

To cite this article:

Ilaria Pitti (2017) What does being an adult mean? Comparing young people's and adults' representations of adulthood, *Journal of Youth Studies*, 20:9, 1225-1241, DOI: [10.1080/13676261.2017.1317336](https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2017.1317336)

This is a pre-print version. Full text is available here:  
DOI: [10.1080/13676261.2017.1317336](https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2017.1317336)

**What does being an Adult mean?  
Comparing Young People' and Adults' Representations of Adulthood**

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# **What does being an Adult mean? Comparing Young People' and Adults' Representations of Adulthood**

## **Abstract**

This article aims at exploring the different representations young people and adults attribute to the concept of adulthood on a normative, ideal and descriptive level in order to analyse the effects these ideas have on their reciprocal perception and recognition as adults. In so doing, it draws upon data collected through a grounded theory study, which has been conducted in Italy involving young people and adults in semi-structured qualitative interviews. The main results underline a traditional model of adulthood is commonly diffused at the normative and ideal levels of the interviewees' representations, constituting a powerful paradigm of recognition for both the involved generational groups. The article highlights how an 'evaluative' function is added to the notion of adulthood based upon classic transitional markers, which is used by both young people and adults to accuse each other of being 'not mature enough'. The risk that these difficulties of mutual recognition could foster the consolidation of a scenario in which youth transitions to adulthood are turned into a sort of potentially 'endless wandering' is discussed.

Keywords: young people; adults; intergenerational relationships; adulthood; transitions to adulthood; generations; recognition.

## **Introduction**

In a sociological perspective, age can be considered as an individual's 'ascribed characteristic', a feature that contributes at defining who a person is, independently from his will (Merico 2004).

Age holds this property because of the definitions attributed to it by society, which ties to the temporal substratum an array of meanings, expectations of behaviour, and roles (Neugarten and Datan 1978). Indeed, the identification of individuals' ages allows for the definition of their position in relation to historically and socially characterised phases of life (childhood, youth, adulthood, old age), to which are attributed specific actions, values, socially defined and expected norms and roles, as well as resources allocation systems and socialisation models (Riley 1976).

Moreover, the specific society into which an individual is born, grows up and gets old, influences the way age and the different phases of life are considered and interpreted: while, for instance, twenty years always correspond to a precise amount of time composed of a specific number of days, being a twenty years old person has acquired and acquires different meanings in different societies.

Every age bracket features an intrinsic relative nature which cannot be extrapolated from the social and historic scenario it belongs to: age is also a social representation, which, in order to be fully understood, requires deep thought on the social processes that, in every society and historic context, lie underneath its formation and definition (Saraceno 1986). Moreover, it should be also considered that people constantly contribute at shaping how a certain age is actually lived through their daily practices and behaviours, favouring a continuous transformation of the social meanings attributed to

a certain life phase (Côté 2014).

On the basis of these considerations, starting from the '60s, sociology of life course studies have explored the processes of construction and transformation of the social meanings attributed to the different life phases in various societies and historic contexts, considering in particular childhood, adolescence, youth, and old age (Van de Velde 2015).

Nevertheless sociological analyses have just rarely and marginally taken into account the central phase of the life course, that is adulthood (Pilcher *et al.* 2003). Concerning sociology, the 'discovery of adulthood' appears fairly recent and the position of adulthood in the sociological analysis is complex, since it combines centrality and marginality (Burnett 2010).

On the one hand, in sociological analysis the adult is often 'an undefined subject who inhabits a sort of timeless and changeless *plateau* located between the end of the age of evolution and the beginning of the age of involution' (Saraceno 1984, 518).

On the other hand, adult behaviour and adulthood as a stage of life are involved in every sociological analysis since 'even when sociologists are explicitly concerned with childhood, adolescence, youth or old age, adulthood is always present as a point of reference' (Blatterer 2007b, 773).

In this sense, adulthood 'is neglected by sociologists, as well as constituting an ever present *default category* that serves as heuristic background to the analysis of all manner of social action' (Blatterer 2007b, 773; Graubard 1976).

Moving from these premises, in this article I focus my attention on the contemporary social meaning of adulthood and I seek to contribute to its understanding by analysing some specific representations of the adult age.

