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FATHERHOOD AND MASCULINITY

Reflexivity, care and gender in the construction of fathering

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Introduction

On November 1st, 2017, while I was in the midst of writing my dissertation, a special issue of the popular Italian newspaper *La Repubblica* was published with the title “How sexy is daddy!”. The editorial article opening the issue was an interesting cocktail of cultural representations of the “new man”, who takes pride in participating to household chores and finds emotionally rewarding taking care of his infant child, and essentialist notions of masculinity and femininity, which are inevitably put on a binary categorization, and invariably related by the rule of heterosexuality. The journalist, a man, spoke of cooking and taking care of little children as two of the most significant examples of domestic duties that, neglected by men for long time, are now being rediscovered as sources of gratification to be looked for in the private sphere. The main point of the article was, though, the discovery of another “emotion”, besides that emerging from changing diapers: a man walking around while holding a baby is seemingly irresistible at women’s eyes, because of the presence of the child that “add[s] tenderness to virility” (Magistà, 2017). This remark, published on one of the main Italian newspapers, stirred the pot of my reflections, already engaged in understanding constructions of fatherhood and the influence of gender on the process. In what ways are masculinity and fatherhood intertwined? Do experiences of fatherhood say something about understandings of masculinity? Is men’s participation to childcare “adding tenderness to virility”?

These are the broad questions that have addressed my work. This thesis deals with contemporary experiences and representations of fatherhood in the Italian context, with the main aim of looking at possible spaces for a deepening of the reflection on how studying fatherhood could give a contribution to the study of masculinities.

Before moving to the specification of the research questions and of the methodology here adopted, it is worth considering the very starting point for a reflection on studying fatherhood and masculinity, well summarized in these words:

“whilst so much around women’s lives and motherhood is simplistically assumed, taken for granted and unquestioned, the relationship between men and fatherhood is seen as more problematic: requiring definition, ‘claims’ and other interventions in order to shape its visibility (or deny it), its dimensions and direction. The parameters of fatherhood are, then, less clearly drawn when set beside those which powerfully and morally encompass motherhood. But both are shaped by the ‘choices’ and constraints in which gendered lives are lived and which converge on the domains of the home and paid work” (Miller, 2011, p.7).

This quotation, while giving at a quick glance the sense of the complexity embedded in studying “fatherhood”, calls for two different sets of necessary clarifications: first, what is meant by “fatherhood”, and second, which perspective I am looking at it from.

The emergence of research on fatherhood as a social phenomenon per se followed a rise of discourses, in the Western world, around the so called “new” fathers, more “involved” and willing to participate in their children’s lives (Dermott, 2008; Miller, 2011 for a history of research on fatherhood; Petteri Eerola & Huttunen 2011); the newspaper article quoted above is a good example of this attention recently drawn on what’s “new” about fathers. In some recent contributions, a useful analytical distinction has been proposed between “fathers”, “fatherhood” and “fathering”. “Father” refers to the connection between a particular child and a particular man, and the process by which the term becomes attached to a particular individual, which may be either biological or social; “fatherhood” is the public meaning associated with being a father and the cultural coding of men as fathers, involving rights, duties, responsibilities and statuses together with discourses on good and bad fathers; “fathering” refers to the actual practices of “doing” parenting, which may occur even not in the direct presence of the child, like when requesting a parental leave or participating to a meeting with teachers (Dermott, 2008; Hobson, 2002). This distinction reflects the one between subjects, discourses and practices typical of a poststructuralist framework, the main

foundations of which are that discourses are ways of framing and giving meaning to phenomena (like parenthood), they are intertwined with practices and contribute to the construction of subjects. Considering the Foucauldian notion of knowledge as a historical product constructed and understood through social and cultural processes, motherhood and fatherhood are not “natural” experiences but rather learnt through acculturation into a particular sociocultural and historical context (Lupton & Barclay, 1997). Following this line of reasoning, fathers, or individual men facing the experience of being attached to a particular child, routinely act out specific practices related to parenthood, and refer to (whether acknowledging it or not) specific discourses around those performances, which contribute to construct their identity as fathers. In this work, this distinction will always be kept as a point of reference and it will guide the journey through men’s experiences of parenthood.

A second necessary clarification concerns my perspective on the issue. In a recent contribution on the state of the art in fatherhood research, Dermott and Miller (2015), reflecting on the history and the purposes of doing research in this field, pointed out how fatherhood as a social phenomenon can be, and has been, looked at from two perspectives, a feminist one and a “fatherhood” one, claiming that “while from a feminist perspective, changes in parenting responsibilities can be viewed as disappointing in that they have not yet led to a wholesale transformation in gender relations, from a fatherhood perspective the changes appear much more substantial” (Ivi, p. 189). In my reading, these two perspectives can be summarized in two roughly distinguished and often overlapping points of view: a perspective which looks generally at parenthood and at fathers as parents, and a perspective which focuses on gender relations and looks at fatherhood as a gendered issue.

From a “parenthood” perspective, fatherhood is studied with a main focus on the ways in which men act as parents, and therefore, we could say, on fathering practices, with the fundamental aim, explicit or implicit, of understanding the outcomes of their actions on the development of their children. This perspective aligns with contemporary research around what has been labelled as “new parenting culture” (Faircloth, Hoffman, & Layne, 2013; Faircloth & Murray, 2015), which focuses on “parenting skills” and draws attention on the relevance of the parent-child dyad for child development. In Faircloth and colleagues’ (2013)

overview of trends in the study of parenthood, parenting skills are increasingly represented as attributes of expertise and science that must be constructed outside the immediate child rearing relationship, when “a good parent is someone who has willingly embraced the science and the professional advice as well as accepted the social policies through which these views are promoted” (ivi, p. xiv). With these premises, the new parenting culture sees children as vulnerable and sensitive to risk impacting on physical and emotional development, and parents as “god like”, determining each individual child’s development and future. This emerging culture is based on a concept of “intensive” parenting (Faircloth & Murray, 2015; Hays, 1996), as parents are required to invest energy, time and money in raising their children, and the focus is strictly set on parents’ behavior: “‘parenting culture’ can be summarized to mean the more or less formalized rules and codes of conduct that have emerged over recent years which reflect this deterministic view of parents and define expectations about how a parent should raise their child” (Faircloth & Murray, 2015, p.1116). Even though it has been mostly related to motherhood, notions of “intensive parenting” have an impact on the construction of fatherhood as well. In the field of studies on fatherhood and with a focus on fathering practices, the influence of such notions is visible in the construction of the “paternal involvement” analytical instrument (Lamb, 2000). “Paternal involvement” has been conceptualized as composed of three dimensions: engagement, accessibility and responsibility. Engagement refers to the time spent in one-to-one interaction with the child; accessibility, to activities “characterized by less intense degree of direct interaction” (ivi, p. 31); responsibility, considered to be “the most important of all inasmuch as it reflects the extent to which the parent takes ultimate responsibility for the child’s welfare and care” (*ibid.*), is by and large defined as time spent in care management. The aim of this conceptualization is to allow for a standardization and therefore a comparison of (quantitative) data on paternal involvement in childcare and thus assess the entity and the trend of the phenomenon. Consistently with the “new parenting culture” paradigm, the instrument of “paternal involvement” seeks to estimate “the variety of ways in which fathers can influence their children’s development” (Lamb, 2000, p. 38).

The starting point of the second perspective, which focuses, instead, on gender relations, is that fatherhood and motherhood represent the experiences through which stereotypical representations of masculinity and femininity find room for more vivid expressions, and, as a consequence, parenthood and family life are among the main fields where gender differences and inequalities may emerge or reproduce.

The body of literature that looks at fatherhood from this perspective includes two sets of researches. The first, usually composed of quantitative studies, often considers child care as part of the standard domestic work, and fathers' participation to it – in providing material care for the infant or in taking a parental leave - is looked at as an indicator of the level of gender equality in the couple (Anxo et al., 2011; Hook, 2006; Sullivan, Billari, & Altintas, 2014). The second set of studies interprets fatherhood as a specifically male experience, and considers it in the field of study of men and masculinities. These researches usually provide deeper reflections on the meaning of the transition to parenthood and the involvement with a child for masculine identities, with the fundamental aim of exploring the potential of changes in the ways fatherhood is thought of and performed to reflect changes in gender relations not only within the family but in society as a whole (Bertone, Ferrero Camoletto, & Rollé, 2016; Crespi & Ruspini, 2016; Dermott, 2008; Donatiello & Santero, 2016; Grunow & Evertsson, 2016; Hobson, 2002; Miller, 2011).

In father's involvement in childcare, when such an involvement is practical, emotional, and bodily, lies a twofold potential. On the one hand, and more intuitively, the relieving of the burden of care traditionally ascribed to women has the clear consequence of broadening the scope of women's life development choices. On the other hand, it may encompass the potential and the possibility for men to perform masculinity in different ways, or to perform a different masculinity, or to claim for a reflection upon and a revision of the very notions of masculinity and femininity, and especially of the imbalance of power these notions carry along (Carrigan, Connell, & Lee, 1985; Connell, 1995). This second lens is the one adopted in this work.

My research, which stems from the perspective of a female and feminist researcher interested in changes in gender relations, positions itself in the complex and challenging field of the relationship between fatherhood and masculinity. This relationship will be investigated through an exploration of experiences and narrations of Italian heterosexual and employed fathers, at their first child aged 0 to 3 years, living in North-western Italy. Such an exploration will focus on different aspects. Firstly, the process of becoming parents, in order to take a closer look at how the self-acknowledgement of a man's new role as "father" takes place, along with the meanings and implications that such a new role carries along. Secondly, taking care and caring for a little child, taking into account motherhood and its own thresholds on the one hand, and bodily boundaries and affection on the other, to explore the field of "fathering"; finally, the reception and interpretation of representations of "fatherhood" available in the popular culture. Across the exploration of these aspects, understandings of gender, as they are expressed in the interviewees' narratives around men and women, mothers and fathers, and fathers and children, contribute to the reconstruction of fathers' reference points when it comes to masculinity and its intersections with parenthood and parenting.

Since such interrogatives call into question processes of construction of meaning and the influence of cultural representations on acting out specific practices, I relied on qualitative research methods: discursive interviews with fathers, a focus group, and a content analysis of media representations of fatherhood, with a focus on advertisement. Between June and December 2016, I performed 33 semi-structured interviews with Italian fathers at their first experience of parenthood, with children aged younger than 3 years. In order to provide an overview of the ways fatherhood is depicted in popular media culture, I analyzed a sample of 15 television advertisements shown in the Italian context. Finally, to investigate the ways such depictions are received by fathers, in July 2017 I conducted a focus group with a sub-sample of five interviewees, with the aim of discussing media and cultural representations of fatherhood.

With the main objective of looking at the relationship between fatherhood and masculinity in mind, the thesis is structured as follows.

Chapter 1 provides the conceptual tools that are the background of my work. First, I will introduce the central notion of “masculinity”, discussing its implications and the development of the concept, and present the main theoretical perspectives on the changes in family lives which represent the backdrop against which contemporary fatherhood takes shape. Then, I will look at the intersections of masculinity and fatherhood, presenting some transversal analytical dimensions.

Chapter 2 is dedicated to the context and methodology of my research. The first section presents what has been defined the “Italian fatherhood regime” (Musumeci, Naldini, & Santero, 2015), or the institutional constraints that define the boundaries of fathers’ rights and duties, and a state of the art of investigations on Italian fatherhood. The second section is dedicated to the methodology of my research. Here, after a new specification of the research question, informed by the theoretical background described in chapter 1, I present in detail the process of the construction of sample for interviews, data collection by means of interviews and the focus group, and data analysis.

Chapter 3 starts the journey in fathers’ experiences: here, histories of becoming fathers are told, with a focus on the ways men acknowledge their new “role”, and how these are related to the meanings ascribed to fatherhood. This chapter deals with changing lives, reflexive issues around parenting “skills”, and notions of “good” fatherhood, with the aim of understanding how fatherhood is constructed after the birth of a first child. Here, the focus is on “fathers”, and the processes underlying the acquisition of such a status.

Chapter 4 deals with fathering practices, and specifically material childcare activities, to give a tridimensional, tangible portrait of what being a father in everyday life implies. Men’s accounts of their participation in childcare practices are presented here, and the role of the mothers in influencing fathers’ involvement is discussed. Finally, the materiality of care activities is explored with a focus on physical closeness and the expression of affection through care work. Here, the keyword is “fathering”, as the gaze is set on the side of practices.

Chapter 5 provides insights on cultural representations of “fatherhood”, with a focus on the media, and especially television advertisements. In the first section I will present an overview

of studies on how fathers have been depicted by the media, and an attempt at analyzing a sample of television commercials shown in the Italian context, in order to define a profile of the mass media father, is proposed. The second section gives voice to the fathers, who provide their own point of view on such representations.

Chapter 6 deals with gender issues. If understandings of masculinity (and femininity) permeate the accounts of fathers on fathering and fatherhood as a leitmotiv across the whole work, this chapter is specifically dedicated to highlighting the relevance of notions of gender for the construction of parenthood. The first section deals with the influence of understandings of masculinity and femininity in defining “proper” fatherhood, presenting insights on how masculinity itself is thought about by fathers, and how it is related to constructions of parenting practices; finally, the last paragraph is dedicated to the gender of the third element of the new formed family: the child.

In the concluding section, I summarize the main findings of the work, looking at how the theoretical tools have provided useful reference points for analyzing fathers’ experiences, and proposing attempted interpretations of men’s narratives around fatherhood and gender.

CHAPTER 1

Theoretical background

1. Introduction

This chapter is dedicated to the presentation of the main theoretical tools that informed my work.

First, two of the basic concepts that inform the study of fatherhood, namely masculinity and family life, are explored from the point of view of the main conceptual perspectives that addressed them. Connell's (1995) theorization of masculinities is here presented as a cornerstone, and criticisms and further developments of the concept are discussed. Family relationships, and the relevance they assumed in sociological theories in the last decades, are here looked at from two of the main perspectives that attempted at interpreting them: individualization theory and family practices.

Finally, in the last paragraph I will present some cross-dimensional themes that have been addressed in the investigation of fatherhood, to provide a wider picture of the most relevant aspects to look at when analyzing fathers, representations of fatherhood and fathering practices. The themes here taken into consideration are breadwinning and the cultural and institutional construction of fathers as providers; reflexivity and moral issues in father-child relationships, and understandings of "good" fatherhood; finally, the involvement of bodies and physical closeness in the performance of care practices.

The aim is to build a theoretical tool case that will prove useful for the journey into fathers' experiences that is about to start.

2. Masculinities: a conceptual reference point

2.1 The origins: Connell's gender order and masculinities

In the mid-1980s, Carrigan, Connell and Lee (1985) highlighted, in a period following the expansion of a stream in literature about masculinity of varied nature, the possibility for a radical analysis of masculinity which would have focused on three main issues. Firstly, the question of sexual power had to be taken more seriously and pursued inside the sex categories (especially referring to the relations between heterosexual and homosexual men). Secondly, the analysis of masculinity needed to be related to other currents in feminism, like the studies on the division of labor and the interplay of gender with class. Finally, the authors underline the necessity of using theoretical instruments that would offer a way past the dichotomy of structure versus individual, with a focus on the historical production of social categories, on power as the ability to control the production of people and on large-scale structures as both the objects and the effects of collective practice. Carrigan, Connell and Lee (1985) propose a critique of the “sex role” framework, considered unable to “grasp change as a dialectic arising within gender relations themselves” (ivi, p.580), and draw upon the history of homosexuality as a starting point, thinking of masculinity not as a single object with its own history but as the product of a continuous construction within the history of an evolving structure of power relations. To sustain their proposal, the authors claim that the understanding of masculinity should start from men's involvement in the social relations that constitute the gender order. The basis of such order is Rubin's “sex/gender” system, composed of division of labor and structure of power, to which the authors add the structure of cathexis, that is the social organization of sexuality. In the case of men, the main categorization to be found inside masculinities is between hegemonic masculinity based on heterosexuality and “various subordinated masculinities” (ivi, p. 590). The authors claim that hegemony always refers to a historical situation, a set of circumstances in which power is won and held by means of the circulation of discourses; hegemonic masculinity involves the division of labor and the negotiation and enforcement of hegemony involves the state as well, with its juridical power of defining legitimate and illegitimate (or even criminal, like homosexuality in certain contexts) masculinities. Connell (1995) developed further these

arguments, claiming as a starting point that not only there are different masculinities but they are also linked by different kinds of relations; these different types of masculinities are not fixed categories, rather the new sociology of masculinity should focus on “different projects of masculinity, the conditions under which they arise and the conditions they produce” (ivi, p. 39). In Connells’ theorization, the issue of power and the centrality of the body are both fundamental. Power, as will become clearer a few lines ahead, is expressed in the definition of masculinities as configurations of practice¹ structured by gender relations, inherently historical and contextual, the reproduction of which is a political process affecting the balance of interest in society and the direction of social change. As for the importance of the body, Connell distances herself from both socio-biological assumptions around the body as a “machine” and from a social constructionism underpinned by a semiotic approach, considering the body as a canvas on which symbols are attached. The author claims that bodies do matter to the extent that they are not landscapes but rather they can react while entering social processes and becoming therefore part of history and a possible object of politics². Speaking of body-reflexive practices, the author highlights the agency of bodies in

¹ The focus on practices for the analysis of gender gained enormous relevance after West and Zimmerman’s (1987) seminal work on the concept of “doing gender”. Developed within an ethnomethodological framework, “doing gender” refers to the process of gender construction through routine practices of social interaction. The doing of gender is learnt at early age, and the authors draw upon the notion of accountability, which means that all social actions are subject to comment, and all social actors are aware of it when behaving in social interaction. Claiming that the sex category is a circumstance that attends virtually all actions, the authors imply that gender is done in every interaction. Recently, Deutsch (2007) criticized the concept, as in her view it perpetuated the idea that the gender system and its power imbalances are immutable, as practices of doing gender reproduce invariably the same system of gender relations. The author proposed a focus on social processes that underlie resistance against conventional gender relations, to shed light on how it is possible to “undo” gender, in order to pursue a theory of change in the gender system of oppression. Based on the conceptualization of gender as “performative” (J. Butler, 1990), a further development of the concept of practices for the analysis of gender has been proposed by Paechter (2003, 2006), who defined masculinities and femininities as “communities of practice”.

² The relevance of bodies for a reflection on gender has been widely discussed in feminist theory debate. Linda Nicholson (1994), in reconstructing the development of the terms “sex” and “gender” during Second Wave feminism, criticized the interpretation of the body as a “coatrack” on which to “hang” cultural meaning and expectations around personality and behavior, an interpretation that she called “biological foundationalism”. Judith Butler (1990), from a post-structuralist perspective, contested the very notion of “sex”, which could be considered as socially constructed itself, to the consequence that the body itself is a construction which has no signifiable existence prior to the mark of its gender. In an attempt at combining post-structuralism with phenomenology, Sara Ahmed (1998) claimed that “the constant negotiation of identifications temporarily

social processes: therefore, instead of focusing on masculinity as an object, the attention should be drawn on the processes and relationships through which men and women conduct gendered lives, because “masculinity (...) is simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practice through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of those practices in bodily experience, personality and culture” (Connell, 1995, pp.71).

Moving from the micro level of individual practices to the macro level of gender relations, Connell proposes a relational approach which recognizes that “any one masculinity, as a configuration of practices, is simultaneously positioned in a number of structures of relationship, which may be following different historical trajectories” (ivi, p. 73). Starting from a conceptualization of hegemony as the cultural dynamic by which a group claims and sustains a leading position in social life, the author defines hegemonic masculinity as the currently accepted answer to the problem of patriarchy (namely, guaranteeing male domination), and distinguishes three kinds of relations between masculinities. The first, of subordination, which describes the cultural and material domination of heterosexual men over gay or “effeminate” men; the relation of complicity is based on the fact that most men do not practice the hegemonic pattern, but the clear majority of them gains from male dominance; finally, the relation of marginalization that emerges from the interplay of gender with other structures like race and class. Connell reasons also with integrative approaches to the study of gender (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004; Risman, 2004, 2009) when explaining the model of structure of gender, which must distinguish relations of power (embodied in the European/American patriarchal order and its subordination of women), of production (related to the gendered division of labor) and of cathexis (or the practices that shape and realize desire), but gives strong importance to the characteristic of gender as at the same time a product and a producer of history, and therefore on dynamics of change. Furthermore, she

assigns the subject to a fixed identity (both gendered, racialized and classed) through a reading of the body.” (Ivi, p. 117), inspiring Berggren (2014) to propose a conceptualization of masculinity as “sticky”, in the sense that “bodies culturally read as ‘men’ are oriented toward the culturally established signs of ‘masculinity’, such as hardness and violence. The repeated sticking together of certain bodies and signs in this way is what creates masculine subjectivity.” (Ivi, p. 245). While attempting at attributing a characteristic of temporariness to gendered (masculine) identities that stem from a certain recognition of bodies, this perspective seems to reproduce Nicholson’s notion of “biological foundationalism”.

stresses the relevance of the level of the body as a locus for a degendering strategy, suggesting, as a means for deconstructing hegemonic masculinity, a re-embodiment for men that may pass through nurturing bodily-involving activities such as early child care. Fatherhood seemed thus to be, in Connell's theorization, a field where potential for change in the gender order lied. Being of great influence on research on men and masculinities, the notion of hegemonic masculinity has also been subject of criticism and the basis for new conceptual proposals, which will be discussed in the next paragraph.

2.2 Moving forward: plurality and transformations in masculinities

2.2.1 The notion of hybridity and plurality

While recognizing the importance of Connell's theorization, which questioned patriarchal power and addressed the possibility for social change, some scholars criticized the notion of hegemonic masculinity. Demetriou (2001) argued on some of its main features, proposing an alternative way of conceptualizing it. Demetriou's idea was that hegemonic masculinity was not to be thought of as a purely heterosexual or white configuration of practice, but rather a hybrid bloc uniting practices from diverse masculinities with the aim of ensuring the reproduction of patriarchy. In the author's analysis of Connell's conceptualization, two different hegemonies can be identified: an external one over women, and an internal one over subordinate masculinities, as, in his words, "Connell's originality lies in the formulation of a single theoretical principle that states that the relationships within genders are centered on, and can be explained by, the relationships between genders." (Demetriou, 2001, p. 343). External dominance is the main goal of the patriarchal power, but also internal dominance seems to be a means for the achievement of that goal: some masculinities are subordinated because they appear inconsistent with the currently accepted strategy for the subordination of women, which goes through heterosexuality. Drawing upon Gramsci's work on hegemony and his concept of historic bloc, and recognizing how in his theorization internal hegemony assumes the traits of a leadership, Demetriou argues that hegemonic masculinity has to be considered as a "hybrid bloc that unites various and diverse practices in order to construct

the best possible strategy for the reproduction of patriarchy” (ivi, p. 348), a historic bloc based on negotiation rather than negation.

Developing from Demetriou’s critique of the hegemonic masculine power and notion of hybridity, Arxer (2011) theorized hybrid masculinity as it stems from homosocial interaction, drawing upon empirical evidence collected by means of participant observation of men in a college bar, with the aim of understanding the ways in which men in homosocial settings conceptualize and negotiate with masculine ideals so as to produce a “hybrid” form of hegemonic masculinity that appropriates non-hegemonic practices. Hybridization is here defined as the creation of innovative forms of power that differ from the traditional ones but aim at the maintenance of male domination, in this case by means of internal appropriation: hegemonic masculinity may appropriate aspects of non-hegemonic masculinity that are consistent with the larger project of domination over women. Effectively, the author observed how men often engaged in emotive sharing and preferred cooperation to competition as strategies in small group interaction, in order to reproduce domination over women and subordinate masculinities. This showed how hegemonic and non-hegemonic masculine practices are not strictly segregated in homosocial interaction among men: in the author’s words, “the notion of hybrid hegemonic masculinity captures how masculine power can be composed of any number of social attributes, not the least of which are those conventionally perceived as ‘feminine’. In fact, the appropriation of diverse, even seemingly oppositional, elements may afford hegemonic masculinity a degree of necessary flexibility to adapt to historical circumstances that are no longer hospitable to previously accepted ways of reproducing patriarchy.” (Ivi, p. 398). According to Arxer, hybrid masculinity might then work as a way of reproducing and protect gendered power and privilege by means of the appropriation of alternative masculinities, since “homosociality may segregate power groups (i.e., hegemonic and nonhegemonic) but not necessarily specific meanings associated with non-hegemony. Thus, while homosociality may continue to have the general function of segregating power groups, the process itself (e.g., formation of masculine identities) may be more specific and may include multiple strategies.” (Arxer, 2011, p. 416).

More recently, Bridges & Pascoe (2014) drew from this line of thought, observing how hybrid masculinities operate on three sides: first, symbolically distancing men from hegemonic masculinity; secondly, situating the masculinities available to young, white, heterosexual men as somehow less meaningful than the masculinities associated with various marginalized and subordinated Others; and thirdly, fortifying existing social and symbolic boundaries “in ways that often work to conceal systems of power and inequality in historically new ways” (ivi, p. 246). The authors claimed that in literature there have been three main ways to answer the question whether hybrid masculinities are perpetuating or challenging systems of gender and sexuality. Firstly, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), after receiving Demetriou’s criticism, expressed skepticism over whether hybrid masculinities represent anything beyond local variations. Others – which I will discuss in the next paragraph – picked up the conceptualization of hybrid masculinities to build new theorizations of masculinities, seeing hybrid masculinity as both culturally pervasive and indicating that inequality is lessening and maybe no longer structures men’s identities and relationships. Finally, the majority of scholars point out how hybrid masculinities show the flexibility of systems of inequality: they represent significant changes in the expression of such systems, but do nothing to challenge them. In the attempt at understanding continuity and change in masculinities, Aboim’s (2010) conceptualization of “plural” masculinities, for instance, draws from the notion of hybridity, or the ability to integrating the other without losing the old self, and in this case of “cross-breeding (...) different, sometimes stereotypically opposite, features” (ivi, p. 158), to propose the idea that the concept of a homogeneous dominant masculinity has to be deconstructed especially in the sub group of the “complicit” (in Connell’s sense) men, who, according to Aboim, are making masculinity evolve into plurality. In the author’s words, “any masculinity, as any man, any individual, is plural both in relation to the material positions that locate him in the social world and the cultural references that constitute his universe of meaning and significance”. (Ivi, p. 3) The notion of plurality is here used as a tool to make sense of the observation of both continuity and change in ideologies of masculinity: the author claims that the gender order has indeed faced change, but at the same time a complete metamorphosis has not occurred yet, and this mix of old and new interpretations and accounts of gender identities is creating novel forms

of masculinity and bringing uncertainties in the social process of gender differentiation overall. Men are therefore plural “not only because the ideological codes of masculinity have also multiplied, but because they use them in more individualized ways.” (Aboim, 2010, p. 161). Drawing again upon Connell’s theorization of the gender order, Aboim points out how each of its dimensions may have its own set of norms, and from their juxtaposition precisely plurality may emerge, since it is very unlikely that a man may occupy an equivalent position in all fields. Instead of assuming that hybridization serves as a strategic instrument to preserve masculine hegemony, the author poses the problem of how this power is reinvented and renegotiated, observing that, on the one hand, traits traditionally associated with femininity have become more gender neutral and therefore more available for men’s construction of male identities, and on the other hand, though, by including such feminine traits (like emotionality and care) men reposition themselves in gender hierarchies, with consequent effects on the overall cultural and material masculine hegemonies, which, drawing from Foucault’s notion of power, have to be interpreted as plural themselves, as power is embedded in and produces all social interaction.

2.2.2 Potential for change: “inclusive” and “caring” masculinities

The concept of hybridity and similar theorizations applied to hegemonic masculinity look overtly pessimistic, as Duncanson (2015; also Johansson & Ottemo, 2015) pointed out in her analysis of the concept applied to military masculinities, underlining how sociological literature dealing with it often finds itself frustrated by the “flexibility of the machinery of rule”. The author argues that a “positive” hegemonic masculinity is possible, namely, one that is open to equality with women. The way to reach it should follow a two-step process: firstly, a transitional stage which sees an establishment of a version of masculinity open to equality with women as hegemonic among men, by means of the adoption of traits, practices and values which are conventionally associated with femininity, therefore incorporating the “feminine”. Secondly, the eradication of “relations of hierarchy, presumably through allowing the hegemonic masculinity to construct those relations of equality” (ivi: 241). Looking at hybridization of masculinities from the side of male homosocial interaction,

Anderson (2009; also, Anderson & McGuire, 2010), in his research on homophobia and heteronormativity in the sports field, addressed a potential for change starting from the theoretical hypothesis that homophobia together with “femphobia” (or the refusal of “feminine” traits) and compulsory heterosexuality resulted historically in “homohysteria”. Observing among young men a diminishing of such a trait, Anderson argued that “the existence of inclusive masculinities means that there is an awareness that heterosexual men can act in ways once associated with homosexuality, with less threat to their public identity as heterosexual” (Anderson, 2009, p. 7). The author proposed, as an explanation, an “inclusive masculinity” theory, according to which in cultures of diminishing homohysteria, two dominant forms of masculinity will co-exist: a conservative but not culturally hegemonic one, named “orthodox”, and an inclusive one, characterized by emotional and physical homosocial proximity among men. In the author’s overtly optimistic view, the point of arrival would be the complete loss of homophobic discourse and the proliferation of multiple masculinities with less hierarchy or hegemony.

The argument of an overturning of hybrid masculinities, ascribable to a perspective of “undoing gender” *sensu* Deutsch (2007), has been recently taken up by Elliott (2016), who proposed a theorization of “caring” masculinities as “masculine identities that reject domination and its associated traits and embrace values of care such as positive emotion, interdependence, and relationality. [...] these caring masculinities constitute a critical form of men’s engagement and involvement in gender equality and offer the potential of sustained social change for men and gender relations” (ivi, p. 240). Elliott looked at caring masculinities from the points of view of plural masculinities in Connell’s sense and feminist theory, addressing two bodies of literature: feminist consideration of gender equality and central contributions of critical studies on men and masculinities on one side, and feminist care theory on the other. Some of the key insights from critical studies on men and masculinities that Elliott takes into account are firstly Connell’s concepts of the relational gender order, together with the focus on men’s emotional lives and their lived realities; secondly, the “costs of masculinity” for both women and men: quoting Hanlon (2012), hegemonic masculinity promotes shame in men when they cannot live up to hegemonic ideals and encourages men to deny their needs for emotion and intimacy, a reflection which make

Elliott argue that men should be engaged in gender equality also for their own well-being. From the side of feminist care theory, the author points out how care is not only practical but also emotional, intimate and affective.

Feminist care theory draws upon the concept of “ethics of care” (Held, 2006; Tronto, 1993), proposed as an alternative to classic moral theories, which consider social actors as independent and rational. The “ethics of care”, instead, starts from the claim that individuals are interdependent, and that relations of care, either as caregiver or as care receiver (Tronto, 1993), are unavoidable across the life course. Drawing upon the theorization of ethics of care, feminist scholars (Fine & Glendinning, 2005; Kittay, 1999; Ungerson, 2006) have looked into the concept of dependence, arguing that care implies reciprocal dependence in the relationship between the caregiver and the cared for, highlighting its relational characteristic and the burden it represents. Kittay (1999), for example, spoke of “dependency work” to define the work of caring for the inevitably dependent. As Held (2006) points out, care, which is a practice and a value, because it is at the same time an activity and the expression of a relationship, relies on factors like sensitivity, knowledge and trust, all factors that can be learned. Drawing upon this reasoning in formulating her proposal, trusting in the potential of involving men into relationship of care and dependency, Elliott’s (2016) conclusions are that caring masculinities’ main features are (or should be) the rejection of domination and the embracement of the qualities of care. Elliott’s proposal seems difficult to adopt acritically, because it focuses on the emotional difficulties of adhering to hegemonic masculinity and the stigma attached to those who fail to, underestimating the power inherent the very existence of a notion of hegemonic masculinity for maintaining the status quo in gender relations. Nevertheless, it provides an interesting lens for looking at specific male experiences that require engaging with care and bonding, like fatherhood.

3. Families, intimacy and practices

Family structures have suffered important changes across the 20th century, and the transformations of fatherhood took place on this backdrop (Chambers, 2012). Different perspectives have been proposed to address such transformations. Among these, the most influential have been the theory of individualization (Beck-Gernsheim, 2002), which opened way to Giddens' conceptualization of democratization of family ties and the "pure relationship" (Giddens, 1992), and the focus on "family practices" proposed by Morgan (1996) and extended by Finch's (2007) concept of "family display". The next paragraphs provide a concise description of these perspectives, both of which present useful elements for the investigation of fatherhood in contemporary families.

3.1 Individualization and the pure relationship

The theory of individualization, proposed and sustained by influential scholars at the end of the second millennium, is based on the observation that on the one hand, society provides new spaces and options for individuals who can now decide for themselves how to shape their lives; on the other, people are individually linked to institutions of welfare, labor market, system of education, bureaucracy and so on, which emerged in modern society (Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). According to Beck-Gernsheim, this progressive emergence of individual interests has had an impact on family ties and structures, more and more unstable, to the point that it is no longer possible to define the contents and relationships that make "the family". The author claims, though, that this does not lead to a disappearance of the family, as "processes of individualization generate both a claim to a life of one's own and a longing for ties, closeness and community" (Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p.8). The context of modernity is characterized by the loss of relevance of traditional institutions like religion and social class, and by a push for creating one's own biography, on working at life as a planning project as it is requested by the labor market and the educational system: in Giddens' (1992) words, "in the arena of personal life, autonomy means the successful realization of the reflexive project

of the self” (ivi, p. 189). In this context, family ties face a “normalization of fragility” (Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p.18). Giddens (1992) narrowed down the focus to look at the micro level of interaction, exploring what he called the potentiality of the “pure relationship”, based on sexual and emotional equality and founded on intimacy. The transformation of intimacy, in the author’s formulation, has its origins in the growing commitment of younger women to reconstruct their sexual and relational identity. Once the aim of getting married as only means of self-realization has lost its grip on younger generations, the focus is on the “relationship” per se, that Giddens defines “pure” to underline how its foundation is on the advantages that each partner gains from it. The author introduced the concept of “confluent love” to define the kind of bond that implies a reciprocal openness to the other, equal and trust oriented, based on intimacy. Intimacy, in Giddens’ formulation, therefore implies a democratization of interpersonal relationships; as such, it is extendable to all kind of bonds based on love, included the parent-child relationship, even though the author does not elaborate on this assumption. The negative consequence of democratization and the pure relationship is its provisional nature, which reinforces the public concern, highlighted by Beck-Gernsheim (2002) as well, about the fragility of contemporary family ties.

3.2 Family practices and display

To provide a more nuanced picture of “the contemporary family”, then, a key issue has been the development of empirical research on how family lives are lived (Chambers, 2012). Jamieson (1999), for example, criticized Giddens’ theorization as it did not take into account the structural imbalance that affects gender relations, unlikely to be pacified by an investment in intimate relationships, and it neglected the practical side of the construction and maintenance of family relationships, as these are “necessarily embroiled in financial and material matters over and above the relationship” (ivi, p. 490). This criticism is consistent with a conceptualization of family relationships as sites of “doings” rather than “beings” or essential structures. Morgan’s theorization of family practices, which “have to do with family relationships and with individual and historical constructs, activities that are related to family matter” (Morgan, 1996), has been proposed to address the contrast between the ideological

notion of the nuclear family and the variety of ways in which people conduct their family lives. At the basis of this theorization is, therefore, the observation, shared with Beck-Gernsheim, that defining the boundaries of contents of “the family” is a task impossible to accomplish. Morgan shifted the focus, though, from the shape of family structures (marriage, co-habitation, divorce, step-families) to the customs and practices acted out by family members, thought of as social actors who “engage in the actions and activities that comprise the routines of doing family life” (Chambers, 2012, p. 41). Drawing from this, Finch (2007) proposes the concept of “family display” as a tool to be added to the investigation of “doing” family. The activity of displaying puts emphasis on the social nature of family practices, where the meaning of actions, in order to for them to be effective as constituting family practices, must be both conveyed to and understood by relevant others. To be recognized as family practices, those actions need to be interpreted by others as carrying meaning associated with “family”. In Finch’s formulation, the importance of display in contemporary families is due to the changed social environment in which family life is now lived: the activity of displaying characterizes contemporary families who deal with a growing diversity of family compositions and a greater fluidity of family relationships. In particular, the three main themes on which the implications of the changing social context are analyzed are, firstly, the distinction between family and household; secondly, the awareness that families are subject to change over time as individuals move through the life course; thirdly, and following from the first two implicating that identifying family relationships is not a matter of “naming members” but rather about demonstrating that relationships between individuals are effective in a family-like way, the focus should then be on the quality of relationships and how they are expressed in practical actions.

4. Studying fatherhood, fathers, fathering: transversal dimensions

With perspectives on family lives laying in the background, the focus returns now to the theorization of masculinities and the developments of the concept, which proved of great relevance for the analysis of fatherhood. While Connell’s now classical definition of hegemonic masculinity has been the most influent starting point for many contributions (Bart

Stykes, 2015; Della Puppa & Miele, 2015; S. Magaraggia, 2012; Plantin, Månsson, & Kearney, 2003), some scholars appealed to the notion of hybridization in their observation of fathering practices (Dolan, 2014; Hauser, 2015), while others drew upon concepts of inclusive masculinity (Farstad & Stefansen, 2015) or underlined the importance of intersectional social dimensions as well as emotional and social competence (Johansson, 2011a, 2011b) when analyzing parenthood, especially of the notion of intimacy, in what seems an endorsement of the potential of “caring” masculinities. In most contributions on contemporary fatherhood, though, the reflection on masculinities lies in the background, while other dimensions of analysis take the foreground. First, the dimension of breadwinning, and its implications for personal experiences and for policy-makers; second, the aspects of morality and reflexivity in father-child relationships and in constructing father’s identities; thirdly, the relevance of bodies and emotions for fathering practices. These dimensions of analysis, which will be discussed in the following sections, cross the proposed distinction between fathers, fathering and fatherhood and encompass both the level of experiences and micro interactions and the level of cultural representations and institutional boundaries to fatherhood (Fox, 2009; Miller, 2011).

4.1 Breadwinning and “being there”: issues of responsibility

Breadwinning, or providing economically for the family, is a traditional and still prominent characteristic of fatherhood in the Western world. Dermott (2008) pointed out how, according to most historians, the predominance of the breadwinner family model was associated with industrialization, starting in the late XIX century but established in the XX, when many men in the labor force could sustain a household with a single wage, and the breadwinner model became an attainable and ideal family type. Even with women’s employment rise, the belief that once a couple had children the male should be the economic provider and the female the caregiver persisted to date. As Hobson and Morgan specified (Hobson, 2002), this is especially true in discourses around family policies, which are often reduced to “cash and care”, identifying who pays for the kids with who cares for them, and fathers’ responsibilities are often defined in law and policy as directed towards economic

maintenance rather than to providing care, here in the sense of material nurturing and interaction with the child. According to Hobson and Morgan, at the core of masculinity politics lie men's authority in the family and male breadwinning, which is assumed and taken for granted in social policies as well as in labor market institutions. Different research has shown how this conception of fatherhood as mainly breadwinning is still deeply rooted in fathers themselves, even alongside discussions of increased father involvement in child care. Shirani and colleagues (Shirani, Henwood, & Coltart, 2012), for example, in studying unemployed, home-working and stay-at-home dads, explored how changes in occupational trajectories away from models of full-time working hold implications for men's sense of competence (or vulnerability), and how men who fail to accomplish that model negotiate between provider and involved carer positions to build legitimate fatherhood's identities. More recently, the same author (Shirani, 2015), with a qualitative longitudinal study on young fathers and unplanned pregnancies, investigated the intertwining of the caring ideal and the still very prominent understanding of fathers as financial providers, underlying how earning is a major pressing concern, and caring and involvement as an ideal. This struggle between providing and caring has been studied also by Machin (2015), who pointed out how even fathers who considered the concept of "involved fathering" as central to the role of the father – a specificity of her sample – were constrained by the necessity of providing, which affected their time availability for one, and was affected by economically unsustainable leave policies. Dermott (2008) dedicated an interesting reasoning on what she called the commonsense dichotomy between emotional involvement and economic exchange within the family, pointing out how households are not only the sites of familial intimacy but also financial units, and that therefore money and intimacy cannot be separated. The issue is whether it is, as suggested by theoretical and empirical research briefly outlined in this paragraph, the role of fathers in particular to provide for the economic well-being of the family, as the author proposes a reflection on whether a father should provide, referring to a subjective assessment of identity, or he does provide, as an objective measurable dimension in the study of family households. Dermott underlines the pitfalls of considering being a father as an aspect of adult hegemonic masculinity, since for an individual, masculinity and fathering identities will be interwoven, but aspects of one or the other are too easily connected

to both, especially the provider role: “therefore, fulfilling the provider role can be used as a justification for otherwise unsatisfying employment, even when other ideas of fatherhood are paramount, and the provider role may be an involvement safety net when other valued aspects of fatherhood are absent” (ivi, p. 40). Another confounding issue is, according to the author, that the relevance of breadwinning for the idea of “good” fatherhood differs depending on their socio-economic situation. This argument has been taken up by different scholars: father involvement has been observed to be bound to working conditions of both fathers and of mothers, and some researchers found that on the one hand ideals of “innovative” fathering practices can be smothered, alongside with ideological and behavioral factors, by economic constraints, which shape care management patterns especially among low-income couples (Meteyer & Perry-Jenkins, 2010; Plantin, 2007). On the other hand, class identities’ interaction with gender and parenthood are more evident in those cases where fathers fail to accomplish their providing mission, because of unstable and low income, unemployment or other constraining factors like incarceration (Catlett & McKenry, 2004; D’Enbeau, Buzzanell, & Duckworth, 2010; Roy, 2004). Returning to Dermott’s (2008) analysis, earning money is important for individuals, and employment is just as important in displaying socially appropriate masculinity, but its significance for the construction of fatherhood needs to be addressed at the micro level of individual processes of meaning-making as well. In the author’s words, “the recognition of money as a resource which fathers often supply should not just be added to a list of attributes; rather the meaning of providing financially for children needs to be understood” (ivi, p. 42); the suggestion here is for an interpretation, supported by empirical findings on men’s narratives of their experience of fatherhood, of providing as a form of care in itself. Such an interpretation may seem to diverge with Held’s (2006) interpretation of care as based on “attentiveness, responsiveness to needs, and understanding situations from the points of view of others” (ivi, p. 18), as providing financially lacks a relational meaning and may be reduced to “caring about” rather than “caring for”. In Tronto’s (1993) formulation, care implies a notion of obligation, and it is composed of four phases: caring about, or recognizing the necessity of a care intervention; taking care of, or the taking of some kind of responsibility around the observed need and the definition of how to respond to it; care-giving, or the practical and direct fulfillment of the care needs; and care-receiving,

or the response provided by the cared for on the activities directed to him or her. From this perspective, providing can be ascribed to the action of “taking care of”, but not to “care-giving”, which has a material, hands on character. On the other hand, as Miller (2011) points out, emphasizing a “provider vs carer” narrative of fatherhood, posing thus these discourses as competing, does not but underscore the complexity of modern fatherhood, which lies at individual everyday level of practice.

4.2 Morality and reflexivity: father-child relationships

A second dimension of the analysis of contemporary fatherhood draws upon notions that reason with the conceptualization of modernization, like individualization, “de-traditionalization”, reflexivity, intimacy and moral issues around father-child relationships. Dermott (2008) discussed some aspects of intimacy and fatherhood, drawing upon Giddens’ concept of the “pure relationship” and of the democratization of intimate interactions, based on intimacy as “a matter of emotional communication, with others and with the self, in a context of interpersonal equality” (ivi, p. 127). Dermott reports that five themes related to intimacy can be identified: sexuality, reflexivity, equality, fragility and communication. I will here focus on two of them, namely reflexivity and equality, as these are the issues mostly taken in consideration by different research around fatherhood.

