

‘Choosing the Gender We Feel We Are Is a Profound Choice’. Gender Identities and Sexual Orientations Among Young People

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Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to analyze the different representations of identity linked to sex, gender and sexual orientation in both academic and scientific debate and in the everyday life of young people. In the first part, three representations are discussed: that of coincidence, that of juxtaposition or denial and, finally, that of relative normality. The second part, on the other hand, presents the results of research on how young people aged between 18 and 33 define and forge their own sexual identity, with particular reference to gender and sexual orientation.

Keywords: gender identity, sexual identity, symbolic interactionism, youth.

1. Introduction

The aim of this contribution is to analyze the different representations of identity linked to sex, gender and sexual orientation in both academic and scientific debate and in the everyday life of young people. In the first part, three theoretical representations are discussed: that of coincidence, that of juxtaposition or denial and, finally, that of relative normality. The second part, on the other hand, presents the results of research on how young people aged between 18 and 33 define and forge their own sexual identity, with particular reference to gender and sexual orientation. In fact, the key to interpretation used to approach the three representations, which can be traced to three broader theoretical approaches – essentialism, individualism and symbolic interactionism –, is how far individual self-determination can go in experiencing and building one’s own gender and sexual orientation. Each of these sets a specific constraint or limit: innate nature, individual creativity and social

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interaction. The empirical research thus aims to observe how young people build and experience these constraints or limits as they develop their gender identity and sexual orientation.

2. First representation: of coincidence

In a nutshell, Carole S. Vance (1989, p. 13) defines essentialism as “a belief that human behavior is “natural”, predetermined by genetic, biological, or physiological mechanism and thus not subject to change; or the notion that human behaviors which show some similarity in form are the same, an expression of an underlying human drive or tendency”. Essentialism particularly characterized the period between 1890 and 1980, and can be defined *sexological* (Gagnon, Parker, 1995). One example is the first systematic study conducted on *passing, Agnes* by Harold Garfinkel (1967), according to whom sex and gender respond to a “natural attitude”: despite Garfinkel’s efforts to overcome the essentialist theory, he remains bound to the dichotomic or binary vision of the sexes and gender. The position of Suzanne J. Kessler and Wendy McKenna, the first to apply ethnomethodology to gender identity studies (1978), while starting from the assumption that “sex is a product of social interaction in everyday life” (p., vii) and that “the reality of gender is a social construction” (p., 6), like Garfinkel, remains anchored to an essentialist vision of sex and gender. In the debate that, in particular, Kessler had with Anne Fausto-Sterling relating to the need, stated by Fausto-Sterling, to adopt the five-sex system (Fausto-Sterling, 1993, 2000)¹ to fully explain sexual multiplicity, overcoming the two-sex system, while sharing the inescapability of having to take into account intersexed people and condemning surgery as a solution, Kessler does not accept having to take the view of the *non-binarity of genders* (1998). In my opinion, the brief reference to this debate allows us to understand the essence of essentialism: only the binarity of sexes, genders and sexual orientations ‘regulates’ or describes the (only two) possibilities – man or woman, male or female, heterosexual or homosexual. According to this statement, *we are born* one or other sex, *we are born* with one or other sexual orientation (DeCecco & Elia, 1993) – the space of individual action in ‘choosing’ which sex to have, which gender to assign ourselves and which sexual orientation is practically non-existent. There is a kind of non-contradiction principle between sex and gender (man = male/woman = female) which sets an immediate identity equation (i.e., there is

¹ In 1993, the sexologist Fausto-Sterling published the controversial study *The five sexes* in which she estimated that around 4% of the world’s population does not fall into the male-female dichotomy as they have sexual characteristics of both sexes.

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no room for any kind of mediation by the individual). Sex, gender and sexual orientation are manifestations of the innate nature of the individual². It is nature that sets the “fundamental differences between the sexuality of women and men, differences that followed upon the natural differences between the feminine and the masculine” (Gagnon & Parker, 1995, p. 7). This scientific discourse on sexuality is therefore dominated by the dichotomous model of sexuality – as Rust underlines (1992a, 1993). The main consequence of the dichotomization of sexual differences and sexual orientation is that “dichotomous sexual orientation also follows from dichotomous sex: if one must be biologically either female or male and choose a sexual partner who must be either female or male, then it follows that the relationship is either other-sexed or same-sexed, that is, heterosexual or homosexual” (Rust, 1992b, p. 286).

Those who do not fall into one of the two categories of sexual orientation as they are bisexual feel that their sexual attraction is not-gender linked (Ross & Paul, 1992). Research on homosexuality, conducted up to the 1980s, in fact tended to confuse bisexuals with homosexuals, placing bisexuality in the category of homosexuality, and this coercion is “a result of the belief that sexual orientations are truly dichotomous” (MacDonald, 1983, p. 99). On the contrary, one of the first research works conducted on female bisexuality (Rust, 1993) demonstrated that, in the social circles to which women belong, the less bisexuality is considered as an authentic form of sexuality, the more trouble bisexual women have in perceiving and choosing bisexuality as a valid, permanent option. All in all, according to this representation of coincidence, no intermediate forms are permitted in sexuality (either you are heterosexual or homosexual) or in sex (either male or female) or forms that go ‘beyond’ distinctions. Without repropounding, here, the whole discussion from its origins (Havelock Ellis, Sigmund Freud, to name but a few), I will merely underline how the dispute between pro- and anti-gay positions is still strongly animated by this. A very interesting example is the recent battle taking shape in the United States between Christian Right discourse and Pro-gay discourse because this battle not only follows the juxtaposition between the essentialist and the constructionist approach to sexuality but, as Shannon Weber brilliantly argues (2012, 2013), it takes place according to highly paradoxical forms. While for the Christian Right, homosexual desire is a sinful, deviant behavior that individuals acquire as they grow, for the Pro-gay discourse, “ gay people are gay because

² One example of the extreme application of this assumption, for example, is the theory of the *un-Africanness of homosexuality*, the most serious implications of which are supporting and fuelling the violent and cruel repression of the LGBT population in the African continent (Armigero & Pannarale, 2021).