In particular, I consider the different meanings young people and adults attribute to the concept of adulthood and I explore overlaps and discrepancies between their normative (what adulthood is meant to be), ideal (what adulthood should ideally be) and descriptive (what actually adulthood is in today's society) representations of adulthood.

Looking at the two aforementioned specific groups of the population, I aim to connect the analysis on the social meaning of the adult age to that of intergenerational relationships. Indeed, studying young people's and adults' ideas on adulthood enables the exploration of their mutual perceptions as adults and 'adults-in-becoming' and of their dynamics of reciprocal recognition.

Starting from the idea that to understand youth paths toward adulthood, we must pay attention to their socially determined target - that is to adulthood itself - and to its meaning and its practices in our society (Martelli 2013), I finally discuss the effects the emerging dynamics of mutual perception and recognition could have on youth transitions.

The article draws upon the findings of a three-year doctoral research project based on a grounded theory methodological approach that has seen the involvement of a sample of young people and a sample of 'significant adults' in semi-structured interviews aimed at exploring - among other issues - their ideas of youth and adulthood, their opinions on the other generation, their mutual perceptions, and their relationships.

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

## **Research Background, Aims and Methodology**

The research data considered in this article have been collected in a three-year doctoral research project that aimed at analysing the significance of participation within youth's transition to adulthood from an intergenerational perspective.

The empirical research consisted of a case study conducted in Bologna (Italy) that took place between 2012 and 2013, which has considered young individuals and adults in a series of semi-structured interviews on the topics of citizenship and participation, transition to adulthood, intergenerational relationships and adulthood.

As specified in the introduction, the aim of this article is to focus especially on the aspects of the research that are more directly related to the socially constructed meanings of adulthood and to intergenerational relationships between young people and adults.

In particular, in this paper I intend to explore what representations young individuals and adults have regarding the concept of adulthood, considering overlaps and discrepancies between the normative, ideal, and descriptive level of their representations (Moscovici 2001) and analysing the implications these ideas have on their mutual perception and recognition as adults.

Concerning the research methodology, in relation to the object of analysis and to the related research aims, the study has been carried out following the grounded theory method (Glaser and Strauss 1967) and, more in particular, a constructivist approach to grounded theory (Charmaz 2006).

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

[Table 1. Main characteristics of the youth sample - near here]

[Table 2. Main characteristics of the adult sample - near here]

The concept of 'significant adult' is borrowed from Mead and Stryker's studies (Mead 1967; Strykers 1967) on the 'significant Others' and used to define adults 'who have played a special role in the personal development of young people' (Galbo and Demetrius 1996, 404). In this research, the assessment of the relevance of a given adult for a young individual has been attributed to the young interviewees themselves who have been asked to identify a person they think have played a primary role in their development.

In the first phase of the empirical research, young people have been involved in individual, qualitative, semi-structured interviews, where, besides describing their conditions of life, their socio-economic and cultural context of belongings and their lifestyles, themes such as relationships with adults and the adult generation, representations and practices of adulthood are talked about in depth.

In a second phase of the project, significant adults have been interviewed as well, with the goal of investigating how intergenerational relationships influence youth's representations and practices of adulthood.

The resulting information was integrated with data and materials gathered through analysis of the interviewees' social media profiles (Facebook and Twitter).

The results have been processed and analysed using the data analysis software Nvivo.

## **Portrayals of Adulthood: Young people's and Adults Representations of Adulthood**

### ***Normative and Ideal Representations of Adulthood***

With the goal of investigating the representation of adulthood, interviewees have been asked to think about the meanings that get attributed to adulthood and about its theoretical and pragmatical attributes, trying to distinguish the aforementioned levels of representation: normative, ideal and descriptive.

This analysis has highlighted a convergence between the normative and ideal representations of adulthood, which tend to coincide, and a similitude between the two samples' representations of what an adult is meant to be or should ideally be.

From an overall analysis of the interviews, several themes and ways in which both young individuals and adults conceptualise adulthood emerge, which belong, however, to two main categories: responsibility and independence.

These two attributes appear in relation to both the concept of what adulthood should ideally represent, and in relation to what, in the interviewees' eyes, adults are meant to be and are called to behave like. Hence, under this light, ideal and normative definitions tend to coincide.

