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Masculinities and Caring Professions. The Case Study of Students Enrolled in University Courses in Educational Disciplines

1. Introduction

The influence of gender on life choices, opportunities and job placement is an important field of research for various social sciences, including sociology.

Research on the Gender Gap in Universities in Italy showed that, in 2020, very few women were enrolled in STEM-related programmes (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics), despite their excellent academic results in all these fields. While personal aptitudes certainly play a role in these choices, social and cultural factors also significantly influence them (Flabbi, 2022). The MIUR data on enrolments for the academic year 2023/2024 confirm that educational choices are markedly characterised by gender, with a strong presence of women in the humanities, education, and training disciplines and a weak presence in STEM disciplines (in particular in engineering and computer science).

Gender “educational segregation” – the separation in academic and professional choices and trajectories, resulting in an inequality of opportunities between men and women – may depend on several factors (Metha, Wilson, 2020). Sociological explanations disagree with the classic opposition between “nature” and “culture”, whereby women’s natural inclination towards care and nurturing also guide their university and professional choices (Mapelli, Olivieri Stiozzi, 2012), while men, oriented by individualistic values and practical interests, invest more in technical-scientific knowledge.

While the literature contains numerous contributions to women’s choice of STEM disciplines, fewer studies (particularly qualitative ones) have investigated men’s propensity for humanistic and educational disciplines. In particular, the relationship between main gender models and representations of masculinity and young men’s university choices in the field of early years and primary education – *i.e.*, in sectors traditionally occupied by women – is less investigated (Biemmi, Leonelli, 2018; Chise *et al.*, 2020; Flabbi, 2012).

The present study aims to contribute to filling this gap by analysing the motives that guide men to choose the humanities and educational disciplines. In particular, the research focuses on the factors that drive them to invest in programmes traditionally associated with care, such as BA Primary Education or BA Early Childhood.

2. Gender Between Structural Influences and Personal Inclinations

Addressing the issue of gender differences calls for a general reflection on socialisation processes and intra and intergenerational relational exchanges that contribute to the development and construction of the personal and social self.

Gender socialisation, as a specific area of the socialisation process, is key to understanding many attitudinal and social aspects of individuals, such as educational, relational and social choices. Social expectations connected to “gender roles”, *i.e.*, those specific functions that women and men are called

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upon to assume within certain fundamental institutions of society (first and foremost the family, see Ruspini 2003) also depend on gender-related choices.

This process is paramount also due to the genderization of contemporary society, in which gender distinction is central to the social construction of reality (Piccone Stella, Saraceno, 1996).

Gender socialisation starts at birth – indeed, even before then: it often begins when the future parents learn of the biological sex of the unborn child, voluntarily (and involuntarily) reinforcing their gendered carrier identity (Abbatecola, Stagi, 2017). During primary socialisation, the choice of names, as well as the colour of clothes and toys, reinforce in children the centrality of gender distinction, which thus constitutes a reference for the construction of the self, firstly individual and, subsequently, social during secondary socialisation.

Through these processes, individuals construct their gender identity, also acquiring those models of behaviour (gender display) that draw different social expectations between – men and women (Goffman, 1979).

The process of socialisation to gender, like socialisation in general, implies a central role of those agencies that form individuals as members of society (Crespi, 2008). In this sense, socialisation can be understood as a process that is both vertical and horizontal. The family and school are paramount agencies for vertical socialisation: they constitute the key institutions of what Parsons (1957) identified as the latency function. Through reinforcements (positive and negative sanctions) individuals internalise the expectations associated with gender roles by perceiving them as natural and voluntary. In the case of horizontal socialisation, agencies such as peers (friends) or the media play an equally decisive role in consolidating the main gender models (Burgio, 2023).

However, the hyper-socialisation model proposed primarily by the functionalist school did not take into account the processes of subjective accommodation that are crucial in defining gender identity. How one relates to the roles and social expectations connected to gender distinction contributes to the solidification of “gender stereotypes” (Corbisiero, Nocenzi 2022). Gender stereotypes are based on approximate readings of this distinction and a biologist and essentialist view of these differences, which see women naturally predisposed to care functions and the private and domestic sphere, while men are predisposed to responsibility roles connected to the public and professional sphere.

