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Abstract: This article aims to investigate, through a qualitative study, the phenomenon of precarization in higher education from two specific perspectives: gender and age. It sheds a light on how academic precariat affects female researchers' fertility decisions. Indeed, we maintain, the increasing length of the early stages of academic careers, and the job insecurity that comes together with it, have gendered consequences on the perceived possibility to have a child. By analyzing fifteen virtual in-depth interviews and by using narrative methods to produce a comprehensive case study material, we argue that, in the discourse on academic precariat, those consequences tend to be disguised through the conventional use of labels like 'young researchers', 'young resources'. We embrace the thesis that 'youth' is not only a way to define a certain age class but it could also be an 'academic construct' (Bozzon, Murgia & Poggio, 2019). The results of our research suggest that those types of label tend to act upon the people who are labelled, as process of subjectivation, influencing the perception of both self and fertility decisions.

Keywords: self-perceived age, fertility decisions, academic precariat, narrative methods

Introduction

In contemporary Italian higher-education institutions, such as universities and research centres, the student's transition between the formative years and entering the academic labour force is particularly blurry (Bellè et al., 2015; Martucci, 2017). Indeed, the succession of such fixed-term contractual forms and possibly low wages (Herschberg et al., 2019) as post-doctoral research fellowships, lectureships and other non-tenured positions entail often marks the beginning of an academic career. Those forms of employment can cause economic insecurity and sometimes imply willingness to move between institutions and even countries (Murgia & Poggio, 2019). Both economic insecurity and mobility have a considerable impact on non-work spheres of life, forcing precarious researchers to delay life-projects, such as family planning (Giorgi & Raffini, 2015). Furthermore, precarious employment in academia shows a gendered division, with women more subject to fixed-term employment than men and more likely to remain on such contracts (Bryson, 2004; Bozzon et al., 2015). Indeed, nowadays, reaching high-level permanent positions is still a man's prerogative. According to a recent report of the National University Council (CUN, 2020), the percentage of women among full professors in Italy in 2018 was 24% (up from 19%) and among associate professors 39% (formerly 34%)¹. Even among senior researchers (rtd-B), the first fixed-term position in the hierarchical scale introduced in 2010, the share of women at 42% is lower than that of men.

Bozzo, Murgia and Peroni (2020) state that due to the enacted university reform (L. 240/2010)², the Italian academic labour market is teeming with 'young on paper' researchers. Indeed, while 'discontinuous recruitment policies' have caused a dramatic decrease in the number of young researchers engaged, the abrupt change in the recruitment process has led to a stretching of the early-career phase. The consequence, they argue, is that in the Italian academy, the concept of 'youth' should be considered a 'discursive construction' rather than an actual reference to researchers' age group (Bozzon, Murgia & Peroni, 2020, p.151-155).

In the life of those 'young on paper' female early-career researchers, further challenges characterise the long period of job insecurity, conceptualised as the *family vs science* dilemma (Lind 2008; Blackwell & Glover 2008). This prolonged phase of academic precariat frequently coincides with the crucial years of fertility (Ward & Wolf Wendel, 2004; Nikunen, 2012), increasing the 'opportunity costs of motherhood' (Barbieri et al., 2015; Blossfeld et al., 2005). It further reduces chances of reproductive success (Liu et al., 2011),

¹ Data updated to 2008.

² The so-called Gelmini Reform of the university system (Italian Law 240/2010), which will be discussed further in this paper.

to the point that female professors are more likely to remain childless and even unmarried than their male colleagues and women in other professions (Palomba & Menniti, 2001; Mason & Goulden, 2004). For those who decide to become mothers, academic work shows a degree of incompatibility with tending to children. Academic mothers face the hardship of balancing their family duties with their academic career (Basset, 2005; Baker, 2010; Ward, 2014), with career delay as the main consequence.

Despite a growing number of studies investigating work-family balance for academic employees (Santos & Cabral-Cardoso, 2008; Woodward, 2007; Huopainen & Satama, 2019; Minello et al., 2020), with a special focus on how the family sphere could affect academic career development, especially at early stages (Bozzon et al., 2017), there is still a lack of literature that disentangles the intricate impact of academic precariat on family planning and, in particular, on the choice to become a mother (De Paola et al., 2021).

Studies show that analysing the impact of job insecurity on family planning should consider both macro and micro factors, where labour market configuration and welfare support characterise the macro aspects, and the micro aspects concern individual career trajectories (Smeeding, 2004; Barbieri et al., 2015). The relevance of the latter, which has received far less attention in the literature, broaches the possibility of investigating the mechanisms of power that affect decision-making processes in the day-by-day life of precarious researchers. Indeed, moving from Sennett's (1998) consideration of insecure and flexible subjects, Sherry Ortner defines, as a critical aim of human sciences, understanding 'subjectivity in its relations to (. . .) the subtle forms of power that saturate everyday life, through experiences of time, space, and work' (Ortner, 2005, p. 46). By informing the structures of feeling that we experience as subjects, those forms of power interact dynamically with our attempt to act *on* the world, even as we are acted *upon*. Thus, from an epistemological point of view, we consider the process that makes researchers precarious workers a mode of subjectivation (Murgia & Poggio, 2019): an incorporation of the normative horizon, capable of permeating the bodies of individuals and influencing every aspect of their everyday lives (Foucault, 2003 ed. Or. 1981-82).

