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EXPERIENCE MATTERS. YOUNG ITALIANS' ACCOUNTS OF VIRGINITY LOSS

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ABSTRACT

The article is based on quantitative and qualitative data from a study carried out in 2006, entailing a survey on a sample in quotas of 1000 young people representative of a population aged between 18–29 and resident in Piedmont, and 51 biographical interviews with young people between the ages of 18 and 34. The article shows how the exploration of the theme of virginity provides a perspective for analysing the ways in which Italian young people construct the meaning of their first sexual experiences and combine conformity, negotiation and resistance in terms of both traditional conceptions of sexuality, and visions of masculinity and femininity.

Key words: young people, gender, sexuality, virginity, double standard

L'ESPERIENZA CONTA. GIOVANI ITALIANI RACCONTANO LA PERDITA DELLA VERGINITÀ

SINTESI

L'articolo si basa su dati quantitativi e qualitativi provenienti da una ricerca condotta nel 2006, che comprendeva un'inchiesta su un campione per quote di 1000 soggetti rappresentativo della popolazione giovanile di età 18–29 anni residente in Piemonte e 51 interviste biografiche a giovani dai 18 ai 34 anni. L'articolo mostra come l'esplorazione del tema della verginità offra una prospettiva di analisi dei modi in cui i giovani italiani costruiscono il significato delle loro prime esperienze sessuali e si muovono fra conformità, negoziazione e resistenza rispetto ad una concezione tradizionale sia della sessualità sia della maschilità e della femminilità.

Parole chiave: giovani, genere, sessualità, verginità, doppio standard

The twentieth century was a period of major changes for all Western nations, including in terms of sexuality.¹ As a country Italy noticeably lags behind when it comes to systematic scientific exploration of this aspect of social life.²

One of the most regulated aspects of sexual behaviour regards the establishment of timescales and contexts within which to legitimately have sexual relations. In this regard one factor that distinguishes Italy on the international scene is the more marked persistence of the so-called »double standard«, namely the continued existence of different criteria to assess male and female sexual behaviour, criteria which are more restrictive for women and more tolerant for men,³ based on the assumption that men have stronger, less controllable sexual urges than women.⁴

The norms regarding virginity are an emblematic example of the application of sexual double standards: while women were expected to »remain pure« for their husbands, men were permitted, or even encouraged, to experiment sexually with partners other than their future wives, women who were sexually accessible because categorized as »easy« or selling their bodies.⁵

Driven by the student and feminist movements of the 1970s, the sexual revolution heralded a change in sexual customs in Italy too. This initially affected behaviour and representations of female sexuality, acknowledging female desire and pleasure, and then extended to a more comprehensive redefinition of sexuality in terms of the couple and the marital relationship, in a model of intimacy based on the negotiation of sexual rules and the meanings of life-as-a-couple from an egalitarian point of view.⁶

In terms of this change in sexual culture,⁷ by taking the results of a recent study on the sexual lifestyles of young people conducted in Piedmont, this article will show how the exploration of the theme of virginity pro-

vides a perspective for analysing the ways in which young people construct the meaning of their first sexual experiences and combine conformity, negotiation and resistance in terms of both traditional conceptions of sexuality and visions of masculinity and femininity.

METHODOLOGY

The article relies on data from a recent empirical study (indicated in this article as ISP 2006 – »Indagine sulla sessualità in Piemonte«), which was carried out in 2006 with funding from the Regional Council's Department for Culture. This study entailed a multi-method approach, mixing quantitative and qualitative research techniques.⁸

A survey, in the form of a two-part questionnaire, was conducted on a sample in quotas of 1000 young people representative of a population aged between 18–29 and resident in Piedmont. The first part, which concerned attitudes towards sexuality and relationship experience, was administered by means of face-to-face interviews; the second, which focussed on sexual experiences, was self compiled and then handed in to the interviewer inside a sealed envelope bearing a code that enabled it to be paired with the first part. The survey was carried out by the demoscopic institute Eurisko.

Moreover, biographical interviews were carried out with a purpose snow-ball sample of 51 young people between the ages of 18 and 34: following a flexible outline, the interviewer invited the interviewee to go over the main stages in his or her sexual biography, from the socialisation process to current experiences. The interviews were recorded, transcribed in their entirety and then codified using the Atlas.ti programme, before being analysed.

The study also included two focus groups with young university students, who were given some excerpts of

1 With regard to attitudes and conceptions of sexuality, see Kraaycamp (2002), Scott (1998) and Haavio-Mannila, Roos, Kontula (1996). For the Italian situation, see Ferrero Camoletto (2010a). In terms of changes in sexual behaviour, see the most recent surveys conducted in various European countries: for France, *l'Enquete sur la sexualité en France*, published by Bajos and Bozon (2008), and for the United Kingdom, see the National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles II conducted in 2000–01.

2 With the exception of the research performed by Fabris and Davis (1978) in the first half of the '70s, in Italy there have been studies on subpopulations (young people, women, etc.) and on specific aspects of sexuality (fertility, contraception, high-risk sexual behaviour, sexual minorities, etc.). A recently published study explores the sexual attitudes and behaviours of a representative sample of Italians aged 18 to 70 (cf. Barbagli, Dalla Zuanna, Garelli, 2010).