they were born that way” (Weber, 2013, p. 116) – that is, you are born gay, you do not become or choose to be so. Indeed, Weber notes, the common rallying cry for members of the LGBTQ community is “We didn’t choose this” (Weber, 2012, p. 680). Weber shows us what ‘hazards’ or paradoxical outcomes the assumption of the essentialist theory, by the LGBTQ population, implies for the LGBTQ population itself. Weber starts from a very simple implicit consideration: if you are born gay, then you do not choose to be gay. That is to say, the power of choice and agency are completely removed and forced out of the processes of forming sexual identities. Therefore, the scholar asks, in a correct yet provocative manner, what about the “voices of queer people who do not identify in biologically determined ways; whose sexual identities have *not* been continuous through life or determined at a very early age”? (p. 680). In Weber’s eyes, in fact, becoming a hegemonic discourse within the LGBTQ population, biological determinism causes “*exclusion* within pro-queer communities” (p. 680). And for Weber, it is the blindspot (‘a hole’) that is created in the pro-gay political discourse in which biological determinism, which has become a *homonormative imperative*, is not able to include “sexual choice and fluidity’ within its observation” (p. 685). The homonormative imperative, and this is the other paradox to which Weber draws attention, is that it favors the Christian Right claims against gays. If, on one hand, the Christian Right antigay movement strongly supports the naturalist conception of gender of the complementarity of male and female roles, on the other hand it admits the power of individual choice only if there is an expression of the will of the individual to be redeemed, i.e., if gay to become heterosexual, or at least to not follow “the willful sinfulness of same-sex desire” (p. 684). In this way, as a whole, Weber notes, by reinforcing the belief in essentialism both inside and outside the LGBTQ community, the idea takes shape that assigning the individual the ability to choose and that of the changeability of their own sexuality is “consistently paired with homophobic attempts to erase same-sex desire and sexual identity from society in favor of heterosexuality” (p. 695). A paradoxical outcome! The solution for overcoming this kind of ‘blindness’, eroding the belief that homosexuality is an innate, permanent quality of gay people, in the LGBTQ movement we have to include all those *other* identities (Sumerau et al., 2019). Also the discussion which, however, here I will not investigate due to reasons of space, concerning a (hypothetical) natural essence of sex is not at all devoid of these ‘battles’. For example, we need only think of all those radical positions according to which de-naturalizing gender and sexuality marks a kind of ‘anathema’ (Case, 2019), an act against nature (Avanza, 2020; Garbagnoli, 2016), the domination of the (presumed) ideology of gender (Grassi, 2019; Prearo, 2020), an illegitimate attempt to limit the freedom to believe, almost dogmatically, in the essentialism of gender and sexuality (Gusmeroli & Trappolin, 2021; Paternotte & Kuhar,

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2018). Yet all this demonstrates how the questions of freedom of the individual and self-determination, on one hand, and the normative expectations of society and the social representations of the various identities linked to sexuality, on the other, are the main issue. To better explain this point, I think it is worth re-reading the proposal made by Anne Phillips (2010) to distinguish four forms of essentialism. I will illustrate them briefly.

The first form of essentialism concerns the attribution of specific characteristics to any belonging to a given category – maternity is that of *all* women, for example (Rossi, 1977; Wilder, 1982). *And what about the experience of transgender men’s pregnancy?* Beyond the medical (Besse et al., 2020) and legal implications (Margaria, 2020), transparenthood leads us to question the (heteronormative and binary) assumptions underlying the identities of father, mother, parent. Remaining within the scope of essentialism, there is no answer to this question. The second form concerns the extension of certain characteristics to a certain category: it is because you are a woman that you are more inclined to care work (Crompton & Lyonette, 2005) or the practices of femininity (Stone, 2004). Or again, it is because you are gay that you like female sports (a belief that is as popular as it is deplorable) and not because, on the other hand, the choice of a given sport by young LGBTs can be strongly influenced by strong cultural homophobia, which again characterizes certain sports, which are therefore rejected by them. Following Phillips’s reasoning, in this second form essentialism leads to the reification or construction of ‘gays’, ‘lesbians’, etc., as *entities*. Also here, there is a naturalization of differences which, in fact, are socially constructed. Often, for those who fight against the stereotypes produced by the two previous forms of essentialism and are victims of this, the irony – as Phillips states (2010, p. 50) – is that, in turn, they refer to a collectivity that “itself seems to presume a unified, perhaps essentialized, group”. And this is the third form of essentialism: the identification of a collectivity as the subject and object of political action (against stereotypes) which, however, implies a very precise identifying essence and which is strengthened in the passage to the fourth and last form of essentialism, that which for Phillips is highly normative: if we belong to a given category, then we cannot question these characteristics without undermining the belonging to that group. If you are gay, you cannot but live in a mish-mash of intimacy, to paraphrase Michael Warner (1999); if you are gay and queer, then you cannot want children, to paraphrase Edelman Lee (2004)³.

The main merit of Phillips’s typology, in my opinion, is that of reminding us that essentialism must always take into account those who, in the attempt to

³ For example, the brilliant article by Cirus Rinaldi (2015) is a successful attempt to de-essentialize essentialist assumptions of masculinity in/of gays.

self-determine, do not agree with it.⁴ The next representation can be taken as an example of the denial of certain *natures or essences*.

3. Second representation: of juxtaposition (or denial)

To introduce this second representation, I would like to refer to some provocations offered by two scholars, Arthur and Marilouise Kroker, in their book, published in 1993, entitled *The last sex. Feminism and outlaw bodies*. Starting from experiments conducted in some laboratories at Ohio University on the DNA of mice in order to create virus-free mice – the transgenic mouse –, the two authors hope that it will be possible to achieve a *transgenic gender, a virus-free gender?* The *transgenic gender* is the *gender beyond gender itself*, it is a non-gender – a gender freed from itself. The Krokeroes write “that’s why we think that the only good sex today is recombinant sex. Sex without origin, localizing gender, or referential signifier [...]. A transgendered sex for an age of transsexuality where sex [...] finally finding its home in a virtual sex”(Kroker & Kroker, 1993, p. 15). The only valid rule is that given by ‘morphing’, understood as “the quick mutation of all the binary signs into their opposites” (p. 15). This is why, in my opinion, this second representation of gender and sexuality can be defined as a representation based upon juxtaposition or denial: that which my gender (and my sex) are is the denial of all that it is not – I am not what I am told I am. “Recombinant sex is the next sex, the last sex” (p. 15): each identity is always the new possible combination, but it is never the last or the definitive as the *other possible combinations in the sense of other possibilities – the otherwise possible – are always accessible* and this ‘regime’ of contingency or of being otherwise (we are what we are not) is the only permissible normative ‘category’. It is not only an exaltation of the infinite possibilities of the practices linked to sexual pleasure (understood by the authors as the ‘art of sex’, ‘an aesthetics of sexual play’, ‘an ecstasy of sexual perversion’ – the sexual lost in the sensual) but recombinant sex or the last sex touches on the material (i.e., physiological and physical) and immaterial (i.e., symbolic) construction of reproduction and sex (as a character we have and are). Material construction or reproduction of life in the sense that new medical and scientific technologies increasingly permit that which *would*

