

The best for the baby: future fathers in the shadow of maternal care

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1. Introduction

Italian families have changed considerably in recent decades. Young Italians stay longer in the parental home, postpone marriage, have their first child later in life and have fewer children in comparison with previous generations (Aassave, *et al.* 2002; Iacovu, 2002). These shifts have been intertwined with women's rising educational attainment and participation in the labor market. Although female participation is still below the European average, dual-earner families prevail in the northern regions of the country, where 60% to 70% of mothers with very young children are employed (Istat, 2011). Women's employment patterns not only vary strongly by geographical area but also by educational level. Against these changes, the chapter aims to illustrate how social constructions of fatherhood and motherhood relate to plans for sharing care and paid work among dual-earner couples living in Greater Turin, expecting their first child. The couples' perceptions of "what's best of the child" are used as a lens through which the partly competing forces of Italian family policy and dominant gender culture are managed, at a time when the Italian labour market suffers from the 2007 economic crisis.

Evaluation of couples' main ideas about parenthood and their planned strategies to balance work and family life, necessitated a review of how the event of motherhood and fatherhood contributed to the "doing and undoing" of gender among couples in relation to the distributions of economic resources (see chapter 1 in this volume). In our analyses, we thus paid particular attention to the role couples attributed to their financial resources (income and job-related benefits), social resources (family and social network), social policy and work environment in shaping the nature, scope and quality of parental (leave policy) and non-parental childcare (out-of-home services) arrangements.

2. The couples

The analyses presented in this chapter draw on data from a qualitative study which was conducted in Turin and the surrounding area, consisting of 42 in-depth interviews of 21 dual-earner couples, aged 26 to 45 (mostly 30 to 39) in the period 2010-2012.

Before illustrating questions and results of the qualitative analysis, it is worth looking at the socio-economic characteristics and features of individual couples. Most respondents were university graduate professionals. Thus, the socio-economic variability of the sample was rather limited, the majority being employed in the service sector, i.e. teachers, researchers, administrators, social workers, nurses, technicians, lawyers. Most respondents held unstable jobs that offered low levels of financial and social security. The couples concerned experienced a mix of standard and "non-standard" employment¹, or a mix of non-standard and self-employment. Those in non-standard employment and/or the self-employed might not be able (by law or in practice) to take maternity and parental leave.

At the time of the interview, about half of the couples reported sharing paid and unpaid work equally or in a "fair" way. With few exceptions the sharing of domestic work had not been subject to bargaining. We labeled this group "equality oriented". One third of the couples reported sharing housework equally while the female partner displayed lower job commitment than the male partner.

¹ Not permanent contracts.

We labeled these couples “neo-traditional”. We defined the remaining couples as “traditional” because they reported a high level of gender segregation in housework and in the labor market.

3. Beliefs, representations, social norms involved in motherhood and fatherhood

The transition to parenthood is often accompanied by a turn to traditional gender roles (see chapter 1 in this volume). Our data indicate that this turn may be preceded by a process in which parents-to-be appraise their old and new social roles. According to our respondents, experiencing pregnancy, and approaching childbirth² set in motion a process of re-considering and re-defining their own specific part within the couple, altering personal identity. At the time of interview, couples were between the second and third trimester of pregnancy, a sort of “middle ground” among the “old” social role (as worker, husband, wife, partner or son or daughter) and the “new” role as parent. Although the couples were going through a similar transition due to the imminent birth, respondents were facing this process of redefining the roles from different trajectories.

Some couples, such as Patrizia and Paolo, whose most frequent words for describing the period of pregnancy were “*profound change*”, “*adaptation*” and “*strong emotions*”.

They were among the couples equality oriented and both reported being really oriented to share the domestic burden and the care for the baby. Both desired this baby intensely but pregnancy, even if planned, appeared to undermine Patrizia’s gender identity. Describing her emotions about pregnancy, Patrizia talked about a “*great upheaval*”, which also affected her identity as a woman:

There has been an upheaval in our lives, our lifestyles, and, for me, in a way, also an upheaval of my identity because, as a woman, apart from my body changing, which is just temporary, I feel as if my own identity were actually changing. /So it's a good kind of upheaval, and very exciting, though at times it can definitely be quite overwhelming. (Patrizia, expert on planning youth policies, age 32)

Uno stravolgimento della nostra vita, degli stili di vita, e per me anche uno stravolgimento un po' di identità perché come donna sento, al di là del corpo che cambia e che comunque è provvisorio, senti proprio che cambia la tua identità, ecco. /Quindi è un bello stravolgimento/, molto emozionante e ogni tanto mette anche un po' in crisi, sicuramente. (Patrizia, esperta di programmazione politiche giovanili, 32)

Paolo and Patrizia seemed very similar in the way in which they dealt with their future parental roles. Both of them were eager to become parents but they were aware that this event would mean a drastic change of their identities. For Paolo, the transition to parenthood was characterized by ambivalent emotions. On the one hand he felt very happy about becoming a father. On the other hand the sight of becoming a father appeared to frighten him:

The closer it gets to the time of birth, the greater the feelings of anxiety, apprehension, and fear become, right? And throughout the period [of pregnancy] there are times when I think cheerfully: ‘Well, that's cool!! I'm going to be a father!’ [said happily], and others when I think: ‘OH MY GOD, I'M GOING TO BE A FATHER!’ [said in a terrified voice] ... that is to say, my emotions are constantly going from one extreme to another. (Paolo, municipal council worker, 36)

Più si avvicina (la nascita), più le dimensioni invece di ansia, di timore, di paura aumentano, no? e in tutto il periodo ci sono momenti in cui passi dal “/beh, che figo! Diventerò papà!” *allegramente*) al /OH MIO DIO, DIVENTERÒ PAPA!/" (spaventato)... cioè è un costante fare avanti e indietro tra emozioni differenti.