Conversely, according to interactionist studies, mainly proposed by the Chicago School, gender stems from the mediation of social and cultural meanings constantly reinvented according to individual needs. This shift in gender perception involved the analysis of those social devices that institutionalise gender distinction through behaviours, languages, and routines typical of the “world of everyday life” (Schulz, Luckmann 1973). This has entailed a deconstruction of the very concept of gender, increasingly understood as the outcome of intersubjective processes, rather than a concept linked to biological sexual distinction. Thus, attention is now focused on the subjective mechanisms that people put in place, particularly in contemporary society, in their way of “saying” and “doing” gender (Rinaldi, 2021).

The increased process of de-institutionalisation that affected the family, the crisis of educational institutions and their capacity to regulate behaviour, and the exponential increase in the sources of secondary socialisation, therefore, require a multidimensional study of these processes (Masullo *et al.*, 2021).

3. Interpretive Paradigms for the Study of Contemporary Masculinities

The term masculinity refers to the various ways of symbolically, socially, and culturally representing the male universe (Fidolini, 2017).

In the Italian language, the term masculinity refers to the cultural and symbolic aspects of virility, within a semantic framework that assumes a direct correspondence between being male and exercising “masculinity”.

The sociologist most active on the concept of masculinity is Raywan Connell (1995), who defined the cisgender and heterosexual male identity as “hegemonic” because of its dominance over other

male identities, which are considered subordinate in terms of power, visibility, and social positioning and status. For Connell (1995), hegemonic masculinity is directly linked to patriarchy as a system of oppression based on extending male dominance, its codes, and values to all aspects of the social sphere, primarily over women and other masculinities considered subaltern (*e.g.*, homosexuals). The Australian scholar also proposes a “gender hierarchy” to classify the various expressions and identity constructions of masculinity.

At the top of the masculinity pyramid is the heterosexual male cisgender identity construction that embodies the prototypical figure of ideal masculinity. Next, Connell considers other types of masculinities, which are positioned lower down on the ladder of the identity and power stratification of the male gender, namely that of:

- Subordinate Masculinities: mainly homosexual and migrant masculinities, or men with physical or mental disabilities. These masculinities are considered to lack one of the core characteristics possessed by hegemonic ones.
- Complacent Masculinities: also lacking compared to the normative model proposed by hegemonic masculinities, but (unlike the subaltern ones) able to find forms of negotiation with the dominant identity, drawing some benefits from it.
- Marginal Masculinities, *i.e.*, the relation existing between the masculinities of the dominant and subordinate classes and between different ethnic groups, whose role is always granted and authorised by the hegemonic masculinity.

Early studies on masculinity in Italy identify typical traits of the model of hegemonic masculinity in virilism and machismo (Bellassai, 2011), both of which still enjoy wide consensus among men in Italian society. In a country marked by traditionally macho imperialism, virilism has been embodied in the image of the nation throughout the fascist era and well into the 20th century. Indeed, it seems that Italian society itself was built in the image of men (*ibid.*). Masculinity is an ideal model, an abstract image, which does not fully correspond to what individuals are, think, and do in everyday life, but which influences their personality, desires, and even behaviour (Ciccone, 2019).

There are many variations of the ideal model of masculinity in any society, but they are all profoundly influenced by the ideals of virility and masculinity. Virilism has also legitimised a supposed hierarchical superiority of men over women through tradition. Indeed, maintaining this supremacy has long been considered a common concern for all men, regardless of the differences between them. From the 1950s onwards, women became more visible: this was interpreted as a sign of progress, as a sign that tradition could be challenged. Women began to demand greater recognition and rights (*e.g.*, divorce, abortion, etc.), leading to the profound social and cultural upheavals that marked this period.

It was the beginning of what many scholars term the “crisis of masculinity”, *i.e.*, men’s loss of power due to women’s emancipation (Ciccone, 2019). It is considered the reason why men anchor themselves in virilism to perpetuate domination over women. For some scholars, an ever-stiffer hegemonic masculinity exacerbated related phenomena such as misogyny, homophobia, and exaggerated virilism. Male domination had unfolded undisturbed for millennia precisely because masculinity is perceived and internalised as a universal and “unmarked” condition (Rinaldi, 2021).