Indeed, working is not only a matter of 'breadwinning' but also one of the main features that place an individual in the social structure and contribute to defining his/her self-representation (Jahoda, 1982). Thus, we should consider precariat not only for its economic and practical impact on life-spheres other than work but also as a broader existential experience (Bellè et al., 2015; Bove, Murgia & Armano, 2017). We propose investigating the discourse that sustains precarious researchers' life choices in the pursuit of an academic career throughout a biographical dimension (Zinn, 2010; Bellè et al., 2015). Indeed, investigating the researchers' personal narration and

comparing systematically the different narrative patterns (Miller, 2005) and the semantics that describe biographical ‘experiences, decision-making and expectations’ (Zinn, 2010; Küsters, 2014) can foster a better understanding of those passages of ‘becoming subjects’ (Foucault, 2003) that escape the meshes of quantitative research and closed-ended questions.

From these premises, this paper investigates how both perceived job insecurity and precarious employment contracts impact the timing of Italian female researchers’ first childbirth, ultimately influencing their fertility decisions, and how this delay dialectically interplays with the representation of early-career researchers as ‘ageless’ or ‘forever young’. In our theoretical framework, the concept of ‘age’ is considered manifold. Indeed, age is a biological marker, as well as an ‘academically constructed discourse’ (Bozzon, Murgia & Peroni, 2020) and a self-constructed representation (Rubin et al., 2006). In the analysis of participant interviews, we considered the latter as the result of a process of subjectivation and investigated both the interrelation of the aforementioned three aspects and its impact on fertility decisions.

We present an analysis based on a qualitative pilot study conducted between September and November 2020. We collected virtual in-depth interviews of Italian women who work in academia and decided to become mothers. By exploring their narratives and representations, we investigated our interviewees’ uncertain career trajectories, aiming to better understand how researchers make sense of motherhood as a transitional event in their life. Furthermore, we tried to understand how this discursive construction acts upon the subjects, shaping their self-perception about adulthood and its related milestones, such as economic independence and family planning (Cuzzocrea et al., 2020).

In the following pages, we first show how job insecurity contributed to shaping our interlocutors’ identities, not only career-wise but also in the way they perceive themselves as acting subject. Then, we illustrate how this phenomenon of subjectivation played a role in their fertility decisions. Finally, we investigate how subjectivation has broadly affected their perception of self, focusing in particular on the fluctuating complexities of ‘working’ and ‘parenting’ as landmarks of adulthood (Cuzzocrea et al., 2020). In the analysis of the interview, we follow a biographical or narrative approach (Miller, 2005): Theoretical considerations emerge from the comparison of the narrative patterns and semantic choices of our interviewees.

The academic career in contemporary Italian higher-education institutions

The French sociologist Christine Musselin (2005) identified a list of academic labour markets characteristics that should be considered embedded in

national traditions rather than common realities (Musselin, 2005; Le Feuvre et al., 2018). Considering the patterns through which ‘salaries, occupational status, recruitment procedures, promotion rules, workload, career paths’ (Musselin, 2005, p. 135) vary across countries lead her to define three different career models in contemporary academia: the tenure-track, the survivor and the protective pyramid models. Following Musselin framework, Italy may be grouped with the countries applying the protective pyramid model (Le Feuvre et al., 2018). A system where ‘nationally organized accreditation procedures’ are set in place, leading PhD holders to identify with their disciplinary field rather than with the institution they work for, and therefore promoting cross regional mobility. Furthermore, a system where the number of PhD graduates is still too low to influence the creation of doctoral positions in non-academic employment sectors (Le Feuvre et al., 2018, p. 64-66), making the early exit from the institution challenging when not unlikely (Bataille et al., 2017; Coin, 2017).

The 2010 university reform (L. 240/2010) goes in the direction of emphasizing the ‘nationally organized accreditation procedures’, with the effect of increasing both gender differences and the focus on academic productivity (Le Feuvre et al., 2018; Minello & Russo, 2021). The reform introduced the National Scientific Qualification by disciplinary field, organized on a series of standardised criteria defined by the MIUR, the Ministry of Education, University and Research. Obtaining the National Scientific Qualification becomes necessary to accessing the role of Associate or Full Professor. The same reform introduced the figure of two fixed-term researchers (type A and type B, respectively, called in this paper Junior and Senior researcher), one with a 3-year contract renewable for a maximum of two more, the other with a three-year contract that guarantees the appointment to Associate Professor following a positive evaluation.

The reformed recruitment system, and the improvement of requested productivity to obtain the National Scientific Qualification seem to have amplified the already existing gender asymmetries. For instance the extended career progression and the difficulties in securing job stability have disadvantaged women dealing with the overlap between childbearing years and the pursuit of career stability period (Bozzon et al., 2015; Picardi, 2020).

In the Italian academia, male and female presence is numerically similar up to the role of permanent researcher, a position that is no longer available, due to the mentioned reform. The greater presence of women in the role of permanent researcher ‘marks a greater relative tendency of women to remain in this position compared to male colleagues who, to a greater extent, are promoted to the role of Associate professor’ (Picardi, 2020, p. 26). Indeed, there is a smaller presence of women in the position of Senior researcher, compared to what happens for the role of Junior researcher. The presence of

women remains also a minority in the top positions: women are only the 24% among the Full professors. A cohort effect could be considered to contributing to the disparity in attendance in top positions: Associate professors and Full professors mainly belong to cohorts in which the female presence was small. Nevertheless, literature has shown that women in academia ‘experience precarity in particularly gendered ways and precarious academic work is feminized’ (O’Keefe & Courtois, 2019). For instance, in our country, as evidenced by some studies, where there are equal merits in terms of quality and quantity of publications men are more likely than women to be promoted (eg. Marini & Meschitti, 2018, Gaiaschi & Musumeci, 2020).