² Most couples interviewed were in the 7th to 9th month of pregnancy. A smaller group of couples was interviewed when the woman was in the 4th or 5th month.

Paolo was very involved with the transition: he reflected over and over about his feelings when the baby would be born and he asked himself how he would change as person. Talking about Patrizia and her preparation to the birth, he seemed largely conscious of the deep work on identity reconstruction that she was making. According to Paolo, this change went along with the physical transformation and involved different levels of reflection: how Patrizia imagined the couple's life with the baby, how her personal and professional identity would change, how she would be able to be in contact with the different parts of herself - woman, worker, mother - after the baby's birth.

The anxiety about the imminent fatherhood expressed by Paolo was a common emotion for a group of fathers who, while being involved in the pregnancy, placed greater emphasis (than other groups of fathers) on the aspect of *concern for future responsibilities*. These respondents claimed their happiness about the forthcoming event but they experienced the transition with a greater sense of anxiety, mainly because they were wondering whether they would be able to handle their relationship with their son/daughter. Gabriele, for example, stated:

How am I feeling? Better, now. It's been very tiring. It's been a time when I've questioned myself continuously, somewhat unconsciously, about what my experiences have been and the things I experienced both when I was eight, ten, fifteen years old, and my relationship with my parents. It's been a few months of/intensive psychotherapy/ (laughing) but it happened naturally. It's not as if I deliberately thought about them, but my experiences, things I've done came to mind [...] There are so many questions, there really are. I want to be a good father. I believe being a good father is more difficult than being a good husband, precisely because it is a mutual decision that has been made.
(Gabriele, high school teacher, 36)

Come mi sento? Adesso meglio. È stato molto faticoso. È stato un periodo nel quale io ho fatto un'analisi continua, in maniera inconsapevole, di quelli che sono stati sia i miei vissuti, sia delle cose che avevo vissuto quando avevo otto, dieci, quindici anni sia del rapporto con i miei. Ho vissuto un po' di mesi in cui /ho fatto una psicoterapia intensiva/ (ridendo) ma succedeva in maniera naturale non è che mi mettessi a pensarci però mi venivano alla mente cose vissute, cose fatte. [...] Ci sono tanti interrogativi, ci sono. Il desiderio è quello di essere un buon padre. Secondo me essere un buon padre è più difficile che essere un buon marito proprio per una dimensione di scelta reciproca che c'è stata. *(Gabriele, insegnante di scuola superiore, 36)*

In the remainder of the interview, Gabriele reported being worried for several reasons. He was scared to not be able to understand his child (why he cries, what is the best for him) or communicate with him as he grows up. In particular, Gabriele appeared to be scared to make mistakes with his child ("My wife can tell me if I am wrong but my child won't be able to do it").

Moreover, the emotional turmoil was particularly intense for couples to whom the pregnancy came a little unexpectedly, perhaps earlier than planned, during an unstable employment situation, or while a change in job career was in progress. In these cases couples reported amazement and a mixture of disbelief, anxiety and fear about how to manage the care of the baby correctly. Different from the feelings described by Paolo and Patrizia, anxiety depended in these cases on the perceived lack of material and relational resources.

For some, it was a real crisis. This is the case of Gaia and Giacomo.

Gaia discovered she was pregnant much sooner than she had planned, at a time when her partner had no job security because he was working without a proper contract:

Let's just say that things were tragic at the beginning for me, because right from the start, we had said that we should have children. We said: "No! we have to become young parents!" I would say: "Yes, we're young so even in two or three years' time; and then one day/my period didn't come [...] I spent the first two, three days either crying or laughing because I didn't know whether to ... I'd say, "No! I'm too young!"
(Gaia, hairdresser, 27)

Diciamo che l'inizio per me è stato tragico perché abbiamo parlato da subito che dovevamo avere dei bambini. Dicevamo: "no! dobbiamo diventare genitori giovani!" Dicevo: "sì, sì giovani siamo quindi va

bene anche tra due, tre anni e poi un giorno /questo ciclo non arriva [...]Io i primi due, tre giorni sono rimasta un po' così tra pianti e sorrisi perché non sapevo come... dicevo "no! sono giovane! (Gaia, parrucchiera, 27)

In the words of Gaia, who had lost her mother some years before, different moods intertwined, indicating alternating phases of adaptation. On the one hand, she did not want to leave her job because she liked it. At the same time she knew that she would perhaps be "forced" to quit, because she could not count on grandparents as carers and she did not see alternatives, given the couple's financial constraints. On the other hand, Gaia was widely aware of the prevailing gender norms: "It is right that the mother acts as the mother and father acts as the father, that is... the roles can not be reversed" especially not during the first year of the child's life.

Giacomo, however, did not seem to know Gaia's ambivalence. He tended to minimize her feelings of delusion and confusion. He was very involved in the birth of the baby and he thought that this happiness was shared also by his wife:

We are very happy now, of course. ... We've already bought some things for the child. We are doing very well [though this transition]. I'm taking it very well, in fact, I can't wait. I'm really calm. I'm ready. I'm ready to change diapers... I am ready to do anything, I'm not afraid. (Giacomo, gardener, 27)

Siamo molto contenti adesso, certo. Abbiamo già comprato delle cose alla bambina. La stiamo vivendo benissimo. Io la vivo benissimo, anzi non vedo l'ora. Sono proprio tranquillo. Sono pronto. Sono pronto a cambiare i pannolini... Sono pronto a fare qualsiasi cosa, non ho paura. (Giacomo, giardiniere, 27)

The ambivalence expressed by Gaia is detectable also in the narratives of a minority of future fathers, who still felt overwhelmed by an event that occurred suddenly, and at a time when job prospects were unclear. In these cases we can detect men's identification with the traditional representation of fathers as principal providers. These men felt threatened because their job conditions were precarious and they feared not being able to be good breadwinners. According to Luca, for example, he was experiencing rather complicated times, being out of work and not thinking he could spend all his energy on his wife's pregnancy. This is how he talked about his emotions related to the idea of becoming a father:

