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## Living Intersectionality and Doing Intersectionality: The Stories of Transition and Struggle of Young Neapolitans

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# Living Intersectionality and Doing Intersectionality: The Stories of Transition and Struggle of Young Neapolitans

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*Abstract:* The economic and social transformations following the exit from the wage earning society (Castel, 2009) made the process of becoming an adult longer, less linear and more difficult than in the past. The transition to adulthood is thus delayed, especially in the countries like Italy, where due to poor welfare protection and reduced job opportunities, young people's destiny depends largely on family support and undeclared work. All of this is happening in the context of structural conditioning, defined by the intersectionality of class, gender, and ethnicity (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016; Amelina & Lutz, 2019), unequally distributing life chances across different categories of young people. This process of being subjected to structural influences is described here as 'living intersectionality'. This, however, is not a one-sided process, as structural conditioning can be reflected and acted upon in the agential process of 'doing intersectionality' (Lutz, 2014; Lépinard, 2014). We argue here that young people are not only subjected to the intersecting dimensions of gender, class and ethnicity but they may also develop the capacity to critically reflect and act on them thanks to the power of agency. On the basis of 80 autobiographical narrative interviews (Schütze, 2008) conducted in the last decade with young people of different gender, class and ethnic background, living in the metropolitan area of Naples, we aim to show how the combination of intersectional and biographical analysis allows to grasp the processes of living and doing intersectionality.

Keywords: young people, transitions to adulthood, intersectionality, agency, biographical approach

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## Introduction

The processes following the end of the so-called wage-earning society have put into question the “standard” biographical paths, for which a self-evident frame of reference or a “horizon” for orientation and planning in life would be provided (Kohli, 2007). Not only the full-time full-life work model came to an end, but Post-Fordist society also gave rise to more general processes, such as the de-institutionalization of family, the progressive “withdrawal” of welfare, and the collapse of the sense of collective belongingness (Castel, 2009).

Following these deep transformations of social order, the life course – the order and the duration of its phases – has been affected by a progressive process of “fluidification”, which made the transition from one phase to another less clear. As Heinz writes, “the social age markers, which used to define the timing of transitions, have lost their normative force in the course of the last decades of the twentieth century” (Heinz, 2009, p. 3). The transition from youth to adulthood, in particular, has taken on completely new features. The traditional stages of the path leading from the status of young to that of adult (conclusion of studies, stable insertion in the labour market, housing autonomy, marriage and parenthood), in fact, today not only are more distant from each other, but they also follow an irregular chronological order and are often characterized by alternating steps forward and backward, which is the process that Biggart and Walther (2006) call *yo-yoisation* of transitions. Furthermore, the processes of individualization (Beck, 1992) accompanying the fragmentation of the Fordist society, placed the responsibility for their destiny on the shoulders of young people, making the development of their personal skills and self-orientation indispensable. As a matter of fact, the young in contemporary society have to cope with increasing pressures that derive from major economic, social and cultural changes (from work precarity to globalization, up to the new digital cultures) that are impacting the youth phase of life (France et al., 2020).

The new situation in which young people are called to build their autonomy have also had a strong impact on *Youth Studies*, giving rise to an important debate on two major issues. The first is about the opportunity of adopting the transitions’ perspective in a context where both the starting (youth) and the arrival point (adulthood) have taken on completely new characteristics. Authors such as Wyn and Woodman (2006; 2007; Woodman & Wyn, 2015) argued that the emergence of a “new youth”, where being young no longer means living in a state of total dependence, and of a “new adulthood”, where being an adult is no longer synonymous with stability, requires a new generational perspective that focuses on the changed conditions in which today’s young people have to build their adult status. The second question

concerns the need of rethinking the mechanism of inequality reproduction in a context in which personal abilities (agency, reflexivity, and the ability to navigate uncertainty) have become fundamental in shaping young people's lives. The discussion, in this case, concerns the actual margins of freedom enjoyed by young people in building their own biography in the contemporary society, where the widespread post-compulsory education and job insecurity seem to have blurred social divisions (Furlong, 2011) and changed the impact of social class. That is, the extent to which structural constraints are still crucial in shaping youth biographies.

The recent debate developed in *Youth Studies* has been retraced in detail elsewhere (Spanò, 2018). Here, however, it is necessary to specify the position taken in this contribution regarding the issues raised above. With regard to the perspective opposition transitions versus generations, here it is assumed that there is at least one good reason to support the validity of the transitional approach, that is that the idea of transition continues to have a normative character both at the institutional level – in public discourse as well as in youth policies (France & Roberts, 2015) – and at the subjective level. In fact, according to Blatterer (2007), although young people are now actively engaged in a struggle for the recognition of a new way of being adults, they forge their adulthoods within the world in which they have to live so that “they are defining for themselves modalities of adulthood at once against and within the normative constraints of an inherited standard” (Blatterer, 2007, p. 11). As for the opposition between “deterministic” or “voluntaristic” understandings of youth (Wyn & White, 1997), we adhere to the position of those who, recognizing the centrality of both structural factors and individuals' reflexivity and agency, affirm that in order to grasp the new features of social inequality and its reproduction mechanisms, social analysis has to focus on the interplay between these dimensions (Adams, 2006; Farrugia, 2013; Coffey & Farrugia, 2014) in order to understand the structural impact in an intersectional perspective (Crenshaw, 1989; 1991).