Considering the burden that the social definition of gender roles places in forging asymmetries in the distribution of family responsibilities, in a country where the ‘male prime-breadwinning’ model is still prevalent, female PhD holders could also be more willing than their male colleagues to accept fixed-term contracts or external teaching positions on a part-time basis, even if they do not offer any near prospects of career advancement (Bataille et al., 2017; Le Feuvre et al., 2018; Minello & Russo, 2021). Indeed, the increasing of the *Glass Door Index*, an indicator of the ratio between the percentage of women carrying out research activities with precarious positions and the percentage of women with stabilized positions, before and after the Reform was enacted, confirms the thesis of a greater female precariousness (Picardi, 2020). These evidences, together with the systematic disadvantage of women in career advancements in almost all disciplines, even those in which their presence is the majority, signal new gender segregation processes exacerbated by the Gelmini Law that acts precisely in the transition between the precarious phase (postdoctoral fellowships and Junior researcher positions) and subsequent incardination in permanent roles (Picardi, 2020; Minello & Russo, 2021).

Research design and method

To select our interlocutors without relying on our personal networks, we published an open call for participation on social media, targeting online communities with large numbers of followers working in Italian academia. About 50 female researchers reached out to us, expressing interest in participating and support for the project. In this paper, we analyse 15 in-depth interviews that lasted between 45 minutes and 2 hours. The interviews took place on an online platform (Webex or Skype) and were video-recorded, then transcribed in their entirety³. The decision to meet our interviewees online

³ Participants orally signed informed consents, where the aims of the research, the right to privacy and anonymity and the right of withdrawal from the study at any time, were presented.

allowed not only respecting social-distancing norms⁴ but also easily reaching out to researchers from different geographic zones of the country.

For the aims of this study, the main theoretical criteria guiding the sample construction were ‘precarious employment condition’, current or experienced for more than five years, ‘fertility decisions’ and ‘age’. We invited participation by both early-career researchers (postdoctoral fellows and junior researchers) and senior researchers⁵, which allowed us to compare present narratives of academic precariat with retrospective narratives. Since ‘fertility decisions’ was one of the key concepts for theoretical sampling, we decided to use the commitment to become mothers as a selection criterion, rather than motherhood status at the time of the interview.

To address the crucial factor of the role of job insecurity in family planning, we selected interlocutors who had passed the age of 35, a crucial time both professionally and reproductively. Indeed, according to the Italian National Health System, pregnancies that occur beyond this age threshold are considered ‘geriatric’ and undergo a different screening and monitoring process. On the employment front, the age of 35 represents one of the most common age barriers to accessing prizes and fellowships.

The mean age of our interviewees falls near 41 years old, which is consistent with the fact that in the Italian academy, the mean age of permanent positions has increased to almost 47 for assistant professors and 59 for full professors (MIUR, 2019; Bozzon, Murgia & Peroni, 2020). Indeed, in defining early-career researchers, we follow the literature that invites considering career stages ‘in relation to the academic hierarchy, rather than to the professional experience of researchers’ (Bozzon et al., 2017, p. 339).

Table 1 - Employment-related characteristics of the interviewees at both the time of the interview and the time of their first pregnancy

Employment relationship	At the time of the interview	At the time of their first pregnancy
Postdoctoral Fellow	2	3
Junior Researcher	5	1
Senior Researcher	6	3
Associate Professor	1	-
Other forms of precarious contracts (i.e. lectureships, collaboration on projects)	1	8
Total interviewees	15	15

⁴ The presented research was carried out during the Covid-19 pandemic.

⁵ With ‘Junior Researcher’, we refer to non-tenure-track assistant professor; with ‘Senior Researcher’, we refer to tenure-track assistant professor.

Table 1 shows the employment-related characteristics of our interviewees at both the time we interviewed them and the time of their first pregnancy. At the time of their first pregnancy, only three out of fifteen of our interviewees had secured permanent employment, while four became tenured after motherhood. Moreover, the most represented forms of contract at the time of first pregnancy were also the most precarious ones, such as lectureships (that do not grant a maternity-leave allowance) and other precarious and lower-paid positions (eight out of fifteen).

Concerning their fertility decisions and reproductive health, the mean age for the first pregnancy was 38; five of our interviewees gave birth after passing the age of 40, four had a second child, six suffered at least one miscarriage and three resorted to medically assisted technology.

Regarding their affiliations, our interviewees came mainly from public institutions (thirteen out of fifteen). Eleven worked in a public university and two in a publicly funded research centre, one in a private university and one for a private research foundation. All of them had worked in a public university in the course of their careers. Their research fields included four in Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) disciplines and the other eleven in Social Sciences and Humanities (SSH). Finally, seven of them worked for institutions in the north-west of the country, three in the north-east and five in the central regions. Although some were born in the south of the country, among the 50 women who volunteered for the interview, none came from a southern institution.

During the interviews, the participants received two open questions: 'Would you like to tell me about your career trajectory?' and 'Would you like to tell me about your reproductive trajectory to motherhood?'. This encouraged explanation by 'emplotment' (Ricoeur, 1979), a key feature of narrative inquiry that allows 'an intuitive grasping together (*prendre ensemble*) of otherwise heterogeneous elements' (Dowling, 2011, p.4). During interview analysis, this 'grasping together' fosters a better understanding of the meanings that interviewees assign to their actions as they relate to their identities (Miller, 2005). This analytical framework assumes that 'the link between social context and the individual is best analyzed by single cases and individual experiences' (Zinn, 2010, p. 34).

The topic of early-career researchers being considered 'young', regardless of their ages, arises spontaneously, primarily during the discussion of those macro-topics. When it did not, because we considered participants not merely informants but interlocutors (original interpreters of the social environment to which they belong), the interviewer introduced the following statement: 'I have been thinking about how often in academia terms as "young researcher" or "young resources" are used to define early-stage career researchers, regardless of their age. Do you think this has something

to do with our discussion about career path and fertility decisions?’ This allowed the participant to talk about her personal experience and express her considerations on the matter. The purpose of this type of question was to orchestrate a more participatory analytical path with which to work, acknowledging the negotiation of discursive knowledge between researcher and interlocutors (Marcus, 2000). Thus, we could receive constant and fruitful feedback about the research assessment, which enhanced the structurally collaborative nature of the query (Holmes & Marcus, 2005).