We were not planning on having a baby but when we heard, we decided to keep it. It took a while for me to realize what that meant. She realized it immediately but I'd say, "but I'm going to be a dad!" (Pause) How am I feeling? /I don't know/ [annoyed]. I'm happy... I'm a little scared about not being able to find work... [pause] Anyway, I think it'll be fine. I'm taking it one day at a time. Since it's such an important thing, whenever I start thinking about it and about when he/she is growing up... it really doesn't solve anything. (Luca, waiter, 29)

Noi non lo abbiamo cercato il bambino però quando lo abbiamo saputo abbiamo deciso di tenerlo. È passato un po' di tempo che io mi rendessi conto di questa cosa. Lei si è resa conto subito ma io dico "ma sto diventando papà!" [pausa] Come mi sento? /Non lo so/ [infastidito]. Sono contento... Ho un po' di paura se non riesco a trovare lavoro... (pausa) Comunque penso che andrà bene. Vivo alla giornata. Essendo una cosa così grande quando mi metto a pensare lui e quando crescerà... cioè non risolvo niente. (Luca, cameriere, 29)

Informants who had planned the pregnancy for some time, those who had been trying to have a baby for a while or who thought they were too old to have one, in contrast, reported greater peace of mind. In these couples the female accounts reflect the idea of maternity as an "achievement", a realization of self as a woman, or as the "time to become a better person" and to discover new skills. For instance, Daniela, manager in a non-profit society with a full time employment contract, used to be absorbed with her job but explained that her priorities were changed due to her becoming a mother.

I think I feel good. For now, I have no big worries... [...] today I'm doing pretty well. I'm glad, selfishly speaking, of my own life experience in life because I'm living this as an invaluable opportunity to improve as a person, to get to know other aspects of myself. (*Daniela, vice president of a non-profit company, 37*)

Mi sento bene credo. Per ora non ho grosse ansie... [...] ad oggi la sto vivendo bene. Sono contenta egoisticamente parlando come mia esperienza di vita perché la vivo anche come occasione preziosa per migliorare come persona, per conoscersi altri aspetti di se stessi. (*Daniela, vicepresidente cooperativa sociale, 37*)

Daniela had decided for a physiological water birth because she believed that this kind of childbirth resulted in a more relaxed, less painful experience that promoted the reciprocal attachment among mother and baby. The same mood was shared by her husband, Davide, researcher with a full time contract in a company providing environmental advices. He was very involved in his future role as a father but – unlike Paolo - he did not have particular fears or doubts and – unlike Terenzio – he did have a stable employment career.

I feel good, happy, a little impatient. [...]. I'm not too frightened about it in that /I feel/ (firmly) quite convinced about being able to understand what will need to be done because I'm sure about this decision of having a child and becoming a father. (*Davide, reasearcher, 42*)

Mi sento bene, contento, impaziente un po'. [...]. La cosa non mi spaventa molto nel senso che /mi sento/ (con decisione) abbastanza convinto di riuscire a capire quello che ci sarà da fare anche perché sono convinto di questa scelta di avere un figlio, diventare padre. (*Davide, ricercatore, 42*)

Davide's account of happiness and impatience was shared by many of the fathers-to-be. They reported feeling *happy, involved and basically ready* to deal with the transition. In this group, some respondents had hoped to become fathers for some time, and so they had already thought about their role as fathers or fathers-to-be before the pregnancy. These fathers considered the birth of their child as the ideal completion of the couple. They spoke about the need for the father to create a bond with the child, to get to know the child and learn to take care of her/him. Generally, these men had in common that they had reached a certain degree of security in their employment position; sometimes with good career prospects or improvement prospects.

Davide, moreover, repeatedly emphasized the great preparation and commitment of his wife on the issues concerning the pregnancy and the importance for Daniela to have a natural and physiological birth (*The worst that could happen to Daniela, according to Davide, was a cesarean section*). The body's transformation, inner change and high emotions generated by pregnancy were processes leading Daniela to rediscover her womanhood and to place more emphasis on the biological changes that made the experience different for her as compared to her partner:

With respect to the changes that pregnancy causes in women, it's really about listening to your body, and trying to find those skills that women have always innately had, but which they have lost somehow. (*Daniela, vice president of a non-profit company, 37*)

Rispetto alle trasformazioni che la gravidanza porta nella donna, è proprio un porsi all'ascolto del proprio corpo, cercare di riacquisire quelle competenze che sono connaturate secondo me nella donna e che un po' si sono perse. (*Daniela, vicepresidente cooperativa sociale, 37*)

As in Spanish, Polish and Czech case (see chapters 9, 10 and 11), the physical experience of pregnancy seemed to relate to a process of *naturalization of gender differences*.

The pregnancy seemed to result in a mother's special knowledge and ability to respond to the baby's needs, a consciousness that was often considered as an inner instinct of women, connected with the experience of carrying the baby.

Whatever the trajectory in which the pregnancy was carried on, all mothers-to-be were very involved in the process that they were experiencing and had tried to prepare in various ways. From

classic antenatal courses in public hospitals and clinics, to private courses run by midwives, yoga courses designed specifically for couples expecting a child. Mothers-to-be reported reading a lot and searching the internet, the latter often being the main source of knowledge on pregnancy and childbirth for fathers-to-be. Apart from the concerns and emotions of fathers-to-be, the prevailing behavior was to take action only on specific requests from their partners. The prevalent idea was that, after all, the ultimate expert of process was the woman. Only a minority of fathers became very involved. They were generally very eager to take part in ante-natal classes for fathers, read a lot and talked at length with their partner and maybe attended private courses in preparation for childbirth. These men were oriented towards analyzing themselves, the relationship with their partners and to reflect on the bond they would have with the baby.