3 The concept of »double standard«, introduced into the literature by Keith Thomas in 1959, has been applied particularly to sexual conduct: for a review of the theme, see Crawford and Popp (2003).

4 For a more detailed treatment of the 'naturalised' vision of male sexuality, see Bertone, Ferrero Camoletto (2009), Ferrero Camoletto, Bertone (2009) and Ferrero Camoletto, Bertone (2010).

5 For an analysis of the scenario of male virginity loss through paid sexual intercourse, see Caltabiano (2010). With regard to the level of acceptance of virginity at marriage and premarital sex in Italy today, see Ferrero Camoletto (2010a).

6 For a broader treatment of the establishment of the intimate model, see Ehrenreich, Hess and Jacobs (1986), Giddens (1992) and Segal (2007).

7 For an analysis of the change in the sexual cultural scenario and the definition of virginity in Western countries, see Carpenter (2005). With regard to the recognition of »sexual diversities« and the multiplicity of forms of intimate/family life, see Weeks (2007) in particular.

8 A previous and longer version of the article was published in an Italian journal: see Ferrero Camoletto (2010b).

interviews about the issue of virginity, with a view to stimulating discussion. This article refers in particular to data from the survey and the biographical interviews, omitting out an analysis of the comments of the focus groups. The interviews and focus groups were held by researchers from the Department of Social Science, University of Turin.

In this article all percentage figures refer to the data in the survey, while the interviews are used both to illustrate the tendencies identified in the quantitative data, and to explore and problematize the definition of virginity and sexual experiences. Survey data from our research project are compared with other data sources, in particular with surveys on a national sample of young people carried out since 1983 by IARD, a research institute on youth attitudes and behaviours.

[NOT] WORTH WAITING FOR? THE PRIMACY OF (SEXUAL) EXPERIENCE

The ideal of virginity is traditionally linked to a condition which is both physical and spiritual: physical as it is associated with not having had penetrative vaginal intercourse, which preserves intact the membrane – the hymen – that closes the vaginal opening; spiritual because it is associated with an interior purity, whereby sexual intercourse is viewed as an expression of the love that rightfully belongs within a marital relationship.⁹ The extent to which virginity is associated with a physical condition, above all for women, is shown by customs and rituals such as displaying the blood-stained sheet

the morning after the wedding night, as empirical proof of deflowering, or medical examinations to attest to the girl's physical 'purity' (a sign of moral integrity), or folk remedies used to recreate a »semblance of virginity«, once more in fashion in view of the popularity of »revirgination« operations. As we will see, the more »embodied« nature of female virginity sparked interesting discussions in many accounts of the young people interviewed.

Numerous studies have shown that not only is the norm that disapproves of premarital sexual relations usually disregarded, but it is also increasingly viewed as less socially legitimate among the younger generations.¹⁰ Comparing the results of the IARD report on young people in Italy (from the first report in 1983 to the last one in 2004) it can be seen that the quota of individuals who deem it morally acceptable to have sex outside marriage has progressively increased, now being at least 4/5 of the young population. It goes without saying that there are parts of the country where the idea that sexual activity should be postponed until after marriage is more firmly rooted: this is the case above all among women, those who live in the south, those with a lower level of education and those with stronger religious identification, who show a stronger disapproval of sexual experience before marriage.

Another significant aspect is the decreasing difference between the answers given by men and women, which would appear to indicate a lessening of the double standard that, as we have already mentioned, took a harsher view of female sexual activity.

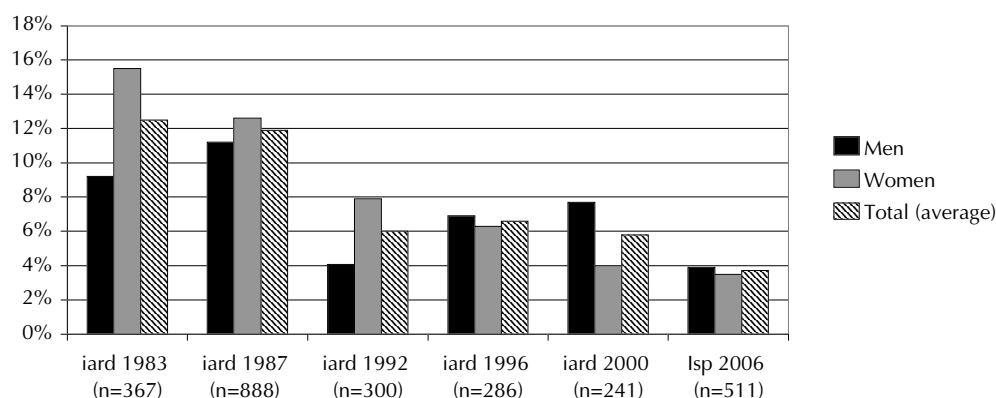


Fig.1: Disapproval of premarital sex (IARD: North-West, 18–24 years old; ISP: Piedmont, 18–24 years old; % values).

Slika 1: Neodobranje seksa pred poroko (IARD: Severozahod, 18–24 let; ISP: Piemont, 18–24 let; % vrednosti).

⁹ With regard to virginity as a religious value, see also Bearman and Bruckner (2001).