Finally, we guaranteed anonymity to our interlocutors by concealing whatever details about their affiliation and career could make them identifiable and all those demographic characteristics not essential to the analysis.

Narrating uncertainty

Our interlocutors’ narration of their career trajectories and fertility decisions revealed that almost every one of them had already considered trying to make sense of their experience while coping with job insecurity as part of their everyday life, prior to being prompted by the interview. Some achieved it with the help of a psychotherapist, some quoted close friends’ reflections on their precariat and generally on life choices. But they considered as necessary the process of constructing and revisiting their own biographies to maintain, despite personal uncertainty, ‘ontological security’ (Giddens, 1991).

Despite the interviewed researchers seeming engaged in a kind of a ‘reflexive project of the self’ (Miller, 2005), organising their biographical experiences into a coherent description of biographical events and life-choices, some reported perceiving themselves as so deeply involved in their career path that they felt out of touch with their personal needs. One of them described it as reaching the point of feeling like a ‘hamster on a wheel’. For her, ‘the possibility of stopping this wheel, until I got over it [by achieving a tenure position] didn’t even occur to me . . . to try to stop it to listen to my needs’ (43a, Senior researcher). Another interviewee stressed perceiving her job insecurity as a ‘cognitive scheme’, so pervasive that she did not feel she could ‘snap out of it just yet’, even though she had secured more stable employment:

...because precariousness deeply changes you, it makes you feel that you are never accomplished, never in the right place, as you will never own the right to be there, plus it left me with the syndrome of the constant ‘I cannot afford it’ because I’ve been struggling for years and years to make ends meet . . . (41, Senior researcher)

As Poggio and Murgia (2019) argue, the process of maintaining people in a precarious employment situation in the contemporary and neoliberal

academy should be considered a mode of subjectivation. Indeed, job insecurity tends to pervade life spheres other than work, to the point that (as the quoted interviewees describe) the experience of precariousness becomes a sort of cognitive scheme to read reality or prevent the subjects from getting in touch with their other needs.

Another core dimension of our interviewees' emplotment of uncertainty in their career trajectories is the way they perceive themselves to be constantly 'out of time'. On one hand is career time, which, despite having a clear scope or movement toward a much-desired end—the tenured position—seems to have unpredictable changes of pace. On the other hand, is the time of life spheres other than work, which, for some, moves at a different speed. In this way, precarious forms of employment seem to produce the perception of being 'stuck' career-wise in a timeless space; meanwhile, the 'clock keeps running':

. . . this precarious condition, it is like being in a limbo that you know that you are in it, you do not know when it will end and maybe it won't for a long time . . . and on one hand you have a family-life that goes on, your age that goes on . . . like the other day, I was reading about a young researcher award, only the under-35 can compete. I'm old for that award, ok, that is, I'm no longer young, but in fact I'm not even, like say, I don't have a senior profile let's say. And I don't have that profile, why? Because I did something else, it is true, but I did something else as a fall-back, to be able to make ends meet, substantially. Because the groceries must be bought, the rent must be paid at the end of the month . . . and now that we are looking for a house, I feel small, because I have a shitty employment contract . . . and when I went to ask for a mortgage at the bank they laugh at me . . . as if I am worth nothing. (. . .) So how can I say, the job insecurity necessarily reflects on the existential precariat. (38, Postdoctoral Fellow)

Feeling trapped in 'limbo', enacting a sort of suspension of the career-time dimension, to the point of inhibiting other life advances, such as buying a house, or even moving forward in her career while juggling other less rewarding but more remunerative job activities besides the academic role, unable 'to see the end' of the 'early-career' phase, is sometimes associated with the perception of being 'exploited':

And I tell you, even just to survive in a world like this, try to overturn things a bit . . . for example, I have this perception of being very exploited, right? Or better, rather than being exploited, I deprived myself to the point that I let myself be exploited. And I don't exploit. I am seeing a psychologist, also to try to survive this period of precariat . . . especially the last period with the co.co.co. [assignment on a project], a precarious employment position, whose end I did not know . . . I mean, I could not see a transition, I have been a postdoctoral fellow

for six years . . . I could not see the growth. It seemed like a lot, a huge investment [of time] without any growth. So, I really needed some support. (37, Junior researcher)

Moreover, since I had already won another fellowship in the summer, even if it would not begin until December, my supervisor did not see the need to renew my contract (. . .) so I was formally unemployed for three months—formally, because nobody paid me, but I worked anyway—because in any case, my supervisor knew that I would have gone to the office every day, he did not need to renew my contract to secure my commitment (. . .) this profile of exploitation would have affected anyone. (49, Associate professor)

The principle of ‘up or out’—obtaining tenure or exiting the system—appears to be embedded in neoliberal contemporary academic policies (Herschberg et al., 2018), due to the structural instability of the funding and the declining number of stable academic positions (Fiske, 2011). Nonetheless, during the early phases (such as post-doctoral fellowships), envisioning one’s possibility of growing and entering the next career step is not that simple. This inability to envision a clear path of evolutionary employment provides room for precarious-worker exploitation, or ‘flexploitation’ (Morgan & Wood, 2017), as the interviewees suggest.