The remaining group's attitude was one of "*waiting to see what happen*". They had attended the pre-birth courses, read up specifically but tended to wait for the event to actually happen. In these discourses the reflection about the necessity to create a bond with the baby was less explored.

Basically, none of the mothers-to-be complained about any lack of involvement from their partner³. On the contrary, their attending the pre-birth course or getting involved in the topics addressed in the course, was regarded by many as unexpected, pleasant and a sign of sharing.

I think it was nice that, even when he couldn't come – also because perhaps fathers weren't allowed – in the evening, he would always read his notes or we'd read them together. (*Rachele, researcher, 33*)

È stato carino, secondo me, che anche quando non è potuto venire – anche perché magari i papà non potevano venire – la sera ha letto sempre gli appunti o li abbiamo letti insieme. (*Rachele, ricercatrice, 33*)

The structure of classic pre-birth courses contributed to the differentiation between the roles of men and women during pregnancy: most hospital-run courses taken by respondents involved fathers-to-be in the final part of the course. In terms of organizing the practical aspects (dealing with the child's clothes, preparing the room, buying the things needed to take care of the child), there was a certain degree of gender specialization. Expectant mothers were responsible for finding materials and, in particular, preparing clothes. The fathers were involved in the practical work needed to arrange the bedroom or areas of the home to be dedicated to the baby.

4. Plans for caring for the baby

For the time after childbirth, couples had a single reference model, i.e. the baby should be with the mother, particularly during the first few months and preferably for the whole of the first year. None of the couples suggested that the roles of fathers and mothers were similar or interchangeable during this period. The prevailing idea was that of specialization, with the first few months dedicated to the bonding between mother and child.

In our interviews, motherhood and fatherhood were conceptualised differently. The traditional model of complementary roles continued to predominate.

For some couples, the element of specialization was slightly less rigid, but in these cases, when male respondents described how they dealt with childcare, they defined themselves (and were defined by their partner) as male mothers ("*mammo*"), almost as if there were no room in the male identity for taking full responsibility of childcare practices.

For instance, Fabiola described her husband's future behaviour after the baby's birth as follows:

He can also become a baby-daddy (or mammo) (laughs). Yes, it might be that, due to employment problems, he will spend a little more time [with the baby], and I'll spend a bit less, that could happen. (*Fabiola, teacher, 34*)

³ The only respondent whose partner was less enthusiastically involved in the pregnancy immediately justified her partner by saying, "*Well, he's more of a man, he shows things in a different way*" [Marta]

Lui può fare anche il mammo (ride). Sì, potrebbe capitare che per problemi lavorativi lui si dedichi un po' di più e io un po' di meno, potrebbe accadere sì. (*Fabiola, insegnante, 34*)

A very similar expression was used by Luciano, talking about the consequences of his wife's return to work:

I wouldn't have any problem [...] finding alternative ways, [...], in fact, my secret dream is to become a "baby-daddy" and therefore be able to stay at home all day.

Io non avrei nessun problema a [...] trovare delle vie alternative, ecco, [...], anzi, il mio sogno segreto è fare il mammo e quindi stare a casa tutto il giorno.

Luciano, 33 years old, bank employee, is an interesting example of a male identity in transition, with elements of tradition and innovation. On the one hand Luciano was not among those interested in sharing housework with his wife on equal terms. He nevertheless expressed a desire to become a hands-on father. In the following quote, Luciano talked about a friend who had recently become a father and did not change nappies himself, but assisted his partner while she did. This kind of "subsidiary" role bothered Luciano a little: "*I mean, I want a slightly more active role, but that's another story; and then I'd like my partner to have her own commitments, but only because, selfishly, I also want to take care of this little being who's just arrived*". Luciano expressed the wish to realize his ideal by means of working less ("My will is to reduce the work activity"), but he also expressed awareness that his work place was not ready to support unconventional fatherhood. Moreover, he emphasized his current role as main earner, implying that taking parental leave would reduce couple's income drastically.

In other couples an ambivalent attitude toward their future roles after childbirth was detectable. For instance Rachele was very involved in the preparation of her PhD thesis and only recently she had had the time to think about the baby's birth and her role as a mother. For Rachele the work career was important, she wouldn't renounce to it but she expressed awareness of not being able to maintain the same pace of work. According to her, her choice to become a mother could influence her career possibilities. At the same time Raniero was convinced that the father had to take care of the baby as well ("*absurd that a father is incapable of changing a baby's nappy on his own or giving him/her the bottle when it's time.*") but that it was not opportune for him to take parental leave. Raniero had just recently returned to his work place after a temporary layoff period.

A few of the fathers-to-be seemed ready for an involvement in care, but *in the shadow of maternal care*. They appeared not to have "words" for talking about it. Above all they did not feel legitimated to assume a new identity as a caring father. The Italian narratives document quite a different construction of fatherhood from the Dutch narratives, where men insisted on "taking care of the baby in their way", in a "masculine" way (see chapter 6).

We interpret the Italian narratives as an initial sign of a new fatherhood ideal. These representations include all elements of ambivalence in this transition: men and women both agree that the father could provide care for the baby (temporarily and in case of need), while both think that the care needs to be provided in a "mothering" way.

The mother's presence was considered necessary, fundamental and best for the infant, especially since all couples believed in breastfeeding as much as possible. The father's presence was often thought of more as a support role, especially during the breastfeeding months when the mother-child relationship was considered essentially symbiotic.