On the one hand, this situation spawned a men’s movement that advocated for the need to reaffirm the centrality of men in society – a veritable revanchism (Masullo, Iovine, 2020). On the other hand, however, the mid-1970s saw the birth of a modest network of men’s groups known as “consciousness-raising”, which argued that the male gender and sexual role were oppressive and should be changed or abandoned (Ciccone, 2019) and was committed to promoting self-consciousness practices to question patriarchal and sexist models internalised by men. As Ciccone (2001, p. 22) points out, «Inevitably, it was necessary to start from a “gender guilt”, that is, to come to terms with male history – interwoven with violence and the exercise of power – to distance oneself from it and give voice to different needs, and then to return to “one’s gender” by rediscovering and giving it another meaning». Indeed, masculinity studies have added new interpretation lenses for masculinity and its relationship with patriarchy and heterosexism, central aspects of hegemonic masculinity and Italian machismo.

Men's intolerance of patriarchy is evident in numerous aspects of everyday life, such as the need to distance themselves from exaggerated macho masculinity, the possibility of being able to express their feelings and care for their children, their openness to previously demonised sexual practices (think of bisexuality), and the degree of tolerance towards alternative masculinities (e.g., homosexuals). Great impetus has also been given to the reflection that links masculinity with the theme of equal opportunities, the fight against sexism (particularly violence against women), as well as the discrimination suffered by homosexuals, aspects that have made possible an alliance between men and women in the fight against misogyny and homo-bi-transphobia (Corbisiero, Nocenzi, 2022; Corbisiero, Monaco, 2024).

In recent years, many Italian researchers have focused on the re-definition of the concept of masculinity, allowing for alternative models aimed at overcoming the essentialist characteristics of hegemonic masculinity while embracing emotional, relational, caring, and nurturing aspects usually associated with the other gender. Masculine and feminine thus become communicating aspects, common and shared horizons – by both men and women – through which a more authentic sense of self can be constructed, free from gender-related and heteronormative prescriptions (Biemmi, 2023; Ciccone, 2016; Slutskaya *et al.* 2016).

4. Gender Segregation in University Courses in Italy

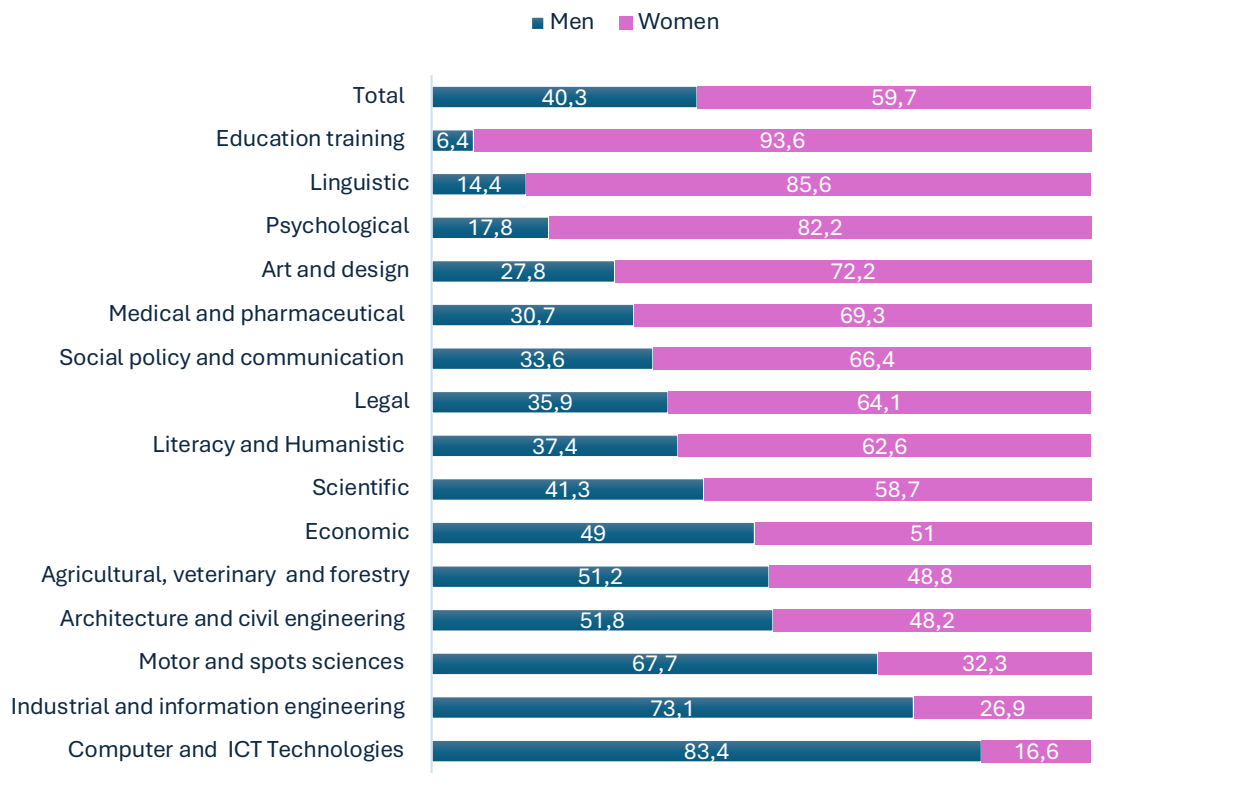
According to the data provided by Almalaurea 2023 on the number of graduates in 2022, the percentage of women graduating from university is around 59.7, *i.e.*, 19.4% more than men, who account for 40.3% of total graduates.