⁴ Personally, I think that the concept of ‘essence’ should be replaced by that of *causal powers* which can be possessed both by a category of persons (by a group) and by morphogenetic individuals, who may be more or less activated and which allow (in the sense that they are both resources and constraints) certain courses of action (Sayer, 1997). Here, however, there is no space for developing this idea, which I merely mention. I therefore refer to Rutzou (2018).

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otherwise not be possible, immaterial construction of life, in the sense that not only a man or a woman can have a child but two men or two women, a man who was a woman with a woman who was a man, or a woman whose partner is a woman who used to be a man, a man whose partner is a man who used to be a woman, etc. – there are innumerable possible combinations. In fact, this relational form of transgender has a specific category of sex – *intersex states*. Intersex states is the *third sex* that the two authors describe thus: “neither male (physically) nor female (genetically) nor their simple reversal, but something else: a virtual sex floating in an elliptical orbit around the planet of gender that it has left behind, finally free of the powerful gravitational pull of the binary signs of the male/female antinomies in the crowded earth scene of gender” (p. 18).

Anyone can ‘belong’ to the third sex, as much gays as lesbians as well as heterosexuals, provided that, and this is the condition, there is no other attempt, on the part of the other, to define, limit or govern my sexual identity which is the ‘nowhere land’ of this virtual sex floating. In the Krokors’ analysis, sexual identity is nothing more than the uninterrupted result of the process of individual agency of which, however, the meaning (justification or legitimization) comes through the denial of that which, at the moment, is not: I am not what the others (society with its categories and distinctions) say that I am – I am that which I am, but I could be otherwise. This is why the third sex is the *next* sex: the sex that it is not currently but which it could be. “Gender is a cult. Membership in gender is not based on informed consent [...]. There is a peer pressure that is being brought to bear on everyone in this cult” (Bell, 1995, p. 111) – is how gender is defined by one of the voices we find in the Krokors’ book.

Two points can be extrapolated from the two authors’ hard (in the sense of radical and provocative) proposal.

The first, *the last sex* is a continuous exhortation to liberation in order to express our sexuality but, in sociological terms, we have to note that quantitative research finds it hard to account for all the fluid and emerging identities (Magliozzi et al., 2016; Nowakowski et al., 2016) and this is why we need *queering* in quantitative research (Sumerau et al., 2019). For example, *asexuality*, today, is a *category* that defines a form of sexuality (Cerankowski & Milks, 2010). The *sexuality measurements* tool is an indicator of this necessary coding. Sumerau and colleagues propose linking the measurement of one’s own sexuality with other characteristics that the partner must or must not have, such as ethnic group (whether my partner must or must not belong to a given ethnic group), religious orientation, gender (if my partner must or must not have a given gender), age, physical appearance, etc. In other words, freeing our sexuality does not coincide with freeing us from our sexuality.

The second point, and linked to the first, which we can find in *The last sex* is that the transgenic gender category leads us to a post-gender sexuality. But what does this mean? As it is not possible to offer an exhaustive and unambiguous answer, and it is even less possible to provide one in this contribution, I shall merely raise a few questions. Among the many terms we can use to define post-gender sexuality we find non-binary: what does it mean to be non-binary? Levi C.R. Hord (2022) offers a very interesting definition starting from a question: *Are we ready for 'sexuality without gender'?*⁵ Hord's answer is built around her experience as a non-binary lesbian woman – and her efforts to keep these three dimensions of her identity bound together⁶. The point of her reasoning that I find interesting for the purpose of my analyses is the definition Hord offers of non-binary identity. On one hand, this ambiguous and problematic term, has no commonly agreed definition; on the other, in the public arena of everyday life, there are more and more expressions of non-binary identity and demands for recognition (from fashion to restrooms to alias careers in schools and universities). For Hord, the non-binary individual is the person who criticizes “the very terms through which we understand gender identity” (p. 625). Non-binarity represents not so much a specific identity of the person but rather “a framing ideology” (p. 625). Non-binarity “has no prescriptive content, no prescriptive behaviors or aesthetic” (p. 625). The non-binary subject “is difficult to pin down precisely because it does not rest on established correspondences between sex, gender, and expression, nor does it rest on established narrative of their rejection” (p. 65). Non-binarity therefore indicates only the exclusion of the binary system in order to include, on the other hand, all the other expressions of gender: “what *non-binary* is exclusive to, then, is an existing ideology of gender: that which insists not only on linking biological sex and gender, but also precipitates the linking of gender and appearance, descriptions and existence” (p. 626). The non-binary system promotes the juxtaposition to all other forms of social and cultural pre-determinism of forms of gender identity, on the other hand favoring *social and individual* creativity. One example can be found in the study by Vijlbrief et al. (2020). In the construction of one's own non-binary identity, terms such as ‘genderqueer’ or ‘gender non-binary’ are an important aid for defining one's own identity, thus developing a greater sense of self-trust, stability and

⁵ Hord reformulates the title of the famous article published in 1994 by Bidy Martin as a question. The article reveals that sexualities without gender pose a huge question to feminism and its “universal category of ‘women’– defined as other than men – the subject of feminism” (Martin, 1994, p. 105).

⁶ And that, like Hord (2022, p. 627) herself explains, “the non-binary lesbian has not yet been discussed in academic work”.

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belonging to a social group formed of other people with whom we can share the same experience, but this is not a question of belonging to the ‘third gender’ category. On the contrary, along with others, they experiment “a continuous searching and switching of identities, identifying as more male or more female, as neither of the two or a mixture of both, depending on the context” (p. 102). De/re-constructing the boundaries of gender, they not only experience forms of social exclusion but also social inclusion and belonging.