If transition to adulthood is understood as a social and biographical process of transformation including autonomisation, reflexivity and empowerment, constituting the building blocks of agency (Domecka, 2017), becoming an adult is a part of the processes of becoming an agent: influenced by the structural context but also increasingly capable of negotiating, resisting and perhaps also changing it. Reflexivity, a crucial element of agency, is defined as the capacity of critical elaboration of one's life situation and life projects in relation to the context of action and to broader social processes, and vice versa, considering the context in relation to life situation and life projects (Archer, 2012). Given the importance of reflexivity and agency for transitions to adulthood (Henderson, et al. 2007), a fundamental question is about the conditions in which they are generated and put into practice (Spanò &

Domecka, 2020). Importantly, the ability of young people to reflect on their life situation does not immediately translate into agency, understood as the possibility of exercising control over their own life and achieving their goals, since this possibility is structurally conditioned (Spanò, 2018). Structural conditioning is recognized and analysed here but not treated as deterministic. Similarly, agential powers of reflexivity, allowing to recognise power relations and to develop some strategies of confronting them, even though acknowledged as playing an important role in gaining more autonomy and control, are not believed to suffice to cancel the interlocking power of structural disadvantage.

Combining intersectional and biographical analysis of the narratives of young people living in the difficult structural context of Southern Italy, we intend to address some of the shortcomings of the intersectionality approach (McNally, 2017) by showing on the one hand how the intersecting dimensions of gender, class and ethnicity/race (being co-constitutive) shape their lives, and on the other, how young people can manage to resist and negotiate the ongoing structural influences, and in some cases, even to overcome the condition of structural disadvantage. Recognizing people's capacity of *doing intersectionality* (Lutz, 2014), that is the possibility, of negotiating, mobilizing and drawing upon their multiple positioning, and the different ways of doing intersectionality (De Vita et al., 2016) we focus here on the conditions that seem to feed young people's "negotiation and navigation skills".

After a description of the territorial context of the research and of the methodology adopted, some life stories will be presented of young people of different social background, male and female, of Italian and foreign origin, in order to show how structural constraints in some cases can be overcome by reflexivity and agency, and in some other, they cannot be negotiated and dominate over young people's biographies.

### **The importance of the context**

The lengthening of the educational paths, following the request for higher levels of qualification that accompanied industrial development, and the "scandal" of precarious work (Gallino, 2014), which condemned entire generations to precariousness and uncertainty (Castel, 2009), jeopardizing the predictability of the future (Leccardi, 2005), the high youth unemployment combined with the cut in unemployment support, which has affected almost all European countries (Furlong & Cartmel, 2007), are all phenomena which have significantly delayed the achievement of autonomy of young people, who remain in a state of suspension and dependence on parents much longer than in the past.

Albeit the “postponed entrance into adulthood” (Hayford & Furstenberg, 2008) is a phenomenon of global scale, many comparative studies have shown how the transition to adulthood varies greatly across countries: institutional structures such as the educational system, the labour market, youth policies, as well as the dominant ideologies and values, in fact, strongly affect the achievement of the adult status. It is exactly in the contexts where the transition regime (Walther, 2006) does not support the process of youth autonomization that the prolongation of youth is particularly accentuated.

This is the case of Italy, especially its Southern part, a context that fully belongs to what Walther calls the sub-protective model. That is a transition regime in which young people are not entitled to social benefits; where “the low percentage of standard work arrangements and the high rate of unprotected living conditions has created a specific ‘dualistic’ welfare regime in which the family and informal work play a significant role” (Walther, 2006, p. 129); where, given the institutional vacuum in which young people are called to become adults, the pathways toward adulthood, as Walther states, fully depend on the extent and type of family support.

As shown by Van de Velde in Mediterranean societies the prevailing logic is that of waiting at family home for the conditions necessary for a stable settlement in adult life, which translates into a very long transition process in three acts: having a stable occupation, getting married, buying an apartment (Van de Velde, 2008; 2011).

In Italy, indeed, as in other Mediterranean countries, we find a selective nature of unemployment, which strongly penalizes young people and women (the unemployment rate of young people aged 15 to 24 is 29% against an EU average of 15%). We also find a theory-oriented educational system, which provides neither a strong sense of orientation nor a clear link between school and labour market; a familistic-occupational structure of the welfare model (Ferrera, 1996), which offers very little support for the young unemployed or precariously employed; finally, a culture that valorizes family ties and intergenerational solidarity. All these are features which, reinforcing each other, contribute to slowing down of the process of becoming an adult. In Italy, in fact, the percentage of young adults (aged 25-34 years) living with their parents is 53%, against 5.7% in Sweden, 11.4% in France and 16.6% in Germany (European average 30.5%), and the average age of leaving the parental home is 30 years old, compared to 17.8 in Sweden and 23.6 in France and Germany, with the European average of 26 years of age (Eurostat, 2019).