¹⁰ For recent studies on the Italian situation, see Buzzi (1998), Vaccaro (2003), Dalla Zuanna and Crisafulli (2004) and Barbagli, Dalla Zuanna, Garelli (2010). For a comparison of the changes in attitudes regarding sexual morality in other Western countries, see Scott (1998).

Therefore almost all young people in Piedmont (just over 95%) believe that sex outside marriage is legitimate. Even among young people with strong religious identification premarital sex is viewed as legitimate: 84% of the regular church-goers surveyed admitted to having had premarital sex.

Consequently the idea that it is preferable to marry a virgin appears to be largely obsolete (table 1): more than 80% of the young people interviewed (and significantly, a higher proportion of women) do not view this characteristic as important when it comes to choosing a partner for marriage.

Table 1: The desirability of virginity in a marriage partner – comparison by gender (% of column) (ISP 2006, 18–29 age group).

Tabela 1: Zaželenost nedolžnosti zakonskega partnerja – primerjava glede na spol (% stolpca) (ISP 2006, starostna skupina 18–29).

	Men	Women	Total
Neither female nor male virgin (%) (N)	79 (398)	88 (424)	83 (822)
Only female virgin (%) (N)	11 (57)	4 (21)	8 (78)
Only male virgin (%) (N)	2 (11)	2 (9)	2 (20)
Both female and male virgin (%) (N)	8 (41)	6 (31)	7 (72)
Total (%) (N)	100 (507)	100 (485)	100 (992)

However, young people appear to be more open and tolerant with regards to the general possibility of having premarital sexual experiences than with regard to the more specific hypothesis of marrying a »non-virgin« partner, that is, a partner with previous sexual experience. This difference can be interpreted as a part of the idealisation of sexuality that seems to be occurring among young people (Garelli, 1984, 250–251). From this point of view, on one hand the right and duty to experiment in the sexual field, among other things, represents the cultural horizon young people aspire to, while on the other, the possibility of experiencing sex as something intimate and exclusive (the »first time«) with the person one starts married life with, still seems to have a legendary, ideal status for some.

In our study, only a minority – 17% – still acknowledge that the norm of virginity has a significant appeal, with one set of young people maintaining a double

standard, attributing importance almost exclusively to female virginity, and another, predominantly for religious reasons (18% of regular church goers, compared to the average figure of 7%), seeing virginity as a value in its own right, for both men and women.

Other data confirm the widespread tendency to attribute value to sexual experimentation. 57% of young people (68% of males compared to 45% of females) believe that in life it is a good thing to have a range of different sexual experiences, namely that it is important to acquire a repertoire of different techniques and partners, in line with the vision of sexuality as an arena for personal formation and self-expression. Cinzia, 28, explains how having different sexual experiences increases one's self-esteem and self-confidence, therefore increasing self-awareness:

I think you need to experiment freely with sex, depending on the opportunities you get, I mean...if I'd only had one boyfriend, the love of my life, and we got married, well, who knows...but I wouldn't have thought I was lucky, actually I think I'm lucky to have had sex with different people because...because it's really good, there are differences, and you feel more like a mature woman, more...you know yourself better. Maybe you get more confident too? With experience, not just sexually, but as a person too.

Filippo, 29, on the other hand, stresses the importance of knowing not only yourself sexually, but also your partner, especially in terms of a long-term relationship: sexual complicity is viewed as an essential ingredient for a successful, long-lasting relationship.

I know boys that kept their virginity [...] till marriage, even being with the same girlfriend for fifteen years, then getting married. I think it's a mistake because actually if you have a good level of experience, including knowing your partner well sexually...you might get married to someone but then in the end you cheat on them and go off with someone else who satisfies you [...]. But if you have a good sexual relationship before then you don't need to look elsewhere afterwards.

A slightly higher percentage (58%, with a bigger gap between men and women: 74% of the former and 41% of the latter) believe it is admissible to have sex with someone you have just met: the legitimacy of rapidly transforming a relationship into a sexual one can be viewed as indicative of a more open, freer conception of sex, which contrasts with the value attributed to waiting and keeping oneself 'pure' for one's life partner.

FOR FUN OR FOR LOVE? YOUNG PEOPLE RECOUNTING THEIR FIRST INTERCOURSE

It is in behavioural terms that we find the clearest confirmation of the changes in the cultural scenario: from the survey it emerged that only 12% of those interviewed – aged between 18 and 29 – had never had full sexual intercourse. Out of the remaining 88%, only 8% (13% of women and 3.5% of men) had sex for the first time with their spouse or the partner they were already living with, namely in the context of an institutionalized or, in any case, highly stable relationship. For 57% of respondents (66% of women and 49% of men), their first sexual partner was the person they were in a relationship with at the time, while for the remaining 35% (48% of men, compared to 21% of women) their »first time« was with a person they had no stable relationship with (friend, classmate or casual acquaintance).

In this context it should be underlined that while there are marked gender differences in the ways people engage in sexual relationships (for example the type of partner they first had sex with), there are no great differences when it comes to the question of having an active sex life or not. Indeed at the time of the interview 14% of women and 9% of men were virgins: this statistic confirms how the contemporary cultural scenario attributes value to sexual experience for both men and women, doing away with the old double standard.