Reflexivity, as Dermott (2008) explains following Giddens, is central to the project of the self, the process of individualization and construction of a “narrative of the self” typical of postmodern thinking. Fatherhood takes part in such a narrative as well: it is an “entrepreneurial activity, part of the shaping of one’s life as a rational, autonomous, responsible individual seeking to maximize one’s potential and achievements as a worthy person” (Lupton & Barclay, 1997, p.18).

As uniformity of social categories like that of “father” breaks down, though, “we might look at men constructing their fathering in diverse ways in response to their own biographies” (Dermott, 2008, p. 130). This argument has been central in the investigation of other scholars as well. Williams (2008), for example, argued that contemporary fatherhood is a phenomenon

affected a process of de-traditionalization in Giddens' sense whereby fathering is increasingly a response to personal biography and circumstances rather than being modelled on traditional ideal types of what it means to be a father. The suggestion, supported by empirical findings, is that fatherhood is becoming progressively individualized. Similarly, Westerling (2015), in studying fathering practices in Denmark from a social psychological perspective, with the aim of exploring the paradox of Danish fathers taking less parental leaves than the mothers but paternal involvement in childcare increasing since 2000, argued that reflexive modernization entails subjective orientations that enable novel pathways to intimacy in contemporary father-child relationships. In his investigation, fathers orient towards intimacy with their children: as fathering is a central part of everyday life for the interviewees and a constitutive element of their identities as well, the father-child relationship is not only given but chosen, not for the sake of children only but, seemingly, motivated by the relationship in itself. As Dermott pointed out in her analysis of intimacy, reflexivity does not eliminate the influence of social structures and power relations, but in recent decades there has been a relaxation of the social prescriptions around personal relationships, and the father role is one that has been rethought in different ways. This argument leads to the other relevant issue related to intimacy: equality and moral implications of interpersonal relationships. If, following Giddens again, the transformation of intimacy allows for more equal and democratic relationship, it could be argued that equality not only is not the norm, but it is not sustainable in parent-child relationships. The relationship which academic interest addressed has therefore been a different one: the mother-father relationship with regard to child care and parenting. Henwood and Procter (2003), for example, investigated men's transition to first-time fatherhood, showing how fathers welcomed the "new" fatherhood model and the possibility of being involved in family life rather than detached from it, but reported also some areas of tension, among which what the authors called "equity and decision making", for those fathers who wished to do more than just help the mother out and sought full involvement in child care (see also Grunow & Evertsson, 2016). Ives (2015) engaged with issues of morality and equality when theorizing the "deliberative father", or a morally progressive form of fatherhood that focuses on process rather than practice, based on the emerged ethical normativity which distinguishes "good" and "bad" fathers. According

to the author, moral discourses of contemporary fatherhood are associated not only with fathering for the direct well-being of the child, but also with wider concerns about justice, gender equality and social cohesion. The “deliberative father” is engaged with fatherhood as a moral activity connected to various constructions of “fairness”, of which, based on empirical findings, the author distinguishes three narratives: fairness as reciprocity, in the sense of a traditional splitting of gendered parenthood, with the mother as the primary carer and the father as the primary breadwinner. Fairness as equality, based on either splitting time spent in child care equally or trying to share all tasks; and fairness as functional specialization, a narrative including a range of approaches all based on specializing in specific tasks and roles. The “deliberative” approach to fatherhood is more concerned about the construction and negotiation of fatherhood roles than about the performance of those roles; in Ives’ argument, different ways of conceptualizing fatherhood and of interpreting “fairness” in constructing fatherhood and motherhood have the fundamental aim of “mitigat[ing] the risk of men failing as fathers because they are unable to live up to an expert-mandated ideal.” (Ives, 2015, p. 290). Those different accounts are morally preferable to those proposed by public discourses around “good” parenthood, because “rather than imposing a set of prescriptive norms, they approach the moral complexity of fatherhood from the point of view of a pragmatic and naturalistic ethics, which rejects the idea that we can draw on externally derived foundational principles to assess the rights and wrongs of a father’s practice, but we have to look instead at the details of the practice and examine the context in which the practice takes place. [...] Deliberation, in the sense being talked about here, involves a wide-ranging analysis of what one ought to do, involving thoughtful consideration of what one is prima facie obliged to do, what one is prima facie entitled to, one’s own needs and the needs of others.” (Ives, 2015, p. 291). With a similar understanding, in addressing the importance of “quality time” rather than “quantity of time” that men spend in caring for their children, Dermott (2008) claims that contemporary fatherhood “is centered on a personal connection at the expense of participation in the work of childcare; because caring activities flow from an emotional connection rather than in themselves constituting the fathering role, the practicalities of “intimate fatherhood” are fluid and open to negotiation.” (Ivi, p. 143).

4.3 Bodies and emotions: the “grey zone” of changing masculinities?

A third aspect of contemporary fatherhood deals with emotional closeness, embodiment and physical care. When first addressing the issue of fatherhood, up to that moment overlooked by studies of masculinities, Lupton and Barclay (1997) observed how parenting has become an integral site of the reproduction of modes of care of the self, revolving primarily, though, around the body and self of another, namely the child. The birth of the child is a project which starts well before the event in itself, for women and increasingly for men too who are encouraged to negotiate participation in childcare, reflect on the nature of the relationship with the child and so on: on this regard, the authors claim that emotional states are an area deserving specific attention. In their opinion, sociology and psychology alike tend to assume the notion of the unified rational subject, assuming a dualism between structure and agency, and lacking interest for the emotional and embodied dimensions of fatherhood. The importance of the bodily experience is evident in the fact that the blurred or, conversely, rigid boundaries between one's own body and the world contribute to the perception of an autonomous self. Observing how women are positioned as embodied subjects far more than men when it comes to parenthood due to the experience of pregnancy, the authors propose that “the blurring of the boundaries then could be experienced as more confronting by men because it challenges specifically dominant ideals of masculinity” (Lupton & Barclay, 1997, p. 32). Both the issues of emotion and embodiment have been later taken up by scholars interested in the study of fatherhood. Dermott (2008) developed the theme of emotional involvement interpreting it as “performing emotion”, highlighted as the keystone of contemporary relationships and the main feature of differentiation of contemporary men with their own fathers. Emotional involvement is increasingly seen as fulfilling the idea of being a “good father”, on the specific dimension of demonstrating affection (Dermott, 2008; Miller, 2011). This topic opens way for a reflection on whether emotions and their expression are themselves the product of a social construction. According to Hochschild (1979), who pioneered the field of sociology of emotions, among the social structure exist conventions of feelings, and the management of emotion is part and contributes to produce the social order. The author speaks of “feeling rules” to mean those social factors that affect what people think

and do about how they feel, and specifically to those – culturally variable - rules that regulate feeling, the expression of feeling and the ability of recognizing feelings inside oneself. In Hochschild's theorization, emotions are a field of socialization and come with a set of practices around them, with courses of actions which are part of the feeling rules. The agent's commitment to feeling rules is what the author calls "emotion work", or the effort made by the individual to adhere to the feeling rules required by the interactional situation, which might be either evocative (of a required emotion that the individual does not feel) or suppressive (of an inadequate emotion that the actor should not feel according to the situation). Dermott (2008), taking up Giddens's postmodern interpretation of contemporary relationships, pointed out how in personal interaction, emotion rather than rationality is supposed to govern, and therefore an ability of emotional awareness, relatable to Hochschild's feeling rules and understood as knowledge on the appropriateness of time, place and method of expression, is needed in order to maintain a relationship correctly. The acceptance of emotion has been a prevalent theme in the remodeling of masculinity, but it is still difficult for individual men to accomplish it because "it requires a radical rethinking of attributes and displays of dominant masculinity" (Dermott, 2008, p. 65).

The same can be said for physical, material care involving male bodies. Connell (1995) suggested that for a change in the gender order to occur it was necessary to adopt a "degendering strategy" at the two levels of the culture and the body, and that a re-embodiment of men was needed, by means, for example, of nurturing an infant. This suggestion has been implicitly or explicitly taken up by other scholars, who, consistently with a theorization of caring masculinities (Elliott, 2016), drew attention upon fathers who do perform material care to their children in an exceptional way, like stay-at-home dads or fathers taking long parental leaves, looking for different conceptualization of the father's role as related to masculine identities. Doucet (2004a, 2004b, 2006, 2016), for example, recounted processes of "internal complexity and contradiction" taking place among the stay-at-home fathers she interviewed: while assuming that these fathers who live and work for sustained periods as primary carers while maintaining only a tenuous relation with breadwinning are in a unique position to create new forms of masculinity, the author points out how her

interviewees were quite adamant, in their narratives, to distinguish themselves as men, heterosexual, masculine, and fathers as opposed to mothers. The author posed three arguments around how bodies matter, about fathers as embodied subjects, the intersections of embodiment and space, and the variable quality of embodiment. Around the first dimension, the author observed how fathers spoke as embodied subjects and agents in their parenting, by emphasizing physical activities with the children, even if all the activities drew on notions of masculine embodiment as “strong, physical and muscle-bound” (Doucet, 2006, p. 711), often referring to playing and being outdoors. Matters of embodiment were also brought up regarding female embodiment and its specificities related to nurturing a child. As for the second, Doucet claims that embodiment has “moral” dimensions as well, in a symbolic interactionist sense: caring for children involves networking around one’s own children, other parents and other children, networks often dominated by mothers, an “estrogen-filled world” (ivi, p. 712) in the father’s words. The consequence of this female domination is that fathers may feel their presence to be potentially disturbing, especially when caring for other people’s children, as male bodies are more likely to be interpreted as potentially aggressive and sexually threatening: here is where fathers speak about the fear of “moral” judgement or suspicion. Thirdly, the author observes how there are parenting situations in which bodies do matter and others in which they do not; her interesting observation has been that when a father is attending to children by performing all kinds of material care, even the most hand-on activities like feeding or bathing them, gendered embodiment can be negligible. In other situations, however, as anticipated, the social gaze upon men’s movements with children is tinged with suspicion and surveillance as men move in female dominated community spaces, and there, in the public, is where male bodies matter the most (see also Doucet, 2009a, 2009b). Overall, though, “embodiment can matter in fathering, and parenting more widely, because the care of others is, quite simply, deeply embodied.” (Doucet, 2006, p. 712)

The embodiment of care has been the central focus of Ranson’s (2015) work on Canadian stay-at-home fathers aimed at showing that material child care work consists of a set of bodily practices that can be learned. The ultimate objective of her work was that of looking at the

consequences of fathers' embodied caregiving, namely, that in the process of acquiring competence in caring practices men can change, thus fulfilling Connell's – and her optimistic followers - prophecy about de-gendering the social structure through men's participation hands-on in childcare. Ranson observed how, due to the imperatives of "true masculinity", fathers have been socialized to "suppress their bodies" (ivi, p. 3), so that the physical experience of the contact with the child's body and the reciprocal feeling of being available for touching is a new element introduced into these fathers' experience of the world itself. The author draws upon Lupton's (2012) notion of "interembodiment" referring to the relational dimensions of embodiment, and the concept of "skinship" developing through this intertwining and intimate relationship between infants and their carers. The major outcomes of Ranson's research have been, firstly, that fathers developed strong attachments to the child or children they had been nurturing, formed directly between father and child with no mediations, and resulting from the time that fathers had invested in daily hands-on care. Secondly, they came to appreciate care work as work in itself, recognizing its dignity and its being different from any other kind of work. Thirdly, for the fathers of her research, learning how to care changed their thinking about family relationships and paid work as well: in the author's words, "taking the leave also constituted a challenge to masculinist workplace norms about men as workers. All these outcomes, taken together, suggested the sort of re-visioning of care, fathering and masculinity that earlier research had predicted" (Ranson, 2015, p. 176). Together with these outcomes, Ranson points out two understandings: firstly, that embodied caregiving involves body techniques that are learned, and fathers became competent with practice; secondly, that when fathers become competent caregivers they become different kinds of fathers, and of men as well. Quoting the author again: "in the process of learning what to do, they become 're-embodied' as men" (ivi, p. 180).

5. A theoretical tool case

As a concluding note to this presentation of theoretical perspectives and insights, I will briefly attempt at summarizing their main implications.

Studying masculinity means, as it became clear, to acknowledge the existence of multiple versions, expressions, and differently power-laden constellations of “maleness”. For the aims of this work, the most interesting and challenging aspect of multiple masculinities is the relationship between “hybridization” and “caring” masculinity: in the following chapters, I will try to explore this relationship. More specifically, I will look at experiences of fathers with the aim at understanding whether elements of “care” are being hybridized into a new form of hegemonic masculinity, or rather the emergence of a new relevance of care for the construction of fatherhood represents a starting point for a change in gender relations.

On the background, the reconstruction of the main understandings of family life and theories on contemporary parenthood has been done with the aim of providing a comprehensive overview. In this work, though, the perspective on family practices and display did not explicitly inform the analysis; the undeniable relevance of the concepts of reflexivity and de-traditionalization for the interpretation of contemporary fathers’ experiences has, instead, been taken into consideration, together with reflections on what has been labelled the “new parenting culture”.

The issues of breadwinning as the main cultural reference point for defining fathers, constructions of “good” fatherhood in their moral implications, and the relevance of bodies for fathering practices as well as for constructing masculinity will be investigated throughout the work.

The fundamental aim of composing a theoretical tool case is not, in this dissertation, that of “testing” the validity or applicability of the concepts here presented; rather, such concepts represent the points of reference for the construction of the “gaze” that I am here posing on the fathers that agreed to share their stories with me.

CHAPTER 2

The research: context, data and method

1. Introduction

The aim of this chapter is first of all to provide a picture of the context in which my research on Italian fathers is set, and then, to narrow down the focus, to describe the research design and the methodological implications of my work.

The following paragraph is dedicated to the reconstruction of fatherhood in the Italian context, both at the macro level of societal changes and welfare policies, to provide a picture of the “fatherhood regime” (Musumeci et al., 2015) in which men (and women) are immersed, and at the micro level of Italian fathers’ representations and experiences. The institutional context necessarily sets the boundaries of fathers’ possibilities when it comes to work-family balance issues, defining rights, duties and constraints, on the backdrop of a welfare system based on “unsupported familism” (Saraceno & Keck, 2011), or the implicit allocation of most of the care work on the women within the family. Fathers, in their day to day experiences, move within those boundaries, sometimes questioning their constrictive power, but mostly adapting to them, as they often share the “gender ideology” that informs understandings of motherhood and fatherhood and sustains the existence of those boundaries.

Once the – composite and necessarily limited – picture of Italian fatherhood has been drawn, the current study will be presented. Firstly, I will describe the objective and the methodological approach of the work, presenting the research design and the process of sample construction. Then, I will move to the description of the methodological instruments adopted for data collection and the process of data analysis. Finally, a reflexive note on the implications of qualitative methods is proposed.

2. Fatherhood in the Italian context

2.1 Changes in gender relations: a long and winding road

One of the most relevant factors for the start of a change in gender relations in the Western world has been the increase of women's involvement in the labor market and female employment rates that occurred since the 1970s. Over the last decades a growth in women's participation to paid work has been registered in Italy as well: as Reyneri (2009) highlighted, in the time range 1995- 2007 the percentage of employed women aged between 15 and 64 years raised from 38% to 47%. According to recent data, though, Italian women's employment rates are among the lowest in Europe: in the age range 55-64, 41.5% of men and only 17% of women are involved in paid work. In the younger cohort, between 25 and 54 years, the gap is even wider: 85.6% of men and 53% of women are employed (Anxo et al., 2011, p.164). Women's employment rate has also a specific territorial distribution, as dual-earner couples (where both partners are involved in paid work) are more likely to be found in Northern Italy, and employed women tend to have a higher level of education (Musumeci et al., 2015). Changes in family formation processes have occurred as well, as Italians start families late and have a low fertility rate, and a range of different family forms – single-parents, stepfamilies, reconstitutions after divorce, unmarried families - have made their appearance in Italy as well (Bosoni, Crespi, & Ruspini, 2016). Women face, though, great difficulties in conciliating work and family life; they still carry the heaviest burden of household labor, and a scarce development of child care services, together with underdeveloped policies for balancing work and domestic labor, make for what has been defined a model of “unsupported familism” (Musumeci et al., 2015; Naldini & Jurado, 2013; Saraceno, 2011b). Welfare state policies will be discussed in the next paragraph; here, a look at the micro level of the allocation of domestic tasks among the family is worth taking. In 92,7% of Italian couples, women are the exclusive bearers of domestic work, while only a very low percentage of men, 0,8%, take solely care of household labor (Geist, 2005). Basing on a use of time research dating back to 2002 (Bloemen, Pasqua, & Stancanelli, 2010), Italian men spend 225 minutes at their workplaces every day on weekdays, against the 112 minutes that women devote to paid work; on the opposite, men are involved in housework on average

95 minutes per day, while women spend 320 minutes every day performing domestic chores (ivi, p. 347). According to Istat data (Ranaldi & Romano, 2008, p. 24), Italian men spend 73% of their daily time in paid work, and 24% in housework. For Italian women, the percentages are inverted: 74% of their time is dedicated to domestic work every day, and 26% to paid work. In a weekly perspective, Italian women aged between 18 and 64 spend 14.7 hours on paid work and 39.7 performing household labor; again, for men the proportions are inverted, with 32.6 hours on the job and 12.7 in housework (Fisher and Robinson 2011, pp. 297-298). Carriero (2011), on the basis of a research on perceptions of equality on the division of domestic work among the couple, points out how 55,4% of Italian women and 55% of men claim to be satisfied with the – unequal – allocation of household chores, which attributes two thirds of the work on women and one third on men. Apparently, an inequality is perceived only when moving away from this “golden rule”, which is, though, unfair in itself (Carriero & Todesco, 2016, 2017). Among couples with a child younger than 1 year, 59% see women taking care of over 80% of domestic work, 28% of women perform between 60 and 80% of housework, and only 13% share equally household chores with their male partners (Mencarini & Solera, 2016). It can be said, then, that women, when they are involved in the labor market, are still bound to a “second shift” (Hochschild & Machung, 2003): what is the men’s place in this picture?

2.2 Family policies and the male breadwinner model

This paragraph offers an overview of the main Italian welfare measures addressing families with children. Welfare policies for families with children of pre-school age imply child care services and the system of parental leaves. As Saraceno (2011a) reminds, the European Union proposed a normative model of maternal behavior and child care that implies a higher female participation to the labor market and a higher involvement of men in childcare, together with the prescription of the opportunity for children to receive care from formal non-familiar groups since the younger age (Unicef, 2008). Overall, family and childhood policies are based on different ideologies around the allocation of care responsibilities on men and women and family or society. Among EU countries, childhood policies have great

differences on different dimensions, like length and type of compensation of maternal leaves, characteristics of parental leaves (for example, whether they are open to fathers as well), child care services coverage for children younger than three and from three to school age. The European Union posed a strategic aim of 33% of coverage of services for children aged 0 to three years, but as data will show, Italy is still far from that goal (ISTAT, 2017).

In Italy, Early Child Education and Care services are different for two age ranges. For children aged three to six years, which is the compulsory school age, kindergartens, with an approach dedicated to enhancing children's socialization and cognitive development (Da Roit & Sabatinelli, 2013); in the 2000s, the threshold age for entering kindergartens has been lowered to two years and a half (León & Pavolini, 2014). For the age range 0 to three, nursery schools, characterized by a "weaker social consensus on the early socialization of very young children" (Da Roit & Sabatinelli, 2013). From three years of age on, attending a kindergarten becomes part of a "normal" developmental curriculum of Italian children, and 91% of children attend to it (Del Boca, 2002). Coverage of care services for the youngest age range, instead, is sensibly lower: according to national data, indeed, in the year 2014/2015 the supply of care services for children younger than three years, both public and private, covered on average circa 23% of potential users (ISTAT 2017). In conclusion, in Italy, care of children aged between zero and three is almost exclusively provided in the family, mainly by the mother or members of the broader family (Da Roit & Sabatinelli, 2013).

Characteristics of parental leaves have an influence on care management as well, as the longer and less paid the leave, the more it is taken by women and the more it polarizes women's behavior according to social class and education; the longer and single-parent (which means, used by women), the harder it is to get back into the labor market (Saraceno, 2011b). Italian law allows for three different kinds of leave: the compulsory maternity leave, the parental leave, and a "paternity" leave (Addabbo & Giovannini, 2013). The compulsory maternity leave is a five months period of abstention from work required to mothers-to-be; it could either start two months before due date of birth and end three months after childbirth, or start one month before and end four months after, and it is paid at 80% of wage. The parental leave, as per law 53/2000 (Murgia & Poggio, 2011; Ruspini, Hearn, Pease, &

Pringle, 2011; Zajczyk & Ruspini, 2008), is an individual and non-transferable entitlement, according to which each parent is allowed 6 months of work suspension, with a benefit corresponding to 30% of earnings if it is taken when the child is younger than 3 years, and unpaid when the child is from three to eight years old. The total amount of parental leave that can be taken by two parents is 10 months, but if the father takes at least three months of leave, he is entitled to an additional month. The paternity leave, introduced in 2012 (Musumeci et al., 2015), is specifically dedicated to employed fathers, who are entitled to one day of compulsory leave fully paid, with the possibility to add two more days if the mother agrees to transfer them from her maternity leave³. In Italy, indeed, men who take parental leaves are very few: among men employed in the public sector, where in general the first month of leave is fully paid, only 1.8% took a leave between 2001 and 2004, a percentage that lowers below 1% among workers of the private sector (Crosta, 2008). More recent data show a feeble rise in parental leave use by father, taken by 7.5% of employed men in 2005 (Ranaldi & Romano, 2008, p. 123). As Cannito (2017) highlights, parental leave policies present some problematic aspects: above all, the retribution of 30% of wage is a disincentive for fathers, as their income is on average higher (if not the only in the household); the very short extension of the compulsory paternity leave for employed fathers, furthermore, makes it very clear that family welfare policies are based on the idea that childcare should be performed first and foremost by mothers. Overall, to answer the question posed in the previous paragraph, it could be said that the men's place in this picture, as it is depicted by welfare policies, is at the workplace, and only marginally involved in childcare. The workplace itself plays an important role in defining the boundaries of fathers' possibilities for work-family balance, as taking a leave implies a reasoning on the opportunity cost of a career break that goes against the "workplace culture" (Musumeci et al., 2015; Cannito, 2017). The institutional context can be thus described as "short leave modified male-breadwinner model" (Bosoni, 2014; Bosoni & Baker, 2015; Bosoni et al., 2016), as at the level of family policies, if some measures are

³ In 2016, an experimental implementation of this measure has been introduced, extending the single compulsory day of full paid leave to two days, available until the child is 5 months old and non-consecutive (Cannito, 2017).

taken in order to support working mothers, the traditional model of the “provider” father is not really questioned.

2.3 Italian fathers: a closer look

Most researches on Italian fathers agree that the male breadwinner model, which sees the man more involved in the public sphere of paid work than in the private sphere of domestic and care work, is still prominent not only at the macro level of policies, but at the micro level of fathers’ experiences and representations as well (Bertone et al., 2016; Della Puppa & Miele, 2015; S. Magaraggia, 2012; Mencarini & Solera, 2016; Zajczyk & Ruspini, 2008).

According to the European Values Study (1999), more than 60% of Italian men think that fathers are suited for caring for children, and paternal involvement in care activities has certainly risen during the last two decades. Daily time that men aged between 25 and 44 dedicate to child care (of children younger than 13 years) increased, indeed, from the 27 minutes of 1988-1989 to the 45 minutes of 2002-2003 (ISTAT, 2006). Specifically, though, time dedicated to interactional and ludic activities grew the most, compared to material child care: if, indeed, in 1988-1989 Italian fathers spent little longer than 20 minutes every day talking to and playing with their children, and little longer than 10 minutes to physical care, in 2002-2003 time respectively increases to around 35 and 20 minutes (ISTAT, 2007). When children are aged between 0 and 5 years, 70% of Italian fathers in 2002-2003 performed at least one care activity every day, against 51% of 1988-1989 (ivi, p. 60). Once again, though, when controlling for type of activity, it emerges that only 39% of fathers in 2002-2003 dedicates daily to material child care, while mothers are responsible for 91% of time allocated by both parents to care activities (ivi, p. 63). According to Ranaldi and Romano (2008), material child care and activities of child surveillance are performed by 72.4% of mothers of children younger than 13 years and these activities take up around 1 hour and 15 minutes every day, and only 26,4% of fathers are involved in such activities, for 45 minutes circa daily. Studies on dual-earner couples (where both partners are involved in paid work) living in Northern Italy show that fathers take up on average 41% of childcare, measured including

physical care but also interactional and social activities like playing and reading, and taking children to school (Todesco, 2015). These couples are thought to be more prone to “innovative” patterns of child care tasks allocation, because of the involvement in paid work of the mothers (Fuochi, Mencarini, & Solera, 2014; Naldini, 2016; Todesco, 2015). Even among these families, though, fathers do not yet reach an equal share of childcare activities, as research shows that, when children are younger than one year, 43% of men members of dual-earner couples can be considered “involved” in routine material care work (Fuochi et al., 2014). Overall, fathers tend, then, to take the role of “helpers”, sustaining the care work performed by mothers and rather taking up a (relatively) higher share of domestic work in order to allow mothers more time with the child (Naldini & Torrioni, 2016).

On the side of cultural references available to Italian men for their construction of fatherhood, several contributions have discussed the influence of “traditional” representations of masculinity and their complex intertwining with the emerging discourse of the “new” man. On the spur of a debate on the “crisis of masculinity”, Deriu (2005) drew attention on the change of male figures in Italy, especially of images and roles of fathers, because of the fact that the strictly codified model of fatherhood gave out without leaving space to a just as much codified new model. According to the author, the father figure is in transformation especially on three “relational nodes”, namely relationships and confrontations with fathers of the previous generation, with women and with children. “Post-patriarchal” fathers share a substantially negative judgment on traditional fathers, an identification with the mother’s role and a strong investment on children, with the aim of acting out a different fatherhood. The previous generation of fathers, characterized by psychological rigidity, moral rigor, physical distance and emotional closure, as Deriu highlights, left a heavy heritage hard to distance oneself from. The traditional father enacted a recognized hierarchy between parent and child, and he would invest more in the public and social sphere: these factors contributed to a symbolization and a sort of mythization of the paternal role, from which Italian fathers find it hard to detach. About this, Magaraggia (2012) researched the ways contemporary Italian fathers establish affective relationships with their children, to the aim of investigating the tensions that emerge between predominant models of fatherhood and hegemonic masculinity.

The starting point of the analysis is the very consideration that contemporary fathers who want to appear as nurturing, participant and emotionally involved, or who refuse the traditional model of detached fatherhood, constantly need to engage with cultural norms that absorb innovative practices. The result is a complex redefinition of what it means to be a father today, while different aspects both of past experiences and of new social expectations are part accepted, part refused. Magaraggia refers to the idea of “paternity” as conceived by Ventimiglia (1994), an idea based on the awareness that processes of identity and role construction are played out in the minute, permanent conditions of everyday lives, as it is through them that values set and interactional actions and interactions are constructed. As a consequence, deconstructing paternity and putting it into practice means to start a different man-child relationship, but also to question hegemonic masculinity (Magaraggia, 2012, p. 82). Magaraggia conducted a research on 40 fathers and mothers of children aged younger than 3 years on the topic of meanings attached to parenthood. Men in her sample express, firstly, a desire to participate to care that is made complex by the fact that young children cannot interact: considering how fathers are more often involved in interactional and ludic activities, this factor makes it harder for men to participate to their children’s lives, a participation that often is limited to providing material support to care performed by mothers. The relationship with women is the second relational dimension taken into account by Deriu (2005), who highlights how contemporary fathers recognize a principle of female authority in two directions: on the one hand, by preferring a maternal model as they experienced as sons to the paternal one; on the other, recognizing a relational competence to their partners that they apparently feel to lack. This lack of relational and emotional ability experienced by men is due, according to the author, to changes in relationships between the sexes: female identities are no longer tied to a relationship with a man, so contemporary men are required to have competences around the management of relationships that they did not need to have before (Giddens, 1992). Italian contemporary fathers are still, then, indefinite figures (Magaraggia, 2012): Zajczyk and Ruspini (2008) proposed a typology of Italian fathers, distinguishing traditional, transforming and post-transformation fathers. Traditional fathers are still bound to the male breadwinner model: they experience a conflict with their own fathers, characterized by rigidity and emotional distance, but they still invest their energies

on work rather than affective and care presence, and gender roles are their main reference point. Fathers in transformation are living a change in their paternal identities following a relevant event in their private life (for example, a divorce); while considering gender roles as a reference point, they want to be more emotionally involved in their relationships with children and are disoriented by the necessity of an alternative model. Finally, post-transformation fathers, which represent a minority, live a strong detachment from the model represented by their own fathers, in favor of relationships with partners and children based on affection and emotional closeness: they dedicate to the building of these relationship both quantity of time and quality time, and they appear willing to question consolidate behaviors, choices and expectations (Zajczyk and Ruspini, 2008, p. 103). The post-transformation father lives relationships with more serenity, he is less ready to refer to gender stereotypes in the education of children, and while considering a father's role as important he questions the traditional division of gender roles. In general, if on the one hand contemporary Italian fathers still consider participation to household work as secondary, on the other hand they want to be present in the socialization of children and they feel the need for an open communication with their partners and for detaching from the model represented by their own fathers. The relationship with children in particular is seen as central in their lives, and it deserves a deeper commitment, a commitment implying also participation to care activities. In the interpretation provided by Deriu (2005), the lack of a definite model of fatherhood, especially on the side of children's education, causes the fact that men base their behavior on their own experiences as sons, with the consequence that a horizontal or friendly model of education is preferred in order to distance themselves from the rigidly vertical model represented by their own relationships with fathers of the previous generation. These discourses emerged also in Bertone and colleagues' (2016) work on homosocial constructions of masculinity in focus groups discussions around fatherhood. The frame that the authors called of "change" is one of the most relevant in fathers' discourses, who use it to distance themselves from a previous and negative model of fatherhood, based on the importance of breadwinning and emotional distance. The "change" is lived mainly as a movement from distance to presence, not only in the historical sense of the changes occurred across the generations, but in a biographical sense as well, as fathers interpret their own presence during the central moments of pregnancy and

birth as the beginning of a change in their lives. The relationship with the traditional model of father is, though, complex and impossible to summarize in a detachment all in all: if, on the one hand, the centrality of breadwinning is questioned, on the other the commitment to paid work at the expenses of family life is still interpreted as a fundamental side of their lives (and their masculinity). If emotional distance and a harsh approach to discipline are seen as unacceptable by contemporary men, the democratization of family relationship that draw attention first and foremost on the “best for the child” is object of criticism (Bertone et al., 2016).

Overall, a profile of Italian fathers is hard to draw. The compresence of strong cultural representations of gender roles as fundamentally segregated, sustained by policies at the institutional level, and emerging discourses on “new” fatherhood, to be defined in opposition to a “traditional” model which indeed remains a point of reference in contemporary men’s imagination, makes the boundaries of Italian fatherhood uncertain, and its relationship with models of masculinity a challenging field of research.

3. The research

3.1 Methodology and research design

The focus of this work is on the process of constructing fatherhood, and it proposes an attempt at analyzing the relevance of looking at the mechanisms of construction of meanings around being fathers for studying masculinities and their different manifestations. The fundamental aim is to understand whether in contemporary representations of fatherhood and in fathering practices, as neo-fathers experience and express them, it is possible to detect a potential for the disruption of hegemonic masculinity and the adherence to a different model, that of a “caring” masculinity, or, instead, caring practices are “hybridized” into a traditional model of masculinity, without questioning the underlying gender structure.

This thesis is based on a qualitative analysis of data collected through interviews and a focus group, and a content analysis of a sample of television advertisements⁴. The three set of data are, both in their design and in how they have been analyzed, strictly linked to each other. Interviews aimed at reconstructing men's representations and experiences of fatherhood and fathering (see par. 3.4 in this chapter), and at understanding whether media representations of fatherhood played a role in the construction of their own identities; the analysis of media content provided a sketch of the main characteristics of depictions of fathers in television commercials; finally, the focus group was an occasion for "testing" those depictions and observing how popular representations of fatherhood were received by fathers.

The decision to resort to qualitative methods was based on the approach that they provide to the phenomenon object of study, that can be summarized in two main characteristics: the restriction of the observed object, and the close and deep look aiming at grasping its details (Cardano, 2011). The aim of qualitative research is to provide a picture of the phenomenon as detailed as possible, in order to accurately recreate the social actions that constitute it and the explanations that actors provide for those actions, the participants' points of view and the interpretations of aspects of those actions that are not explicitly expressed by the actors: to this aim, it is necessary to narrow down the field of observation.

As emerged in chapter 1 and in the first section of this chapter, fatherhood has been studied in its most various manifestations, considering different dimensions such as class, race, sexual orientation (gay or trans fatherhood), family structure (single fathers, non-residential fathers) and employment status (stay-at-home fathers or main breadwinner), just to report some. This variety in the looks upon fatherhood has shown how potential for change can be found in many different situations, even though it could be argued that individual changes in how fatherhood is performed do not allow for a claim that "new fathers" are now a commonality (see Dermott & Miller, 2015). But if those situations which already represent a move away from the traditional family model (represented by heterosexual married/cohabiting couple, male solo or main breadwinner) are the main hotbeds for different

⁴ Extensive details on the construction of the sample of advertisements and the analysis conducted are provided in chapter 5; this chapter is dedicated to data collected by means of interviews and focus group.

and diverse representations and performances of male parenthood, sometimes enthusiastically saluted as the emergence of gender equal family relationships, how to interpret those signals of change observed in the said “traditional” families? Are these the places where “hegemonic” masculinity is most likely to be found? And if it is so, are “innovative” or “different” patterns of involvement observed in those less favorable environments to be considered as more significant? This reasoning follows the principle of argumentation from example based on the critical case, as explained by Cardano (2011). In my rewriting: the critical case is based on a specific argumentation scheme, the “double hierarchy”, according to which it is possible to distinguish between two classes of phenomena related by a direct or inverse proportionality, so that what is observed in a class of phenomena gives an insight on what could be possibly observed in the other. Specifically, it could be either the case that the observed expected phenomenon has a low probability of existence in a particular context, supporting therefore the conclusion that the phenomenon will be observed in a more favorable context, or the opposite case that an adverse phenomenon with high probability of existence in a context is not observed, supporting the opposite conclusion that such a phenomenon will not be observed in a less favorable context. In this case, a “traditional” nuclear heterosexual family, with a male main breadwinner, represents the case where “traditional” understandings of masculinity are most likely to be observed; detecting signs of their questioning and even overturning would then maybe have a higher magnitude. Mason (2010) refers to this logic of sample construction as “sampling strategically” or “illustratively or evocatively” as opposed to “representationally”: in the author’s words, “the aim is to produce, through sampling, a relevant range of contexts or phenomena, which will enable you to make strategic and possibly cross-contextual comparisons, and hence build a well-founded argument” (Mason, 2010, pp.123-124).

The sample of interviewees is composed of 33 men; of these, 5 participated to the focus group. To be eligible for interview, fathers first of all had to be at their first child aged 0 to 3 years, due to two main reasons. First, because of the specific material care commitment that an infant requires, the degree of involvement in which is an interesting field, as explained in chapter 1, for the emergence of constructions of fatherhood and masculinity. Second, because

literature shows that the transition to parenthood and the first few years after child birth are crucial moments for the construction of gender, often resulting in a strengthening of traditional views on gender roles. Longitudinal studies on dual-earner couples facing and experiencing a transition to parenthood (Fox, 2009; Miller, 2011; Naldini, 2016) pointed out how the birth of a first child tends to reinforce a specialization of behaviors based on gender, even among those couples who seemed more committed to egalitarian values before becoming parents. Fathers had also to be employed and currently in a (heterosexual) relationship with the mother of the child, in order to recreate the main features of a traditional nuclear family.

This thesis is, in conclusion, dedicated to the investigation of the experiences of heterosexual fathers at their first child, aged 0 to 3 years⁵, employed and cohabiting with the mothers of their children, living in different areas (mainly, but not exclusively, urban) of Piedmont, in northern Italy. The work aims, firstly, at exploring how these men experience their transition to fatherhood and their involvement in little children's lives, but also at understanding their interpretations of available representations of fatherhood in the Italian media, and especially in one of the most pervasive instrument for conveying culturally laden messages: television advertisements. The fundamental scope will be that of investigating in what ways fatherhood and masculinity are intertwined: necessarily, though, this intertwining will be looked at keeping in mind the specificities of the sample. First and foremost, as it became clear looking at the theoretical background of the work, heterosexuality contributes to shape understandings and performances of masculinities; being employed, and cohabiting with the mothers, either in or out of employment, not only could help frame men's interpretation of gender roles, but it also sets the limits and constraints for participation to care. The place of

⁵ While age of children has been taken into account in the definition of the research question and consequently of the sample of interviewees, age of fathers at their first child did not constitute a threshold for inclusion in the sample nor it has been systematically taken into consideration during the analysis. This decision was not due to an underestimation of the importance of the stage of the life course for the observation of specific experiences of parenthood (Magaraggia, 2015; Saraceno & Naldini, 2013), but rather to a "theory led" reasoning on the higher relevance of the young age of children for fruitful investigations of the relationship between fatherhood and masculinity. While the age of child parameter allowed for the construction of a quite diverse sample in terms of age (as it will be shown in the next paragraph), the characteristics of qualitative analysis and the sample dimension did not allow for a proper sample stratification based on age of the interviewees.

residence, north-western Italy, on its part, contributes to define the context in terms of availability and use of child care services, as emerged in paragraph 2 of this chapter.

The next paragraph is dedicated to describing the process of sample construction and the characteristics of the fathers that participated to the study.

3.3 Sample construction

Interviews were conducted between June and December 2016. The 33 participants have been recruited mainly through three channels: personal acquaintances, snowball sampling and institutional contacts.

The recruitment of participants to a qualitative research, which implies face to face meetings and answering questions about one's personal life (Cardano, 2011), is a delicate phase. My first step has been that of spreading information about my research among my acquaintances, friends and relatives. Parameters to be included in the study were made clear in those informal communications: participants had to be at their first child, employed and in a cohabiting relationship with the mother of their child; finally, the child should be at most three years old. Through this very first channel, I reached 9 men, all interviewed between June and August 2016. Of these, three reside in Torino or surroundings; six in the territory of the city of Cuneo (respectively, the capital and most populous city, and the second most densely populated city of the region of Piedmont, in North-Western Italy).

A second channel has been opened by snowballing: at the end of every interview, I asked whether the interviewee could think of a neo-father that might be interested in participating to my study. This led me to 7 more contacts, all resident in Torino and surroundings and interviewed between July and December 2016.

Last but not least, the majority of the sample has been constructed with the help of an institutional channel: the Integrated Educational System Service 0-6 years of the Educational Services Office - City of Torino (Servizi Educativi – Servizio Sistema Educativo Integrato 0-6 anni – Città di Torino). A first contact with the general area manager, dr. Vincenzo Simone, led me to a meeting with the manager for communications, formation and documentation, Marta Guerra, in July 2016. My original aim was to ask for cooperation in

involving the directors of municipal public nursery schools⁶, in order to obtain permission to personally talk to educators about my research and ask their support in finding potential participants. I had prepared a list of municipal public nursery schools from the general list, randomly selecting a nursery school for each municipal district⁷, so that the whole territory of the city of Torino would be covered. In a second meeting, held in September, I submitted an official request for cooperation, signed by my supervisor, professor Naldini, in which I explained the aims of my research and the characteristics of the men suitable for interview⁸. During the meeting, I informally added that interviews would last around one hour. In that occasion, I obtained from Marta Guerra a commitment to involve the directors of the municipalities I had selected, in a different form than I had envisioned: directors would have presented my research to the parents beneficiary of the care service, collected the contacts of those who were available, and directly provided me their contact information (their telephone numbers). At the end of September 2016, the Internships Office of Educational Services gave me official authorization to interview fathers individuated by the selected nurseries directors. Contact information of fathers available to participate were provided to me directly by the nurseries directors, either by e-mail or telephone, between the end of September and November 2016; by this means, I reached 17 men, all resident in the city of Torino and interviewed between October and December 2016.

The following table shows the sample distribution on the main sociodemographic characteristics: age, education and type of job contract⁹.

⁶ Nursery schools (Nidi d'infanzia) provide care services for children aged between 0 to 3 years.

⁷ The city of Torino is divided into 10 municipal districts (Circoscrizioni). In order to randomly select 10 nurseries from the general list, I took advantage of the worksheet Excel, launching a function for random selection in each sub-list of nurseries filtered according to district. I launched the function twice for each sub-list, in order to have a back-up nursery in each district, in case the first selected were not available. The list of municipal public nursery schools is available at the link <http://www.comune.torino.it/servizieducativi/servizi03/nidicomunali/elenconidi.htm>

⁸ A copy of the official request is included in Annex.

⁹ See Annex for a table summarizing individual information about the participants.

Table 1. Sample distributions on age, education and type of job contract

Age	<30		31-40		>40	
		3		18		12
Education	Middle school diploma	High school diploma	University degree	PhD		
	2	10	17	4		
Job contract	Permanent worker		Temporary contract		Self-employed	
	25		1		7	
Total	33					

Data on the economic conditions of the interviewees and their households were not always available. Some fathers were not willing or unable to provide information on their income, therefore for nine interviewees this data is missing.

In five cases, the fathers were the only providers in the family. Overall, the interviewees' monthly incomes ranged from a minimum of 800€ (even if integrated by extras from the informal economy) to a maximum of 6000€ (a self-employed plumber who claimed to earn around 80000€ of net income during 2016). One father, sole provider in his household, at the time of the interview received welfare benefits for a 200€ worth a month, to reach a total income of 1300€ monthly. The average income of the sample, calculated excluding the missing data, is of 2070€ circa of monthly net income; the median income is a little lower, 1860€ circa. Due to the small sample size and the fact that information retrieved was not systematic, it was impossible to proceed to a sample stratification by social class; instead, information on the socioeconomic conditions of the interviewees (and, in a few cases, of the couple), their working history and the structure of their social networks, were taken into consideration in the analysis, as working conditions and economic resources, together with the availability of relationships of solidarity and support, play an important role in the decision making processes related to the management and allocation of care tasks.

3.4 The interviews

Interviews were semi-structured, and lasted to a very minimum of 15 minutes to a maximum of two hours, for an average duration of 50 minutes circa. The interview schedule originally counted 20 main questions; the scheme has been reviewed after the first 9 interviews with the inclusion of three more questions¹⁰. Interviews touched four main themes: the first section was dedicated to everyday routine experiences of fathering and socio-demographic information of the interviewees; the second looked retrospectively at first emergence of desires for parenthood, pregnancy and preparation for the arrival of the child; the third solicited narrations on the experiences and representations of fatherhood and motherhood; the fourth and last section was dedicated to models of reference for the construction of representations of fatherhood, with a specific prompt on media depictions of fathers. Interviews were audio recorded and integrally transcribed verbatim; interviewees' and their partners' names have been changed, and children's and workplaces' names have been omitted, for privacy reasons. I obtained the participants' permission to record their voices by informal, oral negotiation, while explaining them the purpose and the privacy policy of my research at the beginning of our meetings. Interviewees were then asked, before starting the interview, to sign a declaration of acceptance to participate to the research according to the information they had been provided¹¹. None of the participants refused to be audio recorded; only one asked indirectly, by means of his partner while we were negotiating his involvement in the study, for a reassurance that I would not video record his interview. In organizing the meetings, either on the phone or by means of text messages or e-mail, I assured the participants maximum availability in terms of time and place. In one case, the interview took place at my parents' home; 9 interviews were held at the participant's house; in 6 cases we met at the interviewee's workplace; one meeting took place at the interviewee's daughter's nursery school, and the resting 16 interviews were organized in public places (bars). In 6 occasions, the interviewees' partners were present to the conversation; of these, only one joined the discussion from time to time, adding her point of view on some of the issues

¹⁰ Both versions of the interview schedule are included in the Annex section.