This second representation of juxtaposition focuses on the creativity of the individual, the power of agency, the anarchic power and resistance to pre-ordered forms that is innate in personal creativity (Carr, 1999). We must *resist* – this is the exhortation which, I believe, can be gleaned from the Krokors’ contribution – the pressure exerted *by others, by Society*, to mold us according to the (binary) gender cult to become, on the other hand, *the last sex*, that is, to *collectively* overcome all that links us to (binary) gender. Undoubtedly, the power of individual agency – extremely reduced in the first representation – is amplified here to excess, then standing *against* the social as an enemy force. The third and final representation, on the other hand, in my opinion, has the merit of overcoming this *negative* vision of the social.

4. Third representation: of relative normality

The authors to whom I attribute a kind of ‘paternity’ of this third representation, according to the meaning that I give it, are John H. Gagnon and William Simon. Although they are recognized as those who outlined the highly original theory of sexual scripts, here my interest lies above all in their overall theoretical proposal rather than their ‘conceptual apparatus’ of investigation of the sexual act (Simon, 1999, p. 127), sexual scripts. Indeed, starting from the Seventies, Gagnon and Simon developed the first real sociological theory of sexuality, considering themselves as ‘truly the first sociologists to radically question the biologism, the naturalism and the essentialism that pervaded most existing research and study’ (Plummer, 2001, p. 131). Theirs is a theory with simple arguments, yet equally with broad and complicated implications⁷. While Gagnon and Simon’s theory did not receive the recognition it deserved, this is due to the fact that, at academic level and in terms of public debate, other voices gained the upper hand – Foucault, post-structuralism, the heterogeneous voices of the queer and feminism theories. After all, Gagnon and Simon were interested precisely in this aspect of sexuality that the other referred approaches

⁷ Not being able here to offer an exhaustive presentation of all of Gagnon and Simon’s theory, I refer to the rigorous and rich essay by Rinaldi (2017).

ignored: “ordinary people and everyday tasks [...]. It’s the story of everyday life. We were in fact enemies of the traditions that stressed the power of the sexual for purposes of social change or appealing to sexuality as a source of personal or political redemption, or as the primary terrain of social meaning” (Gagnon, 2004, p. 280). Gagnon and Simon are not interested in developing a totalizing theory of sexuality (explaining every aspect of sexual behavior) or a theory of totalizing sexuality (making sexuality a “powerful psychosexual drive as a fixed biological attribute” and the priority element in causal explanation) (Gagnon & Simon, 2014, p. 6). While placed within social constructionism, Gagnon and Simon have always considered themselves distant from that of the German Schutzian tradition, as well as that of Bergerian-Luckmanian tradition, instead embracing the US-style pragmatic constructionism. Particularly, Kenneth Burke and the Chicago School are the two main theoretical frameworks in which Gagnon and Simon worked. Wanting to study the sexuality of ordinary people has a number of implications. First of all, it means that sexuality, in Gagnon and Simon, is no longer an ‘objet tabou’ (Plummer, 2010, p. 169), and no longer a force of mere repression – à la Foucault. The second implication derives from this first: following Gagnon and Simon means assuming that sexuality is not something extraordinary offered from above (given to man by Nature), something unchangeable and permanent; that transcendental aura is removed from sexuality (coming from a ‘subject’ other than me, whether Nature or Society) that has it equipped with its own specific, universal and fixed *essence* (and also specific, depending on ‘belief’: the complementarity of the sexes, etc.) “over time and across cultures” (DeLamater & Hyde, 1998, 16). On the contrary, relating sexuality to everyday life means placing it in contingent, relative/relational forms, which it can take on in the space and time of interactions (Gagnon, 2004, p. 133). A third implication therefore concerns, as Jackson and Scott observe (2010), a positive conceptualization of the social: the social is not only ‘normative’ or regulatory or repressive – a constraint for the person – but is also *producing sexualities* through the mediation of individual agency. The three levels through which Gagnon and Simon describe the social – cultural scenarios, interpersonal scripts e intrapsychic scripts – tell us precisely this: “sexuality for humans [...] is social and symbolic through and through” (Plummer, 1996, p. xi). This is why Rinaldi and Scarcelli (2016, p. 22) are right when they condense the whole scope of Gagnon and Simon’s theory in this way: we are not *merely* sexual, but rather *we become sexual*: we become male or female, male and female, a bit male and a bit female, or neither of the two, heterosexual or gay, or lesbian, or...but also a bit gay and a bit pansexual, for example...all in all, we become that sexual identity that best expresses who we are in a given context (Guizzardi, 2022) – and we become what we want to be

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not in a single step. The social element is the script⁸ – all sexuality is forged by scripts, not only the perverse, as on the other hand Freud stated, for whom normal sexuality is the result of sexual development guided by natural impulses (Gagnon & Simon, 2014). Our being born sexual is transformed into ‘becoming sexual’ thanks to scripts – thanks to the three dimensions of the social (culture, inter-subjective interaction, reflexivity or interior conversation) – because “scripts are involved in learning the meaning of internal states, organizing the sequences of specifically sexual acts, decoding novel situations, setting the limits of sexual responses and linking meanings from non-sexual aspects of life to specifically sexual experiences” (p. 17).

The script therefore allows the individual to decipher and understand the context, a kind of hermeneutic task to which the individual subjects the social situation in which they find themselves acting. The three different analytically and temporally distinct levels of scripting allow us to see sexuality as something cultural, inter-subjective and personal (understood as identity) *morphogenetic* – something which while ‘crystallizable’ in forms or products or norms or customs or habits or categories or identities or ideas, etc. is in any case contingent as there is no optimal (i.e., *normal*) ‘form’ to be definitively achieved. Who is the real or normal heterosexual (Fidolini, 2019)? Who is the real or normal gay (Schwartz, 2007; Whittier & Melendez, 2004)? Who is the real or normal male sex worker (Bacio & Rinaldi, 2022)? Every truth, that is, all that can be examined “can only be understood in terms of individuals situated in specific points of time and social space: individuals with and within history” (Simon, 1996, p. 30). The point I wish to underline here, before concluding this first part, is that the merit of Gagnon and Simon, in my opinion, lies in the fact that they propose leaving aside a textualist/structuralist concept of gender in favor of a concept of gender as *performance* for which, however, those textual/cultural/structural elements are integrated both as resources and as constraints – as a precondition – of performance.