While it is true that, compared to previous generations, women are more present in “typically male” courses and career trajectories, the gap is still evident.

The table 1. below shows that around 83.4% of graduates in ICT subjects, as well as in many STEM disciplines, are male. This trend is reversed in the humanities and education disciplines where 93.6% of graduates are female (Almalaurea, 2023).

Tab.1 Gender differences in graduates by fields of study

Source: Almalaurea Survey on profile Graduates



The choice of which programme to enrol in at university, as well as the career trajectory, highlights the weight that “gender issues” occupy in conditioning contemporary society (Mapelli, Ulivieri Stiozzi, 2012; Biemmi, Leonelli, 2018).

This difference also affects social and wage gaps, as the professions with higher pay and possibilities for professional empowerment are those related to IT and technological innovation, in which women are underrepresented.

Gender segregation in education is blatant when we compare the Italian and average European figures. The Gender Equality Index report, published annually by Eurostat, shows that around 79% of Italian women attended ‘typically female’ university programmes (Primary education, Psychology, etc.) in 2019, compared to 21% of men, a figure among the highest in Europe².

As stated in the introduction, the gap between men and women in the choice of STEM-related university courses could be explained by several factors. Firstly, the persistence of gender stereotypes sedimented and rooted in society leads girls to mistrust their ability to deal with scientific disciplines and boys to avoid those disciplines related to care. Such aspects are clear throughout the school years, from primary to secondary school (Corbisiero, Berritto, 2020).

The gender gap and gender segregation are closely linked to the concept of the “gender cage” (Biemmi, Leonelli, 2018): the set of social and cultural barriers and resistances that individuals encounter concerning their gender. Thus, men also face a series of social and cultural barriers linked to their gender that influence and orient their choices and social status.

It should also not be underestimated how these choices are affected by how young men relate to the main cultural gender models associated with masculinity, the changes linked to the “crisis of masculinity” and/or the “patriarchal masculinist model” and, therefore, how men (reflexively or

² The Gender Gap in STEM disciplines exists across all European countries, although it differs between Scandinavian countries (Sweden, Norway, Iceland, Denmark, and Finland) on one side and other countries on the other, with Bulgaria, France, and Turkey at the bottom (Eurostat, 2020).

otherwise) rethink the meaning of gender distinction in their life decisions (Corbisiero, Nocenzi, 2022).

If research on gender segregation for women has known greater impetus thanks to the feminist movement, which saw the absence of women within the scientific and technological sectors, and their scarce presence at the top of power as an indicator of the persistence of the macho and sexist patriarchal model. Conversely, male segregation has received little attention from scholars³.

Among the few Italian studies available, Biemmi & Leonelli's (2018) research examined how "gender cages" condition men's life paths, showing that the main reasons that the interviewees offer to explain the lack of men's presence in the field of "care" is the persistence of historically rooted cultural and familial prejudices. Once again, the "nature" vs. "culture" dichotomy allows us to explore the meaning attributed by the interviewees to the function of, for example, care and teaching.