¹¹ See Annex for a copy of the declaration of acceptance to participate to the study.

touched; as emerged in the informal discussion that followed the interview, that I documented in fieldnotes, it was because since the couple was young and very fresh when they discovered the pregnancy, they received criticism and lack of trust from their social circle. The occasion of the interview had been, instead, a good chance for them to talk about what was “good” about parenting, their positive feelings of affection and closeness and the relevance this experience was representing for them.

3.5 The focus group

The focus group took place in July 2017. As explained *supra* (par. 3.1), the focus group had the role of providing a connection between the information collected by means of interviews, on the theme of media representations of fathers and models of reference for the constructions of fatherhood, and the analysis of depictions of fathers as proposed by television advertisements. Due to this methodological reason, the discussion of the focus group has been organized around three stimuli: two television spots, downloaded from the web and projected integrally¹², and the following description of a situation, based on one of the interviews:

Massimiliano is at home alone with his 2-months-old son and his father, the child’s grandfather. Once meal time comes, Massimiliano defrosts a bottle of breast milk, he heats it up, he sits on the sofa with his baby in his arms and starts to bottle-feed him. Looking at him, his father jokes: “you are such a pretty mummy!”¹³

Originally, I had meant to conduct two different focus groups, and to build homogeneous artificial groups of participants (Cardano, 2011): members would all share the experience of being first-time fathers of children aged 0 to 3 years, and ideally, they would not know each other, to avoid the polarization of the conversation. In order to construct the groups, I

¹² The spots are available on Youtube at the following links:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EVQrg4-A41g>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K4d8Ia2Ib8I>

¹³ The stimulus was proposed in Italian during the focus group.

collected potential availability to participate at the end of the interviews: this way, I obtained the availability of 18 interviewees. Once the scheme for the conduction of the focus group had been defined, in June 2017, I contacted the 18 fathers, obtaining a confirmation of availability from 14 of them. Due to incompatibilities in working hours and partly to the forthcoming of summer holidays which hindered the participants' availability, I had to give up the idea of conducting two different focus groups, and the final group was composed of five men. The group thus constituted was homogeneous and artificial: only two participants were already acquainted, not to my prior knowledge, but this did not influence the flow of the conversation, as they did not seem to have a close relationship. The meeting was held in a room at the Department of Culture, Politics and Society of University of Torino; I acted as the moderator, proposing the stimuli and sustaining the flow of the discussion if needed, while a colleague of mine, Francesca Tomatis, very kindly agreed to act as the observer of the interaction. The focus group lasted 1 hour and 55 minutes; the discussion was audio recorded, and the participants were asked to sign a declaration of availability to participate to the focus group, which reported information on the privacy policy of the research¹⁴. The recording was transcribed verbatim, and speaking turns were reconstructed thanks to Francesca's work.

3.6 Data analysis

After the transcription of all interviews and the focus group, I proceeded to identify recurrent themes across the interviews (Della Porta, 2010), first of all selecting sections of the discourses based on their content, qualifying them by means of a set of codes, and, finally, looking for relations between the codes attributed to the segments of content (Cardano, 2011). The software of qualitative analysis Atlas.ti was used as a support tool to identify and retrieve contents relative to specific dimensions of analysis. To this aim, for the analysis of interviews I created 80 codes, gathered into 7 *families*: Becoming a father, Childcare practices,

¹⁴ A copy of this declaration is available in the Annex.

Commitment to parenting, Gender issues, Meanings of fatherhood, Models of reference and representations, and Relationship with child.

“Becoming a father” gathers codes that identify narratives around the timing and the modes of the acknowledgment of the transition to fatherhood. Content around the history of the couple, of pregnancy and birth, changes occurred after the birth of the child, and different ways through which men started to think of themselves as fathers is collected in this family.

“Childcare practices” was used for specific content about care arrangements, childcare activities, and the actors involved in such practices; here, descriptions of childcare practices, the division of care work among the couple and other actors (babysitters, public or private care facilities, grandparents) and retrospective narratives around care arrangements since child birth to interview time find their place.

“Commitment to parenting” is a very composite family which included desires and anticipations of parenthood, knowledge and representations of parenting and reflexive content on one’s own parenting skills, and goals and aims pursued by fathers.

“Gender issues” collected attitudes and ideals around fathers’ and mothers’ roles, and reflections on the gender of children.

“Meanings of fatherhood” gathered all contents in which interviewees expressed opinions on what it means to be a father on the basis of their own experience.

“Models of reference and representations” was used to identify content on the origins of the interviewees’ ideals around fatherhood and motherhood, and on the public and cultural discourses around parenthood, included those provided by the media, and especially television commercials.

“Relationship with child” includes narratives of interaction, descriptions of children and accounts of affection, emotional involvement and physical closeness.

In order to synthesize information on the interviewees and create individual profiles easier to cross with the content emerged from the thematic analysis of the interviews, I produced also individual synopses for each father, including socio-demographic data, information on education and employment status of partners when available, and content on some dimensions of analysis: work/care arrangements, childcare practices, desires and

anticipations for fatherhood, narratives of pregnancy and birth, acknowledgment of becoming a father, meanings of fatherhood and public/media depictions of fatherhood¹⁵.

The single focus group was analyzed with the same content-based principle; since I could only organize one, though, data on the recurrence of themes in homosocial interaction around fatherhood was impossible to collect. For the same reason, I focused mainly on the contents of the discourse rather than the shape of the discussion and the relational dynamics that took place among the participants (Cardano, 2011; Frisina, 2010). Still, the discourse developed across several topics, which reflected the dimensions of analysis already identified for the interviews, and an eighth *family* was created to collect all 30 codes referring to content express during the focus group. It is worth noting, furthermore, that participants enjoyed the rare, for some unique occasion to discuss their experiences of parenthood with other men.

3.7 The researcher's positioning

Qualitative research, and especially methods that require a direct interaction between the researcher and the researched upon aimed at obtaining information around a social phenomenon, implies what Cardano called “a unique violation of the private sphere of the participants” (Cardano, 2011, p.151), and it is based on the construction of a social relation. The consequences of the development of such a relation can be unpredictable (Walby, 2010), especially when social differences between the researcher and the participants to the research interaction come into play (Howarth, 2002). Such differences cannot be downplayed or ignored, as they are likely to play a role in the building of the trust necessary for the development of a fruitful discussion (Cardano, 2011); they must be addressed, by means of a process of reflectivity required to the researcher (Cardano, 2014; Howarth, 2002; Robinson, Meah, & Hockey, 2007).

¹⁵ See Annex for an example of individual synopsis.

At the time of conducting the interviews, I was 26 years old; I am an educated middle-class white woman, able-bodied and heterosexual; I have a face piercing and one of my tattoos is large and very visible on my right arm; I am in a living-apart-together relationship with, for the moment, no intention to have children; I have no experiences in nurturing a small child. There are therefore several layers of positioning to take into consideration.

My gender and my sexuality: I am a heterosexual woman interviewing heterosexual men. Methodological literature has shown how cross-gendered interviews might play a role in influencing the interview interaction, usually drawing upon reflections on how the interview encounter might be a place where traditional power imbalance is played out, with men taking the lead of the conversation (Walby, 2010), or even taking advantage of the situation to suggest sexual interest or acting out a certain kind of masculinity (Allen, 2005; Lee, 1997). Though, I was talking to neo-fathers and often stressing the focus on their children, therefore I did not expect a “predatory” behavior from them, which indeed did not take place; also, since I share the gender of their partners and I could be considered as a future mother, I thought I could count on expectations of some kind of “natural” or “instinctual” understanding of what it is like to deal with a baby, therefore facilitating the conversation and the opening up of the interviewees. Indeed, in some occasions I have been ascribed to the “women/potential mothers” category, in comments that included me in discourses of “differences” between men and women when it comes to parenthood, saying for example “you women carry a child in your womb, it’s different for you”. As for my sexuality, since I do not carry any sign of what might conventionally open the doubt on my sexual orientation, I expected my interviewees to take my heterosexuality for granted, which happened indeed. To remark is also the fact that sexual orientation is not problematized in my research.

My age: I am in a stage of the life course where some people start to make plans on their reproductive lives, while others still struggle with other (usually economic and labor-market related) issues. I expected to be younger than the average age of my sample, considering that Italian men have their first child on average after 30 at least; indeed, I was younger than all my interviewees. I do not show any sign of my relationship status (rings or the like), and I have been told several times that I look younger than my age, so I expected to be looked at

as somehow an “outsider” of the world of long lasting – maybe cohabiting - relationships leading to procreation. This might have made the conversation more difficult if the interviewee felt I did not share his representation of a family daily routine: this was not the case, as indeed some of them were more willing to describe what such a routine is like, to make it clear to someone who does not know anything about it. Mostly, this was due to the fact that parenthood is an experience described by most as impossible to imagine, fully understandable only by living it first-hand. Due to my young looks in most cases, and to my answering “no” to the question that some posed me whether I had any children, my lack of direct experience often called for extensive explanations of what living with a child means. Sometimes, this lead to mocking advices to never have any children, or to give the interviewees a call once - and if - I will become a mother, to check with them if they had sketched a truthful portrait of parenthood.

My class and race: my sample was composed entirely of white Italian men, and racial issues were not at stake in my interviews. As for class, I consider myself middle class, but it did not appear to have any influence on the research interaction.

My bodily appearance: just like class and race, my being tattooed and showing a nose piercing had no influence whatsoever on the trust my interviewees accorded to the “professionalism” with which I was conducting my research. Presenting myself with a recorder, a form to sign and a clear explanation of the purpose of my study maybe evened out, if needed, the diffidence I might have solicited with my appearance. The relatively young age of my interviewees probably played a role as well in favor of accepting as “normalized” my looks. Ability was not at stake either, as none of my interviewees showed any visible physical disability or called the issue into question.

My knowledge on the theme: as anticipated, I have no children, so my knowledge of parenthood is limited to what academic and specifically sociological research has produced (and in any case, since I am a woman my potential experience of parenthood will be most probably different than my interviewees’). Since I presented myself as a sociologist, I risked being put by my interviewees in the “expert knowledge” box, and seen as someone who would judge their answers in terms of right of wrong in relation to what “good parenthood”

is standardized as in pedagogic or psychologic literature. In order to avoid it, I made it very clear at the beginning of every conversation that I was interested in their own experiences and opinions, and that there were no right or wrong answers to my questions, which would not deal with what they “knew” about parenthood, but rather on how they “lived” parenthood. This clarification seemed to reassure more than one participant to the study.

The focus group carried along other methodological concerns around researchers’ positioning. The discussion was lead, as anticipated, by a female colleague of mine and me. If, on the one hand, the fact that the participants were already acquainted with me acted as a reassurance that gender issues in the research interaction would not be at stake, both the presence of a second woman (with whom I shared age and educational background) and the circumstance of a male homosocial interaction, which might have represented a fertile environment for the playing out of hegemonic traits of masculinity, made the question rise again (Allen, 2005; Ferrero Camoletto & Bertone, 2016). Overall, though, our presence as women did not seem to hinder the flow of the conversation at all, considering that very personal and intimate themes were touched as well, as will emerge in the following chapters.

CHAPTER 3

Becoming fathers: acknowledgment and reflexivity

“Nobody is born a parent, you know?”

1. Introduction

The transition to parenthood is recognizably one of the most relevant steps of the life course, because it enacts an irreversible process of re-definition of one’s personal and social identity (Naldini, 2016). Becoming a “father” means to acquire the possibility of being recognized as biologically (or socially) bound to a specific child, a definition which has therefore a relational nature and produces “fathers” as members of the social structure (Hobson, 2002). Such a recognition has its origins in civil laws that regulate family relationship (and define what a “family” is) and in welfare state policies aimed at workers and parents (ivi, p. 11). But how does it happen at the individual level of self-acknowledgement? Looking at it from a psychological perspective, research has focused on the transition to parenthood as a “critical event”, which implies a readjustment at the cognitive, emotional and behavioral level. These studies often identify three crucial moments for a transition to fatherhood: the pre-natal period, birth and the post-natal period until the first year of age, to the conclusions that an earlier identification with the “father’s role” leads to better outcomes for later involvement in child care and fosters higher levels of well-being for the child (Genesoni & Tallandini, 2009; Palkovitz & Palm, 2009). From a sociological point of view, longitudinal studies, both Italian and international (Crespi & Ruspini, 2015; Fox, 2009; Grunow & Evertsson, 2016; Miller, 2011; Naldini, 2016), have tried to grasp the complexity and intricacy of the process of transitioning to parenthood, looking at how expectations and anticipations of soon-to-be

parents intertwine with their experiences after the child is born. Often, these studies aim at comparing women's and men's transitions to parenthood, therefore looking at them from a gender perspective, under the assumption that parenthood is an experience that makes gender differences emerge in all their relevance for the organization of men's and women's lives, and for the production and reproduction of gender inequality patterns in the family. As Fox (2009) pointed out, while motherhood holds a central relevance in the definition of womanhood, fatherhood "encompasses a range of acceptable behaviors" for men who transition to parenthood. During parenthood, gender is constructed at the individual level by means of a strengthening of gender identities, and at the structural level through an intensification of divisions of work and responsibilities between men and women. The time of the transition is the most relevant moment for the observation of the "making" of such patterns. Even before a child is born, differences are brought up as for women the experience of pregnancy already defines them as mothers, and opens way for a scrutinizing of their behavior, in accordance to the paradigm of the "new parenting culture" (Faircloth & Murray, 2015). For men, instead, the lack of a direct contact lived during pregnancy makes fatherhood a "slower" process if compared to motherhood (Bertone et al., 2016). This chapter is dedicated to the exploration of this process. How do men become fathers? What consequences does this process have on their lives? What makes "good" fathers, and how do they speak about it?

2. Becoming fathers: the when and the how

2.1 Paths to parenthood

How does the story of becoming a father begins? The path leading to fatherhood started differently and in different moments for my interviewees. For few, becoming a father was not the result of an active choice, as they decided to go through with an unplanned pregnancy. This group is the smallest and the youngest of my sample, composed of three men aged 27, 28 and 34. Giorgio, for example, who is now 27, discovered that his partner was pregnant when he was only 24. He had never thought about having children, and the news made him

puzzled and disoriented, as their relationship was very recent and they both were quite young. They decided to keep the baby, facing the event “like mature people”, but having children was not in Giorgio’s plans: he had broken up with a previous girlfriend because she had started to think about “a life together and stuff (...) she had scared me a bit”.

For others, fatherhood was a natural and somewhat taken for granted step in the life course, often following marriage as part of what Townsend (2002) called a “package deal”. The average age of the 13 men falling in this group is 35 years, ranging from 31 to 44. Ivano, Cosimo and Fabrizio are good examples of it. Ivano is 32 years old, and has an 8-months old son. He works as an employee in a firm run by his family, and has started working there right after finishing high school. He has been married for 3 years, and he says that he and his partner decided together to have a child short after marriage: “we said well, let’s try, let’s see how it is”. Before his child was born he did not really have an idea of what having a child would be like, besides the practical difficulties of lack of sleep, which he says he did not really experience. Speaking of his desire for parenthood, he says he had always wanted to be a father, describing it in very few words as something he wanted to do, a path he wanted to walk. Cosimo has a similar story: he is 31, his son is 2 years old, and he and his wife have been married for 10 months before the birth of their child. He holds the equivalent of a bachelor degree, acquired at a post-high school in design, and he works for a communication agency. According to Cosimo, his wife and him got married because she wanted things to be settled in order to have children, but he says he did not really think about it until it happened, he used to think of himself as still too young for it. He imagined he would feel somehow different after the birth of his child, which did not happen, and besides that he did not know what to expect. It seems that fatherhood is something that “happened” to him; in his case, though, his wife’s ideas about how a life course should develop (find a partner, get married, have children) had an influence over, if not his own beliefs, his own life course. Fabrizio is 34 years old, father of a 6 months old girl. He holds a degree in mechanical engineering and he works as a manager in a multinational food factory. He followed, again, a similar path: married for 2 years, he and his wife never lived together before marriage, and even if they never really talked about children, they both knew that they wanted to become parents, they

just wanted to wait for their marriage to settle. Still, their child arrived quite soon, as pregnancy was discovered one year after marriage. Fabrizio had thought a lot about having a child during the last years, as he had always liked children. He says that he never felt afraid of not being able to father, knowing that he would learn it day after day: he wanted it strongly and felt ready. In his words, parenthood sounds like a taken for granted experience of life, which does not really need negotiations or discussions among the couple.

Many of my interviewees recount of an early or late emergence of a desire for parenthood, in either cases often accompanied by a concern for being in the “right” situation, namely with the “right” person, and, more relevantly, in a stable working condition. Fatherhood has been, for one third of my sample, a long-desired experience, eventually accomplished after years of trying and even, sometimes, following medical treatments; these men are aged between 28 and 48 years, 39.5 on average. For Lorenzo and Emilio, both in their thirties, the relevance of the “right” conditions to become parents is evident. Lorenzo is 38, and has been married for 12 years; he is now the father of twin boys aged 2 years and 4 months. After leaving school early, a couple of years after starting high school (he never obtained a diploma), he changed different jobs: he worked long time in his father’s firm, which he left because of internal disagreements, to buy a tobacco shop, that he run for six years, even though he did not like that job. He then moved to the field of cosmetics, first selling products and then starting his own production firm, moving across different cosmetic sectors to finally settle on perfumes. The pursuit of financial independence and stability has been his main motivation across his whole life, and to it he is still dedicating most of his time, both during weekdays and sometimes also on weekends. Because of it, and despite a long-felt desire to have a family of his own, the decision of becoming a parent came very late, mostly because he wanted to make sure that they were in the best economic conditions in order to be able to give their children a serene and happy life. Emilio, like Lorenzo, never finished high school; he is 33, works in a factory, and he is the father of a 16-months-old boy. Like Lorenzo, he is in a very long-term relationship, as he and his wife have been together for 10 years, and got married almost 4 years ago. He had different working experiences before becoming a permanent worker on his current job, and a reason for leaving a previous job as a waiter,

despite the high income he could count on, was the fact that it did not allow him to settle and have some free time, which he deemed indispensable for his long-term wish to have a family of his own. As he repeats several times across the interview, his wife and him wanted to have children for long time, but he was looking for the “ideal” conditions, namely a stable job with regular working hours. Once these conditions were there, they did not give second thoughts to having a child, who came at first try. For Ugo and Tancredi, instead, a long-desired parenthood was delayed by fertility issues and medical conditions. Tancredi’s child, who is now 2 years and a half old, was born with an assisted fertilization, after at least ten years of trying. Tancredi is 37 years old, he has a high school diploma and is self employed as a plumber, a job that drains much of his time but assures him very high earnings. He claims that his partner and him started desiring a child very early in life, when he was 22 and his partner only 18, and they had already decided what to name the child, who was a very tangible and present thought for the couple across their years together. Due to a medical condition, though, Tancredi’s partner had to have ovaries surgery. This led to fertility issues, which made the couple decide for assisted fertilization: they went through a few trials before she could eventually start a pregnancy, but when it finally happened, he “went crazy, crazy, crazy”. Ugo’s story is similar: a 41-year-old father of a 2 years and a half son, he holds a PhD and is a full professor in university. He has been with his partner for 16 years, and at first he was concerned about a stable working situation too, which, in academia, has been hard for him to achieve; as soon as he realized that it could mean never having children, when he was around 32-33 years old, his partner and him started trying, but a series of clinical misfortunes hindered their path to parenthood. Ugo’s partner started several pregnancies, all precociously terminated by natural abortions; her last pregnancy, extra uterine, led to the loss of one of her tubes. At that point, Ugo and his partner abandoned the idea of biological parenthood, and started to consider adoption, even though he did not feel convinced about it; they kept trying, though, until she finally could get through a new, unexpected but extremely welcome, pregnancy. For all these men, fatherhood has been a project, which took time, energy and even emotional endurance to develop.

Finally, for some others, the fear of becoming too old to experience parenthood lit the spark, often with a good deal of influence by their partners, who felt more intensely the pressure of biology; intuitively, it is the oldest cluster of my sample, composed of men over 40 years old, on average 42.5. Elia and Leonardo are part of this group. Elia, a 40-years-old journalist father of a girl aged 1 year and 4 months, claims he and his long-term partner were the “eternal kids”, never really ready to start a family, nor “desiring” a child, as his recurrent thought was “sooner or later it will happen”. At a certain point, though, his partner started to realize that as time passed her chances to have a child would drop, so they “looked at each other” and agreed that it was the right time to try: it took them only a couple of months to start a pregnancy about which “the day before, you don’t even think”. Another interviewee, Leonardo, is 45 years old, he has a daughter aged 1 year and a half, and similarly to Elia he claims he did not really have a “paternal instinct”: he did not exclude the idea of having children, but he was very worried about his economically unstable situation. Leonardo holds a PhD and is a university researcher and lecturer, with a temporary contract, and when his wife got pregnant his scholarship was expiring with no perspectives of extensions, so he was very worried about his income and his career. Analogously to Elia’s case, it was Leonardo’s wife to have a relevant, even decisive, role in committing to try to have children. In his case, though, becoming parents required almost two years of trying, to the point that they had started to think it would never happen. For both men, though, fatherhood was not something they fantasized, or have expectations, about: it was not really in their thoughts until their partners started to feel the urge of biology.

2.2 Fatherhood realized

The side of the path to parenthood that deals with desires and anticipations intertwines with a second side, that of the acknowledgement of themselves as fathers. The transition to fatherhood, in my interviewees’ accounts, is a phenomenon that not necessarily coincides with the birth of a first child. It could start earlier, when first acknowledging conception, or during a journey through pregnancy. On the contrary, it could happen after the child is born, when he or she starts to actively recognize the presence of a father, an event that typically

begins with being called “dad”; finally, it could take place when other people recognize the existence of a relationship between the father and the child. In order to try to disentangle these different paths towards fatherhood, this paragraph is dedicated to the presentation of some narratives of becoming a father.

2.2.1 A journey through pregnancy

Pregnancy is, for one third (12) of my interviewees, the starting point of their transition to fatherhood. Fabrizio recalls very vividly the time of gestation, of which he cherishes the moments of the pre-natal screenings as a relevant emotional turning point in his path to parenthood:

“as soon as it made me hear the baby’s heartbeat I had, let’s say, I had goosebumps, *[laughs]* because it was the, the time maybe when you realize, because when it’s only an image, I mean, images are ok, but... really hearing it and saying ‘this is its heartbeat’, that is... and then the second screening, when they told us ‘it’s a girl’, and so on, those were beautiful moments, shared between us, because [...] it’s not only the moment, it’s sharing it, the two of us, ehm... the three of us actually *[laughing]*”.

(Fabrizio, 34, daughter aged 6 months, manager)

Pregnancy is a time of worries and fears, as confirmed by many of my interviewees, but Fabrizio is happy about the fact that they never really had a reason to worry. Only one time put him to the test, when his wife got sick and had a bleeding, with no consequences on the health of the unborn. That was the only scary episode, though; beside that, Fabrizio recalls sweet and sour memories of his wife’s pregnancy, which was serene overall. While taking care of food restrictions was something “distressing”, like his wife’s sleeping issues due to her back aches, seeing his partner’s belly and feeling his daughter kicking inside it has been “beautiful, moving”. Fabrizio did not, though, spend the time of the pregnancy in preparing for the birth of his child. He was looking forward to it, but the becoming a father did not worry or scare him: he was ready to “live it and manage it day after day”. In his words,

becoming a father is a natural progression, which is made “visible” by the changes and progressions that a baby lives as it grows up.

Similarly, for Zeno, a 44-years-old employee father of a boy aged 1 year and 5 months, pregnancy has been the time of acknowledging that he was becoming a father. Zeno has been married for 9 years, but his child arrived late despite years of trying, so much so that he and his wife had an agreement: should they not manage to conceive by the end of the year, they would have started with fertility check-ups. Odds were in their favor, though, because during that autumn they discovered a pregnancy. He says he had desired to become a father since long time, and he was already thinking about it while committed to a previous relationship. His long-term desire for parenthood made him live intensely the expecting months. In his words, the turning point has been

“the first ultrasound screening, where you see, how to say... a little bean, a very small thing, (...) the shape isn’t well defined yet, but you could clearly see something that could be its heart, a thing that was beating, and that was something... I don’t know, incredible, I mean seeing it, thinking that so shortly after conception this thing with no shape or anything, but (...) this beating, this little heart’s beating (...) that was really... it was almost touching it, eventually seeing, realizing that... this baby was about to be born”. (Zeno, 44, son aged 1 year and 5 months, employee)

Ultrasound screening was a very relevant appointment for many of my interviewees. Research has recently interpreted it as an emerging setting of paternal involvement, not only in its character of “normativity” for contemporary men, as they are often expected to participate, but also as a relevant contribution to the development of a parent’s identity by expectant fathers (Ives, 2014; Lombardi, 2017; Walsh et al., 2014), considering how men attending a screening tend to develop an attachment to the unborn child. In Zeno’s story, the materiality of the presence of the baby, that can be experienced by hearing its heartbeat through the screening, makes up for the lack of a bodily involvement in expecting a child (Ives, 2014). Zeno has good memories of his wife’s pregnancy: they felt closer to each other, and they were already committed to doing the “best” for the baby, according to information

they acquired, together, on websites dedicated to pregnancy, that they read weekly as a “ritual”, and on books. He recalls trying to

“listen to music together, because they say that somehow music, vibrations, they can... they can reach it [the fetus] since the beginning, we started- we read tales to it, very often it was «The puss in boots», because we had read... again, the sound of it, the baby tends to assimilate it and after he’s born telling that tale again might be something that helps it to calm down and everything...”. (Zeno, 44, son aged 1 year and 5 months, employee)

Zeno read a book on children’s development, regretting that he stopped reading at the description of the child’s sixth month of age, and he attended pre-birth and post-birth classes. The latter required the presence of the child as well, “they show you how to massage a baby, a lot of things, and that class we attended it together taking an allowance from work, I went too”. Zeno and his partner represent quite well the adherence to the “new parenting culture”, according to which parents need to be trained to “good parenting”, interpreted as “a skill set that can be both taught and learned through reference to expert, scientific evidence about ‘how to’ ‘parent’” (Faircloth & Murray, 2015, p. 1119). Not surprisingly, Zeno thinks of the process of becoming a father as something fueled by a constant concern for the child’s well-being, and despite the great and quite unusual work of preparation for the arrival of the baby, he thinks that being a parent is learned through day-to-day direct experience. For these men, fatherhood means, first of all, to put a child’s needs before one’s own, and to be responsible for its well-being, usually intended in a broad way, to include its basic needs, but also the right to a serene emotional and cognitive development. Fatherhood, in their words, means also to build a relationship, on which they start to work quite early, even before the birth.

2.2.2 The birth

For another group of men, seeing their newborn babies for the first time after birth was a meaningful moment for recognizing themselves as fathers. The event of the birth represented in itself a field of negotiation with their partners, as for some of my interviewees across the

whole sample it was important to be a part of it, while others were not eager to participate¹⁶. Roughly half of my sample participated to the birth, sometimes for clinical reasons rather than father's decisions: for a couple of interviewees, a long labor led to C-section deliveries, thus excluding them from the delivery room after long hours of waiting. Lorenzo's wife, for example, who was pregnant with twins, had programmed a natural delivery, but after five hours of labor, the doctors realized that one of the babies was ill positioned, so they decided for an emergency C-section. Bruno, a 32 years old municipal officer father of a 2 years and 4 months old girl, lived a similar situation with anxiety, communicating a great participation to the situation, also conveyed by the use of the pronoun "we" when telling the story of the birth. In his words,

"everything went well, but we could not deliver naturally, we had to have a C-section after hours and hours, dozens of hours, two days, of atrocious suffering (...) it was something... incredible, she [his wife] does not remember anything now, but I do remember. That's because she replaced those moments with the moment of birth, you know?, when she hugged the baby in the delivery room, in the surgery room, I could not see her right away, because I could not be there during the C-section. And that's why I still remember those phases of... pain, right before the... absolute joy, you know?". (Bruno, 32, daughter aged 2 years and 4 months, municipal officer)

Another interviewee, Fabrizio, expresses also a feeling of uselessness during labor and delivery, a feeling that he extends to all men, who will never experience giving birth (Ives, 2014; Lombardi, 2017):

"that's when you see how hard and painful it is to give birth for a woman. And for a man it's a sense of total powerlessness [*laughs*] I mean in those moments... that's when you feel useless and powerless the most, it's something like "well, maybe it's better if I leave", because (...) it's frustrating, you are there, you can't do anything, you

¹⁶ Lombardi (2017) investigated the participation of (northern) Italian fathers to their partners' labor and delivery, pointing out how both women and health professionals welcome men into the delivery room. Data reported by the author show a percentage higher than 90% of men willing to attend to childbirth, in order either to make a meaningful experience or to support their partners. This data makes the author speak of the emergence of a "triad" concept in delivery, adding the father to the mother-child dyad.

can't say anything, you'll never experience that, at least the people, the women who are there they experienced it, I mean, my mother, her mother, so... any comment of yours is superfluous, because you didn't experience that and you never will, you can't understand what it's like and you can't do anything, you know?" (Fabrizio, 34, daughter aged 6 months, manager)

If birth is an emotionally demanding moment for most of my interviewees, the first moments of interaction with their newborn children for a group of them (9) marked a turning point in their acknowledgement of becoming fathers. Rodolfo, Ignazio and Nicolò are part of this group. For Rodolfo, a 31 years old employee in automotive firm father of a 2 years old girl (and expecting another baby at the time of the interview), holding his newborn child made him immediately recognize the new responsibilities that being a parent implied:

“such a feeling really arrived at birth, when you really are holding in your arms, in your hands a person and you understand that you have to take care of her, I mean, eating, she can't eat by herself, you have to feed her, changing her it has to be you, putting her to sleep, it has to be you, medicine, you have to give it to her, it's on you. And in that moment when you're holding in your hands... in your arms this... person you realize what you have to do. Before that, you don't. Before it's just a thought, ‘maybe I should do that...’”. (Rodolfo, 31, daughter aged 2 years, employee)

In accordance with this last thought, Rodolfo claims he did not prepare for the upcoming event of his child's birth. Married for 4 years but together since high school, he and his partner had always talked about having children, especially after they got married: it was part of a “taken of granted” life course. Being a father means taking up new responsibilities, it requires a constant presence in a child's life and a commitment to taking care of her, but it is also a reason for feeling self-fulfilled.

Ignazio is 35 years old, he has a degree in electronic engineering and he works as an employee in an automotive firm. He has a 10-month-old daughter, and seeing her for the first time was the beginning of a special relationship. In his words,

“I felt I was a dad (...) the moment when I really felt bounded for the first time to my daughter, it was when... she opened her eyes for the first time, at least, this was my impression, I don’t think it means anything from a scientific point of view, because they can’t see anything, but... I mean, my impression, which I think was mostly my imagination, it was like she looked at me in the eyes. And... since that moment... I mean, it was a moment when I felt emptied, really... emptied, as if... like that, that was the sensation, it lasted very short, a couple of seconds. And then I left the room, but I had to come back after a few minutes because... there was something that... I don’t know, something- as if there had been the first bound, the first connection, so if I must talk about, let’s say, when I started to feel a father, it was that moment. I mean, that was the moment when I think... there was really a connection.” (Ignazio, 35, daughter aged 10 months, employee)

Like for Rodolfo, fatherhood in Ignazio’s life has been quite a taken for granted step, as he has always wanted children, and he did not prepare for the upcoming birth either; he asked his colleagues for some advice, but since he has younger brothers he got used quite early in life to deal with infants, so he felt he already had a “good background”. Another interviewee, Nicolò, a 40 years old winery owner, has a son who is almost 2 years old. Unlike Ignazio, he had never held children in his arms before his son was born, and holding him for the first time

“really gives you a sense of his... fragility, like you are dealing with a being who depends entirely on you. And so... you immediately perceive the sense of... fatherhood (...) since that moment when it was absolutely me and him, it was that moment, ten minutes after my partner had given birth, and it was a moment that me and him spent together alone, and there I realized, like, completely... what it would mean.” (Nicolò, 40, son aged 2 years, shop owner)

Nicolò prepared for the birth of his child, psychologically, asking for advices and reading books, but what really mattered the most for him was making “room” for the child. Nicolò holds a PhD in archeology, and for a few years he has worked as a researcher in university, before deciding to exit academia and look for a “normal” job. He moved to different houses

in his adult life, and in each of them he used to save a room to use as an office, where he kept all his books, articles, documents and all that was related to his connection to the field of academic research. When he and his partner found out about her pregnancy, they decided that Nicolò's "office" would become the baby's room. To him, this was a difficult decision to make:

"this is the most personal thing [that I remember], I had to give up my room, the room I had all for myself, and... I did delay this work a bit actually [*laughs*] I mean, giving up my room... it wasn't, it wasn't not wanting him to arrive, but it meant to completely close that thing, I mean, even though I had said 'enough', I had left [academia] banging the door behind me, but I still kept those things, it was reassuring for me to have that world that had accompanied me... I mean, that scenario, in every house I lived in, it always accompanied me, it was always the same room basically, the desk always set in that place, four bookshelves set like that, a tiny sofa there, it was always like that, in every house. For the first time I had to say 'that's it', and... Mara [his partner] was trying to accelerate that step, and... she would make things disappear, we had some arguments on this, and at a certain point I had to... I had to do it, myself, dismantling the desk, the bookshelves, taking all the books and putting them in a box to store in the garage, and... but we got to a certain point when... Mara had false contractions, and thinking that we had time until mid-January I had left many things, maybe like the desk, it was still there, and I knew I was supposed to assemble (...) the changing table, the cradle, (...) I had thought 'whatever, I'm working a lot this December, I'm keeping this time, then when it's January, as soon as... I'm closing the shop for a week, I'll do all this work those days', instead she had false contractions and Mara had to spend some time in the hospital, that day I was working, (...) I went home and in half a day I did all I should have done long before [*laughing*] on December 26, (...) dismantling the desk, taking away the boxes, assembling the changing table- which still sucks nowadays, it's all wobbly, I assembled it in half an hour... (...) I had to do it in a traumatic way. But that really was a passage, giving up the room I had all for myself". (Nicolò, 40, son aged 2 years, shop owner)

In Nicolò's words, the sense of ineluctability and irreversibility of the transition to fatherhood is very evident, so much so that he tried to delay the moment when he had to finally recognize that his life was about to change. The room very clearly symbolizes all he was about to give up in order to "make room" for a child in his life, and it reflects a general "reluctance" around having children: "I think it's very hard for a man to really desire a child... I mean, wanting a child, I can say yes, I wanted a child, but... I never put any effort on it". His partner, instead, had started quite early in their relationship to insist for having a baby; in the end, Nicolò made up his mind, spurred by the insinuating thought that they were getting too old. Research has shown how women often act as mediators in the construction of a relationship between fathers and children (Donatiello & Santero, 2016; Fox, 2009); in this case, Nicolò opposed a resistance to his partner's attempt at anticipating the emergence of that relationship, first by pushing to have a child, then to force him to make room for their baby. When his child was born, and Nicolò saw him for the first time, though, being a father in his words acquired several implications and meanings, all quite emotion-laden: fatherhood means feeling responsible for a child's well-being, it means putting his needs before one's own, but mostly, it means building a relationship, "being more than one", for the rest of one's life.

2.2.3 Recognizing a relationship

For a very consistent part of my sample, though, "feeling like a father" implied mainly an external recognition, either from the child itself, or from significant others or even strangers, thus implying a "social", interactional character to fatherhood, in contrast to the "naturalness" usually attributed to a mother-child relationship (Hobson, 2002; Miller, 2011; Naldini, 2016). For some, the acknowledgement of their new role as fathers came when their children recognized the relevance of their presence:

"When he started to say his first words... mum, dad... I mean... there you really understand that, somehow, that you're important for him because, like when we are out and he maybe hears a louder noise that... scares him, he comes to look for... safety,

right away. Like... he clings to your legs... and... he makes you feel important.”
(Giorgio, 27, son aged 1 year and a half, employee)

“Yeah, [I felt like a father] when he called me dad! Yes, I mean, let’s say at the beginning it’s... a mother’s thing, objectively there’s minimal interaction... I mean, well, then he starts to interact... when he looks for you and he wants you to hold him and stuff, when he calls you dad and he just lassos you...” (Ugo, 42, son aged 2 years and a half, full professor)

“[I felt like a father] when she called me dad, when... when I see that she learns... she’s a sponge, so everything you, you tell her then you’ll see that more or less she does it” (Armando, 42, daughter aged 2 years and 4 months, self-employed electrician)

In other interviewees’ accounts, feeling like a father occurs when others recognize the existence of a relationship between themselves and their children. Dario, for example, a 37 years old employee, feels that when he’s walking around with his 3 years old daughter “it’s obvious, you see the eyes, you know?, of people that identify you as a father before than a person”. Similarly, Ottavio, who is 44, works in a factory and is the father of a 2 years and a half boy, elaborates on the relevance of external recognition, again marking a difference with a mother’s experience:

“kindergarten teachers call me, they greet me, ‘hi dad, hi dad’, like... *[turns around like trying to understand who they are talking to]* is that me? Like yes, it’s beautiful when they call you ‘dad’, especially at kindergarten, the child calls me ‘dad’ as well, but when they call you, ‘hi dad, hi dad’, I mean you realize, it’s not ‘hi Ottavio’ anymore, it’s ‘hi dad’, you know? So it’s obviously... different. A good feeling anyways, they call you dad, then I really have become a dad, because at the beginning, especially for a man, maybe it’s different for a woman who conceives, and... she does it all in the end, nature wise, you know? But when they call you dad... it’s great, yeah.”
(Ottavio, 44, son aged 2 years and 6 months, factory worker)

For a third interviewee, Massimiliano, though, this “external” recognition is not enough, because the most important one, his child’s, has not arrived yet: this means that, in his words,

“I still feel like a half dad”. Massimiliano is 45 years old and he is the father of an only 2 months old boy. He works as an employee in a social cooperative, and having children is something he started desiring long time ago. When he met his current partner, they started quite early to look for a pregnancy, but she happened to have two natural abortions. They started to talk about assisted fertilization, his partner had some clinical check-ups and she went through a treatment for enhancing fertility, which eventually led to a last, successful, pregnancy. Now that his son is born, his relationship with him is recognized in his social circle, but this recognition makes him feel “surprised”. He explains it with the fact that his child is still very young, so Massimiliano is

“still in a phase of... not dad, I don't really realize... maybe because (...) I don't communicate with him, by means of instruments... I mean, with words, rather than... yes, with words basically, I still feel... I'm in a discovery phase, so I'm a half dad”.

(Massimiliano, 45, son aged 2 months, employee)

Not surprisingly, the meaning he is more prone to attach to fatherhood is that of building a relationship.

Overall, in my interviewees' accounts of “becoming a father” it seems that the transition to parenthood does not work according to a “critical event” paradigm, but it is rather a “story”. Discourses on “feeling fathers” most often revolve around a process, following some recognizable steps, and they are very much connected to attaching meanings to fatherhood: in describing themselves as fathers and the process that led to that acknowledgement, these men contribute to define what a father is, constructing fatherhood basing on their own personal experiences rather than recognizable schemes of behavior. Disregarding of the kind of path they followed to parenthood, most of my interviewees, indeed, did not prepare to become fathers. This was due, in many cases, to an interpretation of fatherhood as an experience impossible to anticipate. As it will become clearer across the next paragraphs, adherence to the “new parenting culture” (Faircloth & Murray, 2015) is uncommon in my sample; rather, in most cases the primacy of first-hand experience and of trial-and-error processes of acquiring parenting skills is evident.

3. Being fathers: what changes?

Becoming a father implies going through changes, at different levels. The starting point to detect such changes is at the level of practices, and in order to investigate the transformation in men's lives brought by the birth of a child, it is worth looking at work-family balance. My interviewees are all involved in the labor market, even with different contracts and at different conditions. Only a small minority of the sample, 7 over 33, are self-employed: the remaining work under contract, either with full time standard working hours (16) or on shifts or flexible hours (10). In this latter group, most are in public employment (teachers and university professors), one is employed part-time, and one is a journalist whose employer decided to shorten his working hours to avoid dismissing employees. Different working conditions mean different constraints and possibilities for work-family balance¹⁷. Zeno, for example, who is employed full time in the private sector, says he had planned to take a 2 months parental leave, but a new task on his job forced him to give up that idea. The following table illustrates the strategies my interviewees enacted to deal with their involvement in paid work around the arrival of their babies.

¹⁷ As explained in chapter 2, compulsory paternity leaves and parental leaves are available only for employed men, either in the public or the private sector; self-employed men are not entitled to any welfare measure for work-family balance.

Table 2. Strategies of work-family balance and contract types

	Employed standard full-time	Employed flexible hours	Self-employed full-time	Self-employed flexible hours
Paternity leave	Emilio, Fabrizio			
Paternity leave + vacation	Angelo, Rodolfo, Zeno, Ignazio	Bruno, Nunzio		
Vacation	Cosimo, Dario, Fabio, Giorgio, Ivano, Graziano, Massimiliano*	Saverio, Ugo, Carlo	Nicolò, Armando	Oreste
Nothing	Demetrio, Ottavio, Pietro	Biagio, Marco, Vincenzo	Lorenzo, Tancredi	
Unemployment/work suspension		Leonardo (temporarily unemployed)		Paolo, Raimondo

* Massimiliano’s son is only 2 months old; he is planning to take a 2 months parental leave, and at the time of the interview he and his partner were negotiating the management of the leave period. Information about Elia is missing, so I did not include him in this table.

Even though most of my interviewees do not explicitly mention the relevance of being responsible for the economic well-being of the household in their construction of a father’s role, the fact that the great majority did not review their involvement in paid work makes it quite evident that the “provider” role is still prominent, mostly taken for granted and very seldom negotiated (Bosoni, 2014; Bosoni et al., 2016; Della Puppa & Miele, 2015). Of course, these decisions were not taken in a void: even though information on the interviewees’ partners’ working conditions and strategies of work-family balance were not always precise or, in some cases, available at all, it is important to take them into account. The available information on strategies of work-family balance enacted by the women are summarized in the following table.

Table 3. Women’s work-family balance

Unemployed	Compulsory maternity leave	Compulsory maternity leave + parental leave	Compulsory maternity leave + shorter hours*	Missing data	Total
5	4	13	5	6	33

*Either part-time, home working or breastfeeding allowance (working days shorter by 2 hours)

As it appears evident, set aside the missing information, considering unemployed mothers (who were unemployed at the time of childbirth and still are) and those who added a period of parental leave to the compulsory maternity months, two thirds of the women spent long time at home with their newborns. With this information in mind, we can now go back to the fathers, to observe that only two interviewees, Paolo and Raimondo, actively decided to suspend work when their children were born. The next paragraphs are dedicated to an exploration of the changes that childbirth brought to these men’s lives.