Yet the decline of the double standard with regard to men's and women's rights to an active sex life has not led to an entirely equal scenario for both sexes: as Carpenter asserts (2005), in the second half of the twentieth century a new double standard came into being, according to which men could have occasional sexual encounters or sex without emotional attachment, while women were expected to have sex in the context of an emotional bond or significant relationship. More generally, the qualitative research (Crawford and Popp, 2003), rather than the survey data, showed how the double standard in the sexual field has not disappeared, merely changed, making the guidelines for the behavioural models for men and women less clearly identifiable: the double standard is thus less categorical, multi-dimensional (for example it can regard age at first sexual experience, or the relationship situation of the first sexual experience, or the total number of sexual partners) and more negotiable in relation to the context, according to local and subcultural characteristics (such as age, ethnic identity, national context).

So it is that, while in the context of a cultural climate that favours an active sex life for both men and women, the terms used remain highly gender-differentiated: women more often use the subject of love to legitimize sexuality (table 2). Around 60% of the young women interviewed believed that sex should always be accompanied with an emotional attachment, compared to 37% of men. As a contrast, the latter tend to interpret sex more as an experience with a value in its own right, regardless of the type of emotional involvement, and on a larger scale than their female peers, as an opportunity to be grabbed on every occasion and at whatever cost.¹¹

**Table 2: Sex and love: comparison by gender (% of agreement; % of column) (ISP 2006, 18–29 age group).
Tabela 2: Spolnost in ljubezen: primerjava glede na spol (% strinjanja; % stolpca) (ISP 2006, starostna skupina 18–29).**

	Men	Women	Total
It is legitimate to have sex with someone you don't love (%) (N)	63 (322)	40 (199)	52 (521)
Total (%) (N)	100 (507)	100 (492)	100 (1000)
In sex an opportunity missed is an opportunity lost (%) (N)	41 (209)	13 (65)	27 (274)
Total (%) (N)	100 (506)	100 (494)	100 (1000)

This mixture of normative expectations, in some aspects contradictory (the encouragement of sexual experimentation, which for women is limited by references to a significant relationship and bond) can also be observed in different definitions of virginity.

VIRGINITY LOSS: GIFT, MEMORABLE EXPERIENCE, MILESTONE ON THE PATH TO MATURITY, OR A BURDEN TO BE RID OF?

In the previous paragraphs we saw how the young people of Piedmont widely view an accumulation of sexual experience as positive. What, then, can be said of the concept of virginity? What meanings and functions do young people attribute to virginity in this day and age?

11 Some scholars see this as a version of the traditional double standard translated into the cultural vocabulary of intimacy: for women this spells a transition from the rule of »keeping themselves« to »not throwing themselves away«, from »not doing it« to »doing it for love« (again, see Crawford and Popp (2003)).

In his study on the experience of virginity loss among young Americans, Carpenter (2005), identified three main interpretations (as a gift, stigma or transition),¹² which are often used as alternatives, but also combined, giving rise to original scenarios. Starting from this taxonomy, we included a question in our survey (table 3) that set out to explore the prevailing conceptions of virginity among young people, broadening the possible range of answers compared to the three options identified in the American study, and leaving the results of the in-depth interviews to provide a more complex, multifaceted picture.

Table 3: Conceptions of virginity (one answer only, % of column) (ISP 2006, 18–29 age group).

Tabela 3: Predstave o nedolžnosti (samo en odgovor, % stolpca) (ISP 2006, starostna skupina 18–29).

	Men	Women	Total
It is the greatest gift one can give to one's partner (%) (N)	5 (25)	8 (38)	6 (63)
It is important and not something to lose with the first person that comes along (%) (N)	29 (146)	48 (230)	39 (376)
It is a threshold to cross on one's personal growth path (%) (N)	36 (181)	28 (138)	32 (319)
It is the condition of those who have not had sexual intercourse (%) (N)	22 (111)	11 (54)	17 (165)
It is a burden to be rid of as soon as possible (N)	2 (10)	1 (3)	1 (13)
It is a cultural invention to limit sexual behaviour (%) (N)	6 (31)	4 (21)	5 (52)
Total (%) (N)	100 (504)	100 (484)	100 (988)

The relative majority of those interviewed (around 70%) was split between two very different conceptions: virginity viewed as something important, that must not be »wasted« on a meaningless relationship (39%), and virginity seen as one of the many stages to go through on the road to maturity (32%). Significantly, the first conception was chosen more by girls, the second more by boys: this would appear to reflect definitions of sexuality linked to different ways of constructing femininity and masculinity, sex being more associated with relationships for the former and with experience for the latter.¹³

The first interpretation¹⁴ stresses the value of that characteristic of the individual and therefore the importance of »investing« such a resource in a meaningful way, a translation in secular terms of the traditional conception of virginity as an asset to conserve and give only to one's spouse. A substantial proportion of young people therefore interprets virginity loss as an important episode in their life story, according to the context it occurred in: the partner with whom the event takes place is no longer necessarily the spouse, but must nevertheless be a person who is specially chosen, in such a way that the experience represents an expression of the self, the intimacy constructed in the relationship and the sentiments implied. The account of Loredana, 20, is emblematic: while she rejects the traditional norms regarding female virginity she puts forward a new version:

I think that the first time is really, really important, that it has to be right. I mean, I'm really happy that it happened with a guy I was really in love with, because you've got to get your head around it too. If I'd done it with the guy I was with before, that when I look back I'm like »Oh god, what a shallow guy, what a shallow relationship«, it would've been really bad. So I think it has a value to do with your own interior harmony when you look back and you can say »It was really beautiful«, I mean, in the end... I don't see it at all like: keep your virginity till you get married, no way. Keep your virginity till you're totally in love, then you can look back and say »Wow! I was so in love and I shared it with a person I really respected, I can say that it was a person that...intelligent, that...«, yeah, you have to respect the person you do it with, totally. I think it's important for me to say »I did it with someone I respected«, because you're sharing a big part of yourself.