Sometimes I ask myself, even to do this type of work you must have a predisposition to bear this amount of insecurity or not? Because I repeat, I don’t think everyone would be able to navigate this way of working. I have wondered many times: if I accept those conditions, which honestly few people would accept, it should be because I have something in me that makes it bearable, or it is just a lack of assertiveness I have . . . Am I being induced to accept this, or have I been shaped by my work to be like this . . . I do not know. I have asked it myself several times, but objectively I have not found an answer yet. (43b, Senior researcher)

I had 110 hours of teaching [laughs]. Two 6-credit courses plus another 3-credit course. However, I did 110 hours of frontal teaching annually (. . .) among other things, precisely because I was such an important presence for the maintenance of some courses in my sector; for example, I have always been the degree program secretary, I participated in several commissions . . . so I was quite an important figure, despite having just a lectureship, I did everything a full professor does (. . .) 110 hours for 1400 euros with taxes per year . . . let’s say I have a great passion in what I do and a strong bond with the university I come from. (45a, Senior researcher)

As Coin (2017) argues, the exploitation, which in academia usually consists of doing ‘invisible activities’ as tokens of commitment or favours for

higher academic ranks, could be considered a ‘soul-sourcing device’ (2017, p.713), where the subjects’ desire to secure a stable position is exploited by their superiors to obtain unpaid or informal work. Nevertheless, this ‘economics of promises’ (Bozzon, Murgia & Poggio, 2019) also fulfils the function of providing ‘an identity remedy to a condition of constant precariousness’ (2019, p.37), where the subject feels—in the words of the interviewees—needed and valuable, or even to have a ‘predisposition’ towards uncertainty, in some way destined or stronger than other people unable to navigate this ‘way of working’.

Forever young

In the previous paragraph, we observe how the career pace is often perceived as asynchronous with the speed of other life spheres. One of the elements of this unsynchronised perception concerns applying the label ‘young researcher’ to a woman in an early-stage career, regardless of age:

. . . [before tenure] I felt young, and more than young I felt small, like someone who still had to grow up—despite being almost forty years old. And this, in my opinion, is devastating, because then when you realise what does it mean to feel small, when you have been studying your discipline for twenty years like I did . . . I have had more workload than any full professor [in my sector], I published more than any full professor . . . why am I small, why am I young? I mean, what does young even mean in academia? (. . .) But the fact that you are not tenured, this is the trigger. And I don’t think it’s just our problem, but maybe it’s the whole system that leads us to this. (45a, Senior researcher)

I’m young for academia. They consider me young . . . up to two, three years ago, it did not even bother me, and it is not that it bothers me so much now, but it still is something that I would like to shake off me. I would like to not be defined in any way in this sense, old or young; rather, I would like to be defined for what I do, for my publications . . . but perhaps age still matters a lot, and the gender matters too in my opinion. (38, Junior researcher)

. . . [at her alma mater] everyone always thought I was young, I had to learn, I was doing my apprenticeship, when I went instead to [another university] I arrived as a lecturer, as a person who was valid in her sector (. . .) and therefore I was not perceived as young anymore, I was perceived as professional, and this helped me to understand how capable I really was at my job. (45b, Senior researcher)

As our interviewees point out, being labelled as ‘young’ in academia seems to be associated with lack of possibility to advance in one’s career: You are ‘too young’ to make professorship, too young to perceive the tenured col-

leagues as peers, to the point of feeling ‘small’ or lacking in professionalism, compared with higher academic ranks. At the same time, there is no guarantee that a phase where the researcher is perceived as an ‘adult’ will follow the ‘young phase’; one might just go from ‘being too young’ to ‘being too old’:

I found myself in the category of ‘young people’, or better, the category of young people in my case was stretched up until the age of 37, without me realising it . . . I was always ‘the young lecturer’. At one point . . . an alchemy of numbers, a series of things, the 2008 crisis, a sort of mobbing, a sort of from the day-and-night about-face, and I suddenly found myself being perceived as too old. This is my perception: I went from being too young—you are young, they told me, always young, always young . . . then you lost it! . . . Now you are too old. (47, Lecturer)

Moreover, this ‘youngness’ does not seem to entail a smaller workload:

. . . [when they call me young] it doesn’t come as a compliment, it comes more as a form of denial of the reality (. . .) Of course, then, let’s say instead you observe what I must do: I hold the courses, I have students, I organise congresses, I coordinate projects, so I don’t understand what this concept of ‘youth’ should entail. I mean, I have all the responsibilities of the job. There is this difference that in English you don’t use the term ‘young’, you use the term ‘junior’, but ‘junior’ has a different meaning, is not about age so much as about career stage. (36, Junior researcher)

Finally, this discursive construction about youth tends to have a broader influence on self-perception:

However, even outside academia, I do not feel like an adult (. . .) I don’t know, in my opinion, it’s partly linked to work (. . .). When I say around that I teach university courses, I found myself explaining it, because the image of the professor you have is bearded, with glasses . . . not a woman with a ponytail and a pair of jeans. (. . .) For example, I have my two best friends, we went to high school together, one is a lawyer and the other one is the CEO for a foundation. And that is, when I see them, maybe meeting them at the end of their working day, they seem like two ladies . . . and I’m a junior researcher . . . So yes, maybe I feel this disconnection when I compare myself to my classmates who work outside academia. (38, Junior researcher)

I feel young, despite everything. But this is my doom because in any case, our academic position makes us coincide with an age range, so to speak. We are permanent post-adolescents. (41, Postdoctoral fellow)

As for me, I still do not consider myself an adult [laughs]. I mean, I honestly struggle... (43a, Senior researcher)

Ian Hacking (1995) develops the concept of *effet de boucle* or ‘looping effect’, to refer to the tendency to enter categories set forth in a hegemonic model. He argues that the desire to adhere to the categories produces a complex mechanism of identification, which culminates in a reverse process of adaptation. It is not the category that adapts itself to the human beings it pretends to describe, but the human beings that tend to adapt to fit the category, consciously or not. Borrowing from the economic sciences’ law of supply and demand, the looping effect describes the way in which a certain label is created and individuals who identify themselves with it will be found (Hacking, 1995). In our interviewees’ narration, if the lack of recognition in the professional sphere and the precarious employment conditions have an impact on intimate relationship and family planning, the label of ‘youth’ seems to produce a self-identification (‘I feel young despite everything’) with a mechanism of subjectivation that resembles the looping effect. Being considered young regardless of the anagraphic age seems to threaten our interviewees’ self-esteem (‘I feel small’) and potentially intruding on life domains other than work (‘even outside the academia I do not feel like an adult’).