As far as the teaching profession is concerned, for example, the traditional idea of teaching as a vocation – or as an educational mission – is closely connected to the concept of *maternage*: teaching is configured as a sort of sublimated place of maternal destiny in which women can employ their "innate" gifts of gentleness, emotionality, solidarity, and altruism to care for, protect, and understand growing children. Working as a teacher thus ends up appearing "unacceptable" for a man since, following a binary gender logic, such characteristics by definition do not belong to him and even risk being detrimental to his personal/social identity (Mapelli, Ulvieri Stiozzi 2012). Another explanation points to the scarce social recognition of professions such as that of teacher, nurse, and social worker, also due to the tasks inherent in them (such as washing, cleaning, feeding, etc.), often considered "degrading" for men but acceptable for women (Ciccione, 2016). Mapelli (2012) also adds the interesting consideration that few young men choose certain subjects and careers because of the lack of adult male role models to inspire them. The case of the teaching profession is exemplary: if a child never meets a male figure during pre-school and primary school, he deduces that it is a profession suitable only for women.

5. Methodology

In light of the above, the present essay aims to analyse the motivations underpinning young men's choice to enrol in university and training courses that lead to a caring profession, particularly BA Primary Education, BA Early Childhood and/or equivalent courses, as well as the main gender models that guide the professional identity of future educators.

The exploratory study started with the following research questions:

- RQ1: What are the main motivations and professional expectations that oriented young people towards university programmes in primary education?
- RQ2: What are the main social representations of the male gender that young men consider when choosing to enrol in a course in primary education?
- RQ3: What were the opinions, reactions, incentives, and resistances of the social micro-systems (family, friends, etc.) when choosing a university programme in primary education?

We adopted the biographical approach for this research. The centrality of life stories is not due to their generalisability, but rather by the capacity this tool has to better explain the micro-sociological and identity processes examined. In particular, this work builds on the definition of "life story" proposed by Atkinson (1998, p. 28), who describes it as a narrative «as complete and honest as possible, which a person chooses to tell about the life they have lived. It is constructed from what they remember of their life and the aspects of it that they want others to know, as a result of an

³ In recent years, scholars have focused more on the theme of "caring masculinities", not only in Italy with the previously mentioned studies by Biemmi and Leonelli (2018) and Biemmi (2023) but also internationally, such as the works by Scambor, Jauk, Gärtner and Bernacchi (2019) and by Bergmann, Wojnicka, Scambor (2013).

interview guided by another person». What distinguishes this definition is the centrality given to the ‘biographical pact’, *i.e.*, the balance between the completeness and honesty of the narrative and its inevitable partiality and discretion.

The data collection phase through semi-structured biographical interviews lasted approximately 9 months, from April 2023 to January 2024, and involved 30 young men between the ages of 20 and 32, with a male gender identity – or perceived as such from an identity self-determination perspective. The interviewees are enrolled in three-year degree courses in primary education or early years at two universities in Campania: the University of Salerno and the Suor Orsola Benincasa University.

The following **table. 2** summarises the socio-biographic characteristics of the interviewees involved in the research⁴.

Tab.2 Socio-biographical characteristics of the interviewees

N°	Age	Degree	Year	University	Place of residence
1	23	Education Training	3	Salerno	Salerno
2	24	Education Training	3	Salerno	Caserta
3	21	Primary Education	2	Salerno	Naples
4	20	Education Training	1	Salerno	Salerno
5	21	Education Training	2	Salerno	Salerno
6	19	Education Training	1	Salerno	Avellino
7	23	Primary Education	3	Salerno	Salerno
8	21	Education Training	2	Salerno	Salerno
9	22	Education Training	3	Salerno	Salerno
10	23	Education Training	3	Salerno	Avellino
11	22	Education Training	2	Salerno	Salerno
12	21	Education Training	2	Salerno	Salerno
13	22	Primary Education	2	Salerno	Caserta
14	23	Education Training	3	Salerno	Salerno
15	21	Education Training	3	Salerno	Salerno

⁴ As a rough equivalent, *Laurea in scienze dell’educazione* is a BA in Education Training, *Laurea in scienze della formazione primaria* is a BA in Primary Education.