3.1 Changing “everything”

Raimondo and Paolo are the only ones who actively made choices around their level of involvement in paid work in order to attend to their newborn children. For both of them the lack of explicit constraints related to their jobs was a necessary condition, as both are self-employed and work flexible hours; on the other hand, none of them could count on regular help in child care from their families, nor they sought paid help. Their motivations for taking time off work to dedicate to their babies, though, were different. For Raimondo, it was a very strong commitment to the father’s role, while for Paolo it was mainly due to his partner’s post-partum depression which hindered her involvement in mothering. Raimondo is 41 years old and has a daughter aged 2. He holds a degree in communication sciences, and is self-employed in the field of communication, mainly as a screenwriter and director. When his child was born, he decided to stop working for a while: right before birth he and his partner moved to Spain, her homeland, where she gave birth, and the new formed family spent four

months on a Spanish island. Raimondo has always wanted to have children, since he was a teenager, but for long time he could not find the right person; during a previous relationship, the fact that his (ex) partner did not want to have children was a good enough reason for him to break up with her. To Raimondo, the turning point in his path to parenthood has been the very acknowledgement of conception: since that day, he started to write letters to his unborn child. Writing has been an activity that worked for him as a deep reflection on himself and how he was going to cope with an experience that was going to change the way he looked at himself: his child made what he called a “transformational work” on him. In his words, becoming a father is something that requires, indeed, the active choice of taking that role:

“I didn’t think that being a father required a commitment... not only visceral, but really of taking a role, I don’t know how to say, I mean, you can’t... you really need to know what your function is, you know?, I mean, you can’t stop- you can’t... not be one, (...) you either are [a father] in an important, decisive way, or... you are not a father, I don’t know how to say. I had thought it was more like a natural thing, you know?”

What do you mean, natural?

Eh, like “well, I love you, and... you’re my daughter”, you know?, like...

Like the bond would make itself?

Itself. Exactly. Well said. But you have to be [a father] all the time, you understand? Instead, I had to, like it was not an effort, but say, “ok, now be a father”, you know? Because otherwise, it’s so easy not to be one, you know? It’s a choice, that’s it, it’s a choice.” (Raimondo, 41, daughter aged 2 years, self-employed in communications)

For Paolo, it has been different. He is 34, and his 6 months old son arrived at the end of an unplanned pregnancy, after only a few months of relationship with his current partner. Paolo is a freelance photo reporter, and he has always wanted to be a father: for long time he had a recurrent dream in which he saw himself attending at his thesis defense while holding a baby in his arms. When his partner got pregnant, by mistake, he was enthusiastic at first: “I thought that on the spur of the falling in love, we would pour all our happiness on the newborn, and so I imagined... ‘how cool’, but instead... this totally overturned”. His partner’s pregnancy

and the first three-four months of his child's life made for "the worst year of my life". She lived the expecting time with great emotional and psychological distress, and Paolo had to step in:

"[she] wasn't willing to take care of anything, from bureaucracy to medical things, so I went with her to all check-ups... even skipping work appointments, stuff like that, I used to go to pick up the results... basically, I was trying to ease it as much as possible, but it has been like pedaling for two in an extremely complicated situation, and... especially complicated by the fact that she really built a wall." (Paolo, 34, son aged 6 months, free-lance photographer)

Things did not get better after their child was born, as Paolo's partner had a hard time at accepting her motherhood, so he became his baby's main caregiver: he quit work for a few months, and then he started to work on a reportage in his hometown, so that "at least I'm close to home, and by and large I can control the situation". He takes care of all his child's basic needs, besides breastfeeding, and takes him everywhere with him, almost never parting from his baby. He is committed to a vision of fatherhood as sharing everything with someone new, of building a relationship with his son and feeling responsible for the well-being of the child, but his account is permeated of narrations of difficulties and weariness. The fact that his child wouldn't sleep, being responsible for most of the care management and work, and dealing with a depressed partner are making his experience of fatherhood particularly intense. The peculiar situation he found himself in meant that having a child completely subverted his life as it used to be: his work, his free time, his social life and even the relationship with his partner. While in Raimondo's case, then, the decision to take some months off work was a choice autonomously made, as his partner was unemployed and worked only seldom from home, in Paolo's case the concept of "choice" needs to be problematized, as his involvement was "driven by necessity" (Williams, 2008). His self-employed partner was entitled only to the compulsory maternity leave, and the stress of needing to return to work together with her post-partum depression severely affected her will to take care of their child. If Paolo's working conditions put him in a favorable position, then, the lack of mothering had the most relevant "pull-in" effect in his case.

3.2 Changes in life and lives overturned

Changes in how daily routines and free time are managed after the birth of a child are inevitable, even for the men who did not review their involvement in paid work, but sometimes such transformations are spoken about as a direct emanation of a change of perspectives on priorities in life. In other terms, and oversimplifying it, for some interviewees the discourse is “the things I do have changed”; for others, it is “my life has changed”. Most of the fathers interviewed had to give up some of their free time in order to be “there” for their children; overall, they show a tendency to make their “sacrifices” (often quite light) look easily accepted and even taken for granted sometimes, using expressions like “it’s better now”, “you do it with pleasure”, “it’s hard but it pays you back”. Such a downplaying of the “negative” side of being involved in parenting practices seem to follow social desirability but also those “feeling rules” that deem unacceptable for parents, even fathers, to show intolerance towards the needs of a child (Faircloth & Murray, 2015; Ives, 2014). Only a few interviewees brought out the fact that difficulties are often underscored in discourses around parenthood. Angelo, a 28-year-old father of a girl aged 1 year and 4 months, speaks explicitly of difficulties and of the “taboo” he claims has been posed on them:

“the thing that bothers me the most is that in today’s society (...) it’s a taboo to speak about the negative side of having a child, it seems like you are disowning your child, but I mean it’s not like that, everything has a positive and a negative side, and the unbalance can drive you crazy”. (Angelo, 28, daughter aged 1 year and 4 months, employee)

Similarly, Paolo says that it’s normal to “hate” your child sometimes, but this discourse is not socially legitimated (Fox, 2009):

“I talked about that with a friend of mine, and she said ‘look, you are someone during the night and someone else during daytime, so if you send him to fuck off because you can’t take it anymore, if you feel like tossing him on the couch, like, ‘you broke my balls, that’s enough, I’m not giving a shit about it anymore’, well, don’t worry. It’s all normal, it’s all an underground aspect about which nobody will ever tell you about.

Because of this idyllic vision. But be aware that it's there.' And indeed... I used to joke on these things, I remember another guy who told me 'oi, keep away from the windows at night' *[laughs]* 'because you go off your head, you take him and throw him, and that's it' *[laughs]* he really told me 'keep away from the windows', he was joking obviously, but..." (Paolo, 34, son aged 6 months, free-lance photographer)

The ways men speak about what changed after their children were born can be put on a continuum that sees on one extreme those who say that they experienced changes only in what happens when they are at home, but having a child did not affect the amount of time they allocate to staying at home. On the other extreme, we find those men who claim that becoming fathers not only overturned their daily routine, but it influenced their very perspective on life. Along the line that connects these two ends, it is possible to look at different "degrees" of feeling that things have changed after a child is born: for some fathers, the changes occurred blended so naturally in their lives that they cannot even remember what their lives were like before; for others, a child caused a complete reorganization of their daily routine, but mostly at the level of practices ("the things I do changed"). A closer look at these stories is worth taking.

The fathers who kept their personal spaces intact are more likely either to live fatherhood as an experience they did not look for, or as a taken for granted step in life; often, these men can count on external help for child care as well, either from their extended families, mostly grandmothers, or baby sitters. Giorgio, for example, is 27 years old, and he is the father of a boy aged 1 year and 8 months who is the result of an unplanned pregnancy. Giorgio never wanted to have children, he had never thought about it nor he had ideas or anticipations around fatherhood. Finding out about his partner's pregnancy, after a few months of dating, has been traumatizing, but they dealt with it "like mature people" and decided to go through with it. The birth of his child affected quite marginally his routine, as far as his "family time" is concerned:

"if before you could think about doing your thing quietly, now... you have to think about him (...) it changes, of course. (...) like if in the evening there's the match on

tv... if there's a cartoon as well I will let him watch the cartoon instead of the match, like that". (Giorgio, 27, son aged 1 year and 8 months, employee)

Furthermore, the organization of his time did not change: he kept his working hours and his soccer training time, to the point that some days he only sees his child in the morning, before going out for his long day. Similarly, Ivano, after describing the birth of his child like something that completely changes a life, draining all one's time and energy, he admits that "when I'm outside home I work and do my thing, so it does not make a difference (...) outside home by and large I managed to keep my life standards, like doing sports, this kind of things, just like before".

Among the men who lived fatherhood as a standard life course step, the descriptions of how they experienced changes range from views of a "natural" progression of a new routine which did not cause disruptions but rather flowed to stabilize in an order easily assimilated, to feelings of daily practices being totally overturned. Cosimo and Dario, for example, who only took a few days of vacation when their babies were born, convey these discourses:

"it changed, but not too much, meaning that we tried to avoid that this thing would affect the kind of life we used to live before, (...) and all those habits that now we have assimilated and accompany us all day long have become taken for granted now, but to think that two years ago these things did not happen, this make me think that I have become a father, but telling you that since my son was born I felt different, that didn't happen" (Cosimo, 31, son aged 2 years, employed in communications agency)

"it really fills up your day, you live as a function of your child... it's awful to say that it changes your life, but it does (...) the daily routine is completely overturned (...) but it's not a burden, (...) I can't even remember now what I used to do before she was born, so it's perfectly fine like that" (Dario, 37, daughter aged 3 year, employed in car rental agency)

For most of the men who have desired for long time to become parents, instead, having a child meant not only to see the practical side of their routines change, but to have a new perspective on themselves and the meaning of their lives. Zeno, for example, who waited 8

years of marriage for a pregnancy, speaks of fatherhood as something that helped him “feel better”. Zeno, who is very committed to his job and used to take his work at home at the end of the day, says that after his child was born his life changed for the better, because

“a lot of aspects of my life, of thoughts, of attentions, turned towards him, meaning, certain things acquired a lower value after he was born, because I... realized that he has a greater value, especially around work, job related issues, and other things... I reviewed deeply these things, I downsized them a lot, (...) so [the birth of my child] helped me to face my job better (...) it helped me downsize certain thoughts and worries, and therefore I... I feel better”. (Zeno, 44, son aged 1 year and 5 months, employee)

For Vincenzo, the changes brought by the birth of his son have a great emotional value. Vincenzo is 48 years old, he holds a PhD in Cinema and theatre and after 15 years working as an employee he started an academic career that led to his current job as an assistant professor. When recalling his first emergence of a desire for parenthood, he says he was already thinking about it during a previous long-term relationship, and dates it back to 2003. While his desire for a child was strong and expressed during his current relationship, the decision to try to have a baby came from his partner, previously reluctant, during a moment of stalemate in their relationship, when she said she needed to invest in a new project. Vincenzo reacted with great joy, and he started to prepare psychologically to the idea of becoming a father as soon as they found out about the pregnancy: fatherhood, to him, is a “daily motivation to go on”. During the pregnancy he went through therapy to work on his frailties and insecurities, as having a child meant, for him, a good reason and a means for starting a restructuration of his personality:

“[fatherhood] means, I have to say, first of all to have a sense of a deep affective re-motivation, you know?, I mean, (...) my child’s life represents the redemption of emotions, you know?, the redemption of affection, like I have always had a hard time in my life in expressing my feelings, expressing my emotions, communicating them, while still feeling them obviously, and... my son instead is the explosion of... the season of declared affection, at last, of physical contact, of... declared empathy, of

deep solidarity, of... so for me it was a great internal stirring, because really, it changed my way of loving, you know?, like... it was a revolution of affectivity for me”.

(Vincenzo, 48, son aged 2 years and 5 months, associate professor)

It's a revolution that has also had an influence on his self-esteem and confidence, which makes him feel better overall. Vincenzo's knowledge of his responsibilities towards his child make all other worries fade, and the overturn of his perspective over his life and himself is what defines his becoming a father. In his words,

“it happens sometimes that I wake up in the morning feeling anxious for work, and I hear my son calling me, and it's like a shock passing through me and shaking my anxieties off, (...) I hold him in my arms, he's still warm from the night, you know?, so he leans on me and I really feel my anxieties melt, as if they evaporated, in their inconsistency, you know?, and there's when I really feel a father, a dad.” (Vincenzo, 48, son aged 2 years and 5 months, associate professor)

4. “Good” fathers?

Feeling like a father, then, is the result of a process of acknowledgment, social recognition and construction of a role. But what “makes” a father? What should a father do to be considered a “good” parent? What are these men's reference points for reflecting on their own parenting skills? As Ives (2015) points out, the notion of “good” fatherhood implies a moral discourse that is associated not only with the benefit of the child, but to wider concerns around gender equality, social justice and cohesion. Such a notion implies what the author calls “progressive” forms of caring masculinity which challenge the traditional division of family and work, public and private spheres: a “good” father, in this discourse, spends quality time with his child(ren), expresses affection, prioritizes family over work and participates to household labor. What Ives's research highlights, though, is that posing a single model of good fatherhood turns it into an ideal with a high moral value, and individual fathers who do not achieve it risk being deemed as “failures”. This is a risk that entails all parents, as they are more and more supposed to work on their abilities and rely on experts for the construction

of their parenting skills (Daly, 2015; Faircloth & Murray, 2015; Hopman & Knijn, 2015). Ives, though, theorizing the “deliberative” father, points out that the moral implications of parenting are relative and contingent to the specific conditions that every man finds himself in. In the author’s own words, “deliberation, in the sense being talked about here, involves a wide-ranging analysis of what one ought to do, involving thoughtful consideration of what one is *prima facie* obliged to do, what one is *prima facie* entitled to, one’s own needs and the needs of others. It seeks to justify one’s action and choices, and to do so in a way that can be subject to external criticism; and that requires external discussion and negotiation.” (Ives, 2015, p. 292). Similarly, Williams’ (2008) work on “reflexive” fathers highlights how the paradigm of the “involved” father fails to grasp the complexities of everyday experiences of fatherhood, which are constantly shaped and reshaped by choices and especially constraints of circumstances. Meanings of fatherhood are constructed with reference to one’s own experience of fathering, and as contemporary fathers are now expected to be more connected to family processes, “part of how the men are responding to this transformation is by creating their own fathering biographies, driven by individualization” (Williams, 2008, p. 499). These discourses are quite evident in my interviewees’ accounts. None of the them have a clear mind on what a “good” father is, and characteristics of “proper” parenting are expressed in different terms by different fathers. What they all share, though, is a dominant relevance accorded to their own experiences, whether of growing up as children of their own parents, or of developing as adults with a defined personality, taste, beliefs and values. Reflexivity is often the main resource of those fathers who had long desired to have a child, and are more invested in their role, but do not recognize themselves in the model provided by their own families: these men are more eager to reflect on themselves as fathers, and to express doubts and fears of inadequacy at parenting. Angelo and Lorenzo are good examples. Angelo was raised in a family where gender roles were recognizable and segregated: “at home my mum cleans, does the dishes and she has always been after us [he and his brothers] and my dad was the dad who watches the news (...) the strict and a bit detached dad”, a model that he strongly distances himself from. He is very attentive to his daughter’s cognitive progress, and he seeks aid from experts, books and documentaries, to the aim of “do(ing) a good job as

parents... both of us together”. Angelo complains about the fact that parents are not supported in their developmental role, besides the basic necessities of a child:

“a friend of ours is studying psychology and we are supposed to meet him, we never manage to, to get some information about what happens in children’s minds, which is something we are very interested in, because in the end the pediatrician, you see... he makes you get better from illnesses, it’s a technical expert, at least in our experience so far, and... besides standard pamphlets that every pediatrician gives you he does not give you hints about the psychomotor aspect of children’s development, he does not suggest you... kinds of games or toys or other things, if not in a generic and superficial way. Some texts instead... in some texts you can find something interesting but... (...) if we found an expert on psychomotor children’s development we would be happy to talk to him, but this aspect in Italian’s state society is not considered as something important to pass down to future parents or new parents”. (Angelo, 28, daughter aged 1 year and 4 months, employee)

This lack of specific information makes Angelo wonder about his role and his skills as a parent: as convinced as he is that his daughter needs cognitive stimulus to develop properly, his discourses on “good” fatherhood revolve around his ability to provide her with intellectual and social incentives. He “feels like a dad” when he does his best to behave and give her a good example, or “when I try to build her mind by playing with her”. Showing her new places, making her meet new people, everything that could enrich her experience of the world is something Angelo is committed to make his daughter get in contact with, to the greater aim that he expresses in these words: “good parents, or anyways, parents who, with a help, raise a child in a decent way can make so that future children are a bit more decent, and future society is a bit more decent”.

Lorenzo, like Angelo, distances himself from the model his father provided to him:

“my father was very dedicated to his job... which I am as well, but at the emotional, affective level, with us kids, maybe because their own parents were not expressive as well, they [both his parents] had some lacks, some flaws (...) my father was very

authoritarian, and (...) they smothered us a bit, at the level of personality”. (Lorenzo, 38, twin sons 2 years and 4 months, entrepreneur)

The lack of emotional support he experienced as a son influences greatly his reflection on the construction of parenting skills, which in Lorenzo’s opinion should be devoted to support his children’s affective and behavioral development, without constricting them into schemes. He is very reflexive on his adequacy at being a “good” father, so much so that he feels anxious about it:

“sometimes I talk to my wife about...whether we are giving them the right education, and I’m always questioning myself, I’m always scared... I’m mostly afraid of hurting them emotionally, of causing them traumas, that’s something I’m very apprehensive about, even too much (...) I really care about giving the kids... then of course, we all have bad days, you can be more or less moody, but you try to give them a constant serenity, and a reciprocal expression of affection, you try to give them a lot of affection also physically (...) maybe I’m an anxious dad, sometimes I say so to my wife, and she says ‘yes’, I mean on certain things I’m too anxious.” (Lorenzo, 38, twin sons 2 years and 4 months, entrepreneur)

This anxiety around doing the right thing as a father, and the lack of acceptable models, make Lorenzo rely on himself and his own experience for the construction of his parenting skills, with all the doubts and concerns that this implies: “I’m not inspired to any model, I’m... this is me, I have my prerogatives, my ideas, that might be wrong, or only partially right, I think I’m doing my best considering my conditions, then maybe I’m not”. Life conditions, usually working hours of the partners and the availability of support for care and education (care facilities, grandparents, expert knowledge), are very relevant in defining “good” fatherhood, men’s “proper” level of involvement in parenting and the moral implications of that involvement for children and partners (Fox, 2009; Williams, 2008). As Lorenzo says, “one tries, within what’s possible, to do what’s best for his children”. This is the leitmotiv of most of the accounts on good parenting in my sample. Only a few interviewees seem confident that they have the instruments for performing parenthood the “right” way: it is the case of fathers who rely on their own education for constructing (and evaluating) their fathering

practices. Fabio, for example, who is a sales agent but has a degree in psychology, is sure that a clear differentiation of the mother's and father's roles makes for a "functioning family", on the basis of what sounds like a Parsonsian functionalistic perspective on instrumental and expressive roles of fathers and mothers:

"I think it's perfectly right to recognize differences, because they exist, they are there. That's something I defend with conviction, and I like to see people who really differentiate their tasks and recognize those differences (...) she [his wife] is certainly more welcoming and patient. And I'm the opposite, meaning, if I say 'you can't do that', I can also start explaining you why and then get angry and change register (...) it's ok that the male side is a bit more... [*hits his knuckles against the table*] peremptory, and the other side maybe... different, not necessarily soft, but a bit more... muffled". (Fabio, 34, daughter aged 1 year and 3 months, sales agent)

Demetrio and Marco, if not aligned to Fabio's praise of gender roles, rely heavily on their education for constructing their parenting styles too, and their knowledge makes them feel confident that they hold the right instruments for doing fatherhood well. Demetrio has a degree in history, and his humanistic formation, which implied studies of law and ethics, makes him

"more reflexive, more philosophical, and enables you to elaborate thoughts more leaning towards what's right, let's say (...) and being a father means to give him the right way, teaching him what's right, I mean, telling right from wrong, (...) that's what I have to do, being fair, and I can do that trough example". (Demetrio, 34, son aged 1 year and 6 months, communications agent)

Similarly, Marco, who is an archaeologist but, as a teacher in middle school, he has a strong formation in pedagogy, claims that his knowledge in the field of education, together with his working experience, help him greatly in providing his daughter with the best conditions for her cognitive development, what he calls "the adequate stimulus". In his account of fathering, he sounds didactic and even prescriptive:

“you should never make a big scene when saying goodbye, otherwise a child will think that you won’t be back, (...) instead of telling her off we try to explain her the rules, (...) we always ask her what she feels like doing, (...) fairy tales teach that actions have consequences, sometimes serious and not always reparable, and I think it’s right that these teachings are maintained, I think that on the long term [not showing children the scary side of things] is not protecting our children, rather it’s isolating them, making them live in an ivory tower, it’s not protecting them, (...) we had a lot of arguments, not in front of the child of course, (...) you have to be authoritative and explain the rule, and obviously be punitive when it’s the case”. (Marco, 36, daughter aged 2 years, middle school teacher)

Issues of education and discipline are often the starting point for concerns around men’s parenting skills and adequacy as fathers. For Dario, for example, this is a problem that needs to be discussed, as he feels he is not being as strict with his daughter as he should be. During the interview he expressed the need to speak about his weaknesses, that revolve around the idea of “conceding her too much”:

“the times I tell her ‘no’ are when I feel a father the most (...) she needs to understand what can and cannot be done, and it’s very hard, I’m trying to do that because in the past I have never been able to (...) I wanted to speak about my weak spots, meaning, being more assertive, you know?, in saying ‘no’ sometimes”. (Dario, 37, daughter aged 3 years, employee)

In his account, though, he refers very much to his biography and personality, and to the fact that each child is different and unique: parenting requires a work of adaptation that can be learnt only through direct experience. It is a matter of temperament, of personality: most of my interviewees do not like to be taught what to do, they want to learn while doing. Emilio and Tancredi convey this feeling very explicitly. Emilio, whose negative model for parenting is his own father, claims that

“I absolutely don’t want to follow anyone’s footsteps, I want to do whatever I feel like, hoping to do it the right way, and then we’ll see, my son will tell me if I did good or

not (...) I'd rather live it day after day and enjoy my son like I do (...) we want to do how we think to do well". (Emilio, 33, son aged 1 year and 4 months, factory worker)

Tancredi talks about parenting with his partner, in order to have the same educational aims, but as he says,

"nobody is born a parent, you know?, we look at each other, we try to understand the reactions we have on the spot, sometimes she loses her temper on something, I make her notice it, or the other way around (...) I think it's all instinct. You can rely a bit to some knowledge, but you cannot have preconceptions". (Tancredi, 37, son aged 2 years and 6 months, self-employed plumber)

Even if these men are eager to recognize their own inadequacies in certain situations, it seems that a solution can only be found in themselves, requiring time and an attitude for learning, but often no interferences are admitted. An exception is sometimes an expert or a professional figure, like the pediatrician or the therapist in few cases, the only person a parent can truly rely on when it comes to dealing with children. If these fathers seem to feel aligned to a paradigm of "parenthood by choice", according to which wanting a child means being ready to take the responsibility of raising a decent citizen (Faircloth & Murray, 2015; Naldini, 2016), at the same time, though, they often reject the rules of new parenting culture. Paolo and Bruno, for example, reflecting on the amount of inputs and stimulus they received from outside as parents, point out how the only worth relying on come from medical experts (pediatricians), the rest is redundant. Paolo expresses a resistance to the normative constraints of expert-led parenthood in these words:

"nutritional growth, it's something super discussed now, all those pediatricians, nutritionists, there's a whole debate on this, so advertisements of child food here, there... this attention to biological food as well, I'm not against it... it's a bit excessive though... a bit of normality would be more credible, raise him and... feed him, with all serenity of the world". (Paolo, 34, son aged 6 months, free-lance photographer)

Bruno calls it a "radical-chic approach", which nevertheless, according to him, is not applicable to parenting:

“you become a parent, you want to do it right, you want to be different than the others, almost a radical-chic approach let’s say, I want to be absolutely aware, I have to do it right, scientific method– and then you realize it’s not feasible at all, because of all the difficulties you face, at work, in the relationship with your partner, with your parents, your peer group... personal frustrations, you can’t make it, you freestyle, you make a lot of mistakes, you mistake all the time, most of times... you shouldn’t behave in some way but you still do, and then you feel like an asshole, it works like that. At least, for me.” (Bruno, 32, daughter aged 2 years and 4 months, municipal officer)

It should be noted, though, that mistakes are more easily accepted when coming from fathers than mothers: women’s behavior with their children is much more scrutinized, and women who deviate from what has been called the norm of “intensive mothering” (Hays, 1996) are at a much higher risk of being considered “bad parents” (Faircloth & Murray, 2015; Fox, 2009; Miller, 2011; Naldini, 2016).

5. “New” fathers?

“Good” fatherhood is a contingent and historical construction, and as such its content varies across generations. This observation was on the backdrop of reflections that emerged during the focus group discussion, when discourses about becoming a father developed around the notion of what has been called a “new” role of the father, in contrast to fathers of previous generations. The theme of the “role” has been declined, by the participants to the discussion, around different issues related to the process of becoming a father, especially the event of birth and the relevance of interacting with the child and of its recognition of the father’s presence.

Not all the men involved in the focus group participated to the birth of their children, as some of them were not eager to, and had already negotiated with their partners their staying outside of the delivery room. While those who participated gave value to being there in that special moment, at the same time they readily reassured Oreste, who did not participate to delivery

and claims that it does not make him feel like a “B-series” father: as the following extract clearly shows, the discussion very quickly turned into a more light-hearted and humorous sharing of feelings of uselessness during delivery and the first moments of interaction with their newborns.

Raimondo: did you all see the delivery?

Oreste: no, I didn't.

Paolo: I did

Oreste: she was hospitalized in an emergency [...] had to have a C-section

Rodolfo: me, C-section as well because the child wouldn't be born, but I didn't want to see the delivery, I asked her, but I let her decide, I told her “if you want me to stay I'll stay, otherwise I'm waiting outside”, and then I stayed for a while, but she wouldn't be born so it was a C-section, second child C-section as well, so I did not see any delivery...

Oreste: did you see it? [*to Raimondo*]

Raimondo: yes, yes

Paolo: it's really cool

Raimondo: I was in Spain

Oreste: yeah, indeed... I'm sorry about that, then everyone says, I'll suck it up

Saverio: yes that's right, yes, look, I assisted, my wife had a natural delivery even though they were twins because I mean... everything went well and... yeah, beautiful, I mean, moving, something you'll never forget for the rest of your life, but also seeing her in that state of great pain hasn't really been... indeed she had told me, “if you don't want to stay, I'm not blaming you” like “I don't want you to see me like that”

Oreste: yes, indeed, let's say I don't feel like a B-series father just because I didn't see the delivery, but it's a moment...

Saverio: noooo, no no, absolutely

Paolo: it's really not about attending the delivery, (...) it doesn't make any difference, I think, because you are there but you're absolutely... a butthead [*laughter*] like you're there but you're doing nothing, because there's a team of obstetricians, they take care

of it, you are there to get bitten or to get your arm hairs torn, you have to stand still and quiet, because in that moment it's all delegated to someone else, and I think, like, the most absurd thing is seeing the physical side of it, it's gross

Saverio: yeah! exactly

Paolo: I mean, it's a Tarantino movie, emotionally eh, you look at this thing and you say "no, it's absurd", like really *[laughs]* that thing coming out from there, but that thing I mean, it's so small and we have- he has my same bones, just miniaturized *[laughter]* like...

Oreste: later I'll show you a picture, first a picture of my daughter now that she's beautiful, I'll show you a picture of my daughter as a newborn, when they gave her in my hands, I mean imagine the ugliest child

Paolo: a goblin

Oreste: fucking Gollum, Gollum!

Paolo: with crumpled ears

Saverio: and everyone: "he's gorgeous!" *[laughter]*

Oreste: no, she was really ugly, you know they give her to you "aw, how cute", nope!! Come on, she's fucking ugly *[laughter]* then she got better, but really, we laughed so hard on this, they gave us this thing (...)

Paolo: I was jerking [his son] around because he was born with hair on his ears, I was laughing so hard *[laughter]*

Humor in this case is used as a diversion to protect Oreste from the emergence of a feeling of inadequacy: by bringing him to a side of the discourse around birth that he could join, Paolo and Saverio downplayed the relevance of the event of delivery for the identification with a "proper" father's identity, and restored a climate of complicity built around the rejection of a high emotional involvement, traditionally un-masculine (Ferrero Camoletto & Bertone, 2016). As Rodolfo points out, though, around the event of birth it is possible to recognize the discursive construction of a "new" role for fathers:

Rodolfo: yes, attention on fathers really has increased, I can see that with my dad, like even if he's quite young the time I was born I know that he lived it in a much more detached way than I did with my wife at delivery, just because even being required inside the delivery room, before it was not conceivable, like, the father would stay outside, it was really uncommon, while nowadays it's much more uncommon if you don't participate, because a father needs to be extremely present in that moment, because the mother asks you to but also at the hospital the first thing they ask you is "do you want to participate?", so also these things... even before a child is born you see how different a father's relationship is compared to fathers of thirty years ago.

The role of professionals, though, if on the one hand is important for enhancing fathers' involvement (Ives, 2014), on the other it is subject to criticism for the inadequacy of the support offered, especially to expectant fathers. It seems, therefore, that they contribute to the construction of an "assistant parent" (Habib, 2012), who is supposed to be involved, but on which very low expectations are laid.

Raimondo: did you attend pre-birth classes?

Paolo: I attended the pre-birth classes held by *** hospital for... boyfriends, husbands, whatever, it was three classes and I think it was total bullshit *[laughter]* because it was like "remember, at this time it's important that a man does things at home, so please load the washing machine", yeah, I mean look, ehm... I was listening to this obstetrician and thinking "but, like... are you fucking kidding me? What is it, the middle ages?" *[laughter]* come on

Oreste: but like something... like a follow through path, I mean I'm saying something trivial, like for mothers there's pre-birth classes, these things, something that helps you to be a better father, a father, that gives you a few inputs and... support, but fathers' style, not mothers' style, like those things maybe in front of a beer...

Raimondo: yes, yes

Oreste: it could be... now it could be the right moment, right because indeed fathers have a role even between 0 and 3 years, even when the child is small...

The relevance of a father's role "even" when a child is so young, under 3 years of age, opens way for two discussions: one around the importance of the child's recognition of their presence, and another about the meaning of this "new" relevance of fathers for the construction of parenting.

Fathers' relationships with their children are often mediated by the presence of the mothers, which is often deemed responsible (mainly through breastfeeding) of monopolizing children's attention; usually, in the fathers' accounts, the recognition of the presence of a second parent comes when the mother's cumbersome presence starts to pull back:

Raimondo: my, my partner is very present, you know?, because she's here alone, so the child is a great company for her, then she's working from home, and... she also breastfed until recently, I mean, until a few months ago, little but steady, and... sometimes it would have been nice if she had been there a little less, you know? For her and for me, with my child. Now that my daughter is in Spain... all of a sudden, she misses me, and my wife realized how present I had been even though she had not noticed, I think, as focused as she was on her role (...) so we are a bit in a phase of... probably she's detaching a bit from her mum, you know? And... there were times when I could spend a lot of time with her and other times when I really was a bit secondary, and that hurt me, to be honest

Me: has it happened to someone else, that your children would start missing your presence?

Rodolfo: I noticed it now because they spent two weeks at the seaside, and compared to last year (...) I really noticed a difference, I mean as she grows up I can really tell how she needs her dad, (...) when I went to pick her up I could tell that she was happy. Last year I went to pick her up at the seaside, she was a bit younger than a year and a half, it was not the same *[laughing]* I was dad, whatever. Her mom was there and that was fine.

Oreste: to me it was the opposite, I mean, my partner had to go back to studying now (...) and my daughter suffered from this, because the time her mom could dedicate to her has been reduced, and she had issues... she started to poop her pants again, even if

she had been potty-trained, she had no problems for two months, and now she started to do that again, and we understood, asking around and stuff, that it was a protest against the fact that her mom had reduced her attentions. With me instead (...) she's started to speak now and she makes herself understood, it's fun, and a month ago her mom went out of town with a friend for four or five days and she stayed with me for the first time, sleeping over, and next august we'll leave and it will be the two of us because mom has to work, so right now I'm telling you, just like I suffered during the first two years and a half, because I was always... her second choice, I mean if we were both there, like, mom and dad... she was obviously more bound to her mother, I could hardly do anything with her without her paying more attention... or giving priority to her mom, and now instead it seems that she likes it and she does things with me, and when she's doing things with me ehm... she does not miss her mom and... she has no issues at all. I mean, it still happens that if it's the three of us together on some things she prefers her mom, but... the situation is surely improving.

The “new” relevance of fathers in early childhood switches the discussion around the construction of parenting from a concern around “good” and “bad” fathers to the recognition of their very presence in itself. As the following quotation shows, Raimondo's attempts at discussing good fatherhood and the strive to be good parents (driven by his own great investment in the role) is downplayed by discourses around the inevitability of a greater involvement of fathers, considered the important changes in society occurred in the last decades which made it impossible for men to back out from a participation to family life (Williams, 2008).

Raimondo: (...) I feel that there's a private and a public dimension, and that there's... there are a lot more of good fathers than it looks from the outside, you know? (...)

Oreste: but I mean, it's logical, because before becoming fathers was something much more for everyone, regardless of whether you really had an instinct or not, now...

Raimondo: there's a choice, you can choose

Oreste: there's a choice! I have friends that at 45, 40 or 45, they don't want to have kids, they don't want to hear a thing about it, but before if you didn't have children at that age you would get some stares

Paolo: yeah, and not at 40, 20 years before 40 (...)

Oreste: but, going back to that, one thing I have noticed is that it's quite new this talking about the father's role, or of fathers with children this little. I mean, that's the difference that I noticed.

Paolo: yeah, maybe ten years

Oreste: yeah, because before, really the father did not exist, before I became a dad I've been told: "the real difference is that your wife starts... your partner is a mother 9 months before the child is born, you'll become a father after two years, two years and a half, if everything's fine", or what, no, they told me so 9 months after...

Raimondo: yeah, "9+9" is a saying

Oreste: yes, it's a saying; so, something I actually noticed is that... I see much more attention on what could be a father's role with small children, because when the child grows up and is... like 6 or older, it... it's more recognized or more attention is given to what could be the father's and the mother's role, but before, now maybe also because ehm... couples... single parents, single fathers, single mothers, non-married couples, stuff like that, the role of the father is more... analyzed and scrutinized when a child is from zero to three years old. So this... going back to what he was saying, it's not that before there were... good or bad fathers: from zero to three... only now we can start to talk about fathers who do something (...)

Me: so, is this being more involved something that makes "better" fathers?

Rodolfo: I think the responsibilities- I mean, a father's responsibility has changed as well, before a father felt responsible only in some situations, now instead a father is probably under a different pressure, and so he finds himself responsible in many more situations than before (...) like my wife asks me, not for our second child because she's breastfeeding him but our first child was breastfed only for four months, sometimes she would go out for errands and ask me "I'm leaving the child at home, would you

feed her? You have formula, it shouldn't be a problem"; my dad maybe did it but much less, because... my mom was always present in these situations

Oreste: you see, 10 years ago we wouldn't even be asked to a meeting like this, they would have said "what's the point? What's your role?"

Saverio: maybe, can I go a bit against the stream here? I think it's also out of necessities that we are pushed to be good fathers, like (...) my dad and my mom grew up in families where, like my father had 7 brothers so they would take care of each other; and there was a whole team of aunts, (...) my mother grew up in a farm, they were three siblings but lived together with their uncles and their sons, like, they were all together; and... right now probably if I had the chance to leave the kids maybe not every day, but three times a week with their aunts putting them to sleep, and go for a run at the park, I would... (...)

Raimondo: I don't know, it feels like there's no, I mean... like we're the first to have to change this father figure, you know? (...) it's like we're an avant-garde...

Oreste: well, it's like we are an indefinite generation, I have friends my age who have three kids, others who still go clubbing every night and don't give a damn about settling down (...) it's an age when you don't understand shit, like there's nothing... (...) really, it feels like there's no guideline, like... anything can happen, and I think we are in a generation when, luckily I would say, a lot of attention is paid to the father's figure, since the beginning. We do have a role, so whatever it is... let's play it, I mean, if there's something smart, something useful to bring out... it could do nothing but good.

The logic of "whatever works" is conveyed across the whole discussion. The lack of stable references for the construction of their identities as fathers makes these men wish there were more spaces for a public discourse around the father's role, spaces that, as they complain, are not provided anywhere.

6. Concluding thoughts

Fathers in my sample followed different paths to parenthood; they had different stories, different expectations and different desires, and the experience of fatherhood affected their lives to different extents. What they have in common, though, is the fact that in order to explain what fatherhood means they often rely on their own experience rather than cultural or public discourse representations of fatherhood. The reference point for the construction of parenthood is often their own lived experience, and their contingent living conditions define the boundaries of their deliberation (Ives, 2015) around what is acceptable, desirable or legitimate to do as fathers. The sources of information around parenthood are variable and composite, often subject to criticism and diffidence, should they come from relatives, peers, and even experts. Advice and knowledge around being a father compose a set of references that fathers can draw upon, not systematically, but rather in a personalized way, to construct what seems to be a unique experience, impossible to compare. If for some men, indeed, fatherhood can be ascribed to their “project of the self” (Giddens, 1992), the elements that compose it are to be found in their own lives. As a consequence, not only “profiles” of fathers are very hard to detect, but the very construction of “good” fatherhood as a model to aspire to does not seem to have definite boundaries. Only in few cases a commitment to informed, “expert-led” parenting is evident in fathers’ accounts; in most narratives, men express a resistance to “new parenting culture” and the imperative to acquire recognizable and codified parenting skills. This does not mean that they are not committed to the “best for the child” (Naldini, 2016); as it will become clearer in the next chapter, this is often affected by notions around motherhood and the relevance of mothering in daily family life.

CHAPTER 4

Fathering: issues of care

“You hold a person in your arms, and you know you have to take care of her: she can’t eat by herself, you have to feed her; changing her, it has to be you, putting her to sleep, it has to be you, the medicines, everything, it’s all on you”

1. Introduction

Men’s participation to material childcare is often investigated as a measure of gender equality in the couple. An impressive body of research, mostly quantitative, has been produced in order to assess whether fatherhood has changed by looking at the amount of time men allocate to care activities, often in a comparative perspective, in order to detect trends in fathers’ involvement across the years and in different countries (Anxo et al., 2011; Hook, 2006; Sullivan et al., 2014). Childcare is part of what has been defined “fathering” (Hobson, 2002), or the practices of “doing” parenting. If, though, the concept of “fathering” includes also practices that not necessarily need the immediate presence of the child, like buying child-related products or requesting a parental leave, material child care involves a hands-on commitment, physical contact and specific competences. Fathers’ participation to material childcare implies making a step from what Tronto (1993) defined “taking care of”, or the assumption of some degree of responsibility on the definition of a care need and the determination of how to respond to it (a definition that can be interpreted as corresponding to “fathering” in Hobson’s sense; it has been used as such also by Dermott (2008)), and “care-giving”, or the direct fulfilling of care needs by performing care practices. Here, a “strict” definition of fathering is taken in consideration, with a focus on material child care practices rather than accounts of “taking care of” children in broader ways. This chapter is dedicated

to narratives of men's participation to material child care activities and the relevance of physical closeness. The first paragraph proposes a typology of fathers' involvement in care practices based on accounts of routine childcare arrangements. In the second paragraph, mothers' care and representations of motherhood are taken into account as important reference points for fathers' involvement; finally, the relevance of bodies and embodiment is discussed in the last paragraph. To what extent do fathers participate to child care practices? What do they do? How do they negotiate their involvement? In what ways are their bodies involved in care, and in what terms do they speak about it?

2. Fathers and childcare

To find an order in my interviewees' accounts of their participation to material child care, I will draw upon different sets of categorizations. The first, on the basis of the distinction between "instrumental" and "interactive" care practices (Tanturri, 2006), is the categorization of fathers' "presence" proposed by Mencarini and Solera (2016). While "interactive" practices are generally not necessary on a daily basis and refer mainly to ludic and emotionally gratifying relational activities, "instrumental" care practices are those activities that aim at responding to a child's basic needs: feeding, putting to bed, dressing, changing and washing. Mencarini and Solera (2016) constructed a typology based on the frequency of fathers' participation to instrumental care practices. "Very present" fathers perform every day at least 3 of the 5 activities; "present" father participate daily to one or two; "not very present" fathers do not routinely perform daily any of the instrumental activities, but do participate to at least one of them more than once a week; finally, "absent" fathers not only are not routinely involved in any of the activities, but they also never or only a few times a year perform at least 2 of the 5. This categorization has been originally applied to data on fathers' participation to childcare when children are younger than one year; it is reasonable, though, to extend it to the data collected in the present work, as children aged between one and three years still require the same care practices. This typology proves very

useful for the exploration of fathers' participation to routine care work, posing a very defined focus on practices.

A second reference for the exploration of my interviewees' narratives around child care is Habib's (2012) categorization, which broadens the gaze to a more general interpretation of a father's "role". According to the author, fathers could be committed to a "remote" role, characterized by little interest in the child; a "provider" role, the most traditionally bound to a notion of hegemonic masculinity, in which the father's primary commitment is to be the family's breadwinner; an "assistant or secondary parent" role, participating to childcare but largely as a helper to the mother; a "shared caregiver role", which shares care tasks and responsibilities by and large equitably with the mother; and a "primary caregiver" role, who has the primary responsibility for the care of his child(ren). Habib points out that these "roles" are not mutually exclusive: men could exhibit different roles across their life course or even concurrently. A third reference for the analysis of men's participation to child care is Naldini and Torrioni's (2016) focus on two mechanisms of the construction of gender in the transition to parenthood: a continuum of interchangeability/specialization of practices, and a second continuum of time lack/availability. While the authors analyze these mechanisms on the side of participation to domestic work, it is reasonable and potentially fruitful to apply the same criteria when looking at child care practices. Firstly, because the allocation of child care tasks among the couple often follows the very same mechanisms; secondly, because such mechanisms imply a definition of responsibilities around care management which very often follow gendered patterns. The following table shows the fathers' participation to childcare practices, based on Mencarini and Solera's (2016) categorization. The aim is to provide a window into fathering, looking at men's routinely involvement into childcare; the "types" here constructed are not to be intended as clear-cut categories, but rather as a starting point for a deepening of the look on fathering practices, a look enriched by Habib's insights on father's roles and reflections upon specializations and time availability.

Table 4. Men's participation to childcare

	Very present	Present	Not very present	Absent
	Angelo; Dario; Paolo; Rodolfo; Ugo; Vincenzo; Zeno; Ignazio; Leonardo; Massimiliano; Nunzio; Raimondo	Cosimo; Emilio; Fabio; Lorenzo; Marco; Saverio; Tancredi; Armando; Bruno; Carlo; Demetrio; Elia	Biagio; Nicolò; Fabrizio; Ottavio; Pietro	Giorgio; Ivano; Oreste; Graziano
N	12	12	5	4

It is an interesting data that a consistent part of the sample, 24 men over 33, are here considered as either “present” or “very present” in childcare tasks. The categorization based on the routinely participation to care activities makes it possible to highlight men’s day-to-day commitment to fathering practices. Still, a closer look at attitudes and broader reflections over their roles as fathers add a layer of complexity to the picture. If none of my interviewees can be defined as a “remote” father (Habib, 2012), the interpretation of their involvement in material childcare is complicated by issues of time availability, interchangeability or specialization of care activities and the kind of caregiver role they put into practice.

2.1 Very present fathers, shared caregivers?

Men are categorized as “very present” if they perform at least 3 instrumental child care activities every day: 12 interviewees fall in this cluster. The most common discourse among fathers in this group is that of the interchangeability of the parents when it comes to childcare tasks. In most of these men’s accounts, practices are either performed together, or they are shared based on a “whoever is available” criteria. Still, time availability is an issue that many face, due to the demands of full time employment. Fathers who score as “very present”, as far as their routinely participation to childcare tasks is concerned, are either to be considered as “secondary” or – more frequently indeed – “shared” caregivers in Habib’s (2012) sense.