It should also be emphasized that, given the territorial dualism of the Italian context, the characteristics outlined so far are even more accentuated in the South, where welfare system is much less efficient, where employment services are dramatically lacking, and where – due to the structural lack of demand – unemployment reaches much higher levels. This is experienced

especially severely in case of people of foreign origin, young people and women. The overall foreign-born unemployment rate in 2019 is 13,8 (against 9,5% for native population), but the percentage is 12,3% in the North, 14,8% in the Centre and 17,6% in the South, which is almost double the national average (Istat, 2020). In case of young people, in 2019 the unemployment rate for those aged 20-24 reached 42% against 16,7% in the North and 24,4% in the Centre (26,2% in Italy). As for young adults (aged 25-34 years) in particular, the gap between the different areas of the country is clearly visible: the unemployment rate in the South is 26.3%, against 8% in the North, 13,3% in the Centre, and 14.8% on the country level. The difference appears even clearer when we consider female unemployment: while in the northern regions the youth (25-34) unemployment rate is 9,6%, in the South it reaches 30,5%, almost twice the national figure (16,5%) (Istat, 2019). All these statistics help to understand why the quota of people aged 18-34 living with their parents in Southern Italy reaches 69,2% (Istat, 2019). This does not mean, however, that the Southern – or more generally the Italian – young do not become adults, but that they become adults in their own way, that is living within their parents' home (Cuzzocrea, Bello, & Kazepov, 2020). In other words, for them being an adult is not synonymous with being financially and existentially independent.

## **Intersectionality**

The structural context described above does not impact all categories of young people in the same way. A glance at statistical data allows for some understanding which categories may be more affected than others. However, it is important to avoid essentializing them. For example, as for the category “women”, the intersectional perspective has clearly showed the necessity of going beyond one dimension, by encouraging to look into the multiple and overlapping systems of inequality and their mutual constitution.

Intersectionality introduced by Crenshaw (1989; 1991), and developed further by numerous researches (Collins, 1991; Phoenix, 2006; Davis, 2008; Nash, 2008; Walby, Armstrong & Strid, 2012; Carbado et al., 2013; Cho, Crenshaw & McCall, 2013; Collins & Bilge, 2016; Lutz, 2016; Amelina & Lutz, 2019), drew the attention to the interaction between class, gender and ethnicity/race (and other dimensions of inequality) in the individual lives of young people, social practices, institutional arrangements, and cultural ideologies, as well as the outcomes of these interactions in terms of power (Davis, 2008). As such, intersectionality has allowed researchers to stop essentializing differences and to focus on multiple positioning of individuals and groups as well as on the relationship between the dominant, privileged,

hegemonic sides of societal structural categories and their antitheses (Lutz, Herrera Vivar & Supik, 2011; France & Roberts, 2017).

So far, most attention has been given to the intersection between positions such as ethnicity/race, gender and class. The idea of ‘triple oppression’ where individual effects of sexism and racism are ‘added up’ has been called to be replaced with an approach that recognises a “multiplicative effect within intersections” (McBride, Hebson & Holgate, 2015, p. 333) that exist within certain specific locations and experiences. In the context of Southern Italy thus sexism will be experienced differently in case of white, Neapolitan, middle-class women and those being non-white working class migrants, which is part of what Crenshaw (1991) calls ‘structural intersectionality’.

As the pioneers of the intersectionality approach (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 1991) focused first of all on the interlocking power of the systems of discrimination, later developments (Lutz, 2014; Anthias, 2012) paid equal attention to the processes of agential negotiating and re-interpreting the structurally given opportunities and constraints. In this line, young people are not only seen as conditioned by the intersecting dimensions of gender, age, class and ethnicity/race but also capable of critical reflection, negotiation and strategic acting on them, thanks to the power of agency. Thus, in the paper, the process of being subjected to structural conditioning is referred to as ‘living intersectionality’, whereas the agential process of reflecting and acting upon structural opportunities and constraints is termed ‘doing intersectionality’ (Lutz, 2014; Lépinard, 2014).

Intersectional approach is not treated here neither as a full-fledged theory nor as ‘a buzzword’ (Davis, 2011) but rather as a heuristic tool (Carbado et al., 2013; Cho, Crenshaw & McCall, 2013) helping us to focus on the relationships between different axes of inequality in order to understand the differences between and within groups (Crenshaw, 1991).

We argue here that young people are not only discriminated or privileged by the intersecting of the traditional dimensions of inequality, but they may also develop the capacity to respond to them by creatively drawing upon various aspects of their structural identities in order to gain some degree of freedom (autonomy) in their lives. Thus, we are focusing here on two inter-related processes: what intersectionality does (how it is lived) and how it is done (reflexively dealt with).

## **Methodology**

Addressing both the processes of ‘living’ and ‘doing’ intersectionality requires some methodological innovation. In order to address both the structural and agential powers at play, we combine intersectional and biographical approaches, which allows us to analyse at the same time (1) the mutual



co-constitution (Bhattacharya, 2017) of different categories of social differentiation, (2) the ways they work in different social contexts and locations and (3) the specificity of the biographical experiences shaped by these interactions and (4) the ways young people respond to them while acting inside the intersections. In biographical narrations, the differences are analysed in a non-additive way, considering their reciprocal and complex relationship as ‘individual biographies are situated within all domains of power and reflect their interconnections and contradictions’ (Collins, 2000, p. 287). As the intersectional approach helps us to tackle structural conditioning, the biographical perspective enables us to grasp the ways agency is developed and applied in order to confront the power of structural positioning. Thus, within the dialectics of living intersectionality and doing intersectionality we analyse the struggles of young people on their paths to adulthood by addressing the diversity across and within them. As the development of research designs and methods that can capture effectively all of the tenets of intersectionality theory remains underresearched (Hancock, 2007; Karimi, 2020), the combination of intersectional and biographical approaches we propose, may contribute to an interesting methodological discussion.