For example, Davide talked about how he imagined family life immediately after birth:

In the first months of life, in the first year of life, even compared to what I've read, the father is a kind of super-waiter who has to do everything (laughs) because the child needs to be with its mother and the mother has to focus on the child alone. So we'll see how it goes, we'll see what needs to be done..." (*Davide, researcher, 42*)

Nei primi mesi di vita, nel primo anno di vita, anche rispetto a quello che ho letto, il papà è una sorta di supercameriere che deve fare tutto (ride) perché la bimba ha bisogno di rimanere con la mamma e la mamma si deve concentrare solo sul bambino quindi vedremo come sarà, vedremo quello che ci sarà da fare... (Davide, ricercatore, 42)

Only four fathers intended to apply for parental leave, whereas two said they would take paid vacation time off. More than half the fathers planned on taking a few days off work. The Italian fathers that we interviewed were different from those interviewed in Spain (compare chapter 9): in fact most did not plan on doing less paid work or arrive home a bit earlier after the child was born. They did not plan reducing their working hours substantially, change their working shift or somehow modify the working conditions in order to take care of the child. For most female respondents, fathers' help with housework was more important than their involvement in childcare.

Even though the mother's presence was seen as indispensable during the first few months, different care models were considered among the couples interviewed. Firstly, the period during which the mother was planning on being the full-time carer varied from a minimum of 3 to 4 months to a maximum of 12 (only two respondents mentioned 24 and 36 months respectively). These plans were related to what was considered to be best for the child, in light of the family income, the working needs of the mother and the possibility of organizing care by involving other family members (especially the availability of grandparents). Nevertheless, even in the case of couples for whom "ideally" the mother would care for her child on her own for the first year, strong differences arose between the "ideal" and the achievable (in Italy parental leave for mothers applies to children of up to 9 months of age). In particular, mothers who tried to further their career and those most likely to continue to invest in their job were returning to work sooner (3 to 4 months after childbirth). Secondly, differences involved considering caregivers other than the mother and father. We found three prevailing models of planned care for babies aged 6 months or older. One model, in keeping with what happened during the first 6-7 months of the child's life, was still "mother-centered", the mother being the main provider of care along with the sporadic help of some other family members (grandparents) in case of emergency, and the father's role being one of logistic support. Another "family-centered" model with mostly parents and some relatives (mainly grandparents) being responsible for childcare, the father having a more active role possibly by taking time off work. In the third model, childcare was shared by the mother (part-time job or reduced work commitments), the father (through increased presence at home alone with the baby), the grandparents and public or private childcare services. Couples who adopted this model intended to place their child in a crèches at around 6-9 months, or earlier if there were no other solutions available. Looking at the interviewed couples as a whole, they tended to prefer childcare provided by the family, resorting to crèches only if no family members (grandparents) were able and available. Almost none of the couples intended using the services of a nanny as a possible alternative. The reason given for not using a nanny was lack of trust in strangers.

Finally examples of couples actively trying to deconstruct traditional gender roles (undoing gender) were very few.

A significant example was provided by Paolo and Patrizia. Talking about the impact that their child's arrival could have on her career, Patrizia mentioned that her husband usually said:

Anyway, he told me "it's important for you to go back. It is important for you to take time to think about your career, too, or if not your career, then your interests, what you want to do aside from the child, so the baby doesn't become the only, ever-present part of your life, because in any case, he knows that it is an important part of me, my own fulfillment, etc... and so we have that ... And also, say, on a daily basis, for him it's fine to think about the needs of the child, we have to consider them and try to adapt as much as possible, but we should also bear in mind our own needs as a couple and as individuals. (Patrizia, expert on planning youth policies, 32)

Mi dice comunque "è importante che tu rientri. È importante che ti prendi del tempo per pensare anche alla tua carriera o, se non è la carriera professionale, ai tuoi interessi, a quello che vuoi fare al di là del bambino, che non diventi l'unica parte onnipresente della tua vita" perché comunque lo sa che è una parte importante di me, per la mia soddisfazione ecc. e quindi ne abbiamo... E a livello anche, diciamo, quotidiano quello che pensa lui è che vanno bene le esigenze del bambino, bisognerà ascoltarle e cercare il più possibile di adeguarci, ma dovremo poi tener presente anche le nostre esigenze come coppia e come singoli. (*Patrizia, esperta di programmazione politiche giovanili, 32*)

5. Father and mother involvement in paid work

In the accounts of our informants, interacting with the father became important when the child was able to socialize with other people. This is in contrast to the findings in the Swedish context in which couples emphasize the importance of "participating fathers" and the interaction between the baby and the father from the first month of the birth.

This had consequences also for women's and men's choices about paid work. A good father was often seen as one who thought about investing more in his job:

I consider my present job as stable but I also want to do some extra work, not only to increase the family income but also to grow professionally. (*Davide, researcher, 42*)

Considero il mio lavoro come stabile ma voglio anche fare del lavoro extra, non solo per aumentare il reddito familiare ma per crescere professionalmente. (*Davide, ricercatore, 42*)

A "good mother", in contrast, was expected to, even if she loved her job, decide to reduce her work commitments to take care of her child. In the interviews, gendered career plans were often motivated with the female partner earning a lower salary or having worse job prospects. But what happened in couples where this was not the case?

An example was that of Gaia, a self-employed hairdresser, and Terenzio, a gardener working in the informal economy (i.e. black market). Despite the fact that she was the one with a higher income and greater employment stability, the couple's future plans included her staying off work for two or three years, while he would invest more in work and look for stable employment. The main reason provided to motivate this decision was that the presence of the mother was considered to be "best for the child" in the early years. In addition, Gaia was self-employed, meaning that she could only take a few months off of work. As we have seen, self-employed workers in Italy have a very low level of social protection and a very short parental leave. Furthermore, self-employed tend to lose clients if they leave their job for long time and it is often very difficult to gain them back.

In order to act economically rational, Gaia and Terenzio could very well be a deviant couple from the main Italian normative model but they chose not to. They did not make a rational assessment of his and her job opportunities, deciding on the basis of these. On the contrary, the decision was dictated by gender ideology, with a strong bias toward the traditional gender roles when motherhood was involved.