Both for young people and adults, the former of these two attributes – responsibility – qualifies as adult an individual who is able to take care of others as well as to take on responsibilities related to others, being relatives, colleagues, fellow citizens or the entire world.

Ideally, it's the same thing [of the normative representation]...being adult is a matter of responsibility, on two levels...It means being able to give attentions to and take care of something or somebody, accomplish a task that has been assigned to you, but also being considered responsible person by the people around you, in other words being considered able to do it. (Diego, Male, 21)

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

In relation to the second attribute – independence -, adulthood is seen as very much different from youth because characterised by an increased autonomy and freedom of choice. According to young interviewees, independence is represented by an array of dynamics and behaviours that span from being able to autonomously decide to get a tattoo 'without the need to justify the decision to my mother' (Giulia, Female, 19), to being able and choose to live alone. Often, young interviewees talk about independence in relation to lifestyles and consumption, as well as to a selection of actions that are encapsulated by economic independence.

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

What an adult is meant to...I think independence and responsibility are the main characteristics of the adult *par excellence*. Adults are asked to be responsible and

independent. If you don't have one of these characteristics you are like a child [...] Independence is being able to take decision, to choose, without the need of asking the consent to someone else. (Carla, Female, 53)

For the purposes of this analysis, it is also interesting to note how the roles connected to these two characteristics coincide, for both young people and adults, with two rather traditional adult roles (Du Bois-Reymond 1998).

In young people's words, the concept of responsibility is frequently associated to the archetypal parental figure, while independence is often understood as a characteristic trait of the worker.

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

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

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

I try to put it simple... There is nothing more responsible and more adult of a parent. Responsibility is to act like your father... or your mother... would. Being an adult is to act like your father or your mother would. (Giovanni, Male, 50)

I think an adult should be an independent person. I mean, I refer not only to an economic independence, which is however important as a pre-condition [...]. I refer to a mental independence, to the freedom to act according to my own ideas. [...] However, as I was saying, to be independent in relation to your actions and choices, you must be independent to a certain degree also on an economic side. Having a job, ideally a job payed enough to not just survive and a stable job that allows you to make project about your future, is necessary for being free in this sense. (Gloria, Female, 42)

The analysis of the data shows thus a substantial equivalence of the ideas of adulthood manifested by young people and adults, both defining it in terms of independence and responsibility, and commonly identifying it with the figures of the parent and the worker.

However, if the opinions expressed by the two generations on the matter do not differ specifically regarding the definition of what an adult should normative and ideally be, the same cannot be stated about their points of view on what an adult *actually is*.

In the following section of the article, the focus of the analysis will hence shift from the exploration of the normative and ideal representations of adulthood towards a more 'descriptive' level concerning the idea of what contemporary adults really are according to the interviewed young people and adults.

### ***What actually is an Adult?***

Concerning the descriptive level or the representations of adulthood, the analysis of interviews conducted with the youth sample points out the widespread idea that the adults of today are different from those of the past, as well as a basically pessimistic interpretation of this transformation.

Young generations believe changes in adulthood practices manifest themselves especially in a loss of adults' competence of being guiding and teaching role models. When asked what, according to them, would be the defining traits that separate young individuals from adults today, many interviewees have answered 'nothing really' or 'maybe just white hair' (Alessandro, Male, 23).

Though discerning that 'not all adults are equal' (Sabrina, Female, 18), young individuals tend to describe the members of the generation that preceded them as individuals who 'do not really behave like adults' (Sabrina, Female, 18), individuals who cannot hence be considered as role models or reference points for their own growth.

I think today's adults do not really behave like adults. I mean, not like an adult should ideally behave. Not all adults are equal, some of them are still, let's say, 'normal' adults [...], but many are no more 'normal' [...] I mean, they act as they were still young, children... which is not completely bad, nor completely good, but it changes everything, makes everything more confused (Sabrina, Female, 18).