⁸ Vulca Fidolini (2019) suggests applying scripts not only to sexual practice as it is assumed as an analytical operator able to narrate the persons’ interior conversation in relation to their identity linked to gender which is reflected in the interpersonal dimension and in their position within a broader scenario of cultural and social meanings. In fact, I refer to the recent works by Petra Nordqvist (2021) for an original application of Gagnon and Simon’s theory to reproductive storytelling in families in which recourse was made to sperm or embryo donors.

5. Gender identity and sexual orientation among young people

5.1 The unit of analysis

In the previous pages, I have tried to account for the theoretical debate on self-determination of one's own gender identity and sexual orientation. Now, continuing the article, through the analysis of the interviews, I will seek to shed light on the representations underlying how young people develop their own sexual identity, linked to sex, gender and sexual orientation. The young people or emerging adults (Arnett, 2004) making up the unit of analysis on which the research was conducted are aged between 18 and 33, of both sexes and with a range of sexual orientations (i.e. the definition of sexual orientation expressed by each person interviewed). The main pertinent characteristics for the discussion here are given in table 1. The interviewees are exclusively students enrolled in university courses (only one interviewee, at the time of the interview, had completed their degree and was working) and most of them come from Northern Italy. The interviews were conducted between late 2020 and spring 2021.

TABLE 1. Unit of analysis of the research, by age, sex and sexual orientation.

	Age	Gender	Sexual orientation
Federica	27	Female	Heterosexual
Giusi	26	Male	Homosexual
Gregorio	21	Male	Heterosexual
Claudia	21	Female	Heterosexual
Valentina	21	Female	Heterosexual
Giovanna	21	Female	Heterosexual
Agnese	20	Female	Bisexual/Queer
Matteo	21	Male	Gay
Giulietta	20	Female	Lesbian
Piera	20	Female	Homosexual in reflection
Elisabetta	22	Female	Heterosexual
Susanna	21	Female	Heterosexual
Greta	22	Female	Homosexual
Gabriele	21	Male	Heterosexual
Lucia	21	Female	Bisexual
Roberta	22	Female	Heterosexual
Simona	23	Female	Queer
Marcello	25	Male	Gay
Marica	19	Female	Heterosexual
Davide	29	Male	Heterosexual fluid
Daniela	33	Female	Fluid
Camilla	25	No gender non-binary	Lesbian
Margherita	20	Female	Heterosexual
Martina	27	Female	Bisexual
Linda	22	Female	Bisexual
Antonello	24	Male	Bisexual

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The semi-structured interviews lasted an average of 150 minutes and were conducted using VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) technologies (Skype and Teams) due to the restrictions linked to the Covid-19 pandemic, and were audio-recorded with the informed consent of the interviewees. The group was formed in two ways: initially, by disseminating the request for participation in the interviews to hundreds of students attending various university courses at the University of Bologna to recruit the ‘first’ people, and then the sample was extended *avalanche-style* thanks to the contacts indicated, case by case, by the persons interviewed.

5.2 “Gender is something you feel inside”

The interviewees were asked to offer their own personal definition of gender and indicate their own gender identity.

The various representations of what gender is, as described by these young people, can be roughly separated into groups. Let’s read some of the first:

Let me think...If I had to explain to a child what gender is, I would say it’s something you feel inside. I don’t even think you can explain it in words. It’s something inborn, it’s the way you see yourself, the way you feel comfortable with yourself (*Gabriele*).

For me, nothing is purely male or purely female. Having a gender that can change over time (*Matteo*).

It’s how a person feels, how they identify themselves, it’s something personal, independent of their sex (*Gregorio*).

The personal sense of self and the practice of this personal sense of self (*Federica*).

It’s the way a person feels – male or female or non-binary (*Linda*).

It’s your own way of being, feeling, relating to others, it keeps you together and unites the body to the identity and your relations with other people (*Simona*).

There aren’t two genders, you can’t quantify them. Gender is how a person presents themselves as they wish (*Claudia*).

It’s the way a person feels, they can feel male or female, a bit of one and the other, or neither of the two (*Giulietta*).

It is an identity in which you and only you identify, with the special features that you use to define yourself and through which you decide to appear (*Susanna*).

Nothing specifically characterizes the male or female gender because it depends on how a person feels they are inside (*Roberta*).

For me, it's not even how you are but how you feel. Gender is how you feel that you fall within a male or female pattern, or if you feel that you don't fall in either pattern. Gender is much more fluid (*Margherita*).

And some of the second:

A set of cultural factors that also reflects on our posture in a social context. Sometimes I feel the need to deconstruct masculinity, it depends on the contexts (*Giusi*).

Gender is simply a concept created to facilitate bureaucracy; gender serves no purpose other than to define your outward appearance only in physical terms, and says absolutely nothing about you. I can't see the point of gender, in fact having used it has led us, today, to have many problems, discovering that many other genders exist, not only male and female (*Marcello*).

Genders are all those social constructs, those things in which we identify ourselves and which make us say we are male or females or something else (*Agnese*).

It is a social construction which, unfortunately, is like that, and is used to foster the mental economy. There is nothing that characterizes male and female. If it was up to me, I would eliminate it: gender should be abolished (*Camilla*).

In my opinion, there are two very different, almost opposite, representations of gender. For the first, gender is *something that refers entirely to the personal sphere, something extremely fluid and undefinable – something contingent in time and space – something expressive*; for the second, gender is a *social construct, an alienating device of power* and which should be *de-constructed if not completely abolished*. While the interviewees in the first group refer more to the inter-subjective and personal dimension of gender, those in the second group see gender from a critical perspective, underlining especially the 'structural' elements (Risman, 2004) when, on the other hand, for them, gender is not 'definable' because it does not exist (Marcello, Agnese, Camilla) or must be constantly de-constructed (Giusi). Furthermore, these two representations are also reflected in the ways in which the young people studied construct their own gender identity.

For young people falling in the first group, gender is something that you *feel inside, something profoundly personal which emerges, becoming definable and nameable as you grow up*. At the same time, however, it is not possible, for these young people, to define the essence of (their own) gender, that which is (their) female or (their) male. Undoubtedly, sex is indicated as an objective element but is not in itself sufficient. The same goes for the body: it is not the physical characteristics (beard, physical strength, long hair, etc.) that, alone, are enough

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to identify oneself with one gender or the other. Not even the aspects of personality and character can perform the function of gender identification (courage and sweetness) (Chaplin, 2015). Finally, it is not gender practices (games, clothes, certain attitudes, etc.) which, alone are sufficient for being one or the other gender:

Biologically, I am female, and I also recognize this in the personal identity that I feel I have (*Federica*).