The case of Rachele and Raniero was another example of the couples' doing of gender. As seen before, Rachele had the chance of a better career in the long term, having invested heavily in a degree and PhD in an industry (food safety) which was expanding fast. At the time of the interview she held a fixed-term scholarship, without social protection, and earned less than Raniero. However, her long-term prospect was becoming a manager in the public sector. Raniero had a permanent job, but worked for a small company with fewer than 15 employees, with little job protection. For him the risk of being made redundant was high, having already been laid off a number of times, in a field greatly affected by the downturn in the Turin area (automotive). In spite of this situation, it was Rachele who planned for reducing her work commitments, whereas Raniero wanted to invest more in his job, precisely because of the difficult times:

When I graduated and started to work at the university, I think I was more ambitious. Now, after marriage and pregnancy, I think I am focusing on other things, in the sense that I'm a bit resigned to the fact that things will go as they should. But I also want to create a life for myself outside of work, I care about my family, I really want to have children if that happens, even at the cost of sacrificing my career. Then again I don't know how I'll feel when the time to give up something actually comes, but now the decision to try to have a baby before having any job stability was precisely because that is most important thing at this time. (*Rachele, researcher 33*)

Quando mi sono laureata e ho iniziato a lavorare all'università forse ero più ambiziosa. Adesso con il matrimonio e la gravidanza forse punto anche su altre cose, nel senso che sono un po' rassegnata che andrà come deve andare però ci tengo anche a costruire fuori dal lavoro, ci tengo alla mia famiglia, ci tengo ad avere un bimbo e altri se ne verranno anche a costo di sacrificare la carriera lavorativa. Poi non so quando mi troverò al momento di rinunciare veramente, però adesso anche la scelta di cercare un figlio prima di una stabilizzazione è stata perché appunto è più importante questo in questo momento (*Rachele, ricercatrice, 33*)

Only a few particular situations put the father at the center of the relationship with the child in the first years after childbirth. One of the couples interviewed, included a woman with an important full-time job as aeronautical engineer in a large company, earning a medium to high salary. For this reason, she had no plans to reduce her work commitments in the run-up to childbirth:

Yes, we're thinking that we will both continue to work because it also guarantees our possibility of living a better life: children are expensive, they are so cute, and so with current salaries and the cost of living, a single salary is not enough, but then I also like the idea of working. (*Susanna, aeronautic engineer, 32*)

Do you remember what your career prospects were? Have your career goals changed over time? Have your priorities changed? What are the reasons? Well *** (partner's name) doesn't know, but I won't change my mind, I'm sure that work can be reconciled with family life, and it's important to understand that in Italy, too, in the sense that all over the world there are women who have also become executives and manage to have a family in a balanced way, so it's only right that we Italians should be doing the same, we have to convince ourselves, I am convinced of this. (*Susanna, aeronautic engineer, 32*)

Sì, pensiamo di continuare a lavorare entrambi, anche perché ti garantisce anche la possibilità di vivere poi in maniera tranquilla, i figli portano un sacco di spese, sono tanto carini, e quindi gli stipendi attuali e il costo della vita, uno stipendio in famiglia non è sufficiente, ma del resto mi piace anche l'idea di lavorare. (*Susanna, ingegnere aeronautico, 32*)

Si ricorda quali erano le Sue prospettive di carriera? Ha cambiato nel tempo i suoi obiettivi professionali? Ha cambiato le Sue priorità? Per quali motivi? Eh, *** (nome del compagno) non lo so, io mantengo le mie idee stabili, io sono sicura che il lavoro si possa conciliare con la famiglia, e che sia importante che anche l'Italia lo capisca, nel senso che dovunque nel mondo ci sono donne che diventano anche dirigenti e riescono a mantenere una famiglia e mantenerla bene in maniera equilibrata, è giusto che anche noi italiane lo facciamo, no, che siamo convinte di ciò, io ne son convinta. (*Susanna, ingegnere aeronautico, 32*)

Her partner agreed with her career decisions. However, also he said he wanted to reduce his commitments outside the home, and the couple seemed to have no clear plans yet as to how they would organize childcare:

She is so committed to this job, also because she studied at university for years, that she has done something that not everyone manages to do, and not all women can manage, not in terms of intelligence, but because her field of engineering, is generally preferred by men and so, at *** (company name), there are very few women; which is why that is her job and not raising children, to put it bluntly... of course, I honestly don't know how it will change in practice, that is to say, what will change. (*Simone, trade official, 35*)

Lei ci tiene tanto a questo lavoro che ha fatto, anche perché ha studiato per anni all'università, ha fatto una cosa che comunque non tutti riescono a fare e non tutte le ragazze riescono a fare, non per un fatto di intelligenza ma perché il suo settore, di ingegneria, è preferito più dagli uomini e quindi, difatti da lei in

azienda alla *** (nome dell'azienda) ci sono pochissime donne, per cui comunque il suo lavoro è quello, non è crescere i figli, ecco, detto proprio in maniera... naturalmente, sinceramente non lo so nel pratico come cambierà, cioè, cosa cambierà (*Simone, trade official, 35*).

To conclude, it appeared that mothers- and fathers-to-be often shared the same vision regarding their divided future roles. Mothers did not question their maternal role as the ones with primary responsibility for childcare. Sharing seemed to be allowed when it comes to household chores, but not when it comes to childcare in the early years: a good mother cannot be a career woman. Ideals about what was considered in the child's best interest drove most women interviewed to choose between home and work and not to demand greater reconciliation of work to family life or more male participation in childcare. In fact, the Italian couples did not seem to put a greater demand on the institutions to facilitate reconciliation that it seemed to be considered a private issue, and women, even those who loved their work and had invested in their education and career, were resigned to sacrificing their working life, at least in the first year after childbirth, for the sake of their child.