12 Carpenter (2005) uses the term »gift« to indicate a vision of virginity as a unique, non-renewable property that is an expression of the subject's value, while »stigma« is an interpretation of virginity as a condition or attribute that discredits the bearer, and »transition« is the conception of virginity loss as an important step in the path towards maturity.

13 In this regard Hollway (1996) distinguishes between two gender-differentiated discourses on sexuality: the »have/hold discourse«, which is more typically associated with the construction of femininity, and the »male sexual drive discourse«, which is bound up with the construction of masculinity.

14 In his qualitative study, Garelli (2000) too noted a return among young people to the value of virginity as something not to be wasted, something to be experienced in a significant way.

This interview excerpt clearly evinces a tendency regarding changes in the sexual script: the transition from »virgin till you're married« to »virgin till you're totally in love«, that is, until loss of virginity can be experienced in the context of a suitable relationship.¹⁵ The register of right/wrong is thus replaced by one of authentic/non-authentic: the experience acquires value not according to a norm or absolute moral principle, but according to situational criteria, the assessment of the meaningfulness of one's own experience. It is no coincidence that this view is expressed exclusively by women: as stated previously, it is an expression of the new double standard that has replaced that of the »experienced man« and the »good girl«. We can also see a confirmation of this in the statement of Otto, 21, who, however, significantly projects this conception onto women alone:

For a guy [...] from my point of view, for the first time, with someone older, who you're not in love with I think that... I think it's ok all the same. But for a girl, doing it the first time with a guy that isn't...that's the first person that comes along, is not really great as far as I can see [...]. Men, I reckon, can't wait to lose it, their virginity, I mean have sex with a woman. But women, I reckon, can't wait to lose it either, but with a special person, I reckon, with someone, I mean, that they're in love with.

While Loredana's interpretation underlined the importance of the relationship context and type of partner, Otto's interpretation of virginity and its »loss« focuses on the consequences in terms of the individual's biography: loss of virginity is interpreted as a sort of initiation rite set against the background of a cultural scenario that encourages it. This event is deemed to represent an important biographical transition by virtue of the high level of social recognition that characterizes it. Two important elements of this interpretation can be underlined.

The first is the conception of »biographical watershed« that many young people associate with virginity loss. In this regard the accounts of Eliana, 23, and Giulio, 21, are emblematic:

It was like crossing a line. It felt like the population of the world... this image is very clear in my head... was divided in half: virgins and non-virgins. And it felt like I had taken that giant leap and crossed that

line, so now I belonged to the other half of the world. I felt grown-up. [...]It was like a clear-cut demarcation in my life. I mean it could be one of the big dividing lines in my life.

It was like entering another dimension, like... I don't know... growing up from one moment to the next, really changing in the space of 10 minutes ... [...] that sudden transition from childhood, if we can call it that, in a way to adulthood [...] that's what it was, a clean break between one period and another in my life [...]What is virginity? For me personally [...] it was the dividing line between those two periods, from child/adolescent, let's say, to adult, and once you've crossed that limit, let's say that imaginary limit, I went... I felt like I was moving into adulthood [...] a dividing line [...] a transition from one status to the other [...].

The terms recurring in these excerpts all refer back to the same interpretative framework: the transformative nature of the event, typical of any kind of initiation rite. The interviewees talk about a »line«, a »boundary«, a »break«, a »bridge« or a »demarcation«, the crossing of which represents a significant episode in the individual's life. Having sex for the first time is thus seen as a »transition«, a »leap« into the world of »non-virgins«, of those who have in some way acquired a more adult status, as the various expressions used by the interviewees bear out: »older«, »grown-up«, »adult«. Losing one's virginity therefore represents a »stage in the growth process«, a »normal step« in the young people's path towards adulthood: it also represents one of the few thresholds that still appears irreversible (»because you know you can't ever go back«, in the words of one interviewee), unlike other traditional thresholds into adulthood, which young people now view as non-definitive and always reversible (studies which can be resumed, jobs that can be changed or left, couples splitting up, etc.).¹⁶

The second element is the importance of the homosocial context,¹⁷ intended as the circle of recognition or peer group that acts the social foundation underpinning the credibility of the experience. The young people interviewed often linked the question of virginity and its loss to the physical experience of their first penetrative sexual intercourse: this criterion was accounted for as enabling the experience to be recounted and understood

15 In this regard the results of the study by Jackson and Cram (2003) are significant, stressing as they do the rhetoric of »readiness« used by the girls interviewed, and the ambiguity of this term. From a study I conducted on a number of online forums run by magazines for teenagers (in particular the forum run by the magazine Top Girl), discussions between users often refer to this strategy of legitimization and definition of the »right time« to have sex, but the difficulty of establishing unequivocal criteria for defining »being ready« also emerges: the most frequently mentioned ones were age, type of partner and length of relationship.