16	20	Education Training	1	Suor Orsola Napoli	Naples
17	21	Education Training	2	Suor Orsola Napoli	Naples
18	28	Education Training	2	Suor Orsola Napoli	Naples
20	32	Primary Education	3	Suor Orsola Napoli	Caserta
21	25	Primary Education	2	Suor Orsola Napoli	Naples
22	21	Education Training	2	Suor Orsola Napoli	Naples
23	20	Education Training	2	Suor Orsola Napoli	Naples
24	19	Education Training	1	Suor Orsola Napoli	Naples
25	20	Education Training	1	Suor Orsola Napoli	Naples
26	22	Education Training	3	Suor Orsola Napoli	Naples
27	20	Primary Education	2	Suor Orsola Napoli	Naples
28	22	Education Training	2	Suor Orsola Napoli	Naples
29	27	Education Training	2	Suor Orsola Napoli	Caserta
30	28	Education Training	3	Suor Orsola Napoli	Latina

6. The Main Reasons Behind the Choice of Education-related Programmes for Young Men: Between Second Choices, Socialisation Processes and Personal Preferences.

The analysis of the interviews highlighted three macro-motivations orienting young men towards a profession in Primary and Early Years education.

In the first place, it is in some cases a secondary or alternative choice. Generally, the first choice is a BA in psychology (capped in many Italian universities) followed by primary education and, lastly, early years practitioner. Two main reasons often lead young men to divert their course choice: failing to pass the admission test to the psychology course or logistical and economic issues, as psychology BAs are often in large and expensive cities such as Rome, Bologna, Padua and Milan. Frequently, enrolling in a BA in education aims at obtaining credits to subsequently enrol (after hopefully passing the test the following year) in a psychology or primary education BA. It appears that the choice of psychology is based on its association with the medical sphere, which makes it more prestigious than the other two options in the eyes of the young men. For what concerns a BA in primary education (both as first and second choice) the centrality of job opportunities is the core motivation, as this degree qualifies holders for teaching throughout Primary school (P1 to P5, in Italy).

I chose a degree in education because I didn't get into the psychology course. I think I will try again next year. So I can't really tell you my educational model, as I see myself as a future psychologist. I was always very attracted to psychology and understanding people. Educational science was an easier test and so I passed it. [...] I tried in Rome but I didn't get in, in the meantime I'll take common courses like psychology, sociology and pedagogy and then we'll see [G. 23 years old, Salerno].

A second macro-motivation that emerges from the interviews stems from processes of anticipatory socialisation to the profession of educator, especially if the respondents had a role model (a professional educator, a community volunteer, or a teacher) and even more so if they did extra-curricular activities in voluntary associations or third sector organisations operating in their communities (Biemmi, Leonelli, 2018). The inclination towards a degree in early years or primary education is a natural progression that allows them to exploit the expertise gained in these contexts.

«I enrolled late at university, I used to work in a supermarket. Then I started volunteering in a centre for disabled young people and I fell in love with the work [...] I felt useful and alive». [L., 27 years old, Caserta].

A third motivational macro-category refers to personal preferences and psychological aspects: some respondents choose a BA in primary education because they feel they have no particular inclinations and skills for other disciplines – especially scientific ones. Others point to personal traits, such as listening skills, empathy, and in particular love for children.

«I've always wanted to be a primary teacher, I have been playing pretend since I was a little boy [...] I also like children, a lot, and so I like being able to work with them [...] It's a dream coming true» [I, 21, Salerno].

7. The Contexts of Gender Socialisation: The Role of the Family and Proximity Networks

The interviews reveal the influence of the family, particularly the parents' educational style. While it is true that some parents support their children's choices, for some opting for a course in primary education raises concerns about future job placement, rather than unfulfilled expectations about prevailing gender models.

«I want to join the public sector, I mean, I have to get busy, I can't be a burden to my parents or worse not be autonomous or not be able to think of a future or raise a family. My father already says that compared to my brother who is enrolled in biomedical engineering, at the Biomedical Campus in Rome, I made a wrong choice» [I, 22, Naples].

The interviewees often mention the equal division of domestic labour between male and female members of their families. However, the very examples they bring, in distancing themselves from the traditional gender division of care tasks, are often characterised by a lack of reflexivity, as in the following case, where the respondent refers to a sector (that of the other catering) characterised by gender segregation in top positions, generally occupied by men (Abbatecola, 2023)

«For me it was a serene choice, it was not a painful one also because I grew up with an idea, shared by my parents, that jobs are not male or female, but are done well or badly. My father's job is also something women can do, in fact, if you think about it it is a female thing, he is a cook. [...] I think that in 2023 it is still not possible to distinguish male jobs from female jobs» [C., 23, Avellino].

