‘adult’
responsibilities, as well as active agency, in order to be able to juggle the difficulties of everyday life. In other words, it is not true that the youths interviewed remain captured in a phase of life in their whole experience sphere, at risk of staying ‘forever young.’ One of the reasons why this transition has become increasingly blurred is the fact that entering a new phase of the life cycle involves bringing along some significant remaining parts of the previous phase: a person does not cease to be a son/daughter when he/she becomes a parent. Similarly, one does not find, once and for all, a working identity (or regrettably, full economic independence) when assuming a graduate or professional position in the labour market.

There is agreement on the fact that the very nature of youth is the legitimate claim for experimentation, which allows them to find out what they want to become. Such a social suspension, nevertheless, is not done in a social vacuum, and is not passive behaviour *tout court*. On the contrary, it implies the assumption of a considerable amount of individual responsibility and strong activation of one’s agency. This is due to the remarkable psychological and social costs involved in making the sort of decisions we have explored in this chapter. For example, constructing a certain career path or taking an irreversible decision, such as giving birth to a child, involves such a strong capacity of decision that youth is an increasingly difficult phase of life to be in, at least if compared to a few decades ago.

6. Conclusions

We opened this chapter by acknowledging that transitions to adulthood are increasingly slower everywhere in Europe, and thus this is not an Italian peculiarity. However in this scenario, Italy is a very interesting context to study for its capacity to catalyse the most significant characteristics of the Southern European model. In looking at the transitions of the two groups of young adults interviewed for different pieces of research, we cannot ignore the fact that the social context in which they operate shows important differences from the one that gave rise to the threshold approach, which has been very influential so far, and that thus we are urged to problematise it.

In the first place, the continuous postponing of the transition to adulthood is tied to an increasing variability of status covered in one’s life. Such a prolongation of times of transitions goes within a confusion of the sequences of the markers of the transition. The core of our critique, therefore, concerns the supposed distinctiveness of the different life stages, at least as we used to conceive of them, and especially for what concerns adulthood, the so-called ‘central phase.’

To reconceptualise the transition pathway implies also a profound re-signification of the category of adulthood itself. Our interview material suggests that the young adults interviewed were bringing about a feeling of psychological
‘homelessness,’ and that it is time to re-conceptualise the intrinsic value of reflexively ‘passing’ through turning points to consider oneself fully adult and to problematise adulthood itself as an unquestionable ‘point of arrival.’ Other scholars, such as Wyn and Blatterer, have already claimed for the necessity of discussing how norms associated with adulthood are changing, how adult men’s and women’s biographies are changing, without making the loss of their entitlement to be recognised, how they identify and act as full adults.

The persistence of existent categories in necessarily referring to the threshold mechanism, even the most innovative of which, such as the concept of ‘yo-yo’ transitions, is to be discussed. We propose questioning this supposed inevitability in more depth. Our position, informed by our empirically based research projects, is to be more critical with regards to the inevitability of considering markers of what it is to become a full adult.

Our last remarks point to the fruitfulness of an approach that, liberated from the conception of markers, can further enhance a wider understanding of stages of life. It is in fact plausible to think that our comments, referred in this chapter to the markers we have studied the most, i.e. obtaining a stable working position and parenthood, can be generalised, or at least it seems so, if we consider as a third marker the completion of education. Our attempt to do a reflexive analysis of both literature in the field and our empirical material ultimately suggests that not only youth and adulthood are not so severely distinct, but also that the different markers, mostly studied one at a time as if they were completely separate spheres of life, do have a lot to say about the reciprocal functioning. In the present chapter, the two thresholds studied, despite the different characteristics described in section 2, strongly converge in suggesting a direction for further research.

Notes

10 P. Donati and E. Scabini, La famiglia lunga del giovane adulto, Vita e Pensiero, Milano, 1988, p. 9.
Valentina Cuzzocrea and Sveva Magaraggia

21 V. Cuzzocrea, *Flexi-Jobs or Flexi-Lives? Professionals’ Early Career-Paths in Italy and England*, PhD diss., University of Essex, Department of Sociology, Essex, 2008; S. Magaraggia, *Essere giovani e diventare genitori. Mutamenti nella transizione all’età adulta, e ‘nuova genitorialità (Being Young and Becoming Parent. Transformations in the Transition to Adulthood Pathway and ‘New Parenthood’)*, PhD diss, Department of Sociology, Università di Milano-Bicocca, Milan, 2008. The first piece of research is in origin a comparative study on the constructions of careers. For the sake of this chapter, thirty in-depths interviews conducted with professionals in the fields of engineering, human resources and accountancy have been analysed. These professionals were based in Cagliari and Naples and had all between five to ten years working experience after graduation. The second piece of research is a qualitative study based on 40 in-depth interviews conducted with neo-parents aged between 20 and 37, all living in Milan.

22 Cuzzocrea, op. cit.


25 Cuzzocrea, op. cit.


29 Cuzzocrea, op. cit.

30 In Italy, the average length of marriages is 14 years, but 38% of the separations happen within 9 years of marriage. In the last ten years (1995 – 2005) the birth out of the wedlock almost doubled (from 8% to 15%), and our days the average age at the first child is 30,8 for women and 34,6 for men according to the Italian National Statistical Institute (Istat), *Le condizioni sociali delle famiglie in Italia*, Istat Publications, Roma, 2007, pp. 8, 12, 23.


34 Magaraggia, op. cit.; Du Bois-Reymond et al., op. cit.
36 Magaraggia, op. cit.
39 Jones, op. cit.; Bynner, Elias, McKnight, Pan and Pierre, op. cit.
40 Magaraggia, op. cit.


**Bibliography**


Valentina Cuzzocrea has completed MA and PhD in Sociology at the University of Essex, UK. She currently holds a research fellowship at the University of Cagliari, Department of Economic and Social Research, Italy. Her interests gravitate around the problems faced by youth in first entering the labour market. Email: cuzzocrea@unica.it

Sveva Magaraggia has earned MA in Women’s Studies and Research Training at the University of Lancaster (UK) and a PhD in Sociology at the University of Milan-Bicocca, Department of Sociology and Social Research, Italy. Her research interests regard Youth Culture, Gender and Parenthood. Email: sveva.magaraggia@unimib.it