In a country where having a steady job position, reaching economic independency from the family of origin, is still considered one of the crucial adulthood landmark (Cuzzocrea et al., 2020; Spanò & Domecka, 2020), academic precarious researcher in their forties ‘struggle’ to recognize themselves as adults, feeling trapped in a ‘permanent post-adolescence’, as one of our interlocutor described it.

‘Family or science’ dilemma

The decision to become a mother while pursuing an academic career could be a core dilemma for female researchers, since the idea that investing time and dedication in life spheres other than work, such as bearing children and taking care of them, is still considered antithetical to striving to achieve a top position in science (Lind, 2008; Preston, 2004; Blackwell & Glover, 2008). Moreover, studies show that economic uncertainty and fixed-term contracts directly affect women’s fertility choices (Modena & Sabatini, 2012; Vignoli et al., 2012; Busetta et al., 2019; Vignoli, Tocchioni & Mattei, 2020).

Thus, for the early-career researchers, the ‘biological clock’—the decreasing female fertility with advancing maternal age (Liu et al., 2011)—is often perceived as disruption of their career trajectory:

I had two pregnancies, and I just took the mandatory leave of absence, and I stayed at work until the eighth month (. . .) but despite the two pregnancies, I produced more than my male colleagues. Produced in scientific terms (. . .) I had surpassed them by a lot because I never stopped working. Because obviously, I couldn’t stay 5 months without

publishing, knowing that you should take the habilitation⁶ is impossible. And so, I remember that with the first daughter . . . poor thing, she was good . . . I nursed her, then I put her down near the table and I worked. When I was finished, I took her, I changed her, that's it . . . I did everything with her by my side because that was what I had to do. That was the only way to keep up with the publication required pace, with the colleagues . . . I did the same thing with the second pregnancy . . . So, let's say the question was this, being in this situation where you can't stop working because things are moving forward and because you can't afford to slow down (43c, Senior researcher)

Kemelgor and Etzkowitz (2001) identify two types of fertility strategies in the U.S. academic context: on one side, those female researchers who decide to postpone their motherhood until achieving a tenured position, thus, having late pregnancies already in their forties. On the other side are female researchers who decide to refuse to embrace the *family vs science* dilemma, having a child during their early-career stages, facing great difficulties and sometimes discrimination (Kemelgor & Etzkowitz, 2001). The authors intend those strategies to be considered as ideal types, like the opposite ends on a fertility-choices/academic-career spectrum. Looking at our interviewees, only three of the respondents completely align with the first model:

[about having a child in her forties] I then postponed it [the pregnancy] for two reasons: one was because I was waiting to be tenured and to have a little more certainty (. . .) first because I was waiting to finish my doctorate, then I was waiting to finish my post-doctoral fellow, after that it seemed that the tenure was on the horizon . . . then I wait . . . the first time I decided to postpone it was around the age of 32-33, honestly, at that point, I would have wanted a child. (45a, Senior Researcher)

. . . you can understand that in this context [the precariat], the last thing that comes to your mind—at least to me—is to have a child. Before I was 40 years old, becoming a mother was not even in my mind map, it did not exist, this idea to have a child never crossed my mind. (. . .) I was extremely self-centred, that is, I had to do my job, and also the fact of not knowing exactly where I lived from one year to the next, so to speak . . . I mean, I continued to feel precarious as I was—not only work-wise but, in general, in my way of thinking. (. . .) I just didn't

⁶ She is referring to the National Scientific Qualification, ASN in the Italian acronym. The ASN is a non-comparative assessment procedure managed directly by MIUR, in which national commissions of each of the competition sectors have the task of ensuring the objectivity of the selection process. When compiling the form, only a leave of absence could be counted for the evaluation of the publication speed. Meanwhile, the European Research Council allows one year of leave per pregnancy to be counted, regardless of the actual length of the leave of absence.

contemplate the issue, that is, up to the age of forty (. . .) I just couldn't understand how I could dedicate myself to a care project. My energies were already exhausted in taking care of myself and trying to be . . . to respond to the thousand work solicitations that I felt I had . . . to be able to solve it in some way. So, I am also a little angry with myself, now that some time has passed by, for not having had the courage back then—I think courage is the word—that other women and precarious academic researchers have, who at some point recognise the own needs and feelings. (43a, Senior Researcher)

Just three of them completely aligned with the second type:

I was also in a phase of my life in which I didn't care anyway: For me, the priority was to become a mother, it was the pregnancy, and then the career would follow somehow. (38, Postdoctoral fellow)

(. . .) I had my first baby when I was 33 years old and I realised that if I waited for the tenure to have a child, I would easily reach 45 years old childless, without exaggerating, it was not hyperbole. I realised that few women at the university where I work had children, so this too rang a bell for me, and I was a precarious researcher, and likely to remain precarious for a long time. (38, Junior Researcher)

In most narrations, pregnancy is postponed to a personal point of acceptance, when, as some of them expressed it, they 'could not bear to wait any longer':

I was looking for the moment, I wanted to get pregnant, but when? Deciding when to have a baby was . . . I mean when I couldn't take it anymore. Honestly, I would have done it sooner. But I did it [get pregnant] when I couldn't bear to wait any longer because I thought so much the situation [of job insecurity] was not going to change soon enough . . . I decided to open this door, to welcome the idea of a pregnancy. The first one ended in a miscarriage. (. . .) Then, I decided that I had to distance myself from everything that does me no good and direct myself towards what I actually wanted, my husband and I decided to try again and [daughter name] arrived immediately. (37, Junior Researcher)