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

Adults get often accused of lacking what, historically, has been described as the main characteristic of adults: maturity (Erikson 1959; Saraceno 1984; Burnett 2010) and expressions of adults' immaturity are found on an array of different levels and contexts. In numerous cases their 'excessively youthful' lifestyle is mentioned, specifically in relation to their consumerist or affective choices, which are seen as characteristic of younger cohorts instead, and hence not suitable for adults. Frequently, these are the very attitudes young individual's comments spark from, which underline the older generation's tendency toward a 'youthful adulthood' (Dal Lago and Molinari 2002) that extends beyond the pragmatic behavioural sphere to a deeper identity realm.

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

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

Beyond these considerations on the 'material' aspects of youthful adulthood, some young individuals, most often the older ones of the youth sample, further explain the increasing lack of distinction between youth and adulthood by mentioning the processes responsible for the precarious quality of modern existence, which involve and overwhelm everybody, including adults.

Nowadays everything is so precarious. I find it difficult to talk about adulthood. I

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

These transformations, as effectively summarised by one of the young interviewees, would make contemporary adults 'less adult' (Elena, Female, 23) than the 'real adults' (Elena, Female, 23) which are usually identified with the young individuals' grandparents' generation, while another young individual talks, more specifically, about a 'humanization' of the perception of adulthood, which, in opposition to what used to happen in the past, becomes less distant from youth, but at the same time loses part of its capacity of being a role model for youth itself.

So...there are the 'real adults', that is those of the generation of my grandparents and adults that are 'less adult', like many of the generation of my parents. It is easy to say what are the difference between a young person and my grandfather, while could be more difficult to points out the differences between the same young person and my mother (Elena, Female, 23).

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

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

The analysis of the data seems thus to suggest that young people appear overall aware of how the mutated cultural and material context imposes and allows individuals to achieve adulthood in alternative ways and that 'nobody can be adult like in the old days anymore' (Alessandro, Male, 23).

From their points of view, however, a pessimistic attitude on the matter prevails: the most prevalent idea among young generations is that, when considering pros and cons, the latter is the side that unfortunately is currently winning.

A certain 'bewilderment' emerges among the young interviewees in front of a scenario in which the adults seem to have 'evaporated' and in which the demise of the classic ways of being and becoming adults has not yet been replaced by a clear definition of new 'scripts to adulthood' young generations can refer to.

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

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



Considering their own circumstances of 'adults in transition', this context leads young individuals to believe they have been 'robbed of something'.

If previously they gave you a dress and then closed the closet now they tell you 'you're free to dress like you wish,' only to find out the closet is empty. The only thing that you have earned from this newfound freedom is a key. (Daniela, Female, 24)

As part of the research also the significant adults were asked about their opinions on the characteristics of today's adults. As young people do, also the interviewed adults state that contemporary adults have changed, but contrary to young people they mostly seem to interpret this evolution in positive terms.

On the adults' side the transformation of the characteristics of adulthood is usually welcomed with a sort of optimism, being perceived as a possibility to have a social identity not just confined to the 'adult roles' of parent, partner and worker.

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

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

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

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

Beyond a few exceptions, the interviewed adults describe their generation as still able to be a point of reference for young people, a normative and educational pole in youth's paths of growth. However, they acknowledge that this role is accomplished in different and, according to their opinions, more positive ways with respect to those typical of the past.

Comparing themselves to their parents, the adults emphasise their desire to avoid a distant and authoritarian role in relation to the young people and to their children, aiming to maintain a dialogue as equal as possible.

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

Adults seem therefore to agree on the idea that today adults are different from the past, but they usually propose a positive interpretation of this transformation, which would

enable an open dialogue with the young people.

However their description of themselves, although aimed at highlighting the positive aspects of their way of being adults, interestingly glimpses the same trends of 'juvenilisation' that young people underline in their descriptions of contemporary adults and that they interpret mostly in negative terms.

About my experience as daughter, I can say that my mother and I used to live in two separate worlds. When I was teenager, I would have never used my mother's clothes or talked with her about my love stories, I would have never thought to go to the movie theatre with her, while me and my daughter we do this, we share a lot. (Marta, Female, 42)

Indeed, when asked about the characteristics that would be able to distinguish young people from adults, also the interviewees of the adult sample express some difficulties in identify proper differences that they usually solve making reference to the abstract concept of maturity.

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

Being mature or immature is usually presented as an abstract characteristic, which seems to be acquired 'naturally' and almost suddenly through a broadly outlined path of growth.