Within the PRIN<sup>1</sup> project, between 2013 and 2015, we collected 78 autobiographical narrative interviews, following the autobiographical narrative method developed by Fritz Schütze and his collaborators (Schütze, 2008; Riemann & Schütze, 1991) with young people of Italian (50) and non-Italian (28) origin, female (41) and male (37), of lower (38) and middle and upper-middle (40) class background, living in Naples and in Campania Region in Italy. All of the participants left the educational system in 2008. Those leaving secondary school (or dropping out of school) were 21-23 years old, whereas those graduating university were older, between 28 and 31 years old. A year after the first interview, 10 follow-up encounters with the same interviewees took place, in order to assess what has changed in their lives.

The autobiographical narrative interviews took between an hour and three hours. Following Schütze’s approach, they started with a general question meant to stimulate the telling of autobiographical story. In the first part, the interviewees were not interrupted or asked any additional questions. They were given a chance to develop their narratives using their own language and to look for their own explanations why things had been developing in a certain way. Only after they finished their narration (which was normally indicated by a coda in the form of ‘That’s it, that’s my story’ or ‘I think I’ve said everything’), some more questions were asked. First, the questions

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<sup>1</sup> The state-funded project ‘Pratiche sostenibili di vita quotidiana nel contesto della crisi: lavoro, consumi, partecipazione’ [Sustainable everyday practices in the context of the crisis: towards the integration of work, consumption and participation] within the PRIN Programme: Research Projects of Relevant National Interest.

related to narration itself and then those directed by research objectives. As a result, we received narrative structures made of sequences of events and the meaning narrators attach to them, which allowed us to reconstruct narrators' own perspectives and link them to the contexts they lived in. During the analysis, we contextualised their life experiences into socio-economic and institutional structures affecting them, and in turn, being affected by them as well.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Anonymity was guaranteed to all participants. Open and selective coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) of all interviews, was combined with in-depth narrative analysis of core cases, following Schütze's approach (Schütze, 2008). These have been analysed sequentially (structural description) and comparatively, where comparisons were made across gender, class and ethnicity/race.

During the research process we asked the following questions: firstly, how does the intersectionality of gender, class and ethnicity/race condition young people's lives and secondly, how they exercise their agency enabling them to evaluate and re-interpret the structurally defined opportunities and constraints. In other words, what the intersectionality of structural dimensions does to young people and how they do intersectionality.

For the sake of the current argument, we have selected four cases that illustrate the complexities of living and doing intersectionality particularly clearly.

### **Living intersectionality**

In this section, we present two case studies reflecting the different structural influence on the lives of two young people, Amina and Dario, of distinct configurations of class, gender and ethnicity, as well as different social context and social positioning they experience. What they share are their difficulties in transforming (at least partially) the condition of 'living intersectionality', described as being subjected to structural forces, into 'doing intersectionality' – the capacity of negotiating and resisting them.

Amina is a 25-year-old working-class woman of Macedonian origin. Her father, a bricklayer working in the black market, is Muslim and her mother, a greenhouse worker, is Catholic. Amina is the eldest of four children. She is brought up in Rome, where she lives till the age of 12. Later her family moves to a small town in Campania region where Amina continues primary school with great delay due to her father's ideas about education in a girl's life:

My father had a problem with school, basically he wanted me to start together with my brother. I lost three years because being a Muslim I was conditioned by this thing that I had to be accompanied by my

brother, so I found myself in the 4th grade of primary school at the age of 12.

This marks a very difficult start of her educational path. Amina enters school being three years older than her peers. This gives her a profound feeling of not fitting in. Throughout primary and middle school, “she always has this problem” of lagging behind, which eventually becomes one of the reasons of dropping out from school. Initially, she tries to catch up with her colleagues and to overcome her educational gap, but since her efforts are not supported neither by her family or by school, she gets discouraged. “I gave up, with a heavy heart I left school, which I’ve regretted it until now”. Amina is defined first of all through her gender role, understood mainly in terms of obligations towards the family and the household. She chooses secondary school of linguistic profile but her enthusiasm for school is tempered by her mother’s disbelief in education and her father’s idea of strictly and narrowly defined gender roles. Amina experiences multiple discrimination both at home and at school. At home, she is expected to focus on housework and get married at the age of 18 with a person of similar ethnic background. At school, she feels “excluded” and “abandoned”, viewed with suspicion as “a Muslim” (even though she is Catholic like her mother) and as a person with a “strange surname”. She is constantly controlled, at home by her father and at school by the “obsessive presence” and watch of her younger brother. When she is 18, her rebellion starts. This is an effort of re-defining her place in the family and larger society. She fights for her autonomy, determined to “start thinking using her own head”. Amina starts going out making new friendships against her father’s will. Her mother covers her for a while but when the father realizes that Amina is out (at her friend’s birthday party), he screams that “he’d kill her”. Physical and emotional violence is a frequent form of punishment he uses. Amina meets an Italian young man who becomes her boyfriend. The conflict in the family escalates as her parents strongly oppose this relationship and any forms of “insubordination”. Amina is sent to her paternal grandmother in Macedonia in order to find an “appropriate” candidate for a husband, preferably (from the perspective of her father) a Macedonian or Albanian Muslim. She tries to oppose asking her father to understand that she “was brought up in Italy” but it does not help. There Amina is very much controlled by her grandmother: “a photocopy of her father”. When she returns to Italy, in order to please her father, she leaves her Italian boyfriend. At this point, she goes through a biographical trajectory of suffering. She gets depressed and develops an eating disorder: “size 38 and 41 kilos... and... a period when I didn’t eat anymore. I couldn’t look at him [the father]. I couldn’t stand sitting at the table with him”, she says. She joins her mother and starts working in the greenhouse. After a few months, Amina meets another Italian young man but both her own and his