For some of them, having a three-year contract represented a 'window of opportunity':

Because I thought: I have a three-year contract ahead of me, my husband has a three-year contract ahead of him . . . this means that at least you don't have to do job interviews while your baby is in the crib . . . So, I saw a window of opportunity, even a small one . . . And there was also a little bit of the fact that I felt at an age where it was time, so let's say a little the mix of these two things. (36, Junior Researcher)

For others, the possibility of having a second child was sacrificed to the career:

But I have waited every year because I said maybe something materialises and I should be patient, but then it happened . . . let's say that she chose to come, my daughter. She took me away from the embarrassment of choosing. Remained an only child because she arrived late, because in any case at 38, a pregnancy is not so simple (. . .) I chose, I'm honest because my husband did want another child. But I chose, also because then, it isn't nice to say but it is true, some possibilities opened for me here in [name of the city] and I was afraid to lose those possibilities again. I had built my career, piece by piece, and I was afraid a further pregnancy would have precluded me from achieving a permanent position. (45, Junior Researcher)

Regardless of the personal fertility strategies undertaken, our interviewees' narrations coincide in describing the decision to become a mother as troubled, not only in practical terms (concerning the heavy workload, the economic uncertainty and the forced mobility) but also in existential terms. Indeed, the extended duration of the early-career stage raises the opportunity costs of motherhood because, tenure-wise, women are structurally forced to invest in their career before having children (Barbieri et al., 2015). Moreover, the uncertain result of such an investment seems to impact negatively on the ability to envision caring tasks as part of a foreseeable future, as our interviewees described ('I just couldn't understand how I could dedicate myself to a care project').

Finally, it captured our attention that, in narrating the decision of postponing childbearing, rarely our interviewees mentioned the role of their partners in the decision making process. Indeed, due to the decline of the single-breadwinner model, especially among highly-educated workers, where both partners are employed the characteristics of both their jobs become key factors in planning a pregnancy (Kreyenfeld, Andersson & Pailhé, 2012). Thus, when investigating the nexus between fertility decisions and job insecurity, the empirical research has so far focused mostly on women (Vignoli, Tocchioni & Mattei, 2020). Both this gap of literature and the mentioned lack of information in our interviewees' narration suggest the need for a further investigation of the topic.

Young researchers, old mothers

One of the core features of our interviewees' narrations was the clutch between being represented as 'young' in their work environment and being perceived/perceiving themselves as old regarding their reproductive health:

[When she had her first miscarriage] the gynaecologist told me . . . I went there crying, and she looked at me and said, 'If you wanted a child you should have started trying at 20, not at 40'. (. . .) So, I asked, 'Does the fact that we got pregnant at the first attempt mean that I am likely to get pregnant again?' And she told me, 'Look, getting pregnant at your age is already almost a miracle; therefore, I cannot assure you that you are going to get pregnant again'. (49, Associate professor)

In Italy, as mentioned, the National Health System considers 35 years old the threshold for a healthy and relatively reduced-risk pregnancy. Meanwhile, later-age pregnancies are defined as 'geriatric', requiring a different and richer set of medical examinations, because they are considered to have a statistically higher risk of complications (Gravena et al., 2012). As some of our interviewees point out, the medical discourse around maternal-age recommendations is also embedded in the public debate that surrounds family planning and fertility decisions:

Yes, because in my head 35 was a watershed, because I felt it echo in the public discourse, in the common sense, in what was going around me, and most of all, as an essential watershed with respect to my reproductive capacity (. . .) that is 35 years as a watershed compared to having a peaceful pregnancy, without potential problems, in which you were really safe, you were in an iron barrel up to 35, and then it is clear that there is the other threshold, 40 . . . and more, I did not want just one child, so 35 seemed to me the maximum age for the first pregnancy for having a second one (. . .) I have always had an immense desire to have more than one child and, therefore, if you start to have one at 35 then for the second the times shrink, perhaps also that I considered the age of 35 to be my last chance, not only for the reproductive health threshold . . . so a bit problematic. (41, Senior researcher)

Due to age-related fertility declining, miscarriages occur more often after the threshold of 35 (Stoop et al., 2014), and some of our interviewees had to cope with sustaining the loss of desired pregnancies.

When I had the first pregnancy, which ended in a miscarriage, there I personally reflected on the fact that my ovaries were a little old maybe, given the passing of the years. (37, Junior researcher)

So, I lost the first pregnancy and then the second too (. . .), and in short I was 40 years old and I became aware that my body was no longer so young. (49, Associate Professor)

Having late-age pregnancies also entangles specific fertility choices, such as resorting to assisted reproductive technology.

Then I necessarily entered the world of medically assisted procreation, I started at 42, I gave birth at 44. (47, Lecturer)

But in short, I was aware of the fact that [having passed the age of 40] I certainly could not take for granted that I could get pregnant naturally if I wanted to have a real chance of motherhood. Otherwise, it could have been wishful thinking (. . .) Because at a certain point I, that is to say, we take note of the fact that at 42, albeit you might feel great, you no longer have the age to have children, basically. So that is, in my opinion, chasing chimaeras . . . but this also forces you to undertake a path of acceptance of your past and the choices you made before. I didn't stab myself, because I know I couldn't do it differently from how I did (. . .) I was pretty much on the way to remain childless . . . And then after that I took the last train that passed there too and I turned to NASA like to do it because otherwise, I would not have made it, but in short, I think I made the right choice. (43a, Senior researcher)