Only one interviewee, Paolo, is evidently a “primary” caregiver, but his case is peculiar, as his partner suffered from a post-partum depression that prevented her from taking care of their child, besides the – apparently – inalienable burden of breastfeeding (his case is discussed in the next paragraph 3 in this chapter). This cluster is composed of both couples who do not share care work with external helpers, and couples who instead can count on the help of family members or, in three cases, of paid help from baby-sitters. To make the greater difference between shared and secondary caregivers in this group, though, is mainly the working situation of mothers: secondary caregivers share equally care when they are at home, but they spend sensibly less time at home than their partners, who are either unemployed or still on a leave. Shared caregivers, instead, are coupled with women involved in the labor market, so the time that both partners allocate to care is comparable.

Angelo is an example of the first sub group: he is a “very present secondary caregiver”. Angelo works full time in a shop, with a long lunch break that he spends at home; when he is at home, childcare tasks are equally shared with his partner, who is unemployed, and is the main carer of their daughter who does not attend any care facility. Angelo regularly feeds his daughter, he heats up her milk, and puts her to sleep in the afternoon before going back to work; he changes her and plays with her, and he takes her with him when doing errands. Baths are usually taken with the participation of both parents; in the night, more often his partner puts the baby to sleep, and since the doctor changed his timetables and Angelo cannot take time off work, he can no longer be there for the periodical checks. Once a week, his partner goes swimming and he is left alone with the child. He says they were expecting more help on the part of their parents, to take some time off for themselves on a regular basis, but after a few first times this possibility gave out. He speaks of child care with competence and seems very committed to doing parenting “the right way”, focusing especially on her daughter’s cognitive development and how it could be enhanced by playing together in a certain way or proposing her specific stimulating activities, something he praises his partner for, who is more patient and very prone to follow their child’s development and propose her new things. The current allocation of care tasks is the outcome of a learning and adaptation process which started from scratch when the baby was born: none of them knew anything

about taking care of babies so “the first months we were surviving (..) whoever could, took care of her”.

Ignazio represents the second sub-group, as he could be interpreted as a “very present shared caregiver”. He is an engineer working full time for an automotive firm, and he has a 10 months old daughter who goes to a nursery during daytime. His wife works shorter hours, so she is more present during the day, and he claims that, because of it, childcare is shared 60% on his wife and 40% on him. In the morning they share care equally, changing their daughter together and taking turns in having breakfast and getting ready for work while keeping an eye on the child. His wife takes her to the nursery, and a baby sitter picks her up and takes her home. If he gets home before his wife, he feeds her, and he does so also during weekends, so that he noticed that the child always turns to him for food. Bathing and changing her is something the partners do together, especially bathing, which could be risky since the child is very lively. As for putting the baby to sleep, Ignazio claims that his wife and him have different approaches: while his wife tends to show her illustration books or read her stories until she gets sleepy, he says he has a “stronger” or more physical approach, which works better when the child is nervous or irritable: he puts his hand on the child’s belly and strokes it, which is something that

“even when she’s irritable it calms her down, because when she’s nervous she tends to turn over, to move, so holding a hand on her belly limits her movements a bit, so probably this thing makes her, makes her feel safer...” (Ignazio, 35, daughter aged 10 months, employee)

When the child was smaller he claims that he took care of her more than his wife, “strangely”, because his wife was worried by the cord and she was afraid of hurting the baby; moreover, she did not breastfeed, and he used to bottle feed her more often than his wife did. This is something that has changed now, as now his wife bottle feeds the child more often: he explains this with the fact that since she could not breastfeed as she would have wanted, she probably longs for a contact she could not “properly” have with the child. In the first period after birth he used to get up at night every time he heard the child moving, to check on her,

also because his wife was recovering from the C-section delivery and could not get up too often.

Sometimes, though, what could be interpreted as a virtuous “conduct” does not match with “culture” (Dermott, 2008), which is still anchored to traditional views on gender roles, especially when it comes to defining the “best for the child”: invariably, a mother’s care (Naldini & Torroni, 2016). It is the case of Nunzio, a reluctant shared caregiver. Nunzio works shifts in a post office and is married to a shop assistant who works shifts in a local mall. They have a son who will soon turn 2 years old and attends a nursery. Due to the shifts his wife works, Nunzio takes care of the child in the morning, waking him up, feeding him breakfast and taking him to the nursery. In telling me this, he says he is basically “doing a mom’s functions”. They leave home early, and he keeps his very lively child busy by letting him use the keys, and when they get to the nursery he gets him ready, changes his shoes, “you know those things that... I thought only moms did”. His wife picks the child up in the afternoon, even if Nunzio is already home from work, because they pay attention to giving him a stability in his routine; when they are together at home, care is shared 50-50, “if not 51 on me and 49 on her due to her job...”. Usually, though, he changes his son’s diapers, because he is particularly fussy, and his wife feeds him and washes him. During the first period after child birth, Nunzio was much less involved in care, he would take care of grocery shopping and household chores, but everything changed when he started to take the child to the nursery in the morning. He says his relationship with the child improved enormously, but at the same time he resents being so involved in something that should be a woman’s work. He repeats several times that it would be more “fair” if his wife were more involved in care, for the sake of the child, who needs his mother more than his father, and spends many words on complaining about a labor market and policies that do not respect the importance of the mother’s role. In his account, Nunzio refers to a notion of “fairness” in the allocation of childcare work that Ives (2015) classified as “reciprocity”: gender roles are (or should be, as Nunzio says) specialized in a “traditional” way, so that fathers provide economic security for the household, and mothers take care of children. The justification of “fairness as reciprocity” in Nunzio’s narrative is an understanding of the “best for the child” that resorts to an

essentialist notion of gender and to an interpretation of motherhood as an ideally totalizing experience for women:

“we could say it’s my cultural position, you know?, as I was saying... I think it would be more fair if- it could be wrong, you know?, but that until the [child’s] second year the mum would be more present, you know?, if possible (...) maybe the male is more for, the dad, the physical side, all that is movement, strength, I think that is demanded to... (...) he goes to his mother for eating, for... other things... I don’t know, I think, maybe it’s fairer like that, this is my opinion... at least in our case it’s like this and it’s fine (...) I think the maternal relationship, I don’t know, a woman who has a child, that’s it, it’s a different relationship.” (Nunzio, 42, son aged 1 year and 9 months, employee)

Proper care for fathers, in his words, does not – should not – therefore entail material care, but rather a responsibility for the economic maintenance of the family and participation to the ludic, relational side of interaction with the child. In other words, while he is a “care-giver”, he wishes he could step back to “taking care of” his child (Tronto, 1993).

2.2 Present fathers: a composite picture

Fathers have been categorized as “present” if every day they performed one or two instrumental activities: it is the case of 12 interviewees. Present fathers make a composite group when it comes to allocating their childcare practices along the specialization/interchangeability continuum and interpreting their “roles” as either secondary, shared or provider (Habib, 2012), also considering their lack or availability of time (according to their working hours). Most of these men can count on external help with child care, in all cases from family members, with further occasional involvement of a baby-sitter in one case; only two couples in this group deal with care work by themselves.

Lorenzo, for example, is an entrepreneur who works long hours at his activity and is the father of twin brothers aged 2 years and a half. His wife works part time on shifts as a dentist assistant, and the twins are currently attending a private daycare facility, but they will start

going to the kindergarten in autumn. In the morning Lorenzo's partner takes the children to the daycare facility, and according to her work shifts she picks them up or Lorenzo's mother does. Lorenzo gets home from work in the evening, around 7.30 or 8, and he does not work on Sundays; when he is at home, both during weekdays and on weekends, he takes care of the children, changing and washing them if needed, in order to allow his wife some time to do housework. The children do not need feeding now that they are older, and they always eat all together as a family; when they were smaller and needed bottling they would take turns, but in any case, "it was mainly my wife because she was at home on maternity leave and I was at work". Night time sees a participation of both parents: Lorenzo explains me that the children need a "pre-sleep phase" where they start to relax on the sofa, and then he and his wife take the children to bed and they tuck their blankets in. Lorenzo used to read them a tale before they fell asleep, but he noticed that it would keep them awake instead and even stimulate their energy so that they would ask to be picked up or get off the bed, so he gave up reading. His wife could only take the compulsory maternity leave, so she went back to work quite soon after the birth of their sons, and he made an arrangement with his sister that she would take care of the babies during the day, because he could not leave his work; when the children were 7 months old they started to attend the daycare facility. He tells me that the first two months have been the hardest, because his wife had a nervous breakdown right after childbirth, and she could not breastfeed due to an infection she developed at the hospital; the babies needed to be fed every two hours and a half and they were not synchronized, so in his words "we couldn't even tell days from nights".

Another "present" father, Elia, is a journalist; he used to work full time until 2 years ago, then his employer decided to cut his (and other worker's) working hours in order to avoid dismissing anyone, so he spends some days of the month at home. His wife is unemployed, and they have a 1 year and 4 months old daughter. The child spends the day at home with her mother, but when Elia is at home he claims care is shared "50-50", and the days he spends at home "maybe I even spend more time than her with the child so that my wife has a moment to breathe". He claims that besides breastfeeding "the roles are interchangeable", they share all the activities, for example tossing a coin when it's time to change the baby, but when

telling me of an average day he puts more emphasis on spending time with the child in a ludic fashion, playing, listening to music or dancing together. Elia says it's been like this since the child was born, and he recalls being the one to change his daughter's first diaper; since his wife had a C-section during the first period she could not leave the bed, so he took care of

“that little slip of a thing, she was so small, she weighed 2 kilos and a half, and on me, I used to hold her on my arm, she was like this [*smiling he points at some very small thing on his bent arm*], so it was like this since the beginning”. (Elia, 40, daughter aged 1 year and 4 months, journalist)

2.3 “Not very present”: secondary caregivers

Five of my interviewees can be categorized as “not very present”: they do not routinely perform any specific instrumental child care activity, but they participate to at least one task more than once a week. These fathers are all employed full time, so they lack time to dedicate to care, and whether their partners are in or out of employment, they all can be considered as secondary caregivers (Habib, 2012). Nicolò and Fabrizio are part of this group.

Nicolò has a wine shop and a 2-year-old son. He claims that his partner is the main carer, because “she takes care of many crucial aspects” of childcare: she wakes him up, bottle feeds him in the morning, and takes him to the nursery. His parents pick him up in the afternoon and take him to their home, where Nicolò's partner picks him up after work, and Nicolò gets home around 8.30 p.m., so during weekdays his participation to childcare is very marginal, even though he claims that during weekends “things are more balanced, we both take care of him”. He plays with his child right before it is time for him to go to bed; often he arrives home during bath time, and he does not participate since the activity has already started: “often I find him already changing for the bath, so I... I let go, let's say”. Putting the child to sleep is his partner's job, even though for a short period he had taken her place; eventually, though, he had to give up, because his partner suffered from being left out of it. In his case, his partner's great commitment to childcare, a field she does not seem to be willing to share, does not leave much room for him to participate.

Fabrizio is a full-time worker and he commutes every day to a different city, so during weekdays he leaves very early in the morning and comes home around 8 pm. His daughter is 6 months old, and his wife, an employee, has very recently got back to work with shorter hours (breastfeeding allowance) and home working 4 days a week, after expiring her maternity leave and a month of paid vacation. When she is at work outside the home, maternal and paternal grandparents alternate in taking care of the child. Since during weekdays he is outside for long hours, his participation to childcare is marginal; during the evening, he does play a bit with the child, even though he is often tired, and seldom he puts her to sleep, but mainly his wife does; in the last week, they have started taking her together to bed and wait together until she falls asleep. When he is at home during weekends he claims that care is shared; on Saturdays they take turns at taking the baby to the swimming pool, and in that occasion, he washes her alone afterwards, otherwise when both parents are at home they prefer to bathe her together, because of practical reasons. Sometimes he spends time alone with the child, when his wife goes out in the evening, but it seems to be a rare event (“it happened (...) there is no kind of problem”).

2.4 Absent fathers: providers

Four fathers in my sample can be considered “absent”: they do not perform any activity routinely, and they never (or only a few times a year) participate to at least two of the five instrumental childcare tasks. Their marginal involvement in their children’s lives is mostly confined to playing or “spending time” together, defining a role that Habib (2012) reported as the “playmate”. In their accounts, there are no traces of an “interchangeability” of tasks: rather, they often highlight that due to their partners’ “specialization” at performing childcare their own involvement is not necessary. These men not only did not question their involvement in paid work: in some cases, their routines were not influenced at all by the arrival of their children. Their caregiver role can be interpreted as that of the “provider”, mostly focused on breadwinning and delegating care work to their partners, regardless of the level of the women’s participation to the labor market, and to external helpers as well in three cases. The four interviewees are Giorgio, Ivano, Oreste and Graziano.

Giorgio works full time in his family's company and his partner works at the post office. Their son goes to the nursery, and when he's at home he's mostly taken care of by his mother. Giorgio plays with his child and he can participate to childcare if needed: on a day when he was still on vacation and his partner was not, he made milk for his son's breakfast, and let him watch cartoons on Tv, and then they spent the whole morning together; he then made lunch for him and put him to sleep. It was an exceptional event, though, emphasized by the fact that the child's grandmother was present as well, in order to provide help. On average weekdays, he takes his son to the nursery, and he is not afraid to perform childcare tasks if his partner is busy, as he says,

“putting him to sleep, making him eat, it's always her. But if there's... let's say... I have to change him... that she needs me to change him I'll change him, no problem. I can do it, so... at this point I'm not scared of anything [*laughs*]”. (Giorgio, 27, son aged 1 year and 8 months, employee)

His daily routine was not influenced by the birth of his son (which was an unplanned pregnancy in a relationship at an early stage), he keeps going to his football trainings during evenings, so after taking his son to the nursery in the morning there are days when he does not see him until the next day.

Ivano works full time in his family's company and has an 8 months old son who recently started to spend some mornings at a private daycare facility. His partner has got back to work shortly before that, and is currently working part time in the morning. When she's at work and the child does not go to daycare they take advantage of the help of either grandmother. Ivano participates marginally to childcare activities: he feeds the baby sometimes, he tries to put him to sleep, but claims that his partner is so much better at it that it is pointless for him to participate; in fact, during the first 4-5 month of a baby's life, “a father does nothing. Like, zero.” His partner always makes the baby's food, while “whoever is there” feeds him; sometimes he went to the pediatrician, but only when his partner, who in any case keeps in touch with the doctor, was not available. He takes his son to daycare because it's close to his job, and takes him home, just to wait for his partner to get home for lunch, and then he's back

to work. In any case, thanks to daycare and the availability of grandmothers, “we always manage to make things work, (...) no problem”.

Oreste is a self-employed event planner and has a daughter aged 2 years and a half. He works flexible hours, even though at the time of the interview he was working on the biggest event of the year, so his working hours were a standard full time. His participation to child care, to his admission, is very marginal: in his words, since his partner breastfed their child, and still does, “there’s always been a very close bond between her and her mother, so... I always... I’ve always been a support... I tried to be as useful as possible according to their rhythm, their timing”. When he gets home from work they eat together and then they spend some time playing or relaxing on the sofa, then they put the child to bed, but it’s a difficult task, and he is not of help, as he claims, “she always only wants to fall asleep with her mother”. In his words, the theme of the father being only of support is very recurrent, and lately it has become a reason of disagreements with his partner, as he wishes to be more present in his child’s life now that she’s older and can interact.

Graziano works full time while his wife is unemployed; she used to live in a different city, and she left her job in order to move in with him, with the idea of staying at home to take care of their children. They have a 3 years old daughter who attends kindergarten, and Graziano’s wife is basically the sole carer of the child. She takes care of pretty much all the material care, while he describes his participation only in terms of playing or spending time together. He is not competent at all when it comes to childcare, and he also tells me of situations where he gets home tired from work and barely interacts with the child, regretting it the next day. Off the record, while speaking of his experience as father which he admits did not change his habits or did not influence his life a lot, he claims that it is so because his wife is a stay-at-home mother, and if she had worked he would have enjoyed taking a parental leave in order to be more involved in childcare.

3. Breastfeeding, mothering and the negotiation of involvement

Fathering is not constructed in a void; rather, men's involvement in material child care is influenced by several factors, one of the most relevant of which is the relation with mothering (Fox, 2009; Miller, 2011; Naldini, 2016). As already emerged in the last paragraph, structural factors like women's involvement in paid work and cultural notions around gender and parenting contribute to inform fathers' involvement in child care tasks. This paragraph is dedicated to the investigation of the construction of fathering in relation to mothers' care. Do fathers in my sample negotiate their involvement, and how? How do they deal with mothering and its thresholds, one for all breastfeeding?

Most of my interviewees do not question the mothers' predominant role in child care. The most recurrent saying across my sample is "mommy is always mommy", a very common cliché used by many fathers to explain the greater attachment that children express towards their mothers. The picture, though, is more complex than the use of a cliché image suggests.

For half of the interviewees, the origins of a greater attachment of children to their mothers is to be found in the biological fact of pregnancy, which excludes fathers from the construction of a direct, bodily relationship with the child (or, if that relationship is already felt with the unborn child, it is still of a lesser intensity). As it emerges clearly in the following quote, pregnancy is spoken about as what really marks the difference between fathers and mothers:

"it's like he's a second part of herself. So... since she also carried him in her womb, I really think that... that he's part of... of herself, so... she really feels, maybe, that he is hers more than mine" (Giorgio, 27, son aged 1 year and 8 months, employee)

"the ardor and the bond between a mother and a child, just from carrying him in her womb, you know?, I think it's completely different from the more detached relationship that necessarily is built with a dad, with a father. Because it's a piece of, of your body, you know?, that... for a mother, you know?, that at a certain point... separates, and a father can only imagine it (...) I think there's a physical bond that, yes, it's there and it was there, there's a detachment but there's also something that stays

and will stay forever, at least it's how I think of it" (Bruno, 32, daughter aged 2 years and 4 months, municipal officer)

"I think it's different for a woman because a woman... having it, having it in her... in her belly, she probably develops... I mean, she has an extra nine months to develop that relationship (...) I mean, you [women] can feel it move inside your belly, like I used to see my wife stroking her belly, as if the child was already there..." (Ignazio, 35, daughter aged 10 months, employee)

The relationship built during the pregnancy is often, in my interviewees' words, developed through breastfeeding, the "natural" progression of mothering. Pregnancy and breastfeeding often are mentioned together, implicitly constituting the main biological obstacles to a father's understanding of a mother's relationship with a child, and, sometimes, to the men's participation to early childcare (Fox, 2009).

"a mother-child relationship to me is even more complete than a father-child relationship, maybe because a child is born inside... I mean, it forms inside the mother, she gives birth to it, and then there's breastfeeding, I mean there's a physical contact so strong that I think this thing really builds an unbreakable bond that from my point of view, I mean according to the way I am living this difference, it's really stronger than the one with... a father" (Cosimo, 31, son aged 2 years, employee)

In some cases, the "unbreakable" bond built by breastfeeding discourages even those fathers who try to join that relationship by participating to the feeding. Like Saverio told during the focus group, recognizing that his child would not tolerate bottle feeding with formula milk, not because it was "not good", but because it substituted the feeling of breastfeeding, was a relief to him, who was ready to recognize the prominence of his partner's role in feeding their baby.

"when my wife got back to work and she breastfed only at night, in the morning and at night, while in the afternoon the babies needed bottle feeding, my son could not take it- I tried it many times but he would not eat with me, he only ate when his mother was there to breastfeed him, so... we can do anything to take mothers' places but we do

that within what's possible, you know?, so in front of- I remember that I panicked the first time, I said "oh my God, he's not eating", so I went to [shop of baby products] to buy a different brand of formula because I was convinced that was the problem, "yeah, the other one you'll see, he's going to eat it, it's because this one's not good". Actually, the child wanted his mother's boob, end of story. I mean, stupid me thinking- you laugh about these things with hindsight, how could I think that the problem was the brand of formula?! Because it was not mother's milk, but that wasn't the problem either..." (Saverio, 43, twin daughter and son aged 1 year and 3 months, high school teacher; quotation from focus group)

Breastfeeding sounds, in the discourses of most of my interviewees, as an activity that mothers themselves consider relevant for their own experiences of mothering and are not eager to delegate. Not being able to breastfeed means, in some cases, that fathers take over bottle feeding: it is the case of Ignazio, for example, whose wife "did not breastfeed much, because she had issues", and he enjoyed bottle feeding their daughter when she was a newborn. As the child grew, though, things changed, and now that the baby girl is 10 months old, "mostly her mother bottle feeds her. Because it's something that my wife feels, like... basically she has to do it, probably because maybe... I mean, she could not breastfeed as she wished, so probably this is something that helps her". Bottle feeding is not necessarily, nevertheless, something that fathers take up only because mothers cannot breastfeed: it could also be a part of a routinely involvement in childcare, like in the case of Massimiliano. His story makes it clear, though, that crossing the boundary of feeding a newborn child implies the need for a legitimation that not always is readily available: telling me about his day, Massimiliano recalls that

"at a certain point [my child] started to cry and I understood he was hungry, because we can more or less recognize his crying now, like during the first months he had a colic and there we could understand that he was whining about that, now when he cries by and large it's because... he's either very bored, or he's hungry, and in that case I understood that he was hungry, so I took the milk out of the freezer, his mother's expressed milk, defrosted it, put it in a bain-marie, filled the bottle up, and... then I

bottle fed him, with my dad there telling me “what a pretty mommy you are”, *[laughs]* and once he was done I put him down in his cradle, we... had a little talk, smiles, laughter and... ‘la la la, la la la’ *[laughs]* and then... he started whining again, I held him up again and I kept holding him in my arms until he fell asleep on my, he often falls asleep on my chest because he feels my warmth, my heart, at nights as well sometimes I put him on my chest.” (Massimiliano, 45, son aged 2 months, employee)

Massimiliano’s story is uncommon in how he speaks about childcare: he expresses a special competence at recognizing his child’s needs, he describes in detail the actions required for providing care, and he mentions being physically involved in comforting his child. What is most interesting, though, is that he is aware of the fact that he is crossing boundaries with mothering: his father reminded it to him, by calling him a “pretty mommy”. Magaraggia (2012) highlighted the relevance of language for the definition of fathering practices in relation to masculinity. As the author points out, the lack of specific terms to define a “male caregiver” makes fathers who participate to childcare take advantage of an “androgynous” language, as care is invariably attached to femininity. Massimiliano, since his child is too young to interact, but he is very involved in childcare, claims he finds it hard to define himself a father, rather, he thinks of himself as a “male babysitter”. The implication underlying this specification is that a babysitter, or a caregiver, is usually a woman. According to Magaraggia (2012), the diffusion of neologisms such as “mammo” (in Italian, the grammatically male form of “mamma”, mum) describes fathers who share childcare work, and it expresses an ambivalence as on the one hand it evidences a change in fathers’ roles, while on the other it highlights a “continuing discrepancy between changes in fatherhood and masculinity” (ivi, p. 80). Bottle feeding a child represents, especially in the eyes of a father of an older cohort, as Massimiliano case’s show, an “invasion” of a feminine field: for Massimiliano, it meant being called a “pretty mommy”, in a de-masculinizing definition of fathering.

3.1 Specialization and time availability

In some interviewees' (one third of the sample) narratives, a third set of elements concurs to define the specificities of motherhood and, by contrast, to define father's involvement in childcare: specialization, time availability and what can be interpreted as "second shifts" in Hochschild's sense (Hochschild & Machung, 2003). Only a few fathers, though, seem to recognize the fact that these elements are sustained by a social structure based on an underlying gender ideology.

According to some interviewees, indeed, what really makes a difference between mothers and fathers is the amount of work they share, recognizing that women bear a much heavier burden:

"in our routine now Lucia [his partner] is in a situation where she really has a very, very heavy burden of commitments and responsibilities, (...) poor thing, she really breaks her back, (...) I'd say chapeau to her, because you need to be really organized, if you're a working mother" (Lorenzo, 38, twin sons 2 years and 4 months, entrepreneur)

"it's a full-time job, I think it's one of the hardest things in the world, because if a dad does certain things, a mum always doubles it, somehow" (Paolo, 34, son aged 6 months, free-lance photographer)

"sometimes I realize that my wife takes on her the heavier burden of this..." (Saverio, 43, twin daughter and son aged 1 year and 3 months, high school teacher)

Biagio refers to specialization when speaking about parenting practices: "the mother's hand that does a hundred times the same job every day, maybe the child gets less annoyed...". The mother does the same job every day because, in other interviewee's words, she spends more time at home with the child:

"my relationship with the child is... it is lived across the day but on less hours compared to my wife, so... I would say that this contributes to the fact that there's a stronger bond between child and mother" (Zeno, 44, son aged 1 year and 5 months, employee)

“the mother is at home, of course it’s different, in any case... she spends much more time with the child, when the child was little she took much more care of her, so necessarily the relationship is different” (Graziano, 40, daughter aged 3 years, employee)

As Angelo notices, though, it’s a matter of social conventions:

“if Anna [his partner] had a job I could easily take her role of stay-at-home-mum, but then again, it’s not right saying ‘stay-at-home-mum’, I would be a stay-at-home-dad with a working partner, I wouldn’t have any problem not being the provider for the family (...) the society we live in depicts the mother as if... she’s the only one who has to take care of children and I don’t agree with that, nor does my partner, so I don’t think that the mother should be different from the father, but... if across the years society constructed her like that, stay at home, prepare meals, take care of children, in reality it shouldn’t be like that, in my reality it is like that actually but because of... external contingencies, let’s say”. (Angelo, 28, daughter aged 1 year and 4 months, employee)

Carlo and Zeno share Angelo’s blaming on “society”, public discourses around motherhood and structural factors that make it harder for women to conciliate work and family life, but it still seems difficult to disentangle external constraints and stereotypical assumptions on women’s feelings around motherhood:

“well, I think that [my interpretation of mothering and fathering] derives firstly from the society we live in, and what we get as a message through society (...) let’s say that it’s still, while it’s changing a bit, but we come from a society where we could say that fathers didn’t take much care of material child nurturing, so... my saying that there’s a much deeper bond between mother and child than between father and child, besides holding him in her womb, probably I could say that this claim is the product of a conditioning exerted by our society, where until not long ago child care was attributed to mothers and not fathers” (Zeno, 44, son aged 1 year and 5 months, employee)

“[mothering] is all I told you about fathering but multiplied to the nth degree, because (...) society is not equal yet, many things are... then a woman lives it differently, I

don't know, but it is true that there are more burdens placed on women, and I'm telling you, I help a lot with housework, but there are maybe more burdens on her" (Carlo, 47, daughter aged 2 years, municipal officer)

3.2 Co-parenting

In almost all my interviewees' accounts, an overall predominance of mothers in child care seems to emerge, regardless of the intensity of their own involvement in care practices and the reasons for distinguishing mothering and fathering. Predominance does not necessarily mean, though, unicity: across my sample the idea that parenting is a job that requires two workers is very common. The couple as a unitary "block" providing parenting to a child is often interpreted by my interviewees as more relevant than the single contribution of each parent, in an interpretation of co-parenting as the "best practice" for raising children properly: as Ottavio says, "the important thing is that both parents are there". Many fathers speak of reflections at the level of the couple around parenting practices and education goals, so that parenthood seems to be constructed together, in interaction with the partners and negotiating parenting styles and aims. Marco, for example, does not take into account essentialist notions around the "biology" of motherhood in describing fathering and mothering, but rather he speaks of parenting as the product of a negotiation between different educational styles: what matters to him, is that

"we always avoid contradicting each other, even though on the spot in might happen that... I'm not ok with the way she managed a situation, maybe the way she told the child a thing, but on the spot I don't tell her anything... I don't question her authority (...) so sometimes maybe... I do that as well, maybe on the spur of a reprimand you let something slip, you are not a robot, (...) it's human, sometimes you let slip something in a way that is not the right one, but I think the fundamental think is talking about it, we talk about it a lot" (Marco, 36, daughter aged 2 years, middle school teacher)

Similarly, Leonardo says that in defining his and his partner's parenting style "we reasoned as a couple, to be parents projected to... avoiding that things that we found and received

would end with us, but rather perpetuate and transmit them”. Sometimes, though, there could be disagreements on the kind and intensity of fathers’ involvement and educational goals:

“maybe my wife thinks that we should have a prearranged behavior line... well, maybe not really prearranged or stereotyped, of how to behave, but in the end... even though she thinks so we don’t have the time to reason about it *[laughing]* so it’s as it comes... we set some rules, and we try a bit to make, to prevent the child from doing something, try to limit this and that, but let’s say that bonds are limited.

And do you share her opinion?

No. Nah, it’s too much work *[laughs]*” (Ugo, 42, son aged 2 years and 6 months, full professor)

“[my child’s] mother tells me off, she says that I shout, that I speak too harshly to my daughter and I say ‘well, but I’m the father, I mean when I say something I say it with my tone and way’, sometimes I exaggerate, it could be, but if I say that... she has to stay still, or that she has to do something, I tell her with my tone and my voice, she gets scared?, well, I’m her fucking father, I mean, maybe she must get scared and understand that if mom says something it has a tone and a way, if dad says something I have to get scared.” (Oreste, 42, daughter aged 2 years and 6 months, self-employed event planner)

Oreste claims his right to perform what could be interpreted as the traditional role of the father as the disciplinarian (Habib, 2012), a right that his partner is not willing to recognize him. Basing only on his account it is impossible to detect the outcome of this disagreement; still, in his like in other interviewees’ accounts, mothers seem to have, if not the last word in defining “proper” parenting practices, the “first” word in defining the boundaries of father’s involvement (Fox, 2009). As Massimiliano puts it, it is often a matter of mothers letting fathers in:

“[between mother and child] there’s a different feeling. She’s not making me feel bad about it, meaning she’s very open, she’s not like ‘I’m holding him now, I have him in my arms, you’ll wait’, not at all, on this... many mums do that unfortunately, they’re

very possessive (...) mothers, as I was saying before, unfortunately, because of social convention have more time available... fathers have much less time, so [between mothers and children] there's a particular bond, then it's up to the mom to decide to, to be able to avoid excluding dad, instead trying to involve him as much as possible". (Massimiliano, 45, son aged 2 months, employee)

In Vincenzo's words, for example, a sort of "maternal gatekeeping" (Hauser, 2012) emerges: he speaks of a sacredness of the mother's figure, even though he cannot recount any gender specificities in parenting between his partner and him, and claims that "my partner finds it hard, she finds it very hard to leave the child a whole night alone with me". Participation has to be, in some cases, actively negotiated, not always with a successful outcome. Nicolò, for example, tells me, seemingly without resentment, about how he was pushed out of his child's sleep time:

"we started [one night] because Mara [his partner] was sick, so (...) I tried with Mara's method, of holding his hand and staying close to him until he falls asleep, but in that period we had a problem, that during the night he would wake up and look for the hand, then really it was enough for Mara to reach him and touch him and he would fall asleep again, but this could happen three or four times a night, it became tiring. So that night I used this method, he wouldn't fall asleep so at a certain point I decided to tell him: 'listen, you have to sleepy-bye, now sleep, I am right there, don't worry, if you want you can call me, but now close your eyes and sleep'. He replied: 'yes!' and [laughs] he took his teddy bear and lied down, then of course he called me, 'dad, dad,!' I went back, 'tell me, what is it?', he said gibberish, 'sleep', 'yes, so now you sleep, I'll see you tomorrow, I love you, bye, bye', I left, at the third time he fell asleep and slept the whole night." (Nicolò, 40, son aged 2 years, shop owner)

Eventually, though, he had to give up putting his son to sleep, because his partner suffered from being left out of it. She tried his method, but it didn't suit her, because she felt like she was abandoning him; so, she went back to her way, "in fact she excluded me", says Nicolò, even though he is keen on making clear that it's just fine for him. In his words, it seems that taking that specific practice away from his partner, even though it proved successful, would

have been unfair to her perceived relationship between the child and herself. In this case, though, it seems that an aspect of what could be thought of as the “best for the child”, a good night’s sleep, has been sacrificed to a mother’s unwillingness to delegate part of child care to her partner.

The opposite case is Paolo’s: he is a free-lance photographer and the father of a 6 months old boy; his partner is a self-employed graphic designer, so she was entitled only to the compulsory maternity leave, and she is currently unemployed. In chapter 3, his story has been described as one of the very few cases in which becoming a father meant to go through great changes in his life. Due to the fact the Paolo’s working hours are flexible and self-organized, and he can also work from home, childcare is shared between the partners. During the nights, when the baby wakes up several times, they both get up: Paolo gets up, “I pick him up, cradle him, take him to bed, try to make him fall asleep, take her to Nicoletta [his partner], then back to his bed... it works this way”; they go together shopping for the baby, they share diaper changing and food preparing, and he takes him to the swimming pool in order to relieve his partner for a few hours. This is a crucial theme in Paolo’s story, as his partner suffered from post-partum depression, and he had to step in and take care of their baby because Nicoletta felt so tired and overwhelmed that she could not do anything besides breastfeeding. The very experience of breastfeeding was also negative for her: in his words, “it ruined her breast, and she was so tired, she only wanted to sleep, so I tried to take him outside as much as possible, and even the changing I tried to do that as much as possible, I mean, I tried to take the burden off her”. He is a very participative carer, and he took also the responsibility of managing medical check-ups because his partner due to her depression was unable to put her energy in mothering. In a way, Paolo was “pulled into” childcare by the specific circumstance of his partner’s unwillingness to be fully involved in material care. Interestingly, he tells me that he started therapy in order to find a solution for his and his partner’s situation, and the therapist suggested that he should step back a bit, because “normally fathers leave home in the morning and get back in the evening”. According to Paolo’s therapist, his presence could be a deterrent for his partner’s possibility to recognize herself as the main carer. Expert knowledge, in this case, seems to promote a view of

parenting roles that aim at pushing out the father's care in order to make room for the mother's involvement. The negotiation of paternal participation to childcare, in Paolo's case, is opposite: his partner is not setting boundaries for his involvement, rather she is delegating care work to her partner. The "abnormality" of this situation is clearly highlighted by Paolo's therapist's suggestion. After all, it seems that the predominance of mothering can very hardly be questioned, at different levels: at the level of couple interaction, and at the level of cultural representations of motherhood, as they are conveyed both by institutions by means of conciliation policies, and by experts by means of constructions of acceptable levels of involvement for mothers and fathers.

4. Bodies and boundaries

If the boundaries set by mothering are hard to cross, there are other boundaries that challenge first time fathers: those set by their own bodies. The involvement of bodies is one of the most relevant features of "new" fatherhood, and, as highlighted in chapter 1, some scholars have placed in men's availability to bodily contact with children hopes for an ongoing change in the ways masculinity is performed and gender relations are interpreted. As Ranson (2015) pointed out, material child care work is made of a set of bodily practices, therefore fathering implies engaging in physical contact with children. Physical closeness and bodily involvement seem to make a difference in fathering and in the construction of fatherhood as well. Here, a connection between fathering practices and acknowledgement of fatherhood can be detected in the relevance ascribed to bodily contact and the expression of physical affection in the construction of a father's identity. Across the interviews, care practices and physical contact were declined in three different ways. There were interviews where material child care was spoken about, but physical contact was not; in others, both child care and physical contact found space in fathers' narratives, but did not overlap; finally, another group of interviewees talked about care practices and physical contact together. In this latter case, bodily contacts between father and child are described as laden with emotional and affective contents.

It is interesting to cross these different discourses around care and bodies with the typology of involvement constructed above. The following table shows the intersections between participation to child care and how physical contact is spoken about in relation to care. Here, I distinguished interviewees who described their participation to care work without explicitly mentioning physical contact; others who spoke about child care activities and expressions of affection through bodily contact without overlapping the two discourses; and finally, fathers who, in telling about their involvement in care practices, added narratives of physical closeness laden with affective meaning.

Table 5. Care and physical closeness

	Very present	Present	Not very present	Absent
Care but not physical closeness	Angelo; Dario; Ugo;	Cosimo; Emilio; Fabio; Marco; Saverio; Bruno;	Biagio; Ottavio;	Ivano; Oreste; Graziano
Care and physical closeness separately	Leonardo; Nunzio	Lorenzo; Carlo; Tancredi; Demetrio;	Pietro	Giorgio;
Care and physical closeness together	Paolo; Rodolfo; Vincenzo; Zeno; Ignazio; Massimiliano; Raimondo	Armando; Elia;	Nicolò; Fabrizio;	

The picture looks quite composite, but it is interesting to note a recurrence: on the one hand, most “very present” fathers speak of care and physical closeness and contact in ways that overlap, and only a minority do not mention the involvement of bodies; on the other, most “absent” father, on the opposite, do not speak of bodily contact at all. It might seem at first look, then, that physical closeness is a relevant feature of an interpretation of “involved” fatherhood based on routinely participation to child care tasks. Another interpretation could be that, considering the fact that when childcare practices, experiences of physical closeness and emotional involvement are part of the same narrations, fathers are more likely to be “very present” to care work, a higher degree of participation to material child care could lead to the construction of an affective bond with the child that men are more likely to express through bodily contact.

Almost half of my sample (14/33) speaks about material child care but does not explicitly mention physical closeness. As noted, a few “vey present” fathers are in this cluster as well, but most of the “absent” fathers leave bodily contact out of their accounts of fathering; their accounts of care practices, as described in paragraph 1, are just as scarce, as they are only marginally involved in childcare.

For some others (8/33), both material care practices and physical closeness find room in narratives around fathering but do not overlap: it is the case of Carlo and Lorenzo. They both are part of the group of “present” fathers, and in their words, they both sound very fond of physical closeness, but this is declined as something separated from child care practices. Carlo is a municipal police officer, working shifts, and is married to a factory worker who works full time; they have a 2-year-old daughter who attends a nursery during the day, and they have no help from relatives. He picks the child up at the nursery and takes care of her until his wife comes home from work; describing a typical day, he talks of taking care of the child in terms of “playing” or running errands together, but he claims that the routine care work is shared equally, saying that “washing her, feeding her, no, whoever is there does it”, even though he is not very good at food preparing, because he can only make simple things, and only his wife can put the child to sleep. Carlo explains this with the fact that his wife breastfed their child until she was one year and a half old, and due to this habit now “she

really does not want to go to sleep with me”, but he thinks it will change as she grows up and loses the habit. A compromise, which he enjoys very much, is going all three together in the big bed: they play all together for a while, until the baby falls asleep and then they move her to her bed. He finds it very difficult to convey all the emotion that being a father raises in him, and he tells me so more than once; it is clear though that he enjoys spending time with his daughter very much, and he finds it natural to perform some activities in order to make the house a safe place for his daughter. For example, he tells me that when he works the early morning shift, starting at 5, as soon as he comes back, instead of going to sleep, like he used to do before his child was born, he washes the floor, so that when his daughter comes home she can play on a clean floor. He says that when his daughter hugs him it’s like an adult hug; she gives him kisses, sometimes they are on the big bed and she says, “come on, let’s hug” and she hugs him. Even though expressing emotions is something he finds very hard, these episodes of physical closeness with his child find a relevant place in his account.

Lorenzo, instead, speaks of himself as a very emotional, sensitive and even “moody” person: when he found out about the pregnancy he was so happy that he cried. He speaks of child care with competence, even though he participates only to some routine activities because of his deep commitment to his job. His greater concern is providing to his children an emotionally serene environment in which to develop, and he believes that showing them love and affection is the first step towards this aim. He looks for reciprocal affection, and demonstrations of love make him feel like a dad: in his words,

“I try to give them a lot of affection, also at the physical level (...) the children look for you at the emotional level, they ask for physical contact, now... one of the twins is more easy-going, the other is more hardheaded, but still, the easy-going twin comes to me sometimes, he tells me ‘dad, I love you’, eh... the other one tells me that in my ear sometimes... and those things make me feel like a dad”. (Lorenzo, 38, twin sons 2 years and 4 months, entrepreneur)

For others (11/33), narratives of childcare activities are accompanied by the relevance of a physical contact that represents the relationship with the child and the affective load that characterizes it. As noted above, this characteristic is more likely to be found in fathers

sensibly involved in routine child care. Vincenzo and Armando are good examples: Vincenzo is a “very present” father, and for him becoming a parent has been an experience loaded with emotional meanings. In telling me about his day, he says that

“sometimes it happens to me in the morning for example, to wake up with some anxieties because of... work, and... I hear my child calling me and... it’s like, it’s like a shock running through me, shaking my anxieties off, (...) he shakes me, he urges me, he mobilizes me, he calls me to contact, he calls me to... affection, and I hold him in my arms, he’s still warm from the night, you know?, like that... and he leans all against me, and I really feel these anxieties melt down, you know?” (Vincenzo, 48, son aged 2 years and 5 months, associate professor)

Similarly, Armando, who is “present” in childcare, speaks about it in terms that make clear the affective meaning he attaches to physical contact expressed through care practices:

“changing diapers, it’s something that I... always enjoyed doing, meaning... bathing her, or (...) spreading cream on her, yes, I like it... I enjoy doing it, it’s not, I mean, it’s a relationship... it’s something that, lets’ say... she’s there, still, she cannot escape and it’s a moment when... you know, I take a mental picture of her, of her phases” (Armando, 41, daughter aged 2 years and 4 months, self-employed electrician)

Vincenzo and Armando have different educational backgrounds, and therefore different cultural instruments, so they resort to different words, but they mean the same thing: the relevance of physical contact embedded in care practices for the construction of a relationship with their children.

It is interesting to note that the said relevance of physical contact seems to make a difference in how fatherhood is interpreted. Among the fathers who attach an affective value to childcare, fatherhood is more likely to be considered as something aimed at building a relationship: for Paolo, for example, being a father means

“to share something with someone new, everything I will be able to, everything I will manage to (...) it’s the idea of doing everything with him, and being in contact with

someone that will discover anything for the first time, and he will make you discover those same things again”. (Paolo, 34, son aged 6 months, free-lance photographer)

Nicolò elaborates on this thought: to him, being a father means

“being more than one. Like, it’s not only me anymore. I know that he will always be there, and it will be us forever, even though when at 18 he will tell me ‘well, see you dad, I’m leaving’, I still know that we will never be apart, that in any case that thing will be there forever. And this is something strong.” (Nicolò, 40, son aged 2 years, shop owner)

Fathers who do not speak of physical closeness, and can be considered as “absent” fathers according to their involvement in child care, instead, tend to interpret fatherhood mainly as a reason for personal fulfillment and self-realization. Oreste, for example, feels that becoming a father means to realize the most important thing in life:

“how do I feel? Eh, I feel... a man at last. The circle is closed. (...) it’s an important piece of my life that was missing and I’m happy that it’s here now, because I feel that... I’m extremizing it... I feel that I could be run over by a train tomorrow, it wouldn’t matter, I’ve done the important things of life.” (Oreste, 42, daughter aged 2 years and 6 months, self-employed event planner)

Graziano expresses the same feeling: “I feel happy, very happy, [fatherhood] is something that I would do all over again, for sure, and... it’s something that after all has completed me.”

Those who speak less of a bodily involvement tend also to be more satisfied about their way of fathering, or to justify their flaws with greater conviction, even when only marginally participating to care. In Giorgio’s account, for example, who mentioned “cuddling” his child once during the interview and is classified as “absent”, and in Ivano’s interview as well, there are no traces of a reflection on their own fathering, and they both sound happy with their new life as fathers and the (low) level of their involvement. They do not express specific aims they are tending to as parents, and when imagining future interaction with their children they usually focus on sports or ludic activities in general.

The interviewees who, instead, give affective value to the physical closeness expressed in material care tend to be more reflexive about their parenting skills, to provide more detailed descriptions of care practices and to compare their own practices with their partners', not to express a complaint about being the secondary carer, but to highlight their own competence or the complementarity of their practices. Rodolfo and Zeno are good examples: both "very present", they both intertwine narratives of childcare practices with bodily contact and affection, and they both carve out a place for themselves in parenting. Rodolfo is employed in a firm and has a 2-year-old daughter; at the time of the interview, his partner was pregnant with their second child. His daughter goes to the nursery, as his wife went back to work full time when the baby was around 7 or 8 months old, and since then the child's grandparents started to help as well, at least in picking her up at the nursery in the afternoon. During those first months, then, Rodolfo was less present in his daughter's life: he claims that the child was very close to her mother, so

"she enjoyed being with her mom, being cuddled by her mom, she would sleep only with her mom, eat only with her mom... then growing up she became much more... open towards me, she really changed her personality, it's a different thing now".