parents are against this relationship, which in both cases is related to hostility towards ethnic differences. In an act of rebellion, Amina marries the man, which also means she becomes excluded from her family.

He quarrelled with his family as well, his father didn't want us to be together because I was a "Muslim". We lived three, four months in the car, just the two of us, alone. We looked for help from his grandmother but it didn't work. And then we met a friend who worked as a lifeguard at the swimming pool. We told him that I was pregnant and that my and his parents had thrown us out of the house and we were sleeping in the car, so he hosted us at his house... In the meantime, my husband found some accommodation... My mom knew I was pregnant but she was as tough as my father. When I was seven months pregnant, I was always in the hospital because I always had back pains because of the seats in the car... I called home to get help and my father said: "you have to die for what you did". In fact, I saw my family again when the baby was one and a half years old.

In the context where no structures of support are available, only a friend, a practical and metaphorical lifeguard, helped the couple to cope. Still, at the moment of the interview, Amina lives with her daughter and her husband, a bricklayer who works in the black market, a highly precarious life relying on charity support. Amina dreams about a different life, perhaps "in Germany or France, where's development and growth" as the context of her life in the South of Italy gives her little hope for improvement.

Amina's story shows how one becomes trapped in the interlocking power of the systems of discrimination. The multiple structural disadvantage in terms of class, gender and ethnicity, combined with a lack of support from family, school or any other institution, makes it impossible to resist the power of structural conditioning. The patriarchal structure of the family, where "father was deciding and mother had to respect his will", together with the double standards, where subordination was required from daughters but not from the son (who was free to study and to marry an Italian woman), make the weight of gender especially heavy. This type of discrimination combined further with very limited educational and economic family resources, passivity of school (not providing any type of support) and open ethnic discrimination make the individual acts of resistance futile.

Dario is a 29-year-old man, born in a lower-middle class family. His mother is a housewife, and his father is a retired office employee. His parents value education, which they see as a way for securing a "good job". After middle school, they decide to enrol Dario in *liceo classico* (attended predominantly by upper-middle class children) in Naples, that is far from home, as the family lives outside the city. For Dario, it is a "great institute". Even though this choice suggests an aspiration of social mobility on the part of his

parents, his entire educational path is marked by limited economic resources of his family. Dario would like to study medicine, but he feels that a future as a professional is not suitable for him, who is not “the son of a professional” and, as such, cannot rely on a path already travelled:

I'm, how to say it... I have no particular connections, my father was an employee of the Naples airport, my mother is a housewife. We have no direction, you know, doctors are the sons of doctors, lawyers are the sons of lawyers.

Also, from a pragmatic point of view, Medicine requires too much of time investment that Dario cannot afford, as he needs to start working as soon as possible. Thus, he enrolls in the Faculty of Biology, in the belief that this type of degree could give him an easier access to the labour market:

Biology seemed to me a faculty with broad perspectives because it was a new faculty, and they talked about it very well, you can work in industries, be a pharmaceutical representative, you can do a lot of things ... then there were few students, so one thinks: few students more possibilities to find a job.

Despite doing paid work during his studies, in order not to burden his family, Dario is a brilliant student. He graduates with honours from both the bachelor's and master's degrees, and immediately afterwards takes the state exam for the qualification to become a professional biologist. Once again, it is his economic condition that does not allow him to go further. He does not enrol in the professional register “because it costs”, and he does not even try to make the competition to enter a Specialization School in Biology, which would not only take “other four, five years, if you win it”, but also includes high tuition fees. Furthermore, he renounces the opportunity offered him by his thesis supervisor to start doing research and then apply for a PhD programme, as he cannot afford to invest years of his life in doing research without the certainty of a future stable job. Thus, he starts looking for work as a pharmaceutical representative. Without specialization, he is not able to enter a large company, but finds a job at a small local company, which does not offer leading products, and offers him only sales commissions, instead of desired monthly salary. Dario is also disappointed with the quality of his work:

I'm a salesman, so I could also work at a call centre and sell telephone contracts, it's the same thing. My studies provided a piece of paper but in practice, anyone could do that job, certainly not me, who had a degree in Biology.