16 Due to its irreversibility one exception among these thresholds into adulthood is the birth of the first child.

17 For an analysis of the importance of the homosocial context for the construction of meaning of sexual experiences, for young men in particular, see Flood (2008).

in the context of a common interpretative framework. »Being able to say it« thus becomes an integral part of the experience: that event becomes biographically significant because it is communicable in a shared language that makes it not only comprehensible but also real. Sharing this event with significant others (predominantly friends but also siblings, and much less frequently, parents) is common to both boys and girls, but while for the former it is more of a »laddish« celebration (»a party«, one interviewee said), for the latter it occurs more frequently as an intimate confidence. The homo-social circle thus becomes not only the audience for this account, but also the source of language and meanings with which to relate and make sense of one's own experience.

Franco, 26, underlines the importance of sharing the experience in the context of a »laddish mechanism« of exaggeration, banter and hyperbole that often colour the experience and emphasize the display of masculinity:

Fucking hell! It was a party! It was like... like... a big group of friends, it's hard to explain, I mean it was like a party like someone had got married or something, but it was like that for everyone, anyway for everyone that was »cool« about it [...] anyway in our group, of friends who would talk about that kind of thing, it was something that you would share, like, because it was good to talk about it, not like you were bitching about the girl, know what I mean? It wasn't that kind of mechanism, it was a healthy mechanism, you know, I mean a laddish mechanism [...] I mean, you told everyone things because it was cool and you could take the piss about loads of things.

Sabrina, 30, on the other hand, talks about when she confided in her closest friends, admitting that she had some regrets about »taking the plunge«:

D: Who did you talk about the first time with?

R: [...] With friends [...] you tell it like something that happened to you, a problem that you've got because maybe you regret it. And actually I did regret it. I really regretted it straight away. There is always the feeling of having lost something, of no going back. Then as time passes you realise that it is just a burden.

On the other hand a proportion of interviewees (17%, with a greater number of boys) expressed a naturalized and in some ways »banalized« conception of virginity: it is reduced to a mere physical condition (the integrity of the woman's hymen) or related to experience (not having had »full-on« sex). This is what can be described as »technical« or »physiological« virginity, referring to criteria deemed objective, organic, perceived as not having a multitude of possible interpretations and

almost taken for granted. One example of this interpretation comes from Giulio, 21, who candidly declares:

For me virginity is that moment in a person's [...] life, when he or she has not yet had sex, or sexual experiences; that is, we can say, the act of penetration.

Only 6% of the young interviewees believe that virginity is a gift to give to another person. In more than half of cases these were people with a religious affiliation, drawing on the vision of virginity as something precious that has been received and must be kept and then given to the person they wish to share their lives with. We can compare two accounts, from Carla, 21, and Riccardo, 19, both active church-goers:

For me it has a very high value. I mean I think that it's also about a person's dignity, it has a lot to do with respecting your body, and dignity and the value you give your body. Yes, it's a question of respect and I reckon that it's really a gift, something you have, that's yours, but that's been given to you. The way I see it... I mean... it's yours because, because but someone gave it to you, I mean you got it for free, but it's something so beautiful that you can't just throw it away, that's what I think. So, like, I have no problems with still being a virgin.

I see [losing your virginity] as a big change, a gift to the other person, the biggest complete gift you can give someone, so it's a big step, a big decision that, when it comes down to it, can't be given to just anyone, but has to be weighed up, chosen well [...] losing my virginity in that relationship meant giving myself to her completely for the first time [...] the fact that I did it with her for the first time was like the first gift that I could give, so it had the implicit idea that I would continue giving myself to her, ok, like a seal. [...] If you have one euro it's not like you can give it to everyone, if you want to buy something you buy that thing and that's it [...] so it's like a sign you were keeping yourself for that person.

There are some interesting analogies in the language used by these two interviewees. First and foremost, virginity is accorded a high value, connected to the idea of a person's dignity, their purity, and as an asset to give to another person. To express this value both interviewees use financial terms, as if virginity had a »price«: for Carla virginity is a precious object that she received »for free«, not however implying that it is without value, while for Riccardo it is like a single coin that therefore has to be spent carefully and responsibly. Both underline the importance of not wasting this capital and keeping it to invest in the best possible way. Here we find the only divergence between the two: for Carla, this idea trans-

lates into the strategy we have described as »technical virginity«, namely in experimenting with controlled forms of intimacy that do not cross the line of full intercourse, while for Riccardo the choice was that of a first time experienced as a total gift in the context of a relationship expected to last a lifetime.

Lastly, a small proportion of young people see virginity as a burden to be got rid of (1%), or a cultural invention created to limit sexual behaviour (5%). With regards to the latter interpretation, we have only four accounts from the qualitative interviews, that of a woman who states that »virginity does not exist«, in the sense that it is a sociocultural product (and therefore a mental construct) designed to keep female sexuality under control, and three from men who believe that virginity is a convention or constriction which aims to generate fear and angst.