6. Plans for parental leave taking

Among the interviewed couples, not all informants were entitled to leave, and among those who were, leave entitlement did not have the same duration. In particular, fixed-term or self-employed employees were entitled to shorter durations than permanent workers. In addition, some interviewees (about 1/5) appeared to be unaware of their legal entitlements. Not surprisingly, plans about leave taking appeared to be highly gendered. Typically, women were planning to take leave for one or two to six months (maximum by law). Men rarely planned to discontinue their own career for full-time family care. Even among couples most willing to equally share childcare responsibilities there was no clear evidence of fathers opting for parental leave, whereas almost all mothers were expecting to take it.

In a number of cases the taken-for-granted gendered patterns were inherent characteristics of the decision making process. Plans about parental leave did not seem to be made explicitly by the *couple*; they did not seem to be the outcome of dialogue and bargaining between partners. Not uncommonly, even couples who were very close to childbirth, said that they had not talked much about it. We also found a tendency among some future parents not to inquire at work or with the responsible institutions about parental leave rights for the fathers. One reason presented frequently by fathers-to-be to motivate their decision not to take parental leave (and by mothers to motivate the plan that their partner would not take it), was the widespread culture in the workplace regarding the mother being the most appropriate provider of childcare. Many interviewees reported that the work climate would be hostile to a request from men to take leave and employers and colleagues were not expecting such behavior from a man. For example, Paolo (temporary worker in the public sector) who was cohabiting with Patrizia (permanent worker in the no profit sector), would have liked to take a short period of parental leave but said:

My employer reacted *badly* [*emphatically*]. When I told them my girlfriend was pregnant, the response was "that's great! Ah, well, luckily you are not a woman" [*he laughs*] And I said "yes, but then I was thinking of taking a short period of parental leave", so let's just say I mentioned those two magic words, but no, we haven't made any practical plans for the future. [...] Certainly, today, if a *male*, a *man*, even one working for a small town council, were to say "I want to stay at home because I've got a son", people would look on him as a kind of alien being. /I've already been looked at as if I were a Martian/ [*laughing*]. (*Paolo, municipal council worker, 36*).

Il mio datore di lavoro ha reagito /male/ [con enfasi]. Io quando l'ho detto che la mia compagna era incinta la risposta è stata 'Che bello! Ah, beh certo, meno male che non sei una donna tu' [*ride*]. E io gli ho detto 'Sì, però io pensavo magari poi di prendere anche un po' del congedo parentale' quindi diciamo

Commentato [Grunow1]: Why the bracket?
Rosy: How to read the quotes:

In the quotes reported in the chapters, to express non-verbal, we have enclosed in // the phrases said by the interviewee laughing, smiling, puffing etc. and we have described in parenthesis, the kind of attitude or behavior, gestures, facial expressions or other significant aspects of nonverbal communication. They capitalized phrases or single words mean that they have been pronounced aloud. Proper names of people or places are encrypted with three asterisks (***) and, in the text of the chapter, they are replaced by invented names to protect the privacy of respondents.

che ho messo sul piatto del discorso le due paroline magiche, poi che abbiamo fatto dei piani per il futuro, NO. [...] Sicuramente oggi un maschio, un uomo che fa il responsabile in un comune che non è neanche il manager nella mega-multinazionale ma un comune di 50 mila abitanti dice 'Io voglio stare a casa perché c'ho un figlio' lo guardano come un extra-terrestre. /Io sono già stato guardato come un extra-terrestre in proposito/ [ridendo]. (Paolo, responsabile politiche giovanili presso comune, 36)

Among the different accounts informants presented to motivate gendered plans for taking leave, the opportunity cost motivation was recurrent. Opportunity costs were brought up frequently in relation to the current economic crisis which, in the words of some future parents, was described as a constraint for making risky decisions concerning the father's future working career by claiming parental leave. In many other cases opportunity cost arguments were strongly related to cultural references and motivations with respect to gender roles. Sometimes the first type of arguments appeared to be used by interviewees to mask the second type of arguments. A father who was not planning to take parental leave was considered more socially legitimated as compared to a stay-at-home dad. For example, despite seeming to be an egalitarian man in terms of his attitudes and behaviors toward the gender division of paid and unpaid work, Davide's arguments seemed to be related to his role as *male breadwinner*:

Interviewer: So is your choice only based on financial reasons? Under what circumstances would you be willing to take parental leave?

Davide: Of course, I would take it. I would take it if it were compatible with my finances, in the sense that, in my opinion, it is definitely important for the mother to stay with the baby and in this phase, the role of the father is to make sure that the family has enough to live on; in other words, so that both the mother and the baby can have the resources, all the things they need. (Davide, researcher, 42)

Intervistatrice: E il fattore economico è l'unico che entra in gioco in questa sua scelta? A quali condizioni sarebbe disposto a prendere il congedo facoltativo?

Davide: Certo lo prenderei, certo. Lo farei compatibilmente sempre con la questione economica nel senso che secondo me è importante che la madre stia col bambino sicuramente e il ruolo del padre in questa fase qua è di fare in modo che la famiglia abbia il sostentamento giusto per vivere quindi che sia la mamma che la bambina possano avere le risorse, le cose di cui c'è bisogno. (Davide, ricercatore, 42)

Accounts such as this one contain clear indications of traditional fatherhood cultural ideals, values and beliefs. Fathers-to-be also presented themselves as being indispensable and irreplaceable at their work places. Angelo (permanent worker in a private company), cohabiting with Agnese (36, secretary in a private company with a part time permanent labour contract) said:

As I have a special role in the company and I'm the only one doing that type of job, I'm irreplaceable. (Angelo, manager, 36)

Io avendo un ruolo particolare in azienda e facendolo solo io quel tipo di lavoro, sono insostituibile. (Angelo, responsabile commerciale, 36).