However, adults also attach to the abstract concept of 'maturity' very concrete symbols, status, roles, and behaviours referring to traditional markers of adulthood.

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

In line with the findings emerging from the analysis on ideal and normative representations of adulthood, the classic markers of adulthood (and especially the presence or the absence of a stable job and the involvement in a stable relationship) are still commonly used as 'measuring tape' of adulthood.

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

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

I mean, he's a mature guy but I wouldn't say he's already an adult, he doesn't have a real job. (Paola, Female, 52)

These expressions do not seem to account for the intense evolution the context within which young generations are called to manage their transitions has gone through: by labelling some of these behaviours as 'non adult', adults inscribe young individuals into a potentially eternal 'immature' condition, failing to realise these frequently are merely reactions to material and cultural needs imposed by contemporary society.

Indeed, in adults' words, despite being often described as depositary of a positive power of transformation and innovation, young people are commonly presented as immature,

not yet 'ready' and a widespread tendency of adults to outline the generation that follows them as composed by 'mature kids, just not mature enough yet' can be observed.

### **Real Adults: Dynamics of Recognition and Transitions to Adulthood**

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

As for the overlaps and discrepancies between normative, ideal and descriptive representations of adulthood, the analysis of the words of the young and adult interviewees has allowed to underline a detachment between the normative and ideal levels, on the one side, and the descriptive level, on the other side.

Indeed, concerning what an adult should be or is meant to be, both the samples involved in this study conceive adulthood in rather 'traditional' terms, that is referring to a social construction which associates the adult status to classic character traits of the adult (responsibility and independence), which in turn are connected to classic adult roles, rituals, and symbols (such as parenting, marrying, having a stable work).

The characteristics and roles young and adult interviewees connect to adulthood appear to refer to what Lee (2001) has described as a 'standard model of adulthood'; a set of 'repertoires of behaviour' consisting in the traditional markers of the passage to the adult condition (conclusion of the educational path, achievement and consolidation of a stable position in the job market, transition from the 'family of origin' to the 'family of destination' by marriage and parenting).

On the descriptive level, however, both the adults' and young individuals' ideas on what contemporary adulthood actually is acknowledge a profound transformation of the adults, that are distancing themselves from the traditional ways of living adulthood in response or thanks to a changed social scenario.

The permanence of a traditional image of adulthood on the normative-ideal level and the emergence of a 'new adulthood' in the description of the practices suggest that the changes the mutated contemporary social context has implied and allowed on the practices level, have not yet gone hand in hand with an evolution of the 'common sense' in relation to what adults are meant to be or should ideally be for both the groups of interviewees.

For example, considering a classic marker of adulthood such as having a stable job, it can be highlighted that the growing difficulties in reaching a stable occupational status in the job market which has necessarily changed what adults are in the current society has not yet implied a change on either demographic's ideal and normative representations of adulthood, as both are still associating the adult status to the achievement of a stable position in the labour market.

This permanence of traditional ideals and norms of adulthood appears to be crucial to understand the stressed difficulties adults and young individuals experience in recognising each other as 'real adults'.

Indeed, the words of the interviewees suggest that a traditional model of adulthood is today still solid as a normative and ideal level, constituting both a strong ideal, as well as a powerful paradigm of recognition (Montepare and Lachman 1989; James 2011; King 2013): the roles, symbols and behaviours associated to a typically modern social construction of adulthood (Lee 2001; Blatterer 2007) are utilised to identify who is adult and who is not by both the samples.

On the youth side, the detachment of the contemporary adults from the traditional ways of living and acting the adult role is used to accuse the adult generation of being too much childish and unable to constitute an adequate role model to follow.

On the adult side, the missed adoption on the part of young people of the classic behaviours associated to the adult status is instead proposed as a valid reason to not recognise them as 'fully mature'.

In other words, an 'evaluative' function is added to the notion of adulthood based upon classic transitional markers, which is then used by young people and adults to accuse each other of being 'not mature enough'.

In both cases, these judgments do not always take in consideration how much the detachment from the traditional way of being adult is a choice or a reaction to a transformed social context.