I am male because objectively I am male, and I start from this assumption, but it is an interior issue. As a male, I do nothing, or rather I don't do things because I am male but because I like doing them, that's it. Good grief! In many of the things I do, I don't feel male according to the classical idea of a male. I really like wearing second-hand, vintage clothes from the '80s and '90s, I pay attention to how I dress and people often ask me, "Are you gay?". I hate football (*Gabriele*).

I feel good, great, in the female gender, but with the characteristics I give it. My gender mustn't be made of characteristics or things that society says are or must be female. I like things that are catalogued as reserved for males, but that I relate to. I relate to the female gender but for how I think female is. My femininity is what I put into everything I do, my being Susanna, but I couldn't say anything precise. The same things that for me are female, can be said by another person, who on the contrary identifies with the male gender or something else (*Susanna*).

Gender is therefore fluid and undefinable both for these reasons and because it can change over time and space. This contingency has two different but interrelated aspects: the first relates to the social expectations linked to gender, and the second to personal gender identity. For example, the clothing worn by girls can be both a resource to underline their own femininity and a constraint or obligation to be respected for certain occasions to which, in some cases, they comply with or not. I think that Simona's case is particularly explanatory. Simona is a twenty-three-year-old female who defines herself queer. Simona says that she has always felt 'more woman than female gender', even though 'I often alternate behavior that is socially defined as female with that defined as male', and she feels a woman "because of my woman's body, which I like, because I feel good in my woman's body [...] I like being part of the female gender community, of women's struggles in history. I feel woman because intimately I feel very much a woman". Simona attributes a kind of 'essence' to being a woman deriving from a genealogical bond with the group 'women' (Stone, 2004) but, as she is *queer*, she also feels the need to point out this aspect of her identity. To do this, Simona tells us, at a wedding she was going to with her girlfriend, she was going to wear a very masculine jacket and

trouser suit. By hiding and masculinizing that female body that Simona says she has always felt good in and which she likes, she can confirm her identity as a queer woman: 'I am a woman precisely because I seem male'.

The story of Piera, on the other hand, clarifies the second point – gender identity that changes over time. Piera states that, although she has always felt to be 'of female gender', with great satisfaction, "I wonder if effectively I feel that I am part of the female gender or not. Piera explains: "but I certainly don't feel I am part of the male gender. Perhaps the greatest concern is: but do I feel that I am part of the female gender? I am thinking about the possibility of identifying myself in something non-binary". This is why, sometimes, Piera feels that she does not want to have certain female elements such as breasts, and when she has this uncomfortable feeling, then, wishing that people could not see her breasts, she wears large shirts; when, on the other hand, she is perfectly at ease with her female being, then Piera likes having breasts and 'wants them to be seen', by wearing feminine clothes that emphasize her body. Like the other interviewees, Piera therefore uses the set of both personal characters and elements (appearance, physical characteristics, etc.) and structural elements (social expectations associated with gender), to express *her own gender, her own identity linked to the person she wants to be*.

Now let's look at the second group, including those who see gender as a social construct, an alienating and negative device. To understand the peculiarities of this category, I will offer two short biographies of Giusi and Camilla. Giusi is a gay man who has always felt good about being male but, feeling it necessary to *deconstruct masculinity* in the light of his personal biography and emotional reflexivity (Waling, 2019), states that: "I play a lot with my name, which is misleading. When I send an e-mail, I never specify that I am male. At work and in non-direct contacts, I am mistaken for a woman, but it doesn't bother me. I like playing on this ambiguity". In the family, however, Giusi is well aware of playing the role of "man of the house" but without getting annoyed at this, it is not a matter of "patriarchal authority" but simply "doing men's things, like going to the dump or driving" because, as Giusi explains, he is the only male in a family of women (his mother, grandmother, great-grandmother and aunt). Camilla is the only person in the unit of analysis of this research who states she is non-binary:

Camilla: my girlfriend is very feminine; on the other hand, in the past couple of years, my own exterior appearance has not been in line with either the female or male concept. My appearance is my gender. But I can't really explain it. I haven't defined myself as a man or a woman for five years. I simply feel freer by showing and defining myself like that. Until I was twenty,

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I was a proper girl, I wore heels, make-up and did things which at that time felt right, but they didn't make me feel good.

Interviewer: Then, at twenty, you said “I am neither male nor female”.

Camilla: Exactly! I'm a strawberry! I'm something else, a mixture, I take a bit from here, a bit from there, how I feel when I wake up in the morning.

In fact, this gender fluidity is something seen in other interviewees, described in different ways because it is indicated as an ‘essence’ of gender, but only Camilla defines herself as non-binary. What emerges, in my opinion, from the people interviewed is a transversal and clear critical “positioning” towards what is – to cite an expression by Stevi Jackson (2006) – regulated on both side of prescribed heterosexuality, that is, sexuality and gender. Gender as *the division and distinction* by society that imposes the masculine/feminine-male/female differentiation is the concept of gender that these young people criticize and reject. For these young people, gender cannot catalogue, distinguish, differentiate or impose hierarchies, because their gender identity is their own personal way of being masculine and/or feminine or something other than masculine and feminine, not by juxtaposition. Gender cannot be a differential (Grassi, 2019) or a ‘generator’ of asymmetries; gender identity cannot be built through the socialization to difference or the juxtaposition to the other (gender) (Ciccone, 2012) – in other words, ‘we need to begin to create a culture of equality that doesn't dichotomize the world into the masculine and the feminine’ (Risman et al., 2022, p. 27).

5.3 “But am I really just this?”

As we can clearly see in the table, the unit of analysis of this research consists of 12 heterosexual and 14 non-heterosexual individuals. However, among the heterosexual individuals, some have had very brief and occasional homosexual experiences, and, among the non-heterosexuals, some talk of a heterosexual past, or simply state during the interview that they are homosexual because they are in a relationship with a person of the same sex, while not excluding a heterosexual ‘future’. All in all, beyond these categories, reality is far more ‘variegated’ or ‘complex’. The question in the title of this paragraph that Gabriele asked himself is common to all the trajectories of our interviewees or, to use the words of Rinaldi (2017), their passage from being born sexual to becoming sexual. Now I will continue to analyze the stories of the individuals who state they are heterosexual and will then move on to those who are non-heterosexual.