At that stage Dario has not yet given up on using his competencies. So, he decides to leave the pharmaceutical sector and seek work in an analysis laboratory. Not having the connections necessary to enter a large laboratory

(where recommendations are needed to be hired), Dario falls back on a small laboratory in the municipality where he lives, the only one that, thanks to the limited social network of his parents, was willing to offer him a free internship. Hoping that after this period he will be hired permanently, Dario takes this opportunity. After the internship, he is offered a permanent part-time contract but in reality he works more hours than he is paid for. In addition, he mainly deals with administrative tasks and his working conditions are marked by exploitation as he receives salary of 300 euros for 36 hours of work per week.

They proposed me a permanent contract, part time, with a pay check that was obviously not the one I was being paid, so the moral of the story is that I now find myself in this laboratory where I feel good, there are people with whom I have a relationship of esteem and even affection after two years of collaboration, but honestly with three hundred euros a month I am not going anywhere.

Although the working conditions are completely unsatisfactory, Dario resists, firstly because his tax contributions are paid, and secondly because he does not see alternatives. He still does not give up looking for a better job, but the difficulties he encounters in the job market, lead him to renouncing his aspirations. Having abandoned the desire to use the skills acquired through his studies, he participates in several competitions to enter Public Security Forces, with the aim of having a stable and secure job. The failure of these attempts leads him to further reduction of his ambitions. In fact, he applies for a two-year apprenticeship in a telephone company's call centre as in his current condition, even a two-year part-time contract could be a first step towards stability.

Now, the very last hope is this call centre recently opened. In the end it is a call centre, nothing disparaging because I'm not the kind of person who calls people home to sell stuff, but they give you security for two years, and by doing this, plus what I'm currently making at the laboratory, I could start something... Now, at the age of thirty, even a two-year stability is a stability. If I never start I can't go anywhere.

The failure of this further attempt, "a blow" as he calls it, throws him into a state of discouragement. His goal is now "normality":

Life must be lived by objectives, one is born, grows up, studies with the aim of graduating, finding a job, creating a family, it is a path step by step, to have a child, to have grandchildren, to have a house, to have a dog, whatever it is. Because if you don't have a goal, your life is over.

Having a "normal life", however, is becoming "not a hope but almost a utopia", as he says. Dario is no longer able to see beyond the situation in which he is constrained, and continues to work in the analytic laboratory

with the only prospect of having his salary increased from 300 to 400 euros monthly. His narrative suggests that he feels the pressure of time and of “getting old”:

Unfortunately, you don't make projects anymore, you can't afford to dream, to make plans... I currently live in a situation of anguish... I'm really down because I don't see a future, I can't see it even in three months, I can't see it, that's the problem. And I find myself even more penalized because the apprenticeship is up to twenty-nine years and three hundred and sixty-five days, I'm about twenty-nine and three hundred days, so in practice another door is going to close.

Dario's narrative is the story of a trajectory of decreasing aspirations and shrinking possibilities. Despite his degrees with honours, the range of options he sees has been narrowing more and more: today even a temporary contract as a call centre operator would represent “a hope”. The success in his studies had initially fuelled his aspirations for professional fulfilment, but the difficulties encountered in the labour market changed the meaning he gives to work, making it only a means of subsistence: “working in the end is a sacrifice, why does one do it? To maintain a family”. His idea of masculinity also plays a role in giving up his aspirations, and in his urgent need to find a stable job. Dario has been engaged for eleven years and would like to get married. In his milieu culture, “at thirty” it is time to get married, and in his gender culture it is up to men to create the conditions for starting a family: in fact, his girlfriend, also a biologist, stopped at the bachelor's degree and gave up looking for a more stable job, being content to do odd jobs. Under the weight of a context that offers few job opportunities, where unemployment is widespread and social networks are needed to find work; pressured by a gender culture that dictates his responsibility to start and maintain a family; deprived of economic and relational resources, Dario finds himself in a situation of biographical paralysis.

### **Doing intersectionality**

In this section, we present two case studies reflecting not only the different structural influence on the lives of two young people, Fabia and Tito, of distinct configurations of class, gender and ethnicity, resulting in different social positioning (living intersectionality), but also the agential process of doing intersectionality.

Fabia, is a 30-year-old woman of Sri Lankan origin but born in Rome. At the age of 3, she moves to Naples with her parents, both of them first generation Sri Lankan migrants. Her parents are domestic workers and the father works also as a handyman. It is not possible to understand Fabia's story without considering the specificity of Sri Lankan immigration in Naples. It

is a group of old settlers, today the most numerous in the city, which thanks to the mediation of the Catholic Church has enjoyed important support. Both women and men of Sri Lankan origin were channelled to work predominantly in the domestic work sector, and unlike other migrant groups, are often employed under a regular contract and with an adequate salary. Assuming that there is a stratification of the immigrant population based on nationality, it can be said that they occupy a high position in this hierarchy. It is also important to underline that the integration of women into the labour market as regularly employed carers and nannies has significantly influenced the gender culture of Sri Lankan women, who – also due to their contacts with middle-upper class employers – have internalized the “working woman” model, and developed expectations of social advancement for their daughters.