The idea that virginity is something to be got rid of, on the contrary, emerged more frequently in the in-depth interviews than in the survey. Indeed many young people, especially boys, when talking about their sexual history, refer to virginity as a limiting condition to do away with, as Emanuele, 28, admits:

The first time I said to myself »I'm not a virgin any more« [...] was an achievement, an achievement because I had actually been carrying around this weight of not having had sex and so inside my head it was like an achievement [...] virginity was like this massive obsession for me.

Some boys even found it hard to describe themselves as »virgins« as if it was an emasculating element to be exorcised and removed, even from language. In the accounts of these interviewees, then, the focus shifts to acquiring an active sex life: it is not about being in a certain condition, but modifying one's status by »doing«, thereby becoming men to all intents and purposes.¹⁸ This is admitted by Fiorenzo, 32:

[I thought I wasn't a virgin any more] the very first time, yeah, the very first time I finally got rid of it. [...] So the first time I did it, like I said, I thought, »Finally I've done it, I'm not a virgin any more«, even if it doesn't have the same meaning, honestly I never really thought, »I'm not a virgin any more«, I said, »I've done it«, I never thought about my own virginity actually.

With regard to loss of virginity among boys, the normative dimension, of how things »ought to be« emerges clearly: peer group pressure, the association between

being sexually active, being virile and being adults are elements of the script that define not only the sexual behaviour of young males, but also the construction of their masculinity. Virginity is therefore defined, in most cases, as something negative: an »obstacle«, a »little problem«, an »obsession«, a »handicap«, a »burden«, the elimination of which brings a »liberation«, an »achievement«, a »victory«. The interesting aspect is that male language stresses losing in order to win something: loss of virginity for men actually entails acquiring something, boosting their reputations.¹⁹ The same boys believe that for girls it is more a question of keeping themselves and not throwing themselves away: once more, for a girl loss of virginity only enables her to acquire something if it takes place in the context of a significant relationship. Among girls too, however, there is new script emerging that legitimizes a recreational, instrumental use of sexuality in which the »first time« is viewed as both a loss and a gain, an event that paves the way for a wide range of possible new experiences. For a number of girls, a minority among our interviewees, the loss of physical virginity is seen as a liberation, an »achievement«, as in the case of Betty, 22: *»It was an event, I don't know, almost like an initiation, like from then on, not being a virgin any more, it was going to get easier«.* However what represents a cutting edge position for women, subverting the existing scenario, remains the dominant model among men.

Though we cannot talk about an actual convergence of the male and female models, it would seem that alongside the reproduction of the traditional gender-differentiated sexual scenarios, the socially available cultural repertoires can now be used with a greater degree of flexibility, thanks also to a greater awareness of forms of cultural conditioning. Thus boys can now feel more legitimized in postponing losing their virginity, with a view to seeking a greater emotional investment,²⁰ while girls can feel more authorised to experiment in the sexual field too.

The apparent opening up to a more flexible use of sexual scenarios can however conceal ambivalent normative pressures that give rise to tensions and contradictions in the individual: the general encouragement of sexual experimentation clashes with specific and contextual social expectations that determine the most appropriate behaviours for boys and girls.

CONCLUSIONS: VIRGINITY AS PHYSICAL EXPERIENCE AND SYMBOLIC THRESHOLD

The conception of virginity that emerges from our study is based on a substantial change in the conventional, traditional interpretation. From previously being a

18 On the performative conception of masculinity, see Connell (2005).

19 With regard to the different impact of social conduct on the reputations of boys and girls, see Holland et al. (1996).

20 With regard to the establishment of a romantic, intimate scenario among boys too, see Allen (2007).

value-based and normative frame of reference in which marital sex was the only legitimate expression of sexuality, the concept of virginity and its loss has now become an interpretative framework that young people use to give meaning to their own sexual experience.

The two main discourses used when talking about loss of virginity are the discourse of emotional importance and the discourse of experimentation or experience leading to personal growth: albeit with subtle differences, both of these are based on the rhetoric of authenticity as the main source of legitimization.

The discourse of emotional significance associates sexuality with a relationship or emotional investment: it references the link between sex and love that, as other studies have shown,²¹ continues to be an extremely powerful cultural repertoire in contemporary society, maintaining various elements of continuity with the tradition of romantic love.²²

Meanwhile, the discourse of the prime importance of experience, a typical trait of youth culture,²³ is perfectly applicable to the field of affective and sexual relationships. And placing the emphasis on the experiential dimension enables young people to use multiple cultural repertoires to describe and explain their conduct.

In view of this, alongside a detachment from the moral imperative of virginity, in part of the young population we can observe a redefinition of the term: the focus shifts from »keeping yourself« to »having a significant experience«. The idea of »not throwing yourself away« is therefore no longer connected to the prohibition on being sexually active outside of marriage, but rather to the belief that sexuality represents an arena for the construction of the identity, and is therefore a resource with a value of its own. As a whole then, the field of sexuality acquires initiatory status, as an arena for ex-

perimenting with adulthood, in which young people can experience independence ahead of time and make important decisions, from identifying the right time to choosing the right person to experience the »first time« with.