I will start with two stories, of Gabriele and Susanna:

I have never said “yes, I am a heterosexual male”, as it’s something innate, I have never said at any given time “yes, I am male”. But I have wondered: “but is this really me?” and I mean this not in terms of gender but sexual orientation. I have never said ‘yes, I am straight’ only because that’s what I felt inside. But there was a moment when I said: “maybe, I am not something else because I have never felt the curiosity”. At a party or two I did kiss the odd boy, because I let myself go, but it was never anything serious. I say I am straight, but as I’ve never been all the way with another boy then I can never say that I am 100% straight because every now and again that curiosity comes out (*Gabriele*).

When I told you I am straight, I’m straight because I have always been straight, but not if in future I meet the love of my life, who may be a woman. I am straight because that’s how I am now (*Susanna*).

Among the individuals who state they are heterosexual, it is therefore possible to note a different processing over time of the ‘heterosexual nature’ that was always taken for granted. For example, we can identify three different degrees of ‘certainty’ or ‘belief in the naturalness’ of their own heterosexuality. Giovanna or Valentina or Gregorio have always been heterosexual and have never felt the need to question their own sexual orientation although, as in the case of Giovanna and Valentina, they have been courted by lesbians, or “Of course, I have some good friends and we hug and kiss each other, that’s what girls do. But this has never made me doubt my sexual orientation” (*Giovanna*). For others, on the other hand, there have been moments, in post-adolescence, in which their own heterosexuality has been doubted especially as a result of discussions with friends or when making new ones, but was then later confirmed. Finally, for some, the *relativity* of their own heterosexuality is not only due to curiosity as a mere expression of a spur-of-the-moment, superficial whim but, on the contrary, as a more profound and critical reflection on their own identity – we cannot be 100% straight. Gabriele does not want to identify as either strictly heterosexual or strictly homosexual (Ward, 2015) but wants his (hetero/homo)sexual identity to relate to (hetero/homo)sexual practices of a given time (Kuperberg & Walker, 2018): his own heterosexuality must be confirmed or, on the contrary, it is susceptible to being otherwise. The definition given by Davide to his own orientation explains this point very well: ‘heterosexual/fluid’ as Davide himself explains,

I have tried both, with men and women. Fluid is my orientation. I am attracted to the person; the body comes afterwards. For my whole adolescence and into early adulthood, straight. Then, as I grew, I began to explore my new tendencies; I tried, and I discovered that there is nothing

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abnormal, that it is a part of my identity that I want to experience today, perhaps a phase, or perhaps not. But it is a phase I want to experience.

Let’s read some of the stories of the young people in the second group – the non-heterosexuals:

I have always rather doubted my sexual orientation, I don’t exclude anything. But I don’t need to identify myself in one sexual orientation or another, it’s not important to me. I am attracted to both males and females. So far, I have only had relations with boys, but I also am also equally attracted to girls (*Agnese*).

As I grew up, I realized that many of the things I did or watched when I was younger were due to the fact of being bisexual. I began to be aware of my tastes in 2016, when a girl, who is now my friend, came onto me and we hitched up. I said: “Oh well, perhaps I like it, let’s give it a try”. Before her, I had already had a boyfriend, and after her I had another one, and now I have a girlfriend (*Linda*).

I am homosexual in reflection; I don’t define myself as a lesbian because that term gets on my nerves. It’s a term I use to joke with my friends, but it does annoy me a bit. Perhaps because when I was young, I asked my mum what it meant and she told me it was a bad word. Given that the meaning of lesbian is “homosexual”, then I prefer to use the term homosexual. “In reflection” because in the past few years I have begun to realize that I don’t want to exclude other possibilities, even though I haven’t had experiences with girls yet, only with boys (*Piera*).

I feel queer because it allows me to avoid definition, to not label myself. Today, at the moment, I feel lesbian. But in the past, I have been attracted to men and I know that it could happen again in future, as it’s already happened in the past (*Simona*).

I have always been lesbian. From 14 to 18 I had a long relationship with a boy but, when we split up, I devoted my life to women (*Camilla*).

I only discovered I was lesbian recently. I was in my final year at high school, and a friend asked me jokingly, “you’re not lesbian, are you?”. I had never had a boyfriend, I might say “yes, he’s cute”, but nothing more. I never wondered or realized I was attracted to girls. But that joke set off a kind of crisis of faith. I tried to understand this. A few months later, I concluded that I was attracted to girls, but I didn’t know if only to girls or also to boys. And then I realized: only to girls. And now I have a girlfriend (*Giulietta*).

Up to the end of high school, I took my heterosexuality for granted, it was natural. Then I came to university in Bologna, and I thought about it, and my answer was: “No, I am absolutely heterosexual”. I had been in a long relationship with a boy [...]. And then we split up. I had taken my heterosexuality for granted, until I met my current girlfriend. At first, I said:

“I’m heterosexual, but you”, meaning “I’m with you because you’re you, but I’m still heterosexual”. Then I normalized this thing (*Martina*).

at 15, I was texting with some female friends. I hadn’t even thought about saying it before. Perhaps after I was 18, I told myself, but I wasn’t worried. Then, when I said it for the first time, I was shaking, but after that I told everyone, even people I didn’t know (*Matteo*).

I had homosexual experiences, and I quite enjoyed it, and tried again. Yes, I am bisexual when that’s what I want at that time. But my being bisexual is something more sexual than identifying (*Antonello*).