In the narration of our interviewees, the previously described trick age-perception induced by the label 'young researcher' is associated with a sort of split between their pace-of-life choices and the perception of their body as a biological entity. Looking at the difficulties of late-age pregnancies, they described their body as not young enough, and most directly their reproductive organs, which were aged despite their sense of 'not feeling adult' or still 'feeling young'. As one interviewee points out, deciding to resort to assisted reproductive technology forced her to 'undertake a path of acceptance of your past and the choices made before' in life. Then, it is indeed with maternity that our interviewees' narrations coincide on describing a complete change of perception about their life-phase:

Pregnancy for me marked a bit of a caesura, in the sense that before I felt really young [she had her first child at 38], I don't know how to say. But not only from an age point of view; also from a point of view of mental condition (. . .) After the pregnancy it was no longer like this, I realised that pregnancy brought me this mature perception of myself . . . that's it: I am no longer young. It was something that happened during the months of the pregnancy. And then later, when I had the baby, then even more. (43b, Senior researcher)

So, now I do feel an adult. I feel an adult to the extent that I know I have a series of responsibilities that are also towards my child, which I take care of and which I will take care of forever . . . This gives me a sense of . . . a feeling of centredness . . . I don't know how to say it differently. I think I put myself in connection for the first time with a whole series of aspects that I had overlooked in life that if you want it is the activity of living itself, trivially. And so here, this gives me a

sense of fullness and satisfaction, and it is perhaps the first moment in life when I don't feel like chasing anything, although, clearly every day in the work we do we have deadlines and so on. But, finally, the work took a back seat to several other things. Finally, those things are not negotiable, and that feels right. So here, if you ask me, in my opinion, motherhood made me assertive, or more assertive, something that I have never been before. (43a, Senior researcher)

In the era of academic precariat (Murgia & Poggio, 2019), where the traditional adulthood landmarks, such as securing stable employment and starting a family, are not necessarily achieved according to the expected timing, considering oneself an adult seems to involve a more fluid definition of adulthood itself (Furlong, 2016; Cuzzocrea et al., 2020). In the life of the researchers, where 'youth' has forcibly expanded up to their 40s, becoming mothers seems to represent a turning point in terms of self-perception, allowing early-career researchers to enter adulthood and become 'centred' and 'assertive' about their rights and needs.

Conclusions

In this paper, we analysed fifteen virtual in-depth interviews collected from Italian academic women, by asking about both career and fertility trajectories as mechanisms of subjectivation.

As we observed, the transition from education to work is prolonged in the life of early-stage career academics, confirming that the border between those two conditions is blurry (Bellè et al., 2015; Martucci, 2017). The category of 'youth researcher' has stretched to become a common label for almost-forty-years-old precarious researchers. Therefore, the transition to adulthood, understood as 'a life stage when economic independence and a definition of the occupational role have been established' (Spanò & Domeccka, 2020), is difficult to identify in the life and career trajectories of contemporary Italian academic women. Indeed, while traditionally, adulthood landmarks, such as entering the workforce, leaving parents' home and then building a family, were expected to be a continuum, the sequence of these events might not be so predictable nowadays. It was certainly not for our interviewees.

During the narration of their academic precariat, our interviewees tried to ascribe meanings to the choice of remaining in the academy, despite all the difficulties and drawbacks they had to bear. Since, as scholars argue, in-depth interviews stimulate the process of reflexivity in a way that people might otherwise not embrace (Ribbens-McCarthy et al., 2000), we focused on the relation between their fertility decisions and the career-related experiences in their biographical trajectories. All of them described the decision to

become mothers as troublesome, in terms of compatibility with the academic endeavour and workload. Moreover, they described their academic precariat as a 'cognitive scheme', an existential experience that drove them to postpone their pregnancies not only for such practical reasons as economic uncertainty and forced mobility, but also because they were not able to get in touch with their needs or to overcome their fear of losing their career speed to maternity leave. Being classified into the category of 'young researcher' carries a label that, similar to the job insecurity with which it was paired, contributes to deferring their ability to perceive themselves as adults, even outside academia.

In our interviewees' narratives, one meaning they assigned to their first pregnancy concerns the discrepancy between being described as 'young researchers' by academia and as 'geriatric mothers' by the National Health System. For some, deciding to resort to medically assisted technology or having a miscarriage represented a point of realisation, a chance to come to terms with their fertility decisions, along with their academic careers. Finally, for many of our interlocutors, embracing motherhood's caring tasks appeared to mark the moment of transition to adulthood in their self-perception, a way to become centred.

Speaking of the process of standardisation, Foucault argues that individuals incorporate norms, and he emphasises the unconscious nature of this incorporation process. It is not necessary for a subject to know the rules of the *dispositif* to act and think within those rules. On the contrary, the more visibility the mechanisms of power lose, the more effectiveness they gain (Foucault, 2003). Analysing the narratives of academic women's career trajectories and fertility decisions offers an opportunity to reflect upon the mechanisms of power that come into play during the long and troubled transition from education to work that characterises contemporary Italian higher-education institutions. It offers an angle from which to reconsider the motivations behind academic women's reduced fertility (Palomba & Meniti, 2001; Mason & Goulden, 2004) and tendency to embrace the dominant gender model (Murgia & Poggio, 2018). Moreover, comparing their narrative patterns, considering the role that the label of 'youth' plays as an academic construction (Bozzon, Murgia & Peroni, 2020) for tricking their self-perceived age, offers the chance to contemplate how the mechanisms of power involved in the process of keeping people precarious produce subjectivation, acting on their self-perception as individuals by delaying their ability to see themselves as adults. Ultimately, those considerations might produce some insights into the debate on adulthood transition in contemporary times (Furlong, 2016; Cuzzocrea et al., 2020; Spanò & Domecka, 2020), by suggesting a broader reflection on the role played by standard forms of employment and parenthood in marking the transition between youth and adulthood.

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