The new discourses – experimentation on one hand and affective authenticity on the other – would appear to mirror the process of the democratization of intimacy,²⁴ and therefore signal the weakening or decline of the traditional double standard in the sexual field. Yet various signals are now emerging in research of the reproduction in a new guise of highly gender-differentiated models of sexual conduct. Indeed we have seen how the definitions of the right context (sex within or outside of a significant relationship, and at the appropriate age) for sexuality remain closely connected to differentiated, complementary constructions of masculinity and femininity.

The reinterpretation of the meaning of virginity is therefore not a neutral process: the study showed how the adoption of certain scenarios or discourses to explain and legitimize one's own experience is closely linked to the male identity (virginity as a stigma; the fear of being left behind; the importance attributed to the experience itself of losing one's virginity; etc.) or the female identity (virginity as something to invest, fear of being too precocious; the importance attributed to the relationship context of the experience). It also emerged that some subjects use cultural repertoires in unconventional ways, detached from their gender connotations: for example boys who see loss of virginity as a gift to the partner or associate it with an important relationship, and girls who experience losing their virginity as a liberation or an instrumental experience.

21 In particular see Johnson (2005), who analysed the use of the discourse of love as a source for constructing meaning with regard to one's (hetero)sexual experiences. With regards to a continuing connection between sex and love in young Italians' conception of sexuality, see Buzzi (1998) and Garelli (2000).

22 With regard to the distinction between »romantic love« and »convergent love«, see Giddens (1995); on the power of the traditional conception of romantic love, see Gross (2005).

23 Among the first to recognise this dimension as a characteristic trait of late-modern youth culture (see Garelli, 1984), Garelli also highlighted its importance in young people's conceptions of sex and love (Garelli, 2000).

24 For a broader analysis of the theme of the democratization of intimacy, see Giddens (1995) and Weeks (2007).

IZKUŠNJE VELJAJO. MLADI ITALIJANI PRIPOVEDUJEJO O IZGUBI NEDOLŽNOSTI

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POVZETEK

Članek poskuša raziskati spremembe v spolni kulturi mladih Italijanov – osredotoča se na odnos in vedenje v povezavi s prvo spolno izkušnjo ter na vprašanje, kaj pojmuje pod družbeno oznako »izguba nedolžnosti«.

Članek temelji na kvantitativnih in kvalitativnih podatkih iz študije, ki je bila izvedena leta 2006 in jo je financiral oddelek za kulturo Regionalnega sveta. Obsegala je raziskavo v obliki vprašalnika v dveh delih, izvedenega na vzorcu 1000 predstavnikov mladine med 18 in 29 letom starosti s stalnim prebivališčem v Piemontu. Prvi del, ki zadeva odnos do spolnosti in spolnih izkušenj, je bil izpeljan s pogovori iz oči v oči, medtem ko je bil drugi, ki se osredotoča na same spolne izkušnje, izpolnjen lastnoročno, nato pa izročen spraševalcu v zaprti kuverti s priloženim geslom, ki je omogočilo združitev drugega dela s prvim. Raziskavo je izvedel demoskopski inštitut Eurisko. Vzoredno s tem je bilo opravljenih 51 biografskih intervjujev z mladimi v starosti med 18 in 34 let: s prilagodljivim vprašalnikom je anketar povabil sodelujoče, da ga popeljejo skozi glavne faze svoje spolne biografije; od procesa socializacije do trenutnih izkušenj. Intervjuji so bili posneti, v celoti zapisani in nato kodificirani z uporabo programa Atlas.ti, preden so jih analizirali. Vsa števila v obliki odstotkov v tem članku se nanašajo na podatke, zbrane v zgoraj omenjeni raziskavi, medtem ko so intervjuji prikazani tako za ponazoritev težnje, opredeljene s pomočjo kvantitativnih podatkov, kot tudi za raziskovanje in problematizacijo opredelitve nedolžnosti in spolnih izkušenj.

Članek prikazuje, kako raziskovanje vprašanja devišstva ponuja perspektivo za analizo načinov, s katerimi mladi oblikujejo odnos do pomena svojih prvih spolnih izkušenj in združujejo konformnost, pogajanja in odpor tako v smislu tradicionalnega pojmovanja spolnosti kot tudi v pojmovanju moškosti in ženskosti. V pogovorih o izgubi nedolžnosti se italijanska mladina sklicuje na dve glavni sestavini, obe temelječi na poudarku pristnosti kot glavnega vira legitimizacije: čustveni pomen izkušnje na eni strani in eksperimentiranje, ki vodi k osebni rasti, na drugi. Te nove diskurze lahko razumemo kot odraz procesa demokratizacije intimnosti in njihov pojav kot znak oslabilve ali upadanja pojava tradicionalnih dvojnih meril na področju spolnosti. Vendar pa se sedaj v raziskavah prav tako pojavljajo različni znaki reprodukcije močno spolno diferenciranih modelov spolnega vedenja v novih preoblikah. Pravzaprav smo videli, kako so opredelitve ustreznega konteksta za spolnost (seks znotraj ali zunaj pomembnega razmerja in pri ustrezni starosti) še vedno tesno povezane z različnimi, dopolnilnimi konstrukcijami moškosti in ženskosti. Vendar se je prav tako izkazalo, da nekateri mladi ljudje uporabljajo dane kulturne repertoarje na različne nekonvencionalne načine, ločene od kakršne koli spolne konotacije.

Ključne besede: mladi, spol, spolnost, nedolžnost, dvojna merila

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