He participates to care when he gets home from work, and occasionally he leaves work earlier to meet specific needs, like taking the child to the doctor. In the morning, he is the one taking care of the child: he brings her hot milk in bed (she's a little "spoiled"), gets her up, takes her to the bathroom, gets her ready, changes her diaper, gets her dressed, and then his wife takes her to the nursery. When he gets home from work, the baby is already home with her mother: he spends time with her while his wife prepares dinner, sometimes even while helping his partner; after dinner they play together, "messing up the house a bit", then around 9.15 it's bed time. Putting the baby to sleep is something they take turns in doing, because they both have, in his words, "pros and cons": his wife has more patience for cradling and rocking the child, while he enjoys singing lullabies to her. His wife usually tries to put her to sleep first, which is a difficult task; if she does not succeed, Rodolfo takes his turn: he cradles his baby and sings her lullabies, which she loves, and it takes around half an hour to get her asleep. He and his wife are committed to provide rules and habits to their daughter:

“we try to have dinner quite early because we want her to follow a bit of a schedule, so at nine, nine fifteen going to bed (...) we have dinner rigorously all together to give her the habit of being all together around the table, and we always try to all eat the same things, so that whatever is on the table she needs to get used to eat it”. (Rodolfo, 31, daughter aged 2 years, employee)

While he and his partner seem to have set some educational goals, he still claims that “anyways, sometimes as a parent you ask yourself, ‘am I doing the right thing or is this wrong?’”.

Zeno, on his part, speaks of routine care practices diffusely and with notable details, and both physical contact and reflection on child’s needs and parenting abilities find great space in his narratives, filled with terms typical of “baby talk”, like *din-dins* for food and *sleepy-bye* for sleep:

“we are trying to make him understand that when he has *din-dins* he has to stay on his high chair, and... very often it happens that he is fussy when he’s sitting there, he doesn’t want to eat, so... quite often we take him, I do more often than my wife, I take him, I hold him in my arms and feed him while holding him, and actually he eats more willingly like that (...) when I got back home from work (...) I got changed... and most of the times at that point I pick him up in my arms and I take him... or I take him by the hand and he follows me while I change my shoes in the other room, or I take off sweater and shirt and he follows me, because we have noticed that otherwise he starts to cry a bit, or to be moody if I get home, say hi to him, and then, even just for the time of getting changed, I... abandon him a bit, so I take him with me (...) then I prepared dinner, around 19.45, and he stayed here with me, he had his toy pots, or in any case he was here in the kitchen with me while I was making *din-dins* for him, then he ate, and... the dinner lasted a bit longer because in the last days he’s not eating... he has always eaten vegetables, but in the last times he is eating... less vegetables, he’s finding it harder to eat vegetables, so *din-dins* took a bit longer than usual (...) after he spent some time here with us at a certain point we picked him up, my wife picked him up because he started to be annoyed, because he was starting to feel sleepy, he was in that

phase when he wanted to fall asleep but he couldn't, so we finished dinner while my wife was holding him, actually we didn't really finish, we decided to move to the other room and start to change him, washing, everything, and get him ready for *sleepy-bye*. Then... we sprayed- because he is having a bit of a cold, we sprayed his ears, and we moved him to the bedroom, put him in his bed and tried to make him fall asleep. We usually try to put him in his bed, spend some time there with him, and then go away step by step, while keeping talking to him, and try to make him fall asleep by himself and not with our presence there, yes, he has a puppet in his bed and he sleeps with that, he hugs it, we noticed that during the night he looks for it, holds it, during his sleep.”
(Zeno, 44, son aged 1 year and 5 months, employee)

Zeno has been committed to doing a good job as a parent since his wife's pregnancy, during which he read a book and looked for information about children's development on the internet. He often expresses doubt about his parenting practices, like the described feeding the child while holding him in his arms:

“it is not perfectly right because he should learn that he has din-dins on his high chair, or in any case din-dins is circumscribed to a specific moment, a specific situation, place and everything, and instead I understand that by holding him all the time I'm not helping him, meaning that I'm kind of *[laughs]* putting him in a crisis, so yes, maybe I'm giving him more contact than he really needs.”

According to interview data, bodily involvement seems to assume relevance in defining fathering practices and the meaning men attach to them. Expressing affective attachment through the performance of material care, and a recognizable investment in the latter, might seem a manifestation of “caring” masculinity (Elliott, 2016). Physical closeness is still, though, a controversial theme when proposed in a male homosocial environment. Other researches have pointed out how the experience of the focus group represents a protected setting that could make men recognize the room for making visible practices of intimacy with children that question some traditional boundaries of masculinity, like the relationship with one's own body and emotions through a contact with someone else (Bertone et al., 2016; Connell, 1995). On the other hand, speaking about men's bodies in discourses around

children and child care can open doors on discursive rooms that, as so seldom visited, may cast doubts that deal with the “appropriateness” of a certain level of physical intimacy, doubts that have to do with hegemonic constructions of masculinity that imply sexual aggressiveness and the integrity of bodily boundaries. During the focus group discussion, bodily contact and its relationship with fathers’ involvement in child care has been introduced by one of the participants, Raimondo, in what sounded like the request for a legitimation:

Raimondo: I wanted to ask you, do you have baths or showers, naked, with your children?

Oreste: yes, yes

Saverio: yes

Raimondo: even though it’s a girl? Even though she looks at your wiener?

Oreste: looks at it?! She always wants to play with it...

Saverio: that’s right! I have risked several times to... *[mimics a strong pull]*

Oreste: what do you have to do?!

Rodolfo: they try to hang to it sometimes

Saverio: that’s right

Raimondo: no, I do that too, but...

Saverio: it’s something that probably our fathers didn’t do (...)

Oreste: she almost hurts me sometimes, ‘stop playing!’, she’s there keeping on... laughing, playing, what the fuck do you have to do? At that point...

Raimondo: and doesn’t it occur to you the doubt, whether it is healthy to...

Saverio: yes, yes, it occurs to me, it occurred to me

Oreste: no, I had the doubt about, understanding what kind of reaction my child’s mother could have, but she... didn’t have a reaction, she had the same reaction I had, so I thought ok, as long as we are both serene...

Rodolfo: we take showers together, my daughter and I, but maybe- I used to take showers with my dad

Raimondo: that’s beautiful

Rodolfo: and my wife used to take showers with her mother, when we were children, like 8 or 9, so my wife was never against it, the opposite, ‘take a shower together so you make it faster, please’ *[laughter]*

Saverio: that’s right, it’s always a matter of necessities in the end

Rodolfo: it’s necessities, not a problem *[laughter]* mostly necessities

Oreste: ‘oh, so you’re taking a bath? Here, take her’

Rodolfo: you make it faster, two for the price of one and problem solved

Oreste: ‘so you can do her hair too’

This discussion seemed to mark the breaking of two boundaries: a first boundary is that of men’s bodies, that can, apparently, be engaged in intimate contacts with children, contacts that imply reciprocal nudity. A second boundary is that of legitimate discourses in homosocial interactions: speaking with other men about showering with daughters who hang to their penises is possible. These discourses, though, need to be justified and their weight downplayed, firstly by recurring to humor, and secondly referring to mothers’ roles in allowing that kind of contact. During the focus group, Raimondo tried to give also a different meaning to this kind of intimate physical contact, but his account was received by other participants as not relatable:

“the first time I had a bath with my daughter it was to comfort her because it was her first day at the nursery, and she was really upset by it, so to do something different, she was like ‘daddy comes in the bath too!’, but she was very little, so that was, that thing was to feel close, you know?, because she was so upset...” (Raimondo, 41, daughter aged 2 years, self-employed in communications; quotation from focus group)

In what has been received as an even less relatable narrative, Raimondo explained how his feel for physical closeness with his child was hard to accept in his family environment:

“**Raimondo:** for example, I remember stroking my daughter in order for her to enjoy it, you know?, not just, but really make her feel... *[mimics a caress]* and my sister-in-

law was shocked, how to say... well, Italian men don't have the best reputation abroad, like, a pedophile, you know?

Oreste: ah, really like that?

Raimondo: I gave her lovely caress, like... I will make you feel a shiver, things, and my daughter is very affective, my daughter wins everyone over, she's very physical as well, but I'm like that as well, she took it from me, (...) and that will be her gift, and I think it is right to explain to her, you know?, in due time, bodily pleasures, you know?, physical contact, these are things that... you have to transmit, to teach, I think, so that you don't find yourself in situations..."

Raimondo experienced what Doucet (2006) interpreted as a consequence of the domination of women in childcare: men's embodiment can be interpreted as potentially aggressive and sexually threatening, especially when acted out in public. The author argues that if material care practices that imply physical contact can "neglect" gender specificities in the private sphere, as single care activities are not gendered in themselves, bodily closeness between men and children can be subject to suspicion and surveillance in the public sphere. In Raimondo's case, caressing his daughter at the presence of his sister-in-law put him under a gaze that made this controversy emerge; the absence of comments on the other participants' part signaled a lack of available discourses to oppose to it. Masculinity and embodiment in relation to child care seem thus to be in a complex relationship: if, on the one hand, hands-on care makes way for a revision of the boundaries of fathers' involvement, on the other the meanings culturally attached to the male body, of aggressiveness and sexual potency, may hinder a full legitimation of men's physical involvement with their children.

5. Concluding thoughts

As emerged from the categorization proposed in the first paragraph, the fathers in my sample are more involved in routinely childcare activities than average Italian men (Mencarini & Solera, 2016); looking more closely at their narratives of care practices, it becomes clear that other elements occur in defining the boundaries of fathers' participation to child care. Time

availability is called into question by most men in my sample, even those who perform what could be defined a “fair” share of care activities in their routine family life. What appears to play the most important role, though, is mothering. Mothers represent, in these fathers’ words, the bearer of true knowledge and competence that stems from the natural, universal and ahistorical experience of motherhood; through the involvement of their bodies in the processes related to child birth and rearing, women acquire, at the men’s eyes, the indisputable right to a special relationship with the baby, and an undeniable ability at fulfilling his or her needs. To some fathers, this representation of motherhood as overwhelming is a justification for a marginal involvement in care, and for an understanding of fatherhood that does not necessarily imply practical fathering; to others, it means a threshold hard to cross, even if attempts are made. Negotiation of participation to care and notions of co-parenting always move from the recognition of a maternal primacy during the first years of a child’s life. Still, fathers seem more and more eager to question, if not the boundaries set by mothers’ care, those set by their own bodies. Narratives of physical intimacy and affection expressed in material care practices find room in my interviewees’ accounts, and discourses that question the inviolability of men’s bodies were proposed during the focus group. In that occasion, though, some strategies were enacted to downplay the “un-masculinizing” effect of discussing such a delicate topic, like humor and irony (Bertone et al., 2016; Ferrero Camoletto & Bertone, 2016), and a lack of instruments to address the level of criticality of understandings of masculinity and bodily contact emerged clearly. If, then, the observation of a notable level of participation to routinely care work and the emergence of narratives of physical intimacy make the concept of “caring masculinity” (Elliott, 2016) timidly express its potential, the permanence of essentialist views on mothering and of hegemonic representations of male bodies complicate the picture.

CHAPTER 5

Images of fatherhood

“I mean, if I have to see it as an advertising spot, it’s made to sell a product and it tells you a nice story with a nice music and nice images”

1. Introduction

Fatherhood is constructed in the public discourse by means of cultural representations, and the mass media play an important part in constructing and spreading such representations (Lupton & Barclay, 1997). In this chapter, I explore mass media representations, and in particular advertisement representations, of fatherhood on the one hand, and the relevance that these representations hold for the construction of fathers’ identities on the other. How are fathers portrayed on the media? Do fathers rely on media depictions of fatherhood? How do they position themselves towards such depictions?

The following paragraph is dedicated to a literature review of representations of fathers in the media.

While the production and reproduction of gender role stereotypes in mass media have been the object of many researches overtime (see among others: Goffman, 1987; Bretl & Cantor, 1988; Coltrane & Adams, 1997; Garst & Bodenhausen, 1997; Ganahl, Prinsen, & Netzley, 2003; Scharrer et al., 2006; for Italy: Capecchi, 2006), the specific figure of the father and its representation received to date scarce attention; the few researches published are very recent, and mostly – with few exceptions - circumscribed to the United States. Recent publications signal a starting point for academic interest on the theme, but available research on the representations of fathers in the media is quite little. The following overview of the literature on the theme is based on a distinction between the information media and general print on

the one hand, and audiovisual media content on the other. The latter will be further divided into films, sit-coms and Tv shows on one side, or media products providing recognizable and stable characters and narrations, and television commercials on the other. The analysis will then focus on television commercials, as their peculiar pervasive and capillary content, whose details go mostly unnoticed, carry a concentrate of stereotypical meanings and norms, sometimes even conflicting¹⁸. The interest of this focus lies in the observed uncertainty and “fluidity” (Lupton & Barclay, 1997; Miller, 2011) of the paternal figure, about which it has been observed a discrepancy between “culture and conduct” (Dermott, 2008), and the investigation of which is the aim of this research.

An analysis of representations of fathers’ figures in television advertisements shown in the Italian context will then be proposed, opening way for a reflection on how representations are perceived and interpreted by fathers themselves. To the aim of investigating the latter issue, the last paragraphs are dedicated to the presentation of empirical data from interviews and a focus group, aimed at understanding whether, and to what extent, Italian fathers take into consideration media depictions of fatherhood for the construction of their own parenting.

2. Representation of fathers in the media: a literature review

2.1 Press and news

The representation of various issues related to fatherhood in the news media has been investigated for example by Douglas Vavrus (2002), who examined television news treatments of stay-at-home dads (re-baptized in the American popular culture as “Mr. Mom”) during the late 1990s, claiming that such news accounts represent a challenge to traditional

¹⁸ This decision necessarily excludes from the investigation other forms of media communication, such as public campaigns aimed at conveying a social message, and social media networks for “many-to-many” communication. These - and other - forms of communication contribute to compose the panorama of media content that involve fathers and propose images of fatherhood. In Italy, for example, a media campaign named “Padri Coraggiosi” (“Brave Fathers”) was launched in Bologna in 2007 to promote active and involved fatherhood. Online spaces, on the other hand, have been taken in consideration in other countries (Fletcher & StGeorge, 2011) as important opportunities for confrontation and mutual support between fathers. In the economy of this research project, these kinds of media content have not been included in the investigation.

masculine identities depicted in media. The author argues that “Mr. Moms” - as they are represented in television news programs in the USA - legitimate domesticity and nurturance as an acceptable part of masculinity, challenging some traditional notions about men and at the same time strengthening the connection between these men, who actively take on activities normally ascribed to the “feminine”, and heterosexuality, therefore legitimating nurturance and domesticity inside a “proper” masculine identity, which then seems to assume characteristics of “hybridity” (Demetriou, 2001).

On the other hand, almost 25 years later and in a completely different part of the world, an overall negative representation of fathers as mere providers has been observed by Chauke and Khunou (2014) in the South African newspapers, which, according to the authors, make large use of shaming discourses addressed to fathers who fail on their providing role, lacking nonetheless critical accounts for socio-economic challenges experienced by South African fathers, and overtly aligning to a traditional conceiving of the father’s role as a mere provider.

Parenting magazines have been a recent object of study: Schmitz (2016) provided a content analysis of the construction of fatherhood in this specific media product, analyzing 50 articles from five American parenting magazines. The author’s research questions were on how fatherhood is conceptualized in popular print media, and what stereotypes associated with masculinity and parenting are reinforced or deconstructed in these magazines. The content analysis let three main themes emerge: most articles were “negotiating breadwinner stereotypes”; some were “coming to terms with ambiguity and uncertainty”, and others, a minority, were “navigating the path to fatherhood”. Overall, the author claimed how the depiction of fathers fell into categories that supported hegemonic masculinity emphasizing men’s breadwinning identities over their parenting role: a discourse very similar to the South African one.

The specific depiction of the relationship between fathers and children has been looked at by Flannery Quinn (2009) in American picture books for children. Firstly, the author researched, among best-selling picture books, those that featured fathers as prominent parents and with a significant role in the story, and found only four over a total of 200 titles. Secondly, he performed a semiotic analysis of the images and text in two picture books selected among

those four, using the concept of myth and looking for signs and symbols of fatherhood present in books for children. The author revealed connotations related to the roles of fathers as masculine, protective, nurturing and playful, with an interesting observation of the moon, recurrent symbol related to fatherhood, which may be “distant, yet tangible” (Ivi, p.154).

2.2 Films, sit-coms and Tv shows

Audiovisual media products, namely films and television shows, are another channel of diffusion of discourses regarding fatherhood. An example of an analysis of the representation of the father figure in cinema is Jordan’s (2009) comment on Oliver Stone’s “Wall Street” (1987), in which the author recognizes the “good” and “bad” father personas depicted in the film and interprets them as arguments seeking to persuade the audience about the moral implications of the father-son relationship.

Sit-coms are a very popular media product, which transmit an immediate content related to everyday life, often set in family context and with a humorous tone of voice. As such, they have been the field of investigation of the representation of father’s figures by Pehlke and colleagues (2009), who performed a qualitative analysis of 12 sit-coms aired in the 2004 fall season on US networks with the aim of describing the ways in which fathering and fatherhood were portrayed, identifying meanings related to fathering and noting similarities and differences occurring across programs. The authors looked at three themes: the various ways in which fathers interact with children; how fathers of varying racial/ethnic groups and socioeconomic status were depicted; and the negative messages regarding fathering. Among the first theme, three subthemes emerged from the analysis: spending quality time, emotion-based interaction and teaching life lessons. As for the second, the authors underlined that working-class fathers were a minority among the sample, but in all but one instances of foolish behavior, it was attributed to them. The third theme pointed out an interesting issue: even considering the comedy nature of the shows, which emphasizes mistakes and misunderstandings for the sake of humor, the main idea conveyed was that fathers are somewhat incompetent in their roles. More recently, Troilo (2015) analyzed quantitatively father-child interactions on Americans sit-coms, individuating 699 interactions across 10 situation comedies and attempting at testing four hypotheses, based on literature about the

study of race, class and marital status of television characters, which may be so summarized: black and Hispanic/ middle class/ non-married fathers have more positive interaction with their children than Caucasian/ working class/ married fathers, and certain television channel convey more positive relationships than others. With a statistical analysis based on three codes of father-child interaction, namely “involved with children”, “friendly and fun” and “caustic and critical”, the author found out that while race or ethnicity did not matter as for the quality of the relationship, class and marital status did, with middle class non-married fathers performing better (a result that Troilo finds consistent with research on “real” fathers), and that certain networks were more committed to positive depictions of father-child relationships than others.

An important audience study on this issue, concentrating on the relationship between the representation of fatherhood in television content and expectant first-time parents’ beliefs about parental roles, is the one conducted by Kuo and Ward (2016). These authors, by means of an online survey submitted to a sample of 201 individuals from across the USA expecting their first biological child in a cohabiting heterosexual relationship, investigated the influence of television content on the construction of parents’ ideals on child nurturing and mothers’ and fathers’ roles. The survey was aimed at assessing weekly Tv exposure, exposure to Tv programs featuring fathers, perceived realism of Tv, use of Tv to learn about the world, and beliefs about both fathers’ importance to child development and family gender roles. The sample was composed of both women and men, and the authors’ results showed that attributing more realism to Tv content predicted more traditional gender family role beliefs and ideas that fathers are less important to child development across the whole sample. Furthermore, even among men with a low perception on realism in television content, a greater exposure to television’s father figures was linked with weaker beliefs that fathers were important to child development. These results provide interesting insights on how media may shape beliefs about parental roles among men and women who face a transition to parenthood, especially about fatherhood, because, as the authors remark, “women’s roles as mothers are more clearly prescribed in American society than are men’s roles as fathers”

(Ivi, p. 360), and therefore fathers-to-be might be more likely to be vulnerable to media messages about father roles.

2.3 Television commercials

The representation of fatherhood in Tv commercials has been the object of very little research, even though “as a powerful cultural institution, advertising defines and shapes social identity, particularly gender identity” (Sunny Tsai & Shumow, 2011, p. 38). In Tsai and Shumow’s (2011) words, “therefore, it is imperative to continuously and systematically examine gender representations in advertising to gauge how market-mediated gender roles and the related ideologies of masculinity and femininity have or have not changed over time within our society” (Ivi, p. 38). The authors performed a content analysis of American prime-time commercials focusing on representations of male domesticity, with the idea that understanding how men are represented in advertising is crucial for understanding how marketers conceptualize contemporary gender roles and family dynamics, and how these representations impact male viewers’ interpretation of gender roles in the family. Framing their analysis on Lamb’s (2000) now classic conceptualization of fathers’ involvement, namely based on engagement, responsibility and accessibility, the authors took into consideration a sample of American commercials shown during prime time on three major networks and three specific channels, directed respectively to a male, female and very young audience; networks’ prime time broadcasting has been recorded from Monday to Saturday over two weeks of October 2008.

What they could observe is that in American advertisements, men are frequently depicted only in background and marginal roles in the family context, and they are much less likely than women to be shown performing domestic chores and childcare activities, especially without the presence of their wives. When fathers are depicted, they usually show lower involvement with their children, and they are predominately shown playing with them instead of being responsible for childcare duties. The coding of the commercials has been based on Gayle Kaufmann’s (1999) study of the portrayal of men in family roles on television

advertisements. Kaufmann performed a content analysis of commercials aired during specific broadcasting slots, such as football matches, daytime and prime time, focusing on isolating male characters, and in so doing individuating 944 characters, mostly middle-class, non-Hispanic whites. The author coded the commercials based on five dimensions: family, product type, setting, housework task performed and activities with the children. Crossing these dimensions with the features of the male characters and with the airing time, her most interesting results on the side of men's interaction with children were that men without spouses are more likely to be shown with boys and less likely to be shown with infants than women without spouses; furthermore, men are infrequently shown taking care of a child and never shown caring for girls, but they are often shown teaching, reading, talking, eating, and playing with children. Her conclusions were that "to the extent that men are shown as more involved in family life, they still tend to depend largely on knowledge and activities that are stereotypically male" (Kaufmann, 1999, p. 439).

3. Italian Tv commercials and fatherhood: a qualitative content analysis

3.1 Sample and method

In order to gain an understanding of how fatherhood is represented in Italian television, in an observed lack of references in the literature for the Italian context, I chose to analyze a few television commercials featuring fathers, drawing from cited literature underlining the importance of advertisements in contributing to building and reproducing stereotypes and even normative behaviors. I built a convenience sample of 15 advertisements spots shown in the Italian context, produced between 2012 and 2016, whose main parameter of inclusion was the depiction of a father with some sort of recognizable interaction with his child or children. The advertisement spots have been selected through a search on the internet, both on the search engine Google and on the social platform for video content YouTube, of the Italian expressions "spot papà", "spot tv papà", "spot padri", "spot tv padri", "pubblicità papà" and "pubblicità padri". The reason for this selection choice laid in the necessity, inherent the research design of my project, of obtaining a digital copy of the videos to show

as stimulus during the focus group discussion. In order to be considered as a television advertisement, the video had to feature a recognizable commercial brand.

Of course, due to the size and the characteristics of the sample, this analysis does not aim to give an extensive and insightful depiction of the representation of fatherhood in Italian television, but it is a starting point for a reflection on how popular culture – and, in this case, commercial and marketing discourse – gives a contribution to the image on the place of fathers in the family.

For the analysis of the commercials I took inspiration from Kaufman's work (1999), to which I added, based on a reflection made by Scharrer and colleagues (2006), the perception of a humorous spirit conveyed by the television spot¹⁹. Each of Kaufmann's dimensions could take different values: in the "family" dimension, the male central figure was coded based on the presence or absence of a partner and a child or children, in which case the gender and age of the children was coded as well; in my case, the presence of a child was a precondition for the inclusion of the commercial in the sample. The "product type" could be body products (health, hygiene, cleansing or clothing), car-related products, child related products (diapers, baby food, medicine, toys or other devices), computers/electronics, financial/insurance, food, home products (related to housework or maintenance) and generic "other". "Setting" could be inside home, outside at home (in a yard or porch) or away from home, and "activities with children" included child care (material nurturing and supervising children), teach (including reading and talking), eat and play. I did not take into consideration Kaufmann's coded dimension of "housework activities" since it was not my aim here to look at male participation in domestic work. The result of this coding applied to my sample of commercials has been the construction of a typology, which I will present in the next

¹⁹ Scharrer et al. (2006) performed a content analysis on a sample of 477 commercials aired during prime time which depicted housework, with the aim of exploring not just the distribution of chores but also the success or failure of chore performance. Among their main findings, the authors observed that the "male characters' performance of chores was often humorously inept as measured by negative responses from others, lack of success, and unsatisfactory outcomes." (Ivi, p. 215) The humor attached to men's failure at performing activities related to domesticity has the potential of reinforcing traditional gender roles, by suggesting that men are not suited to household chores and at the same time avoiding any kind of stigma on their inability to perform them.

paragraph, also with the methodological aim, in the economy of my research project, of defining the stimulus to propose to the participant to the focus group I organized.

3.2 Types

Observing recurrences in the content of the considered dimensions, I could distinguish four different types of fathers (and fathering), which I am describing in more details below. Across the sample, four commercials featured couples – rather than fathers with no spouse - with infant children and promoted child-related products; three, on the other hand, showed elderly fathers with grown children. In three of them fathers and young children were related by an interaction based on teaching, and the remaining five saw either fathers or couples dealing with children in a humorous or light-hearted fashion. In contrast with previous research (Tsai & Shumow, 2011), though, a father-child interaction based on play has not been found to be particularly relevant in my sample of commercials. Similarly, the variables “setting” and “type of product” did not systematically prove useful for the construction of the typology.

The following table synthesizes in a typology the most relevant dimensions for the categorization of television commercials: the presence or absence of a mother figure, child’s age, and the father-child interaction showed, either based on childcare, teaching or an interaction either absent or not ascribable to any specific type. A detailed description of the contents of the four types here individuated will follow.

Table 6. Typology of fathers in Italian television commercials.

	MOTHER PRESENT	MOTHER ABSENT/ NOT PROMINENT	
Activities with children	Child’s age		
	Infant	Young child/ teenager	Adult
Childcare	<i>Mommy’s little helper</i>		
Teach		<i>Father knows best</i>	
Other/none		<i>Family guy</i>	<i>My old man</i>

Legenda: humorous situations

3.2.1 “Mommy’s little helper”

First of all, I identified in my sample four advertisement spots promoting only child related products, featuring infant children, and in three cases out of four a couple of young parents. The setting of the commercials is in two cases inside home and in the other two it is mixed, away from home with outside, and away from home with inside; in this latter case, the father portrayed is not related to the child, who is shown only in company of a woman, but rather a testimonial from the sports world presenting himself as a “dad” suggesting the best kind of artificial milk for newborns. None of these advertisements features a single father with an infant child: a woman is always present, and in charge of most direct contacts and nurturing of the infant child; the father-child interaction shown is in two cases a mix of childcare and play or eat, in a third case is a-specific (the father is shown carrying an empty stroller while the mother carries the baby) and in the last case, as anticipated, there is no direct interaction. In most cases, the situations shown are not humorous, but rather attempt at stimulating feelings of sweetness and emotional closeness.

In a 2015 Pampers brand commercial, not related to specific products but rather aimed at promoting the firm by means of emotional evocations, we see a young couple taking home their newborn daughter, and the advertisement follows them across her first years of life, showing different situations. In the first scene they are taking her home, carefully climbing together the stairs carrying her in the stroller; then, sleepless nights (where only the mother is up); her first birthday, the baby sitting in her father’s lap in front of a cake with a single candle on it which she cannot put out, so daddy does it for her behind her back, while her mother cheers her up; the father building a toy house in the garden and proudly showing it to his daughter, but hiding his injured fingers; mother and child sleeping in the big bed, and daddy uncomfortably squeezing in the child’s; on Christmas Eve, dad freezing outside the home in the snow while mum and baby read a book together, dressed as Santa, waiting for the right moment to make his appearance; finally, the child is a little older, and dad is sleeping on the couch, but his blanket fell aside. His daughter sees it passing, and puts it back to cover him, because “the eyes may distract, but the heart remembers everything, because the heart knows that often the biggest love is the one unseen”.

A second advertisement is a Mellin (baby food) spot aired in 2016, in which a mother lightheartedly complains about how hard it is to make a toddler eat properly, and claims she is doing her best: fairly enough, in the next scene we see the child tossing food in his father's face, who laughing says that it is not easy at all. But mommy will not give up, and thanks to her ally, Mellin's artificial milk, weaning the baby will be a piece of cake. The closing scene shows, in a heart-shaped frame, the whole family: the mother holding the baby, and an older child sitting in the father's lap.

The third is a 2015 Chicco (a prominent Italian firm for products related to infancy) commercial, in which a young couple deals with a newborn child, taking him or her home from the hospital in a special Chicco three-in-one stroller, shuttle and child seat. The father is rather accessory, shown in the first scene carrying the shuttle in the way out of the hospital, and in a final scene bringing luggage to the car where the mother is loading the stroller, ready for the holidays. The only scene of direct interaction with the child, being put in the child seat in the car, sees the mother dealing with the baby.

Finally, a 2016 Aptamil – a brand of artificial milk – commercial shows, as anticipated, a testimonial presenting himself as the daddy of two girls. He is presented in his professional environment, a swimming pool, and does not interact with the child shown, who is first swimming in a pool with a woman, and then is being fed by the same woman in a home setting, while the testimonial describes the importance of making the right choices when it comes to a baby's wellbeing, especially in the nutritional field.

In all these situations, the father is never the prominent parent, but rather he takes an auxiliary role in the care of the infant child; he is mostly shown helping the mother out with child care or participating to the most ludic aspects of the interaction with a small son or daughter.

3.2.2 “Father knows best”

In the second type I could find three spots featuring older children, ranging from primary school age to early adolescents, either boy or girl, and showing an interaction only with fathers, with no spouse (mother) around. The content of the interaction is mainly of a

pedagogic nature, therefore all falling in the “teach” category, in one case mixed with childcare. The setting is in all cases inside home, with one of the commercials showing also part of the narration happening away from home, and all advertisements show house related products or food. Humor is not a specific feature of these spots, but they all are rather light-hearted.

In a 2013 advertisement of an Ikea led lamp, the main character is a little girl at bed time: her father looks at her falling asleep and he switches off the light, but once he closes the door we see her jumping off the bed and lighting her led torch to keep playing while saving electricity, as she judiciously reassures the audience: “dad says it’s the light of the future!”. As soon as she hears her father coming back, she turns off the torch and rushes back to bed, pulling the blanket right while dad opens the door: we know he caught her, but he closes the door again with a light, indulgent smile.

A second spot is a 2015 commercial for Leroy Merlin, a do-it-yourself products firm, showing a man with a teenage son, whom he catches while he is clumsily attempting at shaving in the home bathroom, leaving it untidy. The man then goes to a Leroy Merlin shop, he asks the salesperson how to build a new sink, and once he returns home he sets a double washbasin. His son notices with surprise, even perplexity, and the final scene shows father and son shaving together, in a sort of a silent barbering lesson, each on his washbasin.

The last is a Barilla advertisement aired in 2016, featuring a well-known Italian actor, here playing a single father of an early teenage girl in a series of spots for Barilla pasta and sauces. In one of these spots we see him at home in a rainy day, waiting for his daughter coming home from a match that she lost, and the disappointed girl complains at her overestimation of her skills, saying “I thought I was the best...”. The father is then facing the opportunity for a life lesson, which he attempts at giving with some uncertainties, claiming that “even the best can improve”: it is the case of the new pasta, and in clumsily trying to describe its novelty, he manages to cheer his daughter up, and maybe reassures her self-esteem by letting her find the words that he was looking for.

All these situations point out the educational relevance of the father role, who, with no need of a woman around, can pass his knowledge to his – growing up – child.

3.2.3 “Family guy”

The third type is the most composite, with different kinds of interactions father-child, often a-specific, featuring the presence of a spouse in some cases and their absence in others, and promoting different kinds of products, from body to car related products, to food. The gender of children varies, while in all cases sons and daughters are of primary school age. A recurrent characteristic of these commercials is a humorous situation, in which dad does his best to participate to family life. I counted five spots in this category.

The first is a 2012 spot for Iodosan, a pharmaceutical brand: the mother is absent, and it is the father’s job to get the kids ready for school, but the symptoms of a cold make the task more difficult for him, and he performs it with negligence, attracting the disappointed gaze of his mis-groomed daughter. The advertised product, though, assures a quick recovery, so much so that in the final scene the happy and neat kids rush out of the house to go to school, their father cheerfully urging them, while the claim says: “you can go back to being a dad”.

Secondly, a 2015 Volkswagen spot shows various everyday life scenes related to the use of the new car, featuring different family members. In the first one, a father sticks his small kid in the back seat, fastening his seat belt. In the second, a different father recovers his now useless tablet in the water basin where his little daughter is playing, with a resigned look. In the third, a mother driving the car suffers, apparently with goodwill, the death metal musical background chosen by her teenage son and friends. In a fourth scene, a clumsy (or mischievous?) little boy mows the flowers bouquet his father prepared, closing it in the car’s door, with no consequences, as his father makes a “it does not matter” gesture. In the last one, mother driving and father in the front seat, with blond ice-cream equipped boy and girl sitting in the back, the spectator watches a scene of little family revenges: the boy rubs his ice cream on his sister’s face, and his mother, as a reaction, suddenly accelerates, causing the

boy's ice cream to spread on his face this time, for the daughter's happiness and the hilarity of the whole family. Claim: "family evolves: so do cars".

Two Kinder commercials also fall in this category: the first, aired in 2015, shows at the same time an interview to son and daughter on one side, and to dad on the other, to whom the narrator asks some questions regarding the father's role in the house, obviously receiving opposite or contrasting answers, for the sake of comedy. The only thing father and children agree on is Kinder's chocolate bar, which they happily eat together in the closing scene. In the second, dating 2016 and slightly more emotion-laden, we see a family of father, mother and young son dealing with an adopted little Asian girl, whom they initiate to Italian breakfast, made of coffee with milk and a Kinder brioche, which, as the father shows, must be dipped in the milk. The girl imitates him while her eyes ask for confirmation, and they all laugh as she drops some milk on her chin.

Finally, a 2016 advertisement of Segafredo, a coffee brand, features a father woken in the early morning by his baby daughter crying, whom he goes to comfort – "gently" kicked off the bed by the mother, unwilling to get up – and carry in their big bed. Now up and awake, he goes to the kitchen and makes the breakfast coffee for his partner. A male narrator, impersonating coffee, accompanies all his actions, inciting him to perform everyday care activities almost in humorously military terms, with more or less veiled references to a traditional masculinity, made of challenges to be faced with honor, and glory coming, in this case, from being part of a family.

3.2.4 "My old man"

Finally, I could distinguish 3 Tv spots in which the main adult character is not a father, but rather a son or a daughter, with an elder father. The product types are food in one case and the other two fall in the "other" category; one of the commercials is set inside home, while the setting varies in the other two across the advertisement; none of them has a humorous

fashion. In these cases, the commercials tell a story of deep feelings hardly expressed, showing barely any interaction between the elder fathers and their grown children.

The first is an advertising of the mobile communication company Wind, aired in 2014 and lasting a non-standard 4 minutes. The main character, an adult man, has long ago left his family and country of origin to build his own family abroad, where he is shown in the first scenes, but he wishes to restore the relationship with his father. Between present day scenes leading the spectator from interrupted attempts at finding phone or e-mail contact to the decision he takes of visiting his parents, and flashbacks showing the main character's childhood episodes of time spent with his father (always in a ludic fashion) and his adolescence carrying misunderstandings and arguments, we get to the final scene, in which he finds his father in his habit of swimming in the small beach beneath their family house, and joins him as he would have done as a child, thus taking on a conversation interrupted long before.

Another, very similar, advertisement aired by the energy supply company Enel in 2012, shows an elder father, a factory worker close to retirement, telling the story of his life of sacrifice, made with the aim, implicitly expressed, of providing his son a career by letting him study in University. The spot is composed of a series of scenes commented by the main character himself, describing his hard work in the factory with no holidays but also his pride in showing his son's picture and his wish for a deeper communication with him, studying far away, and the final scene sees his proud and quietly excited participation to his son's graduation.

The third spot I added to this category is a very short advertisement of the tomato sauce Mutti, showing an adult woman cooking pasta with a special sauce and then bringing it to the table where her father is sitting, together with a card saying: "Dad and I dinner menu". The father reads it and smiles at this daughter with a pleasantly surprised look, while the narrator describes the product and quotes the roman poet Trilussa: "all in all, happiness is a little thing".

In all these commercials, the story told is that of some sort of distance between elder fathers and their adult sons, due to them being physically parted or unable to communicate for different reasons, and the only spot with a woman shows her cooking for her father, in a quite accurate representation of the gender roles in the Italian family, especially for the elder men's generation. The interaction shown is very feeble, and emotions are hardly expressed in person, but rather lie in the background of the relationship.

4. Discussion: images of fatherhood

The construction of the types of commercials and the description of the different spots opens way to a discussion on the representation of fathers in Italian television. Overall, it could be noticed that, indeed, the depictions collected cover a wide range of possible ways of fathering: from the “old style” of providing without “being there”, to the playful interaction with little kids, from teaching life lessons to teenagers to lovingly caring – together with mothers – for small children. As Tsai and Shumow (2011) pointed out, “instead of being portrayed as authoritative patriarchs, [men] are more likely to appear as nurturant fathers who enjoy spending time and having fun with their children during play or recreational activities” (Ivi, p. 44). A closer look, though, is needed for a deeper reflection on the ways the father's role is thought and expressed in television; in particular, the attention will be focused on two of the types, namely *Mommy's little helper* and *father knows best*. The reason for this focus lies in the specific characteristics of these two types, which allow for a reflection on the discourse around child care and fathering.

Mommy's little helper collects commercials of child related products, featuring infants and conveying an atmosphere of tenderness and sweetness; the interesting point is, though, that they never show fathers dealing alone with small children, but rather the presence of the mother is always prominent. This observation is consistent with Kaufmann's (1999) results, underlying how men with no spouse are generally less likely than women to be shown alone with an infant; in my sample of commercials, no “single” fathers are depicted with small children. Similarly, Tsai and Shumow (2011) pointed out that, in their sample of

advertisements, no men are shown with infants; when children are present, men are more likely to be accompanied by their spouses as well, as it happens in 85,2% of cases, and by contrast women are equally likely to be shown with or without spouses when dealing with their children, “suggesting that mothers are often the primary or the sole parents responsible for most childcare duties” (Ivi, p. 43).

On the other hand, the type I called *Father knows best* excludes the figure of the mother, showing fathers dealing alone with kids learning things about life, be it taking care of the planet’s health, dealing with disappointment or simply growing up. Again, a consistency with Kaufmann’s (1999) study can be traced, as according to the author men with no spouse are more likely than women to be shown alone with young children, and much more likely to be displayed teaching or reading to a child: 29% of men in the author’s sample of commercials is shown teaching or reading to a young child or teenager compared to 10% of women, and more frequently to daughters rather than sons (Kaufmann, 1999, p. 453).

In my opinion, this few but relevant characteristics are crucial for a reproduction of a in a way “traditional” model of the father-child relationship, notwithstanding the importance of showing men contributing to caring for infants and participating to their children’s lives. Overall, indeed, it seems that a “path” of paternal involvement along their children’s growth is proposed. When their sons and daughters are infants, fathers are encouraged to look after them, taking interest in the accessories they need, feeding them, cuddling them and participating to their important moments, but they do not seem to be able to take care of them alone. A woman is always present in these settings, and she is presented as the main caregiver, probably the most competent, with a precedence over her partner when it comes to material care and its management. On the contrary, as the children grow, the fathers seem to be able to carve out their space alone with them, and this space is usually filled up with an interaction based on teaching. The commercials showing fathers alone with young children are all connoted by some sort of transmission of knowledge, be it awareness on the health of the planet, growing up as a boy or learning important lessons around defeat and victory. In these situations, men do not need the help of a partner, and, even with some uncertainties, they are able to perform their role, which looks, more “traditionally”, committed to be an

educator and a model, with the aim of socializing children to becoming aware and decent citizens.

As Tsai and Shumow (2011) pointed out in the conclusions to their work, though, “stereotypical male portrayals may be out of touch with the reality of many male consumers” (Ivi, p. 45). In the next two paragraphs, I will attempt at exploring this issue, presenting results from interviews and focus groups discussions around the depictions of fathers in the media.

5. Father’s experiences and the media

In the last section of the interview schedule, participants were asked if they could recall any representation of father figures on television commercials or the media in general, without specific prompts. According to their answers, the men in my sample do not take television spots in great consideration for their reflection on themselves as fathers. During the interview, ten fathers could not recall any kind of representation of fathers in television; in some cases, this was because television was not present in their everyday life, or, when present, was dedicated to children’s entertainment: in Oreste’s words, “nowadays television is not of our interest- the remote control is no longer in our possession, now we turn the Tv on only to let our daughter watch cartoons”.

Discourses of those who did have in mind some kinds of depiction of fathers in the media, instead, make a very composite picture.

5.1 Advertisements and fathers’ involvement

Depictions of fathers in television commercials are interpreted in different and even opposite ways by my interviewees, a result that highlights the complexity of the issue of media representations and their reception. A common and recurrent theme, though, was the outlining of fathers’ involvement in care.

For few, fathers are represented as negative figures in television spots: this “negativity”, though, could manifest itself in different forms. Angelo, for example, distances himself from the television model of family:

“I grew up with a television that constructs the family with a father that is either strict or... some kind of couldn’t-give-a-damn... doing nothing at home, smoking his cigar and reading the newspaper or watching the news”. (Angelo, 28, daughter aged 16 months, employee in a shop)

This “traditional” model, though, is no longer commonly depicted in commercials and other media products: what other interviewees do not appreciate of television fathers is, indeed, the exact opposite – his loss of authority and recognized ability. Vincenzo, who is a media expert, finds

“very irritating this tendency to turn the father in some kind of... ill-grown child that is somehow... compared to the children, often subject to reprobation by a wife who instead is... super-efficient, super active, and I notice this quite often, I mean, since I am a father I notice this even more that... I don’t know, an image that perfectly synthetizes this tendency is the Wüber sausages commercial, where they are all throwing themselves, the kids and the father who looks like a perfect idiot, they all throw themselves, in slow motion, on these... giant sausages... well, let’s say that, for Heaven’s sake, it is fair that there’s been a downsizing of the father’s figure, and that... the patriarchal structure has been questioned, but from that to depicting mothers who are always nervous, hyperactive, and fathers who are easygoing and in the end they just want to enjoy their kids, I think this is, you know...” (Vincenzo, 48, son aged 2 years and 5 months, associate professor)

Demetrio agrees on the fact that “basically in advertisements the father is an idiot. The common stereotype.” The same view is shared by Armando, who compares this depiction to his own personal experience, distancing himself from it but highlighting the fact that some fathers are incompetent about care:

“sometimes I laugh because they... they are represented like, dads who are a disaster at changing diapers or feeding, and... that makes me smile, because... (...) I started from the first diaper, and... I’m very manual, so like... since the beginning when she [his daughter] had a colic, I always had- I mean, she always had her dad’s smell, so for me being represented like the one who does not know how to handle a baby is not... it’s not truthful, it makes me smile, but... I understand that there can be some less present fathers, there are those who don’t want to change diapers, there are those who don’t want to feed din-dins because... they’re not able, they have no patience, so... it’s like that” (Armando, 41, daughter aged 2 years and 4 months, electrician)

Graziano agrees, and nevertheless, since he is but marginally involved in childcare, recognizes himself in this representation:

“let’s see... if I have to think... yes, the example I see the most on television I think it is that, the father is always depicted as the dolt one, rather than not, so... which is... which I can agree on, I mean let’s say that I can relate to that as well, yes, I can relate to it. Actually... when there’s something to do... like changing the child, or... actually... let’s say that the father looks like the least... at least, in my case, I am the least acquainted and less expert, yes”. (Graziano, 40, daughter aged 3 years, employee)

On the opposite, ideas that fathers are represented positively in television advertisements are very uncommon and mostly related mainly to public discourse representation of “new” families rather than actual depictions seen on television: Leonardo, for example, who claims he and his partner do not watch much television, imagines that

“the representation of the typical family... I don’t think it changed much in the last years, if not for presenting maybe families that are a bit different than usual, which is sacrosanct and perfectly fine, so there will be families with two mums, with two dads...”. (Leonardo, 45, daughter aged 1 year and 6 months, academic researcher)

Similarly, Raimondo “does not think” that fathers are ill-depicted, “like the father who doesn’t do a thing”, but he has not watched television for years now: his deduction is based

on a general discourse that fathers are detaching from the traditional model. This is not necessarily received positively: as Fabio says,

“in the last years it’s like... you know, we are... men and women are equal, and so, go dad with the stroller, go with the bottle, go with this, go with that, they behave a bit like mothers too, you know?”. (Fabio, 34, daughter age 1 year and 3 months, sales agent)

What most of the interviewees convey in their discourses is a sense that television commercials that depict fathers are based on stereotypical images to which it is impossible to relate, for different reasons. For some, it is because the men in advertisement represent an ideal model of perfection that is far from “real” fathers’ experiences, and comparing oneself to them means to inevitably fail, like Ugo says:

“it’s absolute crap, like, all stereotyped, stuff like that, that in the end, it has a... shameless commercial aim, the father must be handsome, young, strong, rich, spectacular, powerful, muscular, with a physique... provide safety... of all kind, physical, economic, like, like it’s a model... this media model is clearly... it corresponds to the realization of the fact that anyone is a loser, like...