Agnese, Angelo's partner, referred to gender ideology and cultural beliefs of "what is best for the child" as confirming the planned role division. Her account was similar to those of many of our informants:

In our opinion, in my opinion - based on things I have read - the mother's presence is indispensable for the baby, because then children start to develop sociality when they are around three years of age. That is when the father figure starts to be crucial because he is the child's interface with the outside world... because we believe in these things. (Agnese, secretary, 36)

Entrambi siamo convinti, ne sono convinta, almeno dalle letture che ho fatto, che sia indispensabile la presenza della mamma per il bambino perché poi è dal terzo anno che il bambino inizia a sviluppare la socialità ed è lì che la figura del padre inizia a essere poi più cruciale perché è il suo tramite per il mondo esterno... credendo in questa cosa qua, di conseguenza. (Agnese, segretaria, 36).

The reference to ideas about what's "best for the child" in the first years of life and concerning parenthood, was observable among many of our couples, including those with a history of sharing paid and unpaid work equally.

Some fathers-to-be could not picture themselves spending a longer time at home with the child and had difficulties answering the questions. Terenzio said:

I Interviewer: Would you go on leave to take care of the baby under these conditions?
Terenzio (gardener, 27): No, absolutely not. Income is important.

Interviewer: Under what conditions would you take it?
Terenzio: I would stay at home for about ten days because it's something new and to see things from the start, but then I would need to get back to my normal life... for the baby's sake, too... What can you do with only 30% of your salary? [laughs]. You have to pay for things at the end of the month. We have to pay rent.

Interviewer: What if the pay for parental leave were 80%, just like compulsory maternity leave?
Terenzio: I would still only stay at home for a short period.

Interviewer: Why have you planned this division of labor, in particular with regard to parental leave?
Terenzio: I think it's fair that way. I don't know... I can't answer this question... because it's convenient and because the mother is the mother. Not that I wouldn't be able to look after our child but I think that this is also the right way to do things.

I: Lo prenderesti per un periodo, a queste condizioni, per accudire la bambina oppure no?
Terenzio (giardiniere, 27): No, assolutamente. Lo stipendio è importante.

I: Lo prenderesti per un periodo, a queste condizioni, per accudire la bambina oppure no?
Terenzio (giardiniere, 27): "No, assolutamente. Lo stipendio è importante.

I: A quali condizioni saresti disposto a prenderlo?
Terenzio: Starei a casa una decina di giorni perché è una cosa nuova e per vedere gli inizi però poi giustamente si deve ritornare alla vita normale. Ma anche per lei, per la bambina. /Cioè cosa fai con il 30%?/ [ridendo]. Le cose le devi pagare alla fine del mese. Viviamo in affitto.

I: E se fosse "pagato" all'80% come la maternità obbligatoria per le madri lavoratrici?
Terenzio: In ogni caso starei a casa un breve tempo.

I: Perché avete programmato in questo modo la divisione del lavoro, in particolare riguardo al congedo parentale?
Terenzio: Penso che sia giusto così. Non lo so. Non ti so dare una risposta. Per convenienza e poi perché la mamma è la mamma. Non che io non sarei capace però penso che sia giusto anche così.

7. Conclusions

Our interviews show that traditional ideas about what's the best for the child contributed to constructing distinct roles for the Italian fathers and mothers interviewed. The couples used these ideals frequently to motivate differences in their plans concerning men's and women's future career investments. As a matter of fact, couples' attitudes and practices of equal sharing before childbirth, did not correspond to their plans and attitudes toward paid work and childcare after the child was born. The majority of women and men in our study presented ideas about parenthood corresponding to a culture of "expert" parenting and intensive mothering. This culture advocated the permanent presence of the mother, especially during the first year of the child's life.

In the female identity, *being a good mother* was a requirement which, for almost all respondents, was already structured during pregnancy. This identity included not only being able to carry the pregnancy to a successful end but also nursing the child and, above all, taking sole responsibility for

childcare, at least during the first few months. Men, in contrast, could be considered "good fathers" regardless of whether their participation in childcare was marginal. *Good fatherhood* might include diverse forms of acceptable behavior. However, they were not considered to have an "active" role distinct from the mother's.

After the baby's arrival the majority of the couples were planning to change their behaviour from an egalitarian towards a neo-traditional one. As we have seen, if a *good mother* is the one who stays with the new-born baby and, possibly, the one who resizes her job involvement, a *good father* has to reinforce his job commitment, even among "equality oriented" couples .

In the more traditional couples the "mother-centered" model prevailed while in the more equality oriented couples, the picture presented was more complex and ambiguous

The accounts of our respondents contained all elements pointing to the ambivalence of the transition towards a traditional division of labour: on the one hand, women were very get involved with their paid work but at the same time they didn't want to renounce to their role as crucial caregivers for the baby, at least in the first year. On the other hand men were not willing to reduce their attachment to paid work in order to become an active carer for the baby. According to the constructions we have found in the interviews, fathers can change nappies and prepare baby food but only mothers are capable of understanding the real needs of the baby.

These couples' apparent resistance to redefine their own future parental roles in a context in which is missing a public debate and a public support for sharing parenthood. Italian couples lack a public discourse that would provide them with alternative models of motherhood and fatherhood to which they could refer to and redefine their identities during the transitions to parenthood.

Reflecting upon our findings in light of the theoretical mechanisms suggested in chapter 1, the expectant parent's plans regarding unpaid and paid work depended greatly on social gender norms. Couples with non-traditional resource matches were rare among the interviewees and they either represented unusual career opportunities for her (female engineer in a booming branch) or an unfortunate employment situation for him (being on unemployment insurance). Only among these couples have we found plans to adopt to "reversed" parental roles along the lines of "undoing gender".

Italy may be in transition with regard to gendered work-family models. However, according to our findings behaviors are more likely to change due to circumstances and the traditional cultural model of intensive mothering appears to be difficult to overcome. If beliefs and ideals about what's best for the child shape very different roles for fathers and mothers with all the repercussions on their job investments, probably most of our respondents will have difficulties realizing their childcare ideals and work-family conciliation preferences.

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