From a social point of view (friends, colleagues, and the wider family network) the interviews did not reveal any forms of gender stigmatisation suffered as a result of the interviewees' degree choices. On the contrary, once again, the social capital possessed seems to support their socialisation into the educational professions, especially if the network of friendships overlaps with that of the voluntary associations in which they carry out their extracurricular activities. Despite the support received from family and proximity networks, however, the respondents do not exclude *a priori* the possibility that in some professional fields sexism is still a problem, particularly in feminised fields such as early years practitioner or primary school teacher.

«Today the figure of the male primary school teacher is coming back, despite this I think some parents don't really look at this well [...] in short I don't feel I can exclude it, especially in the private sector. I believe that in an interview, between a female nursery school teacher and a male one, they would always choose the female, for image» [A, 24, Caserta].

This finding is also confirmed by the following excerpt, which highlights that the choice of early years practitioner is considered also by most of them as a typically female profession.

«If I think about it, in the nursery curriculum boys are almost absent». [F, 22, Salerno].

It could be hypothesised that typically feminised spheres, such as teaching infants and young children, are developing specific areas that emphasize characteristics essentially associated with masculinity (for example, physical and psychological toughness). Some areas, such as early years practitioners, continue to be far from young men's choices, also because male gender identity is not problematised, insofar as they have incorporated the idea that associates this area with women and maternity.

8. Models of Masculinity in the Education Professions: from Empathetic Men to New Forms of Alliance

Men do not always reflect on the impact of gender on their life choices, also because masculinity entails forms of privilege that do not limit their actions – unlike women (Rinaldi, 2021). In a reality where cisgender, white, heterosexual men sit atop the gender and sexual stratification pyramid, the privileges of masculinity often appear natural and unproblematic. As confirmation, the interviewees, despite being invested in highly feminised studies, did not perceive any forms of limitations around them suggesting that their gender was a problem. Therefore, the exploration of the masculinity patterns prevalent among students enrolled in early years and primary education degrees took place only at the invitation of the interviewers, who were seeking to bring out aspects mostly taken for granted. This was not the case for all participants, especially for those who had to contend with prejudices and stereotypes surrounding homosexual masculinity. Indeed, they seemed to be the ones most prepared for this type of reflection, insofar as they had to confront the performative aspects implied in the model of hegemonic masculinity (Dordoni, 2022; Fidolini, 2017). The respondents were all well aware that traditional macho figures are nowadays unacceptable, with their often stereotyped exaltation of masculinity based on the cult of strength, aggressiveness, and possessiveness in (strictly heterosexual) relationships. Indeed, interviews have also been a useful tool to problematise and discuss the changes that have taken place in gender relations.

The interviewees interpret masculinity in terms of a “traditional macho masculinity”, which for most coincides with the negative representation nowadays associated with widespread prevarication and violence towards both women and homosexuals. The majority of them wished to distance themselves from such a male figure, considered largely outdated. However, many still felt the need to assert their

heterosexuality, thus attempting to disavow the cliché associating alternative models of masculinity with homosexual masculinity, understood as a monolithic, feminised, and therefore subordinate masculinity.

«I am not like other men. I would like to point out, but only for the purposes of research and not for any form of prejudice or social discrimination, that I am heterosexual. And yet, I have always been different from the typical male, I am not the strong, dominant, ambitious, shrewd and unscrupulous male who only wants to achieve his goals, I have always been thoughtful [...] I love philosophy and I respect everyone and everything. Indeed diversity for me is an absolute value, no one is superior to anyone else» [L., 23, Salerno].

The discussion on the “traditional machismo” model of masculinity is mostly based on the interviewees’ distancing themselves from the psychological traits usually associated with it (ostentation, aggressiveness, overpowering others, virilism, etc.) by highlighting characteristics positively associated with the dimension of care, such as listening and sensitivity. This model of alternative masculinity, defined as “empathetic man” (Masullo, Coppola 2021), seems to be shared by many respondents. The research does not shed light yet on whether these attitudes precede the choice of care-related paths or, on the contrary, the latter has determined the need to recover psychological characteristics now positively associated with the new forms of emerging masculinity

«I have always felt different. I have always been inclined to listen, with family, and friends, they can always count on me. It felt natural to make this choice because I felt the need to relate to people with real problems [...]. This sensitivity of mine costs me more on a personal level than with others, indeed I must say that people have always appreciated my being different from the stereotype of the common man» [F., 21 years old, Naples].