It’s impossible to correspond to that model?

It’s impossible, I mean if the ideal father is Brad Pitt then we’re all dogs [*laughs*] (...) the ideal father is a Hollywood star, spectacular, always perfect, well dressed, with five kids, (...) and I would like to see them at home, if they play with their children, change their diapers, but yes, the ideal is... like for everything else, light years far from reality, it makes no sense to look for inspiration in what you see, otherwise we would really all be on the verge of failure, or even more, way over failure. Embedded in failure.” (Ugo, 42, son aged 2 years and 6 months, full professor)

In Ugo’s words, it seems that the depiction of the successful male does not match with an understanding of “involved” fatherhood. The image evoked by Ugo can be ascribed to hegemonic features of masculinity (Connell, 1995), like physical prowess, economic success and the ability to provide “safety”, both physical and economic. This depiction, though, is

looked at not only as an impossible standard to reach, but also as an image far from the everyday challenges of a “real” father, who deals with the “home” and “changing diapers”. When representations of fatherhood, like in this case, are criticized, the problematic depiction is not specifically of a father, but rather of a man. What Ugo suggests is that masculinity and fatherhood do not seem to be compatible in the stereotypical portraits available in television commercials: it is an “either-or” choice. Other interviewees agree on a criticism of the “perfection” of media images, claiming that what commercials do not show is the “messiness” of everyday family life:

“I would not count on advertisements... you know, the family that meets for breakfast, on a perfectly clean tablecloth... that doesn’t happen, the perfect dad in a suit, handsome, freshly shaved, no, I don’t... I don’t even consider them” (Saverio, 43, twin daughter and son aged 1 year and 3 months, high school teacher)

“in advertisements maybe... some dads, always handsome [*laughs*] but those are advertisements, it’s all... all full of light, very clean, that’s it, this impresses me, while in reality it’s all full of poo and pee [*laughs*] (...) it’s totally distorted. All clean, all beautiful, daddies with bottles, all shiny and... it’s not like that.” (Massimiliano, 45, son aged 2 months, employee)

A group of fathers, instead, expresses criticism on the rhetoric on the emotional emphasis put on parenthood in advertisement and the tendency to show a stereotypical “idyllic picture”:

“in advertisements you always see the moment... I don’t know, the tenderness moment, all quite forced, and... yeah, I see a lot of rhetoric, and rhetoric in these things for me is... like, it does not annoy me, because it rolls right off my back, but... there are images that... (...) advertisements are there just to show the happy family, the same old story, I mean, we grew up with Mulino Bianco, we know these things...” (Nicolò, 40, son aged 2 years, shop owner)

“I happened to see some spots, and it always looks like something... idyllic, you know?, like in Mulino Bianco commercials, where the father is tired, you know?, and he slips... before reaching the coffee cup, or crawls around the house, it still all looks idyllic, in advertisements I think there’s this thing that everything is always... wonderful and perfect, which absolutely... is not. It’s a view influenced by an archaic notion of family, that is really omnipresent everywhere, everywhere.” (Paolo, 34, son aged 6 months, free-lance photographer)

“yeah, well, the same old bullshit of... Findus or Mulino Bianco, let’s say that television... I don’t watch that television, so this ‘happy family’ thing...

You never happened to compare yourself to these images?

No, but because I never... I never happened to compare myself to any advertisement stereotype, neither the athlete who puts deodorant on in the locker room wearing a towel, *[laughs]* nor the father... I mean, I don’t have those models, that’s it.

They look far from reality for you?

Yeah, absolutely- I mean, it’s obviously a stereotyped image of something... like the Findus thing that showed the gay couple, I don’t know if you remember that, what to say... they play- they have no other instruments, I think, I mean they speak to a generic audience, in 20 seconds, and that’s what they can do” (Elia, 40, daughter aged 1 year and 4 months, journalist)

The complexity of the picture of media discourse on fatherhood, which in some cases seems to send contradictory messages, is evident in how for some interviewees fatherhood is depicted as something easier than it really is, while for others, on the opposite, it looks harder than the real experience. Giorgio and Ivano convey the former feeling, in saying that fathers look excessively competent in childcare, ready and condescending, but, as Ivano says,

“they are always shown smiling, always ready, knowing everything, always... but no, I don’t think so, (...) the woman has an extra gear on this, that’s for sure, it’s for sure”. (Ivano, 32, son aged 8 months, employee)

Ottavio, on the contrary, does not believe that fathers' participation to everyday care tasks should be thought of as something "heroic". Indeed,

"Sometimes these dads seem like superheroes, (...) but instead it's natural things that a dad should do, I mean, it's normal that a dad takes care of a child too, and not only the mum, indeed, changing his diapers, cleaning him, feeding him, so in some cases it seems like they're doing... super things, like superheroes, but instead I think it's the nature, so... yeah, I see things like that sometimes." (Ottavio, 44, son aged 2 years and 6 months, factory worker)

5.2 Depictions of "good" and "bad" fathers

If advertisements raise – contrasting - opinions and interpretations specifically on the representation of fathers' involvement in child care, the depictions that the interviewees detect in other media products are more likely to suggest reflections, instead, on what it means to be a "good" father. When asked whether they could recall any media representations of fathers, some men in my sample referred to other audiovisual products than advertisements: sit-coms, films, reality shows, talk shows and in one case cartoons. These media contents were often used, in the interviewees' accounts, as a starting point for a reflection on what their own models could be, and on what it meant for them to be "good" parents. Unlike advertisements, which in many of my interviewees' narratives do not constitute a reference point for reflection on one's own behavior, fathers represented in other forms of media entertainment could represent a term of comparison for their own parenting.

Cosimo, for example, recalled seeing a scene of an American sit-com that raised his criticism on how the situation was handled:

"the only thing that comes to my mind, I remember some time ago we were watching this series named Modern Family, and... in that episode the family father... (...) the father and his son were trying to fix... a boiler I think it was, something like that, and they asked the grandfather for help, let's say, you know?, and... they were there all together fixing this boiler and at a certain point the father started fighting with the

grandfather, you know?, and this thing stroke me because, indeed, they started arguing like that in front of the child, you know?, so that thing stroke me and I thought ‘well, maybe it could have been handled differently, not arguing there or at least arguing later- at a different time and place’”. (Cosimo, 31, son aged 2 years, employee)

In this case, “good parenting”, defined by difference, is composed of a concern for protecting the child from situations of conflict. Many interviewees, when reflecting on their own parenting skills and educational aims, mentioned their efforts in avoiding fights and quarrels in front of the children, in order to preserve their emotional stability. In Cosimo’s words, the depiction of a conflictual situation, even if presented in a sit-com and therefore with a light-hearted spirit, is immediately received as a negative representation of family relationships, something to distance oneself from.

Reality shows are another source of criticized representations of fathering. Saverio, watching an episode of an Italian reality show based on baby-sitting and education, learned what a dad should not do:

“fathers do not look good in these shows. But in general, all parents do not look good, because... especially dads, because that’s it, what impressed me, is that they don’t play with their children. They don’t play with them. And instead I think this is fundamental. It’s true that it’s a sacrifice sometimes, but you have to play with the children. That’s it, these shows taught me what I must not do, actually”. (Saverio, 43, twin daughter and son aged 1 year and 3 months, high school teacher)

Similarly, Angelo comments on a different reality show, in which a mother was parted from her family for a week, and the father had to be the main carer of their children for that time:

“they wanted to convey this- I read articles about it as well, this effect that... leaving the kids with dad, dad is a bit of a loser, he messes up, but he still can manage because in the end we’re all good and happy (...) let’s say I liked the idea but not the implementation... well, in the end at least we’re talking about fatherhood” (Angelo, 28, daughter aged 16 months, employee in a shop)

Overall, if on the one hand fathers are starting to make an appearance in television shows dedicated to parenting, on the other hand the specificities of the involvement they show – they do not participate to their children’s games, they are not competent enough despite their good will - does not represent some interviewees’ views on what fatherhood “really” is or should be.

The way fatherhood is talked about bothers Rodolfo as well, who blames Italian talk shows for being a bad model for parents:

“classic talk show, they show celebrity dads, celebrity mums, (...) it’s an extremely distorted vision of being a parent. Like... what something could seem an effort if showed in tv for a normal parent is not, or... many times in television the experience of a parent is not correctly represented, I mean, it’s either extremized, it seems like being a parent is an impossible thing, and becoming a parent is a crazy effort, pregnancy, birth and after, or on the contrary it seems a piece of cake, really, something so easy that you can face it with all serenity... I don’t think that’s the point, and then, every pregnancy, every delivery, every motherhood or fatherhood is faced differently, and television cannot represent all situations, (...) I don’t think television is a good model for parents, it’s the grandparents, (...) they are the ones who teach you how to parent, or friends and colleagues (...) I don’t approve television as- the impression they give of parents in television, I really don’t like it, I prefer real life”. (Rodolfo, 31, daughter aged 2 years, employee)

Overall, these kinds of media content seem to be taken into account as a negative point of reference, models to detach from rather than draw on. Films, on the other hand, represent a more composite group of contents that fathers can rely on, and usually depictions of fathers proposed by the cinema are considered more positively, as they can show in more depth the implications of what being a father means. As Demetrio says,

“I’ve seen many films where the father- many nuances, you see the perfect father and the worst one, but even the worst father has a pinch of... love and... righteousness. And at the same time even the best father has a pinch of error, for God’s sake, there’s

no perfect father, a perfect father cannot be created: you have to be right according to the situation in my opinion, so... it's very hard in a film, because a film takes those 120 minutes of your life and it tries to convey everything and some more" (Demetrio, 34, son aged 1 year and 6 months, employee)

The same variety of father figures in films is recalled by Fabrizio, who seems to find more relatable the image of the "imperfect" father, who does his best to make up for his flaws:

"yeah, in movies, there's everything and some more, from the contrived dad to the... divorced dad who tries his best... the dad who maybe cannot see his children, the detached, the super busy dad, and... there's a bit of everything (...) I used to see myself in the... not in the couldn't-care-less dad, maybe in the dad who's immersed in his job but in the end, I don't know, there was a... I don't remember, different films, like in the end he did everything he could to try to make up for it, like that, not like the perfect father, the present one- nor even the authoritarian father, that one maybe you don't recognize yourself in..." (Fabrizio, 34, daughter aged 6 months, manager)

This feeling is conveyed also by Bruno, who uses a different media content, and specifically the anti-heroic main character of a cartoon, to make a comparison with his own "imperfect" fatherhood, sounding self-condescending and mocking:

"right now, I can think of Homer Simpson, you know? And often I think I am Homer Simpson. In my indolence, in my difficulty, in... you know? In a very... prosaic, maybe too much so, approach, you know?, you can recognize yourself in him, that's it, they really provide an intelligent cross section... I mean, the figure of Homer Simpson really is representative of what we might potentially become." (Bruno, 32, daughter aged 2 years and 4 months, municipal officer)

It seems that discourses around "good" fatherhood, as they are stimulated by a comparison with fictional or stereotyped characters, resonate with those emerged in chapter 3: a unique model of good parenthood does not exist, nor does a universal goal to reach as parents and a

single path to reach it, but rather what matters is “doing one’s best”. Unlike advertisements, unanimously assessed as too far from reality, these other kinds of media representations are sometimes interpreted by the interviewees not as sources of inspiration, but as terms of comparison, and often reassuring, as they either show a “negative” model of fathers’ involvement or they point out how fatherhood is varied, nuanced and complex, and “perfect” fathers are nowhere to be found.

6. Discussing Tv spots

Data collected with the interviews show a composite picture of representations of fathers on the one hand, and of interpretations of those representations on the other. In order to gain further insights on how men receive media depictions of fatherhood, I organized a focus group discussion during which two television advertisements were showed to the participants. The spots chosen as stimulus were picked from two of the types described earlier in this chapter: “mommy’s little helper” and “father knows best”. As already noted (*supra*, par. 4), these two groups of advertisement are of particular interest in how they seem to show a “path” of fathers’ involvement in their children’s lives: secondary or assistant caregivers (Habib, 2012) when children are infants, and prominent educators and points of reference as their children grow and need guidance. Fathers who participated to the focus group were selected among the sample of interviewees, so the decision to show them, firstly, a television spot featuring fathers dealing with infants, was also due to the idea that participants would more easily compare themselves to the protagonist of the advertisement. Secondly, the spot of the type “father knows best” was used as a prompt to challenge participants’ attitudes towards “traditional” depictions of fathers as educators and role models, and to raise anticipations on their future interactions with their children.

6.1 Mommy's little helper: a "beautiful" image

The spot of the type "mommy's little helper" proposed as a stimulus was a Pampers advertisement from 2015. The advertisement does not show the product, but it is a brand promotion, and it proposes a series of scenes from the life of a young couple dealing with an infant from birth to the child's first years of life (described *supra*, par. 3.2.1). The participants to the focus group evaluated it positively, as a realistic depiction of fathers with young children, even though they could detect some differences with their own experiences, and some images were missing:

Saverio: I never watch Tv but... I should watch it more often, it's beautiful

Me: Did you like it? [all "yes"] **what kind of impression has it given you, if you think of your experiences as dads?**

Saverio: well, I'll start, so, there's a study behind this, because it's quite realistic, besides commonplaces it's quite... I don't know, the times I went to sleep on the sofa are much more numerous than my wife's, and... yes, the clumsy dad, who hammers his finger, it could be... so I would say it's well wrapped, but the dad is present, so I would say it's quite realistic, yeah

Me: do you all agree?

Paolo: yes, it's a dad who is present (...)

Raimondo: (...) well, the episode of my daughter's first birthday for me has been instead a moment of conflict with my partner (...) I saw that cake and for me it wasn't like that, meaning... I mean, fathers- fathers are also still hindered, you know?, it's a loved figure but a bit still, still hindered, you know?, many times...

Me: what do you think?

Paolo: what do you mean, hindered?

Raimondo: I mean well, there's, there's the discourse around how... women react to pregnancy, how... you know?, that thing is not told much (...) there are some things that are not said, you understand?, besides the images

Me: so there are things that these spots do not show

Raimondo: they don't show it, like this woman in the bed, but she's not wearing a pajama, you know?, like, with a chemise, a nice bra, that...

Saverio: well but that's obvious...

Raimondo: that's not what happens, inside the home it's a bit more... but the relationship with the child is there, the relationship with the child... yes, I mean, the relationship with the child is there, it's beautiful this relationship with the girl, isn't it?

Me: so, do you think it's represented in a positive way?

Saverio: yes, the relationship... the child that takes care of the father, beautiful

Rodolfo: let's say they do not show the real moments of difficulties in everyday life.

Oreste: I mean, if I have to see it as a spot, it's made to sell a product and it tells you a nice story with a nice music and nice images, so I have nothing to say on the spot itself, it's well done; it's probably someone who's good at their job and tried to get to the target. So we saw a product...

Rodolfo: they show the emotions... emotions are positive

Oreste: yes, exactly, I mean, they have to do that, so they need to associate something positive to their product and I think they did a good job. Showing the most beautiful things that happen, on the side of participation- I mean, they make you understand the balance between the effort and...

Raimondo: and the reward

Oreste: and the reward.

Rodolfo: let's say they do not show the moments when you have to change diapers
[laughter] (...)

Paolo: it's like Mulino Bianco advertisements, it's all shiny, of course they are not telling you some other things, but it's clearly... very sweet. And the music helps of course... (...)

Me: so it seems to you that this dad is depicted as present

Saverio: yes, yes

Raimondo: very

Me: and what if the mum wasn't there? Can you imagine something like that?
(...)

Paolo: yes!

Oreste: well, it would be very strange

Me: it would be strange?

Rodolfo: in the end during the first year of a child's life the mother is the most present person. Either for physiological reasons because she breastfeeds him, if the mum breastfeeds him... she's more present. And however, mummy is mummy.

Me: do you all agree?

Rodolfo: then it depends, you can grow up without a mother, no problem, but the mother is always the most important

Saverio: yes, in a Pampers spot it would be strange.

Paolo: well, but sooner or later there will be a Pampers spot with two dads *[laughs]*

Saverio: well, but that would still be... how to say, more normal, you know?, than a missing mother.

The participants to the focus group seemed to recognize themselves in the kind of involvement depicted in the spot. Overall, though, some of the criticism that already emerged in the interviews was brought up again. The messy, “dirty” side of childcare is left out, to assure more space to what some interviewees had defined an “idyllic” image of having a small child: tenderness, sweet melodies and a sexy partner. On the other hand, the predominance of the mother's involvement in child care is not questioned: it is not questioned in “real life”, and consequently it could not be questioned in media representations. As Saverio points out, seeing in an advertisement a family featuring two fathers would be more “normal” than a single father with an infant: the option of a man being the “primary caregiver” (Habib, 2012) seems hard to imagine. Starting from this, the discussion developed into a reflection on the fact that “being two”, co-parenting, is generally desirable, but as it emerges (and was pointed out in chapter 4), it is often a matter of mothers letting their partners in, defining the boundaries of fathers' involvement and evaluating their adequacy:

Rodolfo: maybe it's... easier when there are two people present, because...

Saverio: yes, yes, that's right

Rodolfo: because in any case, couple life, raising a child as a couple is probably simpler in some cases, there might be particular situations as well, but being two helps... (...) my wife asks me sometimes, not for the second child because she's breastfeeding him, but our first daughter was breastfed only for four months, and it happened that my wife would go out for errands and tell me "I'm leaving the baby at home with you, will you breastfeed her for me?, you have formula, it shouldn't be a problem" (...)

Oreste: I have noticed that we have started having rituals lately, so... dad will comb her hair, dad will do her ponytail, ehm...

Raimondo: clothes...

Oreste: eh no, mummy will dress her, though, otherwise it's 'what did you put on her?!'

In this case, it seems that advertisements ascribable to the "mommy's little helper" cluster are, set aside the shiny glaze, a good portrait of how fathers interpret their participation to their little children's life. Keeping together tenderness and good will with clumsiness and a feeling of being assistants of mothers, according to the participants these advertisements grasp the main features of being fathers of young children: secondary caregivers (Habib, 2012) doing the best that they can.

6.2 Father knows best: an "old school" dad

The second spot used as a stimulus was selected among the type "father knows best": specifically, it has been a Leroy Merlin spot (a brand of do-it-yourself supplies) showing a man whose adolescent son is starting clumsily to shave. The father here depicted does not comment on his son's activity, but he buys a double sink in order to shave together with him and, by sharing that moment, teaching him how to do it properly without lecturing him, which would have embarrassed the boy (described *supra*, par. 3.2.2). When first showed the spot, the participants to the focus group commented on the figure of the main character, a fit man in his forties, sharing a sense of physical inadequacy if compared to him.

Raimondo: he's skinny, another fucking skinny guy

Oreste: they're all handsome

Raimondo: am I the only fat guy? *[laughter]*

Paolo: no, it's not that... it's that we wear oversize t-shirts

Saverio: he can afford to tuck his shirt in his pants

Oreste: I'm not even wearing shirts anymore... like he's all muscular

The father depicted in the mentioned spot is a model far from the participants' experiences, not only in how he represents physically an aesthetical standard impossible to reach (skinny, fit and handsome), but also in how he behaves with his child:

Saverio: well, it's kind of an old school father (...)

Paolo: yeah, he reminds me of...

Saverio: instead of talking to you I'll show you...

Paolo: how to shave *[laughs]*

Saverio: I mean, delicate, nice, sensitive, but still... you see, he does not worry about the fact that his son... (...) he sees that his son has cut himself (...)

Oreste: well, it's smart, it's... multi-message, indeed, he gets hurt so I'll teach you how to do it, but not in a... didactical way, but by example instead, so... I put you in the position of not asking me to because you could feel embarrassed, or you could... yeah, it's like it should be always done (...)

Me: about the way the father-son relationship is represented in this spot, does it look realistic to you? Positive?

Rodolfo: it looks very introvert to me

Saverio: yes, yes I agree

Rodolfo: I mean, in my opinion actually today's fathers are much more open, I think it's true what was said before, that it seems an old school father-child relationship, where you didn't talk much and you would do small things to make something understood, instead it's much easier, I think, it's much easier to talk to children, not only, to people, not only to children, before it was harder to talk to people, it's much

easier now.

Saverio: yes, the risk is, as I was saying, of being too immediate, and therefore intrusive, you know?, I mean, the father... I can see myself in a situation like that, '[name of child]!, what the fuck are you doing?, come here, I'll show you how to do it!', like those comedians, you know?, 'come the fuck on, Gianluca', being too much, you know?, that's it, that...

In this case, interestingly, fathers do see themselves in the “educator” role, but they decline it differently, detaching it from the un-communicative model of the “old-school” father who sets the example with his own behavior, and adding a layer of what could be interpreted as intimacy (Dermott, 2008): father-child relationships are “democratized” in Giddens’s (1992) sense, and communication and the removal of hierarchical boundaries to interactions are at the basis of the construction of new levels of intimacy. In this case, under scrutiny is also the representation of a model of masculinity: the protagonist’s “manly” physical appearance and his inability to communicate are characteristics ascribable to a traditional scheme that the participants to the focus group do not relate to. If, on the one hand, it could be said that being an “educator” is part of fathers’ aspirations, on the other hand what seems to matter the most is being able to build a connection with one’s child. “Father knows best”, but he’s committed to decline his educational role in a more intimate, democratized way.

7. Concluding thoughts

This chapter was dedicated to media representations of fatherhood and fathers’ interpretation of such depictions. From the attempted analysis of Italian television advertisements, the definition of a sort of path of paternal involvement in children’s lives emerged: media fathers are supposed to be emotionally involved in care of little children, but on the side of practice they are always secondary carers, as mothers are inevitably the main caregivers; when children grow, fathers reach the foreground, and are represented as role models and teachers. In fathers’ accounts, though, media depictions do not play a relevant role in the construction

of their reference model of fatherhood, which, as emerged in the previous chapters, is hard to delineate. Representations available in the media, according to the interviewees, are very varied, open to various interpretations, and often thought of as far from their own lived experience. When explicitly asked to comment on advertisements featuring fathers, though, the situations depicted were a starting point for a confrontation with their own experiences, and for a construction, through discussion, of “proper” fatherhood. Participation to childcare when children are small is talked about as something required to a contemporary father, but at the same time a good deal of tolerance on his abilities is allowed, and the dominant role of mothering, as already highlighted in chapter 4, is not questioned. When anticipating interaction with an older child, though, if the teaching role is seen as a predictable point of arrival, the mode of implementing it will probably be different than the detached, “old school”, virile father available on the media: a democratized relationship, based on direct and intimate communication (Dermott, 2008; Giddens, 1992), is foreseen. In these discussions and accounts, not only images of fatherhood were under scrutiny, but of masculinity as well. Most fathers feel far from media representations of the hegemonic model of the successful, protective, physically strong man (Connell, 1995; Dell’Agnese & Ruspini, 2007), but how do masculinity and fatherhood intertwine in fathers’ experiences? The next chapter will be dedicated to trying to answer to this question.

CHAPTER 6

Gender matters

“How do I feel? I feel like a man.”

1. Introduction

Across the accounts of new fathers, gender issues have always been on the background. As the narratives explored in the previous chapters have shown, “being a man” meant to live pregnancy and birth in ways sensibly different than women, mainly due to a lack of direct bodily involvement. Taking material care of an infant was influenced by gender as well, as mothers’ care was often described as predominant, and the gendered bodily involvement expressed first and foremost in breastfeeding in many cases set the boundaries for fathers’ participation. In discussing media representations of fatherhood, legitimate or unacceptable notions of masculinity were called into question as well, in ways that made clear how available models for fathers are a complex and even contradictory constellation. This chapter is dedicated to a more thorough exploration of gender issues related to experiences of fatherhood, with the aim of collecting more specific information for attempting at answering the main question informing my work: in what ways are masculinity and fatherhood intertwined?

The first paragraph deals with fatherhood and motherhood as gendered experiences, looking at how they are described in relation to understandings of masculinity and femininity, with a focus on the kind of positioning the interviewed fathers express in relation to “traditional” masculinity and the ways it is thought to inform fatherhood. Finally, the attention is drawn

on an issue often overlooked in studies on fatherhood: the gender of children and the role it plays in constructing parenting skills for fathers.

2. Talking about parenthood, constructing masculinity

Discourses on fatherhood often carry along notions of femininity and masculinity, in an overlapping of understandings of gender and parenthood. In chapter 4 this overlapping has been shown in how mothers' care appears to have a prominence, mainly due to the biological facts of pregnancy and breastfeeding, which set the boundaries for fathers' involvement and prompt essentialist views on the "naturalness" of motherhood for women. In these discourses, gender is constructed by difference: if motherhood seems to define womanhood per se, as in many accounts fathers claim that being a mother is a woman's greatest wish, the ways fatherhood is related to notions of masculinity is more complex and less taken for granted (Dermott, 2008). A testimony of the complex relationship between masculinity and fatherhood is the way the words "man", "men", "masculine" and "male chauvinist/sexist" are used by the interviewees in their accounts of being fathers and performing fathering. In looking how these words appear in the fathers' narratives, it appears evident how two main positioning are expressed in reference to the broad category of "men": distance and belonging. Analyzing more deeply these two discourses, a quite clear, even if composite, picture of a traditional masculinity appears, either represented as a model to adhere to, in what could be interpreted as a complicit attitude to a hegemonic ideal (Aboim, 2010; Connell, 1995), or as a construction to be criticized and abandoned, especially when facing parenthood. In the latter case, a complex overlapping of processes of hybridization and attempts at "undoing" gender can be found, with the faint appearance, in few cases, of the recognition of the importance of care for the construction of fatherhood. Overall, fathers in my sample express views on gender and parenthood that range from a rejection of essentialist notions that deem parents' roles to be necessarily segregated according to gender, to an

alignment to traditional understanding of motherhood and parenthood as fundamentally different. On this continuum, though, interesting complexities can be detected.

2.1 Refusing gender roles

Men who believe that fatherhood and motherhood are substantially interchangeable, as they do not see parenting abilities as related to gender, are a minority in my sample, and all either “very present” or “present” carers, according to the typology proposed in chapter 4. Angelo, for example, believes that there are no father’s and mother’s role, rather, we could talk of “parent 1 and parent 2”. His partner is unemployed, so she is the main carer of their daughter, but he shares care when he is at home from work, consistently with his gender attitudes:

“if Anna [his partner] had I job I could easily take her role of stay-at-home mum, but then again, it’s not correct to say “stay-at-home-mum”, I would be a stay-at-home dad with a working mum, I wouldn’t have any problem in not providing for the family (...) we interact differently [with the child] because we are different people, rather than because we are the mother and the father, we didn’t set it out, like ‘you are the dad so you have to reprimand her if she’s naughty’ or so, she [the child] has to be able to be serene with me or with her [his partner] and until now it has been like that, obviously since she spends more hours with Anna, with her mum, if she had to choose she would spend more time with her mum, but if mum is not there she’s fine with her dad, sometimes she calls for mum but just like that, when she wakes up in the morning and dad is not lying next to her she calls for dad (...) I’ve always been pro absolute gender equality” (Angelo, 28, daughter aged 1 year and 4 months, employee)

Paolo, the only “primary caregiver” (Habib, 2102) in my sample, criticizes more passionately the cultural prescriptions around motherhood:

“I noticed that there are totalized mothers, whose only motivation for life is being a mum, having kids, the family, and it’s something I find quite wrong, whereas there are

others who want to go back to being women doing things, just like anyone else, but with a child, and this is very complicated I believe especially because of the kind of country we live in, with a catholic culture that has been there for 2000 years, and you'll never remove it, according to which... the mother must take care of the family, which is total bullshit, but everyone's obsessing you [as a mother] on this and making you feel guilty if you don't do all canonical mummy things, and so... being a mum is extremely hard, if you really want to keep on being a person beside being a mother". (Paolo, 34, son aged 6 months, free-lance photographer)

This culture is so rooted that Paolo encountered it also in the words of experts, as already emerged in chapter 4: when attending the pre-natal class, Paolo felt annoyed at the teacher's comment that since the participants' partners were pregnant, they needed a man in the house who would help out with domestic work: this sounded, to him, like a "medieval times dad, the man who doesn't do shit".

These men have university degrees; they are not economically successful, nor they aim at it: working is mainly a means of sustenance, or, in Federico's case, the expression of his creative side, as he is a photographer. They seem to reject essentialist notions on gender and sexist representations of gender relations, that, according to Angelo, should not be like "men have to hang out with men and women are there just for you to do them". They do not feel responsible for protecting their families, and they consider childcare as part of their duties as fathers. Overall, traditional understandings of masculinity do not seem to inform their construction of fatherhood, nor they look at its content as a model to adhere to: on the contrary, they explicitly question and criticize the patriarchal system.

2.2 Traditional fathers

On the opposite end of the continuum, we find men who believe that mothers and fathers are substantially different, and these differences should be respected. In their words, it is possible to detect elements that refer to specific constructions of masculinities. These men are either

not very present or absent carers, as described in chapter 4, and do not seem to question traditionally hegemonic contents of masculinity, such as ideas on men being providers rather than care givers. In Biagio's words, hints at some sort of patriarchal references in his construction of the ideal family can be found here and there: when speaking about fighting with his partner, he says it is something that happens in "any man's house"; he claims he is "lucky enough to allow my girlfriend to stay at home", because with his work he can provide for the whole family, and he does not approve of gay parenting. Biagio does not participate but marginally to childcare, as he believes that other (implicitly, less burdensome) activities have a greater value to him:

"maybe instead of spreading moisturizing cream after changing her I rather I don't know... look her in the eyes and spend like half an hour like that, looking at her. Those are fantastic moments, beautiful moments, I wish every man on earth to live moments like those". (Biagio, 28, daughter aged 5 months, employee)

Fathers and mothers are extremely different to his opinion, as being a mother implies much greater responsibility and involvement:

"I think a mother's job begins before anything might happen, a mum is ready much earlier, she is much more scrupulous, meticulous, much more... preventing things from happening (...) and pregnancy is something that, both those nine months and giving birth, they are such a big effort and a big joy that I believe for a woman they are the most beautiful things of life." (Biagio, 28, daughter aged 5 months, employee)

Ivano, who is similarly quite absent from care, speaks of childcare as something men are not suited for: he strongly believes women have an "higher gear", and when he talks about the activities he is seldom involved into, he loses his individuality to become "a man" just like all other men:

"well, as for interacting [with the child] on those few things that I do [*laughing*] I mean, that a man does, (...) we interact the same way (...) but maybe I lose my temper much sooner. That is a thing. I don't freak out, but you lose your temper sooner, it's normal (...) being a mum means to have a lot, a lot of responsibility and patience.

Because... I wouldn't be that patient, and I think 90% of men aren't". (Ivano, 32, son aged 8 months, employee)

In Ivano's reasoning, the idea that masculinity is "essentially" incompatible with material child care is quite clear. Here, the "naturalness" of the equation women–caregivers is not questioned, and instead it is used to support a definition of masculinity constructed by difference, on the basis of a lack of characteristics, seemingly shared by most men, that make for good caregivers: patience and self-sacrifice.

Fabrizio, who is "not very present" in childcare, is similarly convinced that men and women are fundamentally different, and that those differences emerge in parenting, which is based on the complementarity of the contributions that mothers and fathers can give to a child's development. In his words, manhood is constructed around a specific issue that has so far informed hegemonic understandings of masculinity: competence (Connell, 1995; Dell'Agnese & Ruspini, 2007). He depicts the typical man as "the one who does it all, knows it all", who always insists to have his opinion recognized as the right one, and who, once he gets enough information on the physiology of delivery, will "mansplain"²⁰ (Bridges, 2017) contractions to women, like in his imaginary reconstruction of a dialogue between a man – in which he recognizes himself – and his pregnant partner:

"he starts to look for symptoms, to ask 'right now? Are you having a contraction? How often?' so like she says 'no, it wasn't a contraction' 'are you sure?' [*laughs*] 'you know, I've been told that sooner or later you'll have one without noticing it', it becomes something like that." (Fabrizio, 34, daughter aged 6 months, manager)

When a baby comes into the picture, though, things start to change: according to Fabrizio, decisions taken around the well-being of a child are not like any other, when a man can insist on the validity of his opinion. As he puts it, "on the baby, you [the partner] decide because you know better, (...) because there's a whole relationship (...) that a dad will never understand". Being a mother and thus having access to this instinctual, natural, universal

²⁰ "Mansplaining" is a neologism, born from the words "man" and "explain", that gained popularity on the social media to define men "speaking to women in a patronizing manner" (Bridges, 2017, p. 94).

knowledge about child rearing, a knowledge unavailable to men, gives women the opportunity to take a “revenge over husbands”. Fabrizio puts it jokingly in terms of a “battle of the sexes”, but the themes of parenthood as an experience inherently female, and masculinity as based on rationality and competence, emerge quite clearly and are partly used to justify his lack of participation to care work.

For some interviewees, becoming a father represents the completion of their being men. Oreste and Armando, for example, when asked how they felt once they recognized they had become fathers, both replied “I feel a man”. This feeling referred on the one hand to a process of becoming full adults; on the other, to specific contents of adulthood for men: assuming new responsibilities over the formed family. In the case of Oreste, this new responsibility implied the taking of a “disciplinarian” role (Habib, 2012), rather than a consistent involvement in instrumental child care tasks. A father, in his view, has a firm hand, is allowed to raise his voice, and his child needs to recognize his authority. Being a man affects also the relevance that is legitimate to publicly attribute to fatherhood: during the focus group, Oreste wished there were more spaces for discussions around experiences of parenthood for men, but, in his words,

“like there are pre-birth classes for mothers, maybe something that would help you to be a better father, something that gives you some stimulus and support, but father style, not mother style, like maybe in front of a beer...” (Oreste, 42, daughter aged 2 years and 6 months, self-employed event planner)

The beer to share with other fathers when discussing their parenting, in this case, shifts the focus from the “feminine” topics related to children issues (Dell’Agnese & Ruspini, 2007) to the construction of a pluralized, collective experience of fatherhood, which men lack in their everyday life (Bertone et al., 2016). Even if children do represent the center of this experience, and the goal of becoming “better fathers” is a stimulus for carving out spaces for discussions among peers, the legitimation of fathering practices and their connection to acceptable, shared models of masculinity seems to be the ultimate purpose, in the context of, as emerged in the previous chapters, a lack of stable reference points that anchor fathering to masculinity.

2.3 Uncertainties and hybridizations

Along the line that connects these extremes, though, other more complex constellations of attitudes and behaviors around fatherhood and motherhood can be identified, and uncertain constructions of masculinity stem from this complexity. Carlo, for example, finds it hard to position himself between a society that is “not equal yet”, because it places a heavier burden on women’s shoulders when it comes to balancing work and family life, and his own views on mothers’ and fathers’ roles. Carlo is 47 and works shifts as a municipal officer; in his participation to childcare he is “present”, and when his daughter was born he took only a few days of vacation. Speaking about the arrangements they made before the birth of their child, which resulted in his wife taking the compulsory maternity leave and then a period of parental leave until the child was one year old, he mixes blames on an “unequal society” with cultural assumptions about motherhood and the naturalness of the mother-child bond, sustained invariably by breastfeeding:

“[in order to take a parental leave] I had to alternate my wife’s maternity leave, so she would have to go to work, I felt like it was... I mean, my wife... I don’t think she would have [agreed to it]... or maybe she would have, I don’t know. But it was an alternative

It's a thing you didn't discuss?

no, but honestly, I don’t know if I would have been able to manage a child so little. (...) well, maybe it’s Teresa, my wife... but no, I think it’s all mothers, anyways... I mean, society is not equal yet, many things are... and in any case a woman lives it differently, I don’t know, but actually there are more burdens on a woman, and I’m telling you, I help a lot with the housework, but maybe there still are more burdens... how does she live it? Well, she’s more tired than me, for sure. I mean, no, she’s very happy, all of that, but maybe she’s accumulating more stress on some things, I don’t know, a flu maybe worries her more than it worries me, (...) because the mother-child bond is different, I mean... the child has been breastfed, those are relationships that really bond.” (Carlo, 47, daughter aged 2 years, municipal officer)

As Carlo's case exemplifies, "present" and "very present" fathers, or men who are routinely involved in child care activities, make the most composite group when it comes to understandings of motherhood and fatherhood and their relations with femininity and masculinity. Nunzio and Fabio, for example, are both involved daily in childcare, especially in the morning, when they both perform routinely instrumental care tasks. Both are, though, committed to traditional views on gender roles. Fabio, who has a degree in psychology but works as a sales agent, believes that gender differences should be sustained, because they are the foundations for a well-working couple and, consequently, for proper parenting: to him, a mother should be more "welcoming", while a father should have the responsibility of firmly disciplining the child. Nunzio, on his part, believes that a "mother's nature" is to stay with her child, and he blames labor market related constraints for his own – in his view – excessive involvement in care:

"I thought that only mothers did certain things, you know?, instead I do them and I also see other dads, let's say at that time [when he takes his child to the nursery school] there are only dads, maybe- I mean, that depends on women's work commitments, because otherwise it would be fairer for the child that the mother takes him to the nursery school (...) nowadays most women work, it's no longer like it used to be, when the head of the family worked and the woman stayed at home, so it's something personal for me, I think it's wrong that women don't get more, like in my opinion the child until his second year should have been with his mother, I mean, I do that [taking him to the nursery school] but I think it's something, a wrong approach" (Nunzio, 42, son aged 1 year and 9 months, employee)

Armando, a 41-year-old self-employed electrician, shares Nunzio's ideas on the naturalness of the connection between women and motherhood. Armando has a high school diploma and has a daughter aged 2 years and 4 months; the summer when she was born, as he is self-employed, he could only take a short period of vacation. Speaking about his partner's pregnancy he recalls her being beautiful, glowing, in a visible expression of how being a mother-to-be represents for a woman "the highest point of her femininity". In his words, indeed, becoming a mother

“it’s a self-fulfillment, I think it’s just like getting married in a white dress for a woman, I mean, it’s a dream come true, because for a woman, more than for a man, there’s a time in life when you really start to feel the inner need to become a mother” (Armando, 41, daughter aged 2 years and 4 months, self-employed electrician)

Armando, though, is a “present” father as far as routinely involvement in childcare activities is concerned, and he explicitly gives an affective meaning to physical contact expressed through care work. When asked whether he talked with his friends about becoming a father, he replied that it was impossible, because of the stereotypical difficulty of men to have meaningful conversations: “no, besides classical jokes among men, like, around lack of sleep, not making love, diapers, stink... same old stupid things”. In his case, it seems that the most “feminine” aspects of parenting, physical care and emotionality, can be hybridized (Demetriou, 2001) into a gender scheme that sees women as inherently mothers, and men as primarily involved in paid work.

2.4 Gender as a personality trait?

As emerged earlier in this chapter, a commitment to participating to routine material child care can be accompanied by a refusal of traditional mothers’ and fathers’ roles and a strive for gender equality, in the family and outside. Sometimes, though, this detachment does not result in an overturning of gender stereotypes, but rather in accepting essentialist notions and the binary construction of gender, just feeling a personal, contingent inapplicability of those notions to their own experience. It is the cases of Massimiliano and Raimondo, both involved in child care, both refusing traditional notions of masculinity for themselves, but both recognizing masculinity and femininity as ahistorical and fundamentally unquestionable categories, especially when facing parenthood.

Massimiliano is a “very present” father who gives great emotional importance to his participation to child care; at the time of the interview, his child was only two months old, and his partner was still on her maternity leave, but regardless he participated routinely to many childcare tasks, including bottle feeding his baby. In his behavior he was performing

what could be described a “caring” masculinity (Elliott, 2016); his words were similarly attempting at “undoing” gender (Deutsch, 2007), but what emerged was rather an attribution of masculinity and femininity randomly, without questioning their content, in an interpretation of gender as a “set of attributes” to be attached to psychological personality traits rather than biological sex. In describing himself and his partner, he ascribes “feminine” characteristics to himself, and “masculine” to her:

“In general, I am more... I go deep into things, I try to see all facets, and I empathize, I question myself a lot on some things, while she is more clear-cut, she’s on her railroad, and she says ‘no, it’s like this, there’s not thinking too much about it’; whereas I have all my... blues, my thoughts, and I’m very introspective, she is more... simple, immediate, and I don’t know, (...) I can get in communication easily with women because I don’t know, there are things... there are topics, and ways of arguing, that are more familiar to me, while with men I often find it hard, because it’s either fucking around and keeping it superficial, or nothing, I mean, I find it hard, very hard to go deep into things with a man, while with a woman it’s much easier to me. She [his partner] is more of a bear, she’s more introverted, she doesn’t go deep [*laughs*] but it doesn’t mean she’s shallow, it’s just her personality, she’s a bit more masculine in my view, because of this.” (Massimiliano, 45, son aged 2 months, employee)

At the same time, though, when discussing parenting, he goes back to assumptions on the natural equivalence women-mothers, in which he puts his partner as well, seemingly contradicting his own attempt at deconstructing gender stereotypes: in his words,

“I think that women in general have a way of presenting themselves... they walk on a different road, that maybe, let’s say, they can touch a child’s heart [*laughing*] we are a bit more... a bit more black or white, and they have, I don’t know, more nuances, that we should learn to have. It’s a bit hard to explain but I do feel that she walks on roads when she’s approaching him that I can’t, that’s it.” (Massimiliano, 45, son aged 2 months, employee)

In Massimiliano's words, a tension between a "we" encompassing fathers, less able than mothers to understand a child's needs, and another "we" that stands for men, with whom he does not feel related, resonates loudly in its dissonant effect: even though he participates to material child care, and he takes pride and emotional reward from being physically close to his child, and even though he feels he has some personality traits that make him more "feminine", still he is not a woman, therefore he is not as "good" as his (masculine?) partner at parenting.