All this open some questions also in relation to youth transitions to the adult condition. Youth's transition to adulthood can be seen as the passage between one social age to another, which implies, as any other transition, the abandonment of a starting status and the reaching of a new, definitive status (Côté 2000). This process entails an effort, a striking tension towards the achievement of a goal (Furlong 2009), as well as the comparison between those transitioning and those who have already reached the final destination (Van Genneep 1909; Turner 1969).

In the case of youth's transition to adult life, this comparison involves young individuals and adults. Through this comparison, adults and young individuals commit to a co-definition process of the destination itself and of the requirements that need to be met in order to reach it. In this sense, the transitional process to adulthood assumes necessarily a 'relational character', and can only be understood by considering the mutual relationship between young individuals and adults.

However, the existing relationship between the two generations considered in the research's findings appears to feature an ambivalent tone, at the root of which seems to be the particular social meaning that both young generations and adults attribute to adulthood itself, meant as the final destination of youth's transitions.

Indeed, since the anachronistic traditional representations and markers of adulthood are still used by both the young people and the adults to determine who is an adult and when the adult status can be considered acquired, the achievement of the goal of the transition become harder.

In the tableau outlined by the research' findings, it appears likely not only that young people could experience more and more difficulties in considering today's adults as model of their transitions and in achieving ideal and normative goals that are less and less practicable in contemporary society, but also that they could encounter more and more obstacles in the processes of recognition and self-recognition as adults.

Looking at youth transitions to adulthood from this perspective the detachment between the representations and practices of adulthood highlighted by the words of the interviewees seems to suggest a scenario in which youth transitions to the adult condition are turned into a sort of potentially 'endless wandering'.

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Table 1. Main characteristics of the youth sample

<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>Youth sample's characterisation</b>
Age	The interviewees are aged between 18 and 24. The average age in the youth sample is 21.
Gender	The sample is composed by 16 females and 16 males.
Housing status at the time of the interview	19 interviewees live with their families of origins. 12 young individuals are living with friends and/or roommates. 1 interviewee is living with his partner. None of them is living alone. All those who do not live with their family are renting the house where they stay.
Relational and family status at the time of the interview	15 interviewees consider themselves singles, 8 consider themselves in a stable relationship, 9 say they are living a 'complicate' or 'unstable' relationship. None of the interviewees is married. None of the interviewees has children.
Educational status and level at the time of the interview	Each interviewee has completed the lower secondary school. 27 young individuals have also completed the upper secondary school. 4 young interviewees are still at the upper secondary school, while 16 are university students.

Occupational status at the time of the interview	Considering the 12 young interviewees who consider to have completed their studies, 10 are working and 2 are unemployed. Considering the 20 young people who are still studying, 8 are also working in seasonal or part-time jobs, but their main activity is studying.
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Table 2. Main characteristics of the adult sample.

<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>Adult sample's characterisation</b>
Age	The interviewees are aged between 40 and 60. The average age in the adult sample is 49,5.
Gender	The sample is composed by 7 females and 11 males.
Relationship with the interviewed young individual	In the vast majority of the cases (13 cases on 18) there is a parental relationship between the interviewees. In the remaining 5 cases, the significant adult is another family member (2), a teacher (2) or a sport coach (1).
Housing status at the time of the interview	2 adult interviewees are living alone, 11 are living with their family of destination*, 4 are living with both their family of origins and their family of transition in the same house, 1 is returned living with his family of origins after divorcing. The vast majority of the interviewees (13) own the house where they are living.
Relational and family status at the time of the interview	12 interviewees are married (first or second marriage), 3 interviewees are in a stable cohabitation with their partner**, 3 interviewees are single. 16 out of 18 interviewees have children.
Educational level	5 adult interviewees have a lower secondary school certificate, 7 have obtained a high school diploma and 6 have a university degree.
Occupational status at the time of the interview	Just 1 of the interviewees is unemployed. 15 of them have a stable job, 2 of them a short-term contract. 14 of the interviewees are working full time, 3 are working part-time.

\* Following Fulcher and Scott's distinction (2001), by family of origin I intend the family in which people were born and grew up (parents and siblings), while by family of destination

- I consider the new family they create themselves (e.g. partner and children).
- \*\* The use of the expression of 'stable cohabitation' is due at the current absence of a legal recognition for common law couples in Italy. Just religious and civil marriages are contemplated and fully recognised by the national laws.