These sociocultural traits are evident in the case of Fabia. Her parents, in fact, upon arrival in Naples, settle in the historical centre of the city and work for families of the upper-middle class (as a child she lives with her parents in a “noble family” where her parents work). Since she attends schools close to her parents’ workplace, she spends her childhood and adolescence in a privileged area of the city and among middle and upper-middle class peers. Fabia goes through good primary, middle and grammar schools, without encountering any learning difficulties. She admits having some experiences of ethnic discrimination and exclusion (“I was always the only dark stranger”) and having a “xenophobic teacher” in secondary school. But this does not have a negative impact on her educational path. On the contrary, after secondary school, Fabia intends to study Medicine, a long and expensive course of study, and if eventually she does not do it, it is only due to bureaucratic reasons: she does not receive her Italian citizenship on time, and the number of places available to foreigners in the Faculty of Medicine is very low. She decides to study Tourism and Management instead but, realizing that this course was not a right choice for her, she leaves it with a Bachelor degree. After graduation she goes to London for a year, where she works in a pub, a restaurant and a hostel. After returning to Italy, she works in the administration of a holiday resort in Campania, then in a pub. Only when she is 25, she receives her Italian citizenship, which she describes as “life changing”.

She has a serious motorbike accident and stays in the hospital for a month. This negative event becomes an asset for her. While staying in hospital, she discovers her talent of understanding people even if she does not speak their language:

I spent a month in a very depressing ward... but there I discovered that I was really gifted as a cultural mediator, because next to me there was a Romanian girl with an amputated leg, with her mother, who was Romanian too. I didn’t speak Romanian, they didn’t speak Italian, but we



communicated without problems! Her mother told me her whole story, her life, in Romanian, and I understood! I don't know how (laughs).

After recovery, she finds a job in a gym. She works without a formal contract as a secretary and is not satisfied with her work: "doing this job, I couldn't grow, I couldn't learn anything". Demonstrating her ability to exploit her resources, Fabia seeks and finds an intercultural mediation course not to waste her knowledge of her native language, as she says. After doing this "small course of 60 hours, for free", Fabia has the opportunity to follow other courses, also thanks to the relationships she creates with the tutors she meets along her way. In the space of three years, thanks to her determination, she manages to obtain the regional qualification of mediator: "I was really stubborn! I said 'I want to do this!', I searched a lot for cultural mediation courses that provide the regional qualification". Thanks to asking for help from the people she met three years earlier in the centre where she attended her first course, she finds an institution where she does an internship, after which she gets hired. Once employed, Fabia is able to live on her own (away from her family), in a shared flat. This choice seems obvious to her, even though the fact she left home without getting married is a break with the culture of her parents: "I left home, which is... Now I'm thirty and I couldn't stay with them, with the mentality I have, which is a fusion between the Sri Lankan and the Italian one".

Due to her modest salary, Fabia needs to be careful with spending. Trying to find some additional sources of income, she tries to make use of her photographic skills, learns how to construct websites and helps her father with his painting jobs. Her philosophy is that in life you have to "make do":

Photography is something I like. I also do it a bit for work. It's not that I get paid extra but I learn, so I can get involved in other things too. That is making do, in the sense that you do things, you take advantage of things that you didn't think you could use for work.

Taken together, all these activities form a strategy of active use of all possible resources, both skills and social networks. Fabia is very proud of what she has built: "I did it all by myself and now I am happy". In fact, she has been able to confront the interlocking class, gender and ethnic disadvantages thanks to her parents' investment in education and her own development of resourcefulness and reflexivity. Some years after the interview, Fabia got in touch with one of the authors as she wanted to get information on the Master's degree she intended to enrol in. It is another example of her ability to use resources – in this case relational ones – in order to realise her projects. Thank to this encounter, we know that Fabia recently had a baby girl with an Italian partner, with whom she lives happily.

Fabia's story seems to illustrate how an apparently disadvantageous configuration of class, gender and ethnicity/race can be negotiated through reflexivity and agency: Fabia uses her ethnic background as a resource to reach employment in the sector of cultural mediation. Her story also indicates the need to avoid the adoption of essentialist visions, which do not take into account the specificity with which the axes of inequality exert their influence: in the case of Fabia, for example, the value assigned to education could not be understood without considering the specificity of Sri Lankan settlement model in the Neapolitan context, and the repercussions it had in redesigning the gender culture of first generation of migrant mothers.

Tito is a 23-year-old working class man who grows up in the centre of Naples, in a quarter marked by high unemployment and high crime rates where "they shoot like in Wild West". His mother is a housewife and his father makes do as a sound specialist on the Neapolitan popular music scene. As this is a seasonal type of business, the father works only six months a year and the economic situation of the family is difficult. In the family there is a founding story of biographical metamorphosis of Tito's father who went through drug addiction, minor offences and convictions and then changed his completely when he met Tito's mother. This story has been internalised by Tito as a lesson teaching what type of mistakes one needs to avoid. The family is large and united. The moral lesson given to Tito is the one on the importance of family as "the union of the family is the strength", and on dignified life: "we don't care about getting rich, we just want a dignified life". At school Tito has some difficulties and he admits he has never been "a brilliant student". He learns, however, how to use the help of his colleagues and teachers. For Tito, an encounter with a particularly dedicated teacher is life changing:

He told us: 'Guys, I'm here to help you', because my school was practically in Bronx, the ugliest area, and he said 'I came here to help you because only with study, with knowledge and intelligence you can get out of this is a cage'.