Being an Empathetic Man does not, however, necessarily mean having elaborated a reflexivity capable of distancing oneself from an essentialist view of gender, or placing it within the broader question of inequalities and equal opportunities (Ottaviano, Persico, 2023). This type of attitude, which today constitutes a bridge between the feminist tradition and the “critical studies on men and masculinities”, emerged in two cases of boys who had experienced forms of devaluation, demasculinisation, and devirilization in relational contexts such as the family and the peer group. The need to find answers to this oppression prompted them to delve more deeply into these issues, allowing them to link the problem of educational gender segregation to broader sexism. According to the interviewees, sexism is still all too present in Italian culture and generates gender inequality and a lack of equal opportunities. This model, defined here as “the alliance” critically discusses gender cages, made up of the main stereotypes associated with men and women, conscious of their impact on the collective consciousness or in the labour market, particularly towards women.

Sexism is rife in our country, and what you speak of shows that there is still much to be done for gender equality, and this is felt by those of us who aspire to do this work, but I think especially by women who are almost excluded from all places of power, and paid a pittance compared to men. [...] However, a lot is being done today to encourage this, but I don’t feel that men are in any way encouraged to be educators. So I think the problem is right upstream, in the culture of this country that is still too sexist [G., 21, Salerno].

9. Conclusions.

The analysis so far has brought to light the main motivations that young men put forward in explaining their choice to enrol in a BA primary education or similar degrees, and how these relate to a professional context that has always been feminised.

The research also sought to understand the imaginary that young men have developed regarding these topics, particularly their models of masculinity, given that this could be challenged to the extent that the educational professions require characteristics not positively associated with the model of hegemonic masculinity. The respondents seem to disapprove of said model and consider it anachronistic also because of its effects on the relationship with women and with genders and sexualities considered subordinate, such as homosexuals.

For the interviewees, the model of hegemonic masculinity seems to be embodied in the “traditional macho masculinity”. The opposite model is that of the “Empathetic men”, which embodies certain characteristics necessary for the work of the educator, such as a propensity to listen, a sense of care, etc., confirming the idea that «care is a human dimension and not an (exclusively) feminine quality» (Ottaviano, Persico 2023, p. 85). The analysis, therefore, highlights a certain circularity between certain psychological characteristics (far from those proposed by the model of machismo masculinity) and the programme choice: the former could determine the latter, or the latter can lead young men to rethink how to perform their gender (Bernacchi, Di Grigoli, 2023).

The vast majority of interviewees lack an “alternative” masculine culture that distances itself from an essentialist view of gender, beyond mere rhetoric about traditional machismo-type masculinity. Moreover, the absence of reflexivity does not allow us to understand how this model of masculinity reproduces itself, its links with patriarchy and heterosexism (for example, when the interviewees justify their model of masculinity by declaring their heterosexuality), nor does it allow us to fully examine male privilege in all its forms. However, some respondents manage to take this reflection beyond mere identity aspects by recognising the damage that patriarchy wrecks on masculinities in terms of social obligations and expectations and by a sexist culture that produces social inequalities for both men and women.

This latter group advocates for the need for an alliance with women, who are considered the main victims of this situation. This “critical” orientation, linked today to the extensive literature proposed by the “critical studies on men and masculinities”, emerges from those training in the educational professions, as one among the possible contexts (Fidolini, 2023) of the educational gender segregation, in which young people come to terms with social disregard by having to elaborate and rethink the gender order and its consequences on the life chances of men and women.

Given the exploratory nature of the research, the approach employed means that the result are not, unfortunately, representative of the general population. We focused on two realities within the Campania region, although the degrees examined are present also elsewhere. Indeed, one should not underestimate the weight of some typical structural components of the area examined that may affect the choice of one degree or the other. Additionally, this choice is inextricably linked to secondary school attainment and the practical feasibility of reaching certain university realities (e.g., a psychology degree), including due to structural limits (economic, political, and cultural ones). Therefore, it will be essential in the future to explore the topic of educational gender segregation with more complex epistemological and methodological approaches (e.g., mixed methods), to analyse in greater depth the relationship between subjective propensities and the influences attributable to structural factors.

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