In contrast to the previous heterosexual peers, these non-heterosexual young people are less inclined to talk of an innate non-heterosexuality (Corbisiero & Monaco, 2021). Some discovered that they were homosexual (gay or lesbian) only at university, after leaving a highly heterosexual environment in which homosexuality was not contemplated or after encountering ‘other sexual orientations’, some believed that their own homosexuality was just a passing phase, some began to contemplate the possibility of being homosexual through friends (a joke, an exchange of messages, etc.); some discovered they were lesbian and define themselves in this way only after the end of a long heterosexual relationship and some, on the other hand, needed more time to define themselves in this way; some do not want to define themselves lesbian but homosexual, due to the negative connotation of the term to which they were accustomed as children, and do not exclude the idea of being attracted to males; some are bisexual ‘now’ because they are with a girl, but could be otherwise; some are bisexual only within the secrecy of a homosexual relationship. Basically, if every story is a kind of ‘representation’ of the category of sexual orientation to which they feel they belong and a re-formulation of the definition itself, also for this group, in any case, the characteristic shared by these various biographies, just like the previous group, is the reflexive contingency or relativity but with a partly different meaning, which is linked to the experience of coming out. Where coming out has met with, or continues to meet with, strong resistance in the family and the personal difficulty in accepting oneself is very hard, the possibility or becoming heterosexual again is used strategically as a ‘hope for normality and social acceptance’. Greta’s story reveals precisely this:

I had a lot of trouble accepting myself, first of all. My first doubts came at middle school. But I managed to crush the thought and hide it away in a corner of my mind. Then, at high school, because everyone had a boyfriend, I made more effort to fit in with the general thought, and I too flirted with the boys, it cost me a lot to say “that boy is really hot”. Until, after high school, I went to England to learn English, as an au pair in a family. There I

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met loads of people from all over the world. My perception of sexuality has changed hugely: there was much more freedom and far fewer stereotypes. There, I began to think, working on that idea that I had put to one side. Towards the end of 2019, I couldn't keep this thing hidden any more, and I said to myself: “Greta, you have to face up to this fact”. I was frightened of everything being homosexual represented, how it would have influenced my life, from saying that perhaps I won't be able to give my parents grandchildren to knowing that people would start to see me differently.

Antonello's story, on the other hand, offers a different use of his own heterosexuality:

There is public life and private life. In public, nobody knows I'm bisexual. I always wear a mask, the image of the strong, virile lifeguard who sleeps around. I never feel open, it's always a matter of image. I have always wanted to give an image of me not as bisexual but as a straight male, this is what we want to see in society. And I'm fine with my cliché as a heterosexual lifeguard, otherwise I would have said so immediately, I would have come out. But I don't say anything, as I'm a bit afraid of losing face, and a bit because I tell who I want to.

In social spheres where there is a strong expectation of confirming the heteronormative and heterosexual order, among us young people the belief of having to develop an identity linked to sexual orientation and gender within the binary realm of heterosexuality (Adams et al., 2014) and an essentialist logic of genders (Pollitt et al., 2021) can be equally strong. Undoubtedly, some strategies adopted by some of these young people foster the re-production of the heteronormative order, to the detriment of an order that overcomes it (Marchia & Sommer, 2019).

6. Conclusions

The guiding thread of this contribution was how to link the self-determination of the individual, their gender identity and sexual orientation as well as the expressions and practices and the 'boundary' that this power cannot overcome. In strictly theoretical terms, the first part is developed seeking to offer three broad representations relating to gender identity and sexual orientation. This boundary can be Nature, assumed as the *essence* of that which is masculine and feminine, heterosexuality and homosexuality, etc. – the first representation. Or, there is no limit except the very power of individual *free* agency (the second representation). Finally, the third representation, rather than

offering a pre-determined form of sexuality – understood as the identity of the individual, their gender, sex and sexual orientation – which *informs* (shapes) individuals, states that the individual becomes sexual (in this sense) through scripts adopted in various *social contexts*.

In the second part, I sought to highlight the representations young people process concerning their (own) gender and sexual orientation. *Essence (or nature), freedom* and *society* – the three elements that, respectively, characterize each of the three representations described in the first part – how do the young people link these together? I would like to underline four key points which, in my opinion, emerged. The first concerns the concept of *nature* that the young interviewees assign as much to their (own) gender as to their sexual orientation. Gender is natural not because it has a nature that we feel we must conform to. Gender is natural in the sense that it is human (precisely and inalienably of the human being) which belongs to that most profound sphere of the primordial feelings of the individual of being happy with themselves, developing harmoniously in the light of who they want to be. And this is when being of one gender or another, or both or neither of the two, is not a ‘congenital’ state received once and for all but it is a personal condition that is built over time, which can vary, a condition of becoming a person, the main rule of which is that it is *expressive* – in the sense that it is consistent with the person they want to be – and *instrumental* – in the sense that it makes them feel comfortable with themselves. Sexual orientation is also described as a condition, something that is fluid and changing – although to different degrees among the various interviewees. At the same time, coming to the second point, precisely because gender is this inalienable human characteristic, it cannot but be a free expression or, at least, the search for free expression in the expressive sense mentioned above. Even among the young people who think that gender should be abolished as it is an alienating social construct, in fact, what, in their opinion, should be deconstructed is the binary of genders, the models imposed by heterosexuality, homosexuality, masculinity. This leads me to the third point. The gender identity of the young people interviewed seems to be the result of a profound and continuing reflexive interior conversation through which their male or female ‘nature’ is de/reconstructed in the light of their (more) fundamental attention to who they want to be. The various ‘strategies or scripts adopted by the young people depend on the – more or less formal, more or less familiar – social context, and reflect their preoccupation with being believed by others for what they want to be.

Finally, I would like to conclude by noting what Judith Lorber defines the paradox of contemporary gender (Lorber, 2021). While on one hand the young interviewees criticize and condemn the binary nature of gender in both words and actions, on the other each one forges their own masculinity or femininity,

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anchoring their own identity in one or the other, switching between both depending on the moment, or overcoming them. On one hand, they criticize gender as an indicator of inequality and difference, and on the other they use it to remark their own identity (expecting their boyfriend to carry the bags, dressing like a princess, dressing like a male to underline their own femininity). On one hand, they emphasize the *degenderization* or fragmentation of gender itself (Lorber, 2021) i.e., they use gender to undo gender itself. The young people criticize the division of gender as a device that distinguishes men from women in the various social spheres (legal, educational, work, family, etc.), not only as a marker of differences (in treatment, social expectations, etc.) but as an indicator of one or the other: gender differentiation must be overcome, because inevitably, in their opinion, it causes gender inequalities. For them, sex cannot be an element of social distinction; gender, sex and sexual orientation are *personal* (i.e., *intimate*) more than *social* (i.e., *public or social categorization*). On the other hand, the young people emphasize *genderization*, that is, in fighting gender as a device of inequalities, they pursue binarism. To be able to understand if, as man or woman, as gay or lesbian, they are a victim of discrimination, inequalities, coercive socialization models (in other words, patriarchal or homophobic) gender binary is necessary in order to bring to light toxic or discriminatory cultural, social or legal practices.

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