The choice of secondary school is difficult and Tito believes that being "a young person, 13 or 14 years old, you can never know what you want to do". This decision is then taken collectively, among significant others. Tito has a close friend, whose father is a teacher in a secondary school with the specialisation of hotel services. This becomes a natural choice as the two boys can commute with the father and approach together the new environment. The school offering some courses in cooking and restaurant management seems right to him also because Tito comes from a family of pizza makers. The new school is in the quarter called "Bronx" and there Tito finds a teacher with a mission of saving young people from disadvantaged neighbourhoods. The message he sends about the importance of education and intelligence is

convincing to Tito and makes him work hard. This charismatic teacher only strengthens the orientation and reflexivity Tito has been already developing at home. Importantly, Tito does not study for “a piece of paper” as for him it is a matter of interest, joy and pride. From the current perspective, he describes schools as a “beautiful experience”.

Tito gets socialised to work very early. Already at the age of 12 or 13, he starts working with his grandfather selling fried pizza in the streets of Naples. Then he works in the pizzeria of his uncle during weekends, and after graduation, he works there full time. His working hours are very long and his only day off is Sunday. Tito not only becomes well qualified to do the job but he also develops his occupational identity as a *pizzaiolo*. He is happy to work and earn his wage and despite the initial opposition from his parents, he contributes to the household expenses. The rest he saves for his travels abroad, which he treats not only as leisure but also as a learning experience. For his future, he has a very clear plan. He wants to open a his own pizzeria, offering jobs also to others and “move economy a bit”. Tito sees his life in the context of broader processes and believes that “only collectively you can solve the problem of the crisis today”.

Tito remembers that when he was younger other boys living in the same neighbourhood (many of them now “lost, in jail or addicted”) tempted him with easy money in illegal activities, saying: “Look, you go to work for 50 euro per week, and 50 euro I get in one day, in an hour”. The counterbalance to this temptation was the very clear message given by his family to do school and to work in order to “understand what sacrifice means”. If we add the intelligence and reflexivity of Tito (keeping his eyes open, thinking about the consequences, recognising his limits and asking for help if needed), we can understand his choices. The story of Tito is a history of difficulties and strategies to overcome them. He has experienced the structural conditioning as he was born in the context of very limited economic resources, surrounded by organised crime. However, the resources he develops and learns how to use on the way are the support offered by his family, early socialisation to work, which then is developed into a work ethos, family-based entrepreneurship and cultural capital he managed to acquire at school. He develops also his personal resources, such as intelligence and reflexivity, which help him to frame his life in the broader social context.

Tito treats school as a source of social and cultural assets. Teachers are his allies, who are meant to help him with the difficulties he experiences. It is also important that Tito is able to ask for help and to make the most of it. His family is the source of identity, reflexivity and orientation. Being socialised from early age to work and to belief that this is the only way to achieve something, he appreciates every little step he makes on his way to adult life, building his skills, making feasible projects and making the most

of the social, economic and cultural resources he has access to. The impact of structural conditioning on his life is undeniable but with the help of his family, teachers and other members of his social network, he learns how to cushion this negative impact.

## **Conclusions**

The combination of intersectional and biographical analysis allowed us to show firstly, the differences in structural conditioning by focusing on multiple positioning being a result of unequal distribution of life chances in the form of opportunities and constraints across the intersecting lines of class, gender and ethnicity/race; and secondly, the ways of dealing with structural conditioning. We conclude that the impact of the intersecting dimensions of class, gender and ethnicity can be mitigated by agential powers of reflexivity, especially when they are combined with tangible enablements (as in case of Fabia) and support of significant others, such as family members and school teachers (both in cases of Fabia and Tito). We do not argue, however, that agency resets structurally defined inequalities but that it may help gaining control over one's life despite the negative impact of power relations. Crucial here is the social dimension of reflexivity and agency. Agency requires reflexivity, but it is difficult to expect that young people become reflexive on their own, without any support from significant others and institutions. Fundamental is also the role of structural opportunities and constraints (Farrugia, 2013). Moreover, when young people are devoid of structural enablements, their reflexivity may be translated into discouragement and frustration (Adams, 2006) rather than agency, as in case of Dario, or a loss of control over their life, described as biographical trajectory of suffering (Riemann & Schütze, 1991), as in case of Amina. When left unsupported, young people, even if they are reflexive, experience difficulties in transforming living intersectionality into doing intersectionality.

What biographical analysis adds to intersectional perspective is the multi-level contextualisation. The questions how structural conditioning operates and how reflexivity and agency are developed (or not) and used (or not) in order to confront the structural powers, can be answered by analysing them in the context of particular life situations and particular sequences of biographical experiences, which viewed comparatively allow us to see the general patterns. What intersectional perspective adds to biographical analysis, on the other hand, is the sensitivity towards the multiple and overlapping systems of inequality and their mutual constitution, which are analysed across cases and contexts.

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