Raimondo, another "very present" father, has been described in the previous chapters as particularly invested in his experience of fatherhood; he had desired a child for long years, and the discovery of conception marked the beginning of his acknowledging of a new role, which he honored by writing a series of letters to his incoming child. He suspended his work for four months when his daughter, who is now two years old, was born, and as he is self-employed and works flexible hours, he still participates routinely to care activities. He describes himself as more affine to feminine characters: he attended a high school mainly populated of girls, because he finds "boring" the typical male figure, and because of this he claims he

"did not live a typically male adolescence of, you know... fighting in the elevator, probably a bit homosexual as well, I don't know, touching each other, all this... I had only female friends, I felt good (...) I was muffled by these female presences"
(Raimondo, 41, daughter aged 2 years, self-employed in communications)

Once again, this affinity is related to stereotypical constructions of masculinity and femininity, which do not seem to be questionable; as emerged from his words, "boys will be boys", and the only way to detach from a despised, unsatisfying masculinity is to hang out with girls, fundamentally different, with whom it is possible to have a deeper connection. It is a material detachment though, not a symbolic one, and one that does not question the existence of a structure of gender relations based on binary and essentialist views on men's and women's "characters".

These accounts highlight the complexity of the overlapping of parenthood and gender; if on the one hand masculinity can be defined by “difference” with a femininity naturally related to motherhood, on the other constructions of fathering practices can make cultural tensions about the “right place” of fathers in the relationship mother-father-child emerge (Magaraggia, 2012). The next paragraph will be dedicated to the so far missing piece of this relationship: the child.

3. Fathers meet gender: sons, daughters and parenting²¹

Fathers and mothers are not the only actors who “do gender” in a family: children are socialized to gender first and foremost in the family, and their behavior is often assessed according to gender norms (Torrioni & Bainotti, 2017). While numerous research investigated mechanisms of gender socialization of children (Aina & Cameron, 2011; Leaper, 2000; Owen Blakemore, Berenbaum, & Liben, 2009), the specificities of the father-child relationship in relation to the gender of the child, though, have received to date scarce attention²². This paragraph is dedicated to the investigation of the mechanisms of gender construction in father-child interaction: how do contemporary fathers interact with their sons and daughters, and how does the gender of children contribute to the construction of fatherhood?

²¹ Part of the content presented in this paragraph is included in Mercuri (2017).

²² On the contrary, Butler and Shalit-Naggar (2008) report that an active debate is ongoing on whether and how mother-son and mother-daughter relationships differ during childhood. An exception is Bucher (2014) who studied masculinity and homophobia in father-son relationships, focusing on fathers of gay sons on the one hand, and sons of gay fathers on the other.

3.1 Gender socialization of children and parent-child relationships

Psychological research has focused widely on parental influence on children's gender socialization. Witt (1997), for example, highlighted that "parents encourage their sons and daughters to participate in sex-typed activities, including doll playing and engaging in housekeeping activities for girls and playing with trucks and engaging in sports activities for boys, (...) and fathers [are] found to reinforce gender stereotypes more often than do mothers" (Ivi, 255). Parent-child relationship has been investigated in psychological literature with focus on different aspects, like leisure and physical activity situations (Kindelberger Hagan & Kuebli, 2007; Leaper, 2000), emotion displays (Denham, Hamada Bassett, & Wyatt, 2010; Kennedy Root & Denham, 2010; van der Pol et al., 2015) and values transmission (Rittenour, Colaner, & Odenweller, 2014; Roest, Dubas, & Gerris, 2010). The focus of this stream of research has been on the intertwining of gender of parents with gender of children, looking at gender specific behavior during interaction. While general tendencies in behaviors of mothers and fathers in relation to children cannot be detected, these studies point out – even if in an uncritical way - the relevance of the same sex parent-child dyad when it comes to values transmission, and fathers, unlike mothers, usually seem to adapt and change their behavior according to the gender of children, apparently giving a more consistent contribution to the reproduction of gender stereotypes.

Sociological research on gender socialization often focused on use of time and children's participation to family life, looking at gender specific differences in the organization of every day's lives of boys and girls, especially from puberty on. In the Italian context, several contributions (Allegra, 2002; Belloni & Carriero, 2006; Ciccotti & Sabbadini, 2007; Facchini, 2002; Ricucci & Torrioni, 2006) pointed out how those activities that are related to family life, like participation to household chores, but also money availability and autonomy, are gender specific. All mentioned research show that starting from as early as the age of 6, girls are on average more involved than boys in domestic work and are more likely to perform more stereotypically feminine activities like setting the table, washing the dishes, helping to cook and ironing. Allegra (2002), Facchini (2002) and Ricucci and Torrioni (2006) pointed out how the rules for children in the family, in different age spans, are gender specific.

Ricucci and Torrioni (2006), looking at duties and rules as they are perceived and lived by sons and daughters up to 24 years of age, showed a general tendency to reproducing and identifying with gender models and roles as transmitted by parents: 35% of girls, opposed to 25% boys, consider a duty the participation to household chores, while 36% of young men give more importance to respecting commitments (against 29% of young women) and cohabitation rules (respectively 63% and 56%). It seems then that girls feel more bounded to the stereotypically feminine domestic role, while boys are more committed to constructing an autonomous and respectable self in the public sphere; while children's behavior is gender specific, though, this line of research does not show specific influence by mothers or fathers. A more recent contribution for Italy by Demurtas and colleagues (Demurtas, Menniti, & Cerbara, 2016) confirms the fact that girls are more involved in housework than boys, and get more involved in case of higher requests (like the presence of younger siblings), recognizing thus a pattern in the allocation of family time among boys and girls seemingly based on traditional gender ideology. Interestingly, the authors observed also a specific parental influence: in families where fathers are more involved in household chores stereotypically attached to the feminine, both sons and daughters are more cooperative in the home. While this finding does not sustain the idea of the higher relevance of fathers' behaviors on sons', as the effect is observed in offspring of both sexes, the authors hypothesize that fathers more involved in family life and especially in "feminine" chores, thus breaking the rule of gender roles, represent a model of de-gendered participation to the well-being of the household that children may adhere to.

Overall, two reflections emerge from this brief review of research on parental influence on gender socialization of children. Firstly, the relevance of the same-sex parent-child dyad is somewhat taken for granted, and often used as a starting point for research on parental influence on the socialization of children (Bucher, 2014; Rittenour et al., 2014; Demurtas, Menniti & Cerbara, 2016). In the value transmission process, gender is generally considered in relation to the sex role model of socialization theory, according to which fathers tend to transmit their values to sons and mothers to daughters, leading to a stronger identification of an adolescent child to their same-sex parent (Roest et al., 2010). Quantitative sociological

research on gender socialization in the family, on its part, while shedding light on how the home is a relevant environment for the observation and the reproduction of gender specific behavior among children, in most cases does not provide insights on the mechanisms that sustain it, and often overlooks early childhood.

Secondly, it seems that fathers in some occasions make a difference when it comes to gender socialization (Demurtas et al., 2016; McHale, Crouter, & Tucker, 1999).

3.2 Gender matters in father-child interaction

The reflection on gender socialization of children lays on the background of some interesting insights that emerged in the interviews first, and partly during the focus group as well. As explained in chapter 2, the interview scheme included questions about child care practices, retrospective reconstructions of desires and expectations related to parenthood, meanings attached to fatherhood, changes in self-perceptions after the birth of the child and reflections around reference and inspiration in the building of representations of fatherhood, but it did not explicitly include a reflection on the gender of children. Interestingly, this theme emerged spontaneously in the discourses of a subsample of 15 interviewees. Of these selected interviewees, 9 have a baby girl, 4 a boy, and one is the father of twins of both sexes. During the focus group, to which four of these men participated, the topic of gender of children was brought up as well. When speaking about the issue, three main discourses emerged in the fathers' words: a discourse around desires for male or female children before their birth, and whether this desire has been fulfilled or not; a discourse related to specific characteristics of baby boys and girls, and a discourse around specificities in the relationship with a male or a female child. Even though I could distinguish different contents, it must be made clear that the three discourses are tightly linked to one another and in some cases inevitably merge.

Among the sub-sample, six men recount having desired a child of a specific sex, and for most of them, the child born was of the opposite sex. Four men out of these six longed for a boy and had a girl, one wished to have a girl and had a boy, and only one says he wanted the girl than was eventually born. The motivations for these different desires lay, in few cases, in

cultural reasoning around the consequence for the extended family of giving birth to a son (Witt, 1997): for example, Oreste explains:

“the discourse around the baby boy is... [snorts] mainly related to the fact than in my family, and when I speak of family I mean the family... with my father’s surname, so... ehm, it’s eight- my father has eight brothers, and sisters, ehm... who had children whom then had nephews, in all my father’s family, among, so we are talking about around 25 nephews, /all females/ [articulating]. There’s only one boy. So, they are all very worried about the... the continuation of the surname.” (Oreste, 42, daughter aged 2 years and 6 months, self-employed event planner)

On the other hand, Biagio seems to have broken this tradition:

“I wanted I girl, opposite to many dads who want a baby boy, despite I have origins... from the south [*using the Italian word “terrone”, which originally had a derogatory meaning*], so you know, the son... I wanted a girl, I was certain it was a girl, and... very happy to receive a... pink news” (Biagio, 28, daughter aged 5 months, employee)

The discourse on desires for baby boys or girls intertwines and overlaps with that on specific characteristics of children and with the reasoning on experienced or expected relationships with them. Especially for those whose desire of having a son was not fulfilled, indeed, this reasoning draws upon discourses around the characteristics of the child, based on gendered expectations, and, following from this, about the specificities of a relationship with a boy or a girl. This reasoning opens way for a reflection on expected and acted out interaction between fathers and sons or daughters, and on the cultural references laying in the background of these discourses.

In general, by the men in this selected subsample, daughters are thought to be more communicative, more sensitive, and whinier, while sons are expected to enjoy more outdoor and physical activities and to be less sensitive and easier to manage than girls of the same age, with clear references to implicit and taken for granted cultural norms around masculinity and femininity. Saverio, who has twin children of both sexes, explicitly claims:

“well, I don’t want to say anything inconvenient now, but there’s a whole debate on ‘gender’²³, right? I did perceive indeed a gender difference between these two children, there’s nothing to it, I see it, because the girl is attracted to necklaces... and when we are walking around she stops to every shop window to look at dresses, I swear it’s true, and the boy doesn’t give a damn...” (Saverio, 43, twin daughter and son aged 1 year and 3 months, high school teacher)

Oreste, when talking about his desire for a male child, adds to his explanation that “I’ve practiced a lot of sports, I’m sporty, and I enjoyed the idea of having a son... with whom... to have... a... relationship very much based on activities, on sports”. Nicolò instead, who wanted a girl, is eventually relieved that his child is a boy, because “[it is] /much better a baby boy at this age/ *[smiling]* less, let’s say, less, less whiney, less fussy than a baby girl of the same age”.

The specific characteristics of boys and girls, whether they are expected or – less frequently – directly observed, are an important starting point for reflections around the relationships that these men can build with their children. A discourse of boys very fond of their mothers and girls in love with their fathers, maybe based on popular understanding of Freudian psychology, is very common in the whole subsample of the men who brought out gender in their recount of experiences of fatherhood; for example, Cosimo, who has a two years old boy, describes him as “very, very, very close to his mum, that’s maybe because of the male- I mean, the fact that’s a boy so he’s very close to his mum”. On the other hand, many fathers of girls are waiting for the special love for dad to bloom, even though sometimes this seems to be a ready-to-use script for describing the experience of having a daughter, like Angelo points out:

²³ In the original interview, Saverio uses the English word “gender”, instead of the Italian equivalent “genere”. This reflects the custom originated recently in public discourse around an alarm for the spread of so-called “gender ideology”, a misinterpretation (brought up mainly by the Church directly and indirectly by religious groups) of gender theory which caused fears of a precocious exposition of children to sexuality and especially homosexuality or gender fluidity. Attackers of “gender ideology” question the basic distinction between sex and gender, criticize the assumption that gender is a social construction and therefore based on stereotypes, and claim for the defense of the traditional heterosexual family held up by segregated gender roles.

“anyways it is always a little loaded with stereotypes... like this, that... anyways, ‘for... for daddy, ah, you will always be the most beautiful’, or... other similar things ‘and he will always be... at home in his armchair waiting for you...’” (Angelo, 28, daughter aged 1 year and 4 months, employee)

This “daddy’s girl” discourse declines in different ways. It could be expressed in the tendency to spoil, cuddle and never contradict or disappoint a daughter’s wishes, like for Dario, a 37-years-old employee with a girl of three, who blames himself a little because “I concede her too much, no?, this is the classic thing... of a father with his daughter [*laughs*] like, he hangs off her words and whatever she would like to do it’s ok”.

Secondly, it could extend to anticipations of future interactions with teenage daughters to be jealous of. For example, Bruno, who is 32 years old, works as a municipal officer and has a daughter aged two years and a half, tells me:

“yes, I am already jealous, I already panic now when I imagine future moments, no?, when I project her to the adolescence period. It scares me, that’s it. (...) I hope it will not be like that so not to smother²⁴ her too much, not to make her life impossible, but I think I can... I can be sure of the fact that right now I would be a jealous father, if I project myself to my daughter’s adolescence.” (Bruno, 32, daughter aged 2 years and 4 months, municipal officer)

Sometimes, this specific issue can be related to implicit references to heteronormativity and characteristics of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995), like in Oreste’s case again. He speaks of himself as a man who had many relationships before meeting his current partner, and tells me that his ex-girlfriends reacted with irony to the news that he would become the father of a girl:

“they told me «this is the... divine law, the circle is closed, ehm... at last there will be a woman that will... that will make you lose your mind and who- and who will... who

²⁴ In the original interview, Bruno uses the Italian verb *castrare*, literally “to castrate”, to mean the action of repressing, smothering, undermining his daughter’s freedom.

will make you fall madly in love»”. (Oreste, 42, daughter aged 2 years and 6 months, self-employed event planner)

This side of the discourse emerged during the focus group as well:

Raimondo: no, my, my baby girl now is in love with her cousin, who is a- I call her “patatina, patatona”²⁵

Oreste: how old is he?

Raimondo: eh, he is 5, a very handsome little cousin, (...) and I call her “patatona”, “cucciolotta”²⁶, and she uses my words with another man, and this thing... well, I’m joking now

Saverio: you are jealous already?

Raimondo: no, no, I’m joking, but sooner or later I will surely have to deal with this, I mean I know that already, (...) there’s going to be work to do, you know?, when she will have... her first boyfriend, when she will be so beautiful that I will have to protect her, and... I don’t know

Oreste: let’s not anticipate problems [*laughs*]

Rodolfo: eh, but it’s something you think about...

Saverio: she [*meaning myself*] will do a research on jealous fathers and she’ll call us [*laughter*]

Saverio jokes about the existence of a category of “jealous fathers”, but as it clearly emerged, being jealous of a daughter is a feeling that sooner or later a father is expected to experience: as it could be drawn from his own comment, being “already” jealous of a two-year-old girl might be too soon, but the adverb “already” implies that there’s a “right” time for feeling possessive. That time is sexual development and daughters’ interest in boys, but apparently even more, boys’ interest in them, interpreted as threatening and aggressive: here, hegemonic masculinity and its predatory heterosexual mandate is not questioned, rather taken for granted as a given fact one cannot but adapt to.

²⁵ Popular familiar nickname for children, translatable as “plumpy little girl”

²⁶ Literally, “little puppy”; translatable as “sweetie”, “darling”.

Lastly, the “daddy’s girl” discourse could manifest itself in the difficulties related to disciplining a girl, with whom the option of physical punishment seems inconceivable (unlike with boys), or at least for dad, maybe mum could do the job, according to Ignazio:

“Maybe to- to a baby boy you can even give a spank, but maybe not to a baby girl, how... I mean, indeed I always say that to my wife, I say «if ever there’ll be the need to give some spanks, eh that’s your job, because I don’t...»” (Ignazio, 35, daughter aged 10 months, employee)

Ignazio is worried about how to educate a girl because he grew up as a boy, and as he was raised as a boy, his mother had a harsh approach to discipline, an attitude that he describes as “male chauvinist”, and therefore he cannot take advantage of biographical instruments to learn how to properly educate his daughter: in his words, indeed, “there’s a different attitude with a boy or a girl”. A similar reasoning can be found in the words of Raimondo, who claims, about how to educate boys and girls: “to a boy I would say ‘you broke my balls’, you understand? But ‘to you, how do I tell you this?’”.

The relevance of the personal gendered experience of the fathers in describing or imagining a relationship with a son or a daughter is very evident in the words of most of my interviewees. Many think, indeed, that fathering a baby boy is somewhat easier, because they can expect from their sons a similar life path, similar experiences, and therefore they can draw from their own experience of growing up as men some useful instruments to understand and be there for their sons.

As Rodolfo explains during the focus group,

“I was born in a family of males, I have a brother, I’m a male, so there are only men in my family, besides my mother and my aunt, and the grandmothers, so I never directly lived a situation of seeing like a female cousin, how she grew up, how she lived her life, so... having to raise a daughter, and thinking about what will happen when she’s 12, 13, 14, I don’t know... so I think that is difficult really, while maybe with my youngest son, who is a boy, I will know how to deal because I lived it directly, first-hand, or I saw it on my brother, or anyways in my family...” (Rodolfo, 31, daughter aged 2 years, employee)

Fathering a daughter seems to have a specific difficulty, besides the ones ascribable to the “daddy’s girl” discourse: men do not know how a woman is “formed”. Raimondo highlights this issue very fondly: answering my very first question, a general request for a description of his daughter and a narration of their history together, he claims that

“she is also teaching me what- how, how a woman is formed, no?, I mean- that for a father this is also an... ehm... interesting topic [...] I am understanding how a feminine personality is formed”. (Raimondo, 41, daughter aged 2 years, self-employed in communications)

Across his account, the specificities and difficulties of being the father of a girl are constantly pulled in the conversation, and again, a recourse to heteronormativity is very evident, this time taking on the responsibility of contributing to the emotional and affective development of a daughter when it comes to relationships with men: “I know that she will have the first love for a man with me, and so I have to teach her to love those persons who lo- who love her, no?, not to fall in love with assholes, you understand?”

The discourse of the difficulties related to fathering a girl could also be overturned when daughters are expected to have specific characteristics which may make it easier to interact with them, but only in those cases when the father describes himself as affine to those characteristics, namely sensitivity and emotionality, stereotypically feminine. Fabrizio, for example, who has a 6-months-old girl and describes himself as a very emotional person, reflects on the gender of children, claiming that while with a son it would have been possible to have practical comparisons between his behavior and his own, and draw from these comparison terms for educating him, on the other hand “towards a daughter you might be more sensitive because you are facing a more sensitive person compared to a boy”. Following a similar reasoning, Massimiliano, who has a two-months-old son, claims he had always wished to have a daughter instead, because, in his words,

“males have a different reasoning which I find sometimes degrading [...] I am much more a female inside me, and... [...] maybe that is why I was expecting... or I wished

for a girl, in the sense of really creating a... a complicity, paradoxically, with... with dad”.

3.3 Reflexive fatherhood and gender of children: a problematic relationship

Overall, in my sample fathers of daughters raised the issue of the gender of children more frequently than did fathers of sons. The discourses on this issue often revolved around differences and similarities with themselves, with their own personal experiences and characteristics, and how these would represent a resource or cause doubts of inadequacy. Among fathers of sons, the opinion that it is easier to take care of a little boy because they share the same gender is quite common. Some of them speak of a similarity of interests or of a – premature – complicity, and anticipations of what they could do together as their children grow often revolve around sports or ludic activities in general. On the opposite, fathers of daughters generally find their task more insidious, as they do not have the experience of “being females”. The few exceptions to this “rule” are those fathers who find it – or would have found it - comfortable to deal with girls due to their own personality traits that they ascribe to stereotypical femininity. Other ways, if, on the one hand, fathers wait for their daughters to stereotypically “fall in love with dad”, on the other sometimes the only feminine experience they acknowledge or recognize themselves into is, overturning the perspective, the dynamic of male (hetero)sexually predatory behaviors, which they project on their daughters anticipating concerns and jealousies that will arise when they will be teenagers, with a clear reference to a substantial heteronormativity in the construction of gender of girls in particular. Still, having a son or a daughter, across my sample, does not make a difference when it comes to participation to child care or expressions of emotion, affection and physical closeness. Material care and the emotional involvement related to fatherhood are both experienced to various degrees, but regardless of the gender of children. The discourses that emerged in the fathers’ words are then mainly anticipations or expectations of future (possible) interactions and relationships, often revolving around the reproduction of gender stereotypes.

Two reflections emerge from this excursus in the narrations of neo fathers dealing with boys and girls. First, the overwhelming recourse to personal experience and personality in building one's parenting style apparently supports an interpretation of parenting skills as constructed with a main reference to personal biographies, as pointed out by Dermott (2008) and Williams (2008). The thesis of the "individualization" of fatherhood, though, is here problematized by the observation that such recourse to direct experience is very much true as far as the construction of gender in interaction with children is concerned. It looks evident, indeed, that the notions of masculinity and femininity permeate the experiences of parenting of the interviewees, not only in terms of capability of representing a gender model for children (both sons, directly, and daughters, in opposition), as already observed in literature (Halpern & Perry-Jenkins, 2016; Raley & Bianchi, 2006), but in fact constituting a resource for the construction of one's parenting skills. In the case of a son, indeed, such skills are (or will be) built based on the personal experiences of growing up as males, and thus potentially re-constructing and reproducing in generational transmissions the same features of masculinity already experienced. Vice versa, elements of uncertainty and possibly of difficulty in the educational processes rise when facing interaction with a girl, apparently because of the lack of suitable biographical instruments to draw from, as their gendered experiences are not comparable. If a performative interpretation of gender and parenthood is used as a lens, then, an explanation for the same-sex transmission of values and socialization could maybe be found in the fact that the gendered life experiences of parents provide them with the instruments for the very act of parenting. Those few cases who seem to be performing a different masculinity in terms of expressing a tendency to sensitiveness and emotionality, in their considering such an attitude more suited for fathering a daughter than a son, do not but define a range of possible behaviors, once again based on stereotypical representations of gender: expressing emotions and building a deep bond is possible with a girl, not with a boy (or maybe harder). While referring to personal gendered biographies, thus, fathers do refer to essentialist interpretations of gender and are in fact to some extent committed, if unconsciously, to reproducing the same stereotypes that informed their own socialization. Both when imagining a relationship with a son or a daughter based on traditional representation of masculinity and femininity, and when expressing a detachment

from hegemonic representations of masculinity, like Fabrizio and Massimiliano do, all these fathers base their legitimation of fathering behaviors according to dichotomized and exclusive gender categories. If on the one hand, then, it is possible to say that fatherhood is indeed individualized and reflexive, because parenting skills are constructed on the basis of personal biographies, on the other hand such an interpretation does not seem to include the construction of gender in the relationship with children, and reflections on the gender of children make this problematic emerge.

4. Concluding thoughts

The aim of this chapter was to explore issues of gender as they emerge in narratives of fatherhood and fathering experiences. As it became clear, masculinity related to fatherhood is often constructed in a relational way, by confronting with mothers on the one hand, and children on the other. Motherhood represents the main stable reference point for building understandings of gender in the fathers' accounts: it is thought of as a universal, natural experience that defines women and, by difference, men as well. The lack of a bodily involvement during pregnancy and birth, the difficulties related to entering what sometimes seems to be an inviolable dyadic relationship between a mother and a child, the expertise that women acquire by virtue of their very status of parents allow men to recognize their inability to live up to the example set by mothers, and to rely on notions of masculinity to explain that inability. Among the few interviewees who explicitly express a distancing from those notions, only a minority seem to be committed to questioning not only constructions of masculinity, but of femininity as well, detaching it from motherhood and refusing to align to the structure of gender relations, to express what has been defined a "caring" masculinity (Elliott, 2016). Most often, essentialist understandings of gender are taken for granted also by men who feel far from hegemonic constructions of masculinity. When participation to care work and emotional involvement are taken into account, then, men rely on hybridization strategies to merge "feminine" traits into a "traditional" scheme of gender relations (Arxer, 2011; Demetriou, 2001). When gender of children comes into the picture, the emergence of a binary construction of gender into dichotomized and exclusive categories is even more

evident, as it has been discussed in the previous paragraph. Boys will be boys and girls will need protection, in a reproduction of gender stereotypes and heteronormativity that transcends reflexivity and the recourse to personal biographies in constructing fatherhood (Dermott, 2008) to bring men back to the starting point of gender essentialism.

Conclusions

This thesis, which moved from the point of view of a female and feminist researcher interested in potential for changes in gender relations, started with a very broad question: in what ways are fatherhood and masculinity intertwined? In this concluding section, it is time to look back at the journey that has been travelled in fathers' lives and summarize the main findings of this study.

In order to try to provide an answer to the research question, in the first section of the work I gathered some theoretical tools that would serve as lenses through which to look at fathers' experiences. First and foremost, I presented the conceptual and analytical distinction between fathers, fathering and fatherhood. This distinction worked not only as an analytical instrument to investigate fathers' narratives, but also as a structure on which the contents of my work were organized. On the background, theorizations of the family and parenthood were a constant reference point, especially the theory of individualization (Beck-Gernsheim, 2002) and the proposals of intimacy and pure relationship (Giddens, 1992), which provided useful concepts to look at fathers' experiences in the context of changes in how family relationships take place. Parenthood and parenting practices were looked at also under the lens of "new parenting culture", the main goal of which is the "best for the child" (Faircloth & Murray, 2015; Grunow & Evertsson, 2016); even though my focus was on fatherhood as a gendered experience rather than on the construction of parenting skills for the best path of children development, this perspective proved useful to investigate men's understanding of their roles as fathers. The main conceptual reference point has been, though, that of masculinities in its original formulation and subsequent developments. If Connell's (Connell, 1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005) theorization is seminal in its proposal of multiple expressions of masculinity and of hierarchic relations among them, the scholars that examined the concept provided useful insights on how changes in the gender order can be

hindered or fostered by different contents historically attributed to hegemonic masculinity. The concepts of hybridization (Arxer, 2011; T. Bridges & Pascoe, 2014; Demetriou, 2001) and of the emergence of a caring masculinity (Elliott, 2016) were important reference points for the analysis of fathers' experiences: in looking at how men lived their transition to parenthood, in immersing in their discourses around involvement in child care and the relationship with mothers, the question whether fathers were hybridizing hegemonic masculinity or were performing a caring masculinity was constantly laying in the background of my reasoning; I will return to this point later.

When looking at how fatherhood had been studied, I recognized three main transversal dimensions of analysis: breadwinning, reflexivity, and bodily involvement. If across the work these dimensions have not been systematically addressed, to give priority to a thematic structure based on the distinction between fathers, fathering and fatherhood, I will dedicate here a few concluding words specifically to them.

1. Breadwinning

Literature on fatherhood discussed in the first chapter showed how being the main provider for the family has long been, and still is, the main concern of fathers in the western world, and that family policies still rely on this assumption for allocating childhood related welfare services. In Italy, as explained in chapter 2, family policies are still based on an “unsupported familism” that only marginally attempts at providing men as well as women suitable instruments for work-family balance (Musumeci et al., 2015). In my sample, though, being the main breadwinner is not explicitly talked about as an element that contributes to give meaning to their being fathers, no matter the kind of involvement in the labor market or the income level. As Dermott (2008) pointed out, being successfully involved in paid work could simply be part of adulthood, not necessarily linked to being men and fathers; in most of my interviewees' accounts, indeed, being providers was not at the center of their commitment to parenthood. Only in a few accounts the economic responsibility for the family was explicitly called into question as one of the aspects of their experience; for Angelo, Biagio and

Raimondo, this was mainly because their partners were out of employment, or only occasionally working. For others, like Lorenzo, being economically successful was something they had aimed for their whole life and being fathers did not but add a justification for an involvement in paid work that was important already before child birth. In none of the cases, though, it was the most important meaning of their experience, or it was talked about as the father's "role". Looking at the side of practices, though, it seems that a commitment to their jobs is implicit for most fathers, who in majority did not arrange their working conditions after the birth of their children, if not in very few and particular cases. The fathers who took a break from their careers and arranged their working hours were self-employed, therefore, since they could not count on a paid parental leave, they relied on the flexibility of their working conditions to adapt their lives to their new status as fathers. Among employed fathers, if some took advantage of the one or two days of paternity leave, most did not take into consideration taking a parental leave: Zeno, who would have liked to take two months of leave, had to give up because a new task on the workplace made it impossible for him to take some time off; Massimiliano, whose son at the time of the interview was only two months old, was planning to take a period of leave, but his idea had not been discussed with his employer at the time of the interview yet, therefore I have no information on whether he eventually went on to asking for it or not. Overall, as it emerges from my research as well, a combination of cultural reasoning on the importance of working to be full adults, sustained by workplace cultures, and the lack of suitable measures, like fully paid parental leaves, for men who wish to be involved in child care, do not make the most favorable conditions for working fathers. This research contributes, therefore, to call for family policies aimed at involving working fathers in child care, by means of social policies that allow for them to spend time at home with their babies without renouncing to a consistent part of their incomes. Parental leave policies that guarantee only 30% of earnings, in situations where the men's incomes are often the highest in the household, as it is the case for most of my interviewees as well, do not encourage the achievement of a fair share of care work within couples. Instead, social policies should challenge the conventional center stage attributed to men's authority in the family and breadwinning, in order to contribute to a revision of "masculinity politics" (Hobson, 2002) not only in family policy but in the labor market as well.

2. Reflexivity

The concept of reflexivity has been discussed as a very relevant aspect of contemporary fatherhood. In Dermott's (2008) use of Giddens' concepts of intimacy and of the democratization of intimate relationships, interesting analytical instruments can be found. The concept of reflexivity, has been argued, is central to the project of the self, in which the experience of fatherhood plays an important role as well (Lupton & Barclay, 1997). According to this interpretation, on the one hand becoming a father requires a constant work on oneself, and it implies anticipations and provisions for a goal to reach, to be constructed with the aid of experts as well. On the other, the lack of stable reference points for defining relationships, and the principle of equality on which they are based, means that the terms of being related to a child need to be constantly negotiated. It seems, therefore, that reflexive fathers fit well within the "new parenting culture" (Faircloth & Murray, 2015), according to which parents (both mothers and fathers) are involved in a relationship with the child interpreted as deterministic, and therefore their parenting skills need to be molded "outside of the immediate child-rearing relationship" (Faircloth et al., 2013), with the aid of experts, professionals and specific cultural products. As the analysis of the interviews made clear, though, the adherence to a model of "intensive parenting" (Fox, 2009; Hays, 1996) is very rare, and when it makes its appearance, it is mostly to be found during the pre-birth period, when some fathers looked for information on pregnancy, fetus development, birth and how to deal with a newborn. In most cases, though, once the child is born, fathers rely on themselves to construct their parenting styles: the relationship with the child is called into question by most as the real testing ground. Many express an explicit resistance to expert-led parenting, basing it on an interpretation of parenthood as a unique experience, in which the characteristics of the child define the terms on which parenting skills are constructed and thought about. More often than not, individual biographies take the place of professionals' knowledge, besides the most basic health-related issues, about which pediatricians are the only reliable source of information. In building their abilities as parents, fathers often look for instruments in their own biographies, either recalling (in positive, but often in negative) their childhood memories as sons, or the lived experiences that concurred in forming their

personalities and individual features. “Good parenthood” is not an ultimate goal set by experts, but rather a process based on trial and error, and being invested in “trying one’s best” is the main moral standpoint of these fathers (Ives, 2015). This reflects the lack of models of reference or, more appropriately, the criticism often expressed around the available models, either the families of origin, peers or cultural representations proposed by the media. The latter do not seem to hold a relevant place in fathers’ constructions of their own identities as parents, mainly because of media products’ inability to encompass all sides of fatherhood, including the “dirty” implications of hands-on care, even though they are seen as quite accurate in portraying men as secondary caregivers if compared to mothers. Maybe, media representations would be taken into a higher consideration, and even represent a reference point for men, if they depicted fathers dealing with little children by themselves, taking material care of infants without the supervision of a woman and thus contributing to the legitimization in the popular discourse of fathering as not simply “taking care of”, but as “care giving” to children. The individualization (Williams, 2008) of fatherhood resonates in most interviewees’ accounts, who base their parenting on deliberations (Ives, 2015) in which contingent issues and personal characteristics play the most relevant role. As emerged in chapter 6, though, gender complicates the picture: the individualization of fathers’ experiences and the impossible task of defining “fatherhood” once and for all finds an obstacle in the expressed understandings of gender categories, essentialist, dichotomized and, for most, unquestionable. Gender seems to represent the ultimate reference point for constructing fatherhood, if not by relying on traditional contents of hegemonic masculinity (like breadwinning), by expressing a fundamental distance from femininity and its natural connection to motherhood. When gender of children is called into question, the acritical adherence to stereotypical understandings of masculinity and femininity is even more evident.

3. Care and bodily involvement

Narratives of fathering practices and the participation to child care were a relevant field for investigating men’s experiences. Most fathers in my sample were involved in routinely,

instrumental, “hands-on” care work. For many, participating to practices of material care was part of their understanding of what being a father means; in most cases, though, such a participation was not intended at questioning the prominence of the mother’s role in care. Only one interviewee, Paolo, interpreted what could be categorized as a “primary caregiver” role (Habib, 2012), as he not only performed most care activities during the day, but he was also a care manager, taking responsibility for the organization of his child’s daily life and keeping contact with the pediatrician. His case, though, was peculiar: his partner’s pre- and post-partum depression had a very strong pull-in effect on him, so his being a primary caregiver emerged from what he described as a crisis, both in his partners’ life and, consequently, in the couples’ emotional balance. Seeing how the mother of his child was not ready to take on the responsibility of nurturing the baby, Paolo had to step in and take “her” place in mothering. Paolo did not feel uncomfortable in being the main caregiver, but he felt that he was, in his words, “pedaling for two”, not much on the side of practices, but especially on the emotional side. In his case, performing “caring” masculinity, rearranging his working hours to take care of his child, committing to creating a strong bond with him, feeling responsible for his well-being, was partly due to his need to be two parents in one. In most cases, mothering, with its naturalized content of pregnancy and breastfeeding, was interpreted as a bulky presence that either justified fathers’ marginal involvement in childcare or made it difficult to participate even when men were eager to. Around the construction of motherhood, masculinity related to fatherhood was constructed mainly by difference, in some cases hybridizing elements of the “feminine” (material care, affectivity expressed through physical contact) into traditional and stereotypical understandings of gender, like for Armando. As it emerged from these interviews, masculinity represents a set of elements to be picked up and integrated with “other” elements, either borrowed from the feminine realm of emotions and care, or described as something else than a traditional attitude, without a name or specific connotations, a characteristic that underlines the complexity of the hybridization process (Demetriou, 2001). In some other cases, fathers seemed to be committed to create emotional bonds, participate to instrumental, material child care tasks, and refused conventional notions of masculinity. On the other hand, though, in feeling and expressing an “affinity” with women in order to justify their “innovative” fathering practices,

these fathers did not but underline the lack of cultural and symbolical instruments to go beyond dichotomized and mutually exclusive gender categories, as was discussed in Massimiliano's and Raimondo's cases.

Overall, as it has been observed by other scholars (Mencarini & Solera, 2016), we are assisting to changes in the models of care, rather than in models of gender. Considering how hegemony, in the sense here used for the analysis of masculinities, defines the cultural dynamic by which a group claims and sustains a leading position in social life, the data presented in this work does not lead to the conclusion that the patriarchal system is being subverted all in all. By means of the hybridization of "traditional" masculinity into new forms on the one hand, and the impossibility of questioning mothers' predominance in care and the existence of fundamentally indisputable gender differences and "roles" on the other, the burdens of parenting are still, in most cases, assigned to women, and the reproduction of the gender hierarchy is assured. Still, the potential of men's bodily involvement in the care of children and of the realization of a caring masculinity is not doomed, as it emerged from the focus group discussion presented in chapter 4. Fathers are questioning the boundaries of their own bodies when dealing with their children; they are experimenting the development of a "skinship" (Ranson, 2015) by means of an intimate physical contact; what they lack, yet, is a legitimizing discourse around these practices. Observing feeble attempts at disrupting traditional understandings of the male body as "inviolable", even if controversial and hard to address, makes believe that a subversion of the structure of gender relations might really pass also through men's bodies (Connell, 1995).

4. Parenthood, masculinities and femininity

When analyzing men's accounts of their becoming fathers, and narratives of fathering practices, as already noted, the relevance of motherhood is often called into question. Descriptions of the process of transitioning to fatherhood are often laden with the lack of a bodily involvement, which would sometimes make it easier to acknowledge the upcoming event of child birth. Similarly, when talking about care practices, mothers are always on the

background, defining the boundaries of fathers' involvement either by taking up most of the space by breastfeeding, or, in any case, claiming a special relationship with the child, a greater ability at understanding and fulfilling a baby's needs (Fox, 2009; Naldini, 2016). These constructions of motherhood, as they are proposed by the interviewed fathers, rely heavily on understandings of femininity: as it emerges quite clearly in most of the fathers' words, motherhood defines womanhood, all women want to become mothers, and being mothers changes women forever. It seems, then, that if models of masculinity are harder to define, blurred and uncertain, and sometimes seem to be questioned in the fathers' words, models of femininity are still the same when parenting comes into the picture. Only a few interviewees openly refuse gender roles all in all, criticizing the unequal structure that lies beneath them. In most cases, definitions of femininity, both in the construction of motherhood, and when discussing the peculiarities of fathering a daughter, represent the field where gender comes up the most, and in the most universal, ahistorical and crystalized way. Gender represents the most stable reference point for these men's constructions of fatherhood: if not masculinity, femininity and its immutable nurturing role.

5. Missing voices

This latest remark calls out the main limit of the study: the lack of women's voices. As the men's accounts implicitly highlighted, both in interviews and during the focus group, gender is a relational concept (Connell, 1995), and both gender and parenthood are constructed in relation. Masculinity is constructed in relation to femininity; fatherhood, to motherhood. In this work, I collected the men's narratives on becoming a father, on fathering practices, on the models of fatherhood available in the popular culture, but as it became clear, fathers' experiences are constantly sustained and fostered, or on the contrary, hindered and challenged, by those of the mothers. Decision-making around strategies for work-family balance, processes of negotiation of involvement in care, maternal gatekeeping (Hauser, 2012), emotional and physical bonding in a triadic relationship, all these phenomena have been looked at from the perspective of fathers only. Taking into account the mothers' voices

as well would maybe have shed more light on the relevance of gender in the construction of parenthood, in the context of individualization and reflexivity in building parenting styles.

Other missing voices are those of fathers as a collective group. The experience of the focus group discussion seemed to play an important role in making the necessity of constructing a “we” for fathers emerge (Bertone et al., 2016). The protected environment of the – more or less – controlled discussion opened way for unexpected developments in the reflection around cultural models of fatherhood, fathering practices and the questioning of some pillars of masculinity. Due to time constraints, I could only hold one focus group discussion, with the consequence of not being able to consider in a more systematic manner the ways in which the themes were pulled in and out of discussion, and the emergences of dominant or rejected discourses, as it would have been more appropriate by confronting different discussions (Frisina, 2010).

An ideal continuation of this research would see, on the one hand, an involvement of women as well, in order to allow for a more insightful reconstruction of processes of making and crossing boundaries, of negotiations and conflicts, of meaning-making around parenthood and dynamics of co-parenting. On the other hand, a repetition of focus group discussions would be needed, to observe and even allow for a development of a “we” as fathers, to compare the emergence and sustaining of a collective discourse around fatherhood, and to reflect on its potential consequences. The ultimate goal would be a further investigation of the relevance of gender in individual constructions of parents’ experiences and parenting practices, to look for, as was my original intent, those places where potential for change in gender relations hides within the family.

Annex

1. Information on the participants

Fantasy name	age	age of child (months)	Education	Profession	Type of contract
Angelo	28	16	Bachelor degree in Performing arts	employee in a shop	permanent worker - full time
Biagio	28	5	High school diploma	employee in accounting office; occasionally, waiter and co-teacher in professional high school (bartending)	permanent worker - part time ⁺
Cosimo	31	24	Equivalent of bachelor degree in Design	employee in communication agency	permanent worker - full time
Dario	37	36	Master degree in International Sciences	employee in car rental agency	permanent worker - full time
Emilio	33	16	Middle school diploma	factory worker	permanent worker - full time
Fabio	34	15	Bachelor degree in Psychology	sales agent	permanent worker - full time
Giorgio	27	20	High school diploma	employee in family firm	permanent worker - full time
Ivano	32	8	High school diploma	employee in family firm	permanent worker - full time

Lorenzo	38	28 (twins)	Middle school diploma	entrepreneur	self-employed - full time
Marco	36	24	Master degree in Archeology	middle school teacher	permanent worker - full time*
Nicolò	40	24	PhD in Archeology	shop owner	self-employed - full time
Oreste	42	30	Master degree in Architecture	event planner	self-employed - flexible hours
Paolo	34	6	Master degree in Architecture; further courses on photo reporting	photo reporter	self-employed - flexible hours
Rodolfo	31	24 (expecting a second child)	Bachelor degree in Law applied to computer science	employee in automotive firm	permanent worker - full time
Saverio	43	15 (twins)	Degree in Humane letters	high school teacher	permanent worker - full time*
Ugo	42	30	PhD in Earth sciences	full professor in university	permanent worker - full time*
Tancredi	37	30	High school diploma	plumber	self-employed - full time
Vincenzo	48	29	PhD in Cinema and theatre	associate professor in university	permanent worker - full time*
Zeno	44	17	High school diploma	employee: software programmer	permanent worker - full time
Armando	41	28	High school diploma	electrician	self-employed - full time

Bruno	32	28	High school diploma	municipal officer	permanent worker - full time
Carlo	47	24	Bachelor degree in Political sciences	municipal officer	permanent worker - full time
Demetrio	34	18	Bachelor degree in History	employee in communication agency	permanent worker - full time
Elia	40	16	Bachelor degree in Economy	journalist	permanent worker - reduced hours (solidarity regime)
Fabrizio	34	6	Master degree in Mechanical engineering	manager	permanent worker - full time
Graziano	40	36	High school diploma	employee in automotive firm	permanent worker - full time
Ignazio	35	10	Master degree in Electronic engineering	employee in automotive firm	permanent worker - full time
Leonardo	45	18	PhD in Romanic philology	university researcher	temporary worker - full time*
Massimiliano	45	2	Master degree in International cooperation	employee in social cooperative	permanent worker - full time
Nunzio	42	21	High school diploma	employee in post office	permanent worker - full time
Ottavio	44	30	High school diploma	factory worker	permanent worker - full time
Pietro	32	30 (expecting a	Bachelor degree in nursing	nurse	permanent worker - full time

		second child)			
Raimondo	41	24	Bachelor degree in Communication Sciences	copywriter/director/ screenwriter	self-employed - flexible hours

*As employed in the educational sector, even though they are employed “full-time”, these interviewees can count on flexible and on average shorter hours than standard full-time employees.

†Even though he is employed part-time in an office, the informal work commitments Biagio has outside the office make him work longer hours than a standard part-time employee.

2. Interview schedule – 1st version

1. Per cominciare, mi piacerebbe che mi parlasse un po' di suo/a figlio/a, che mi raccontasse la “vostra” storia e me lo/la descrivesse un pochino.
2. Mi descriverebbe la sua giornata di ieri?
3. Chi si occupa del/della bambino/a?
4. come è emersa questa divisione? È cambiata da quando è nato il bambino fino ad oggi?
5. La sua routine quotidiana è cambiata da quando è nato il/la bambino/a? In che modo?
6. Mi piacerebbe che mi parlasse un po' del suo lavoro.
7. Mi racconterebbe qualcosa della sua famiglia di origine? Dov'è nato? Ha fratelli o sorelle? I suoi genitori cosa fanno o facevano? [e simili]
8. Prima di avere questo bambino, le era mai capitato di desiderare di diventare papà o a immaginarsi di avere un bambino?
9. [Se sì:] Si ricorda quando ha iniziato a pensare che le sarebbe piaciuto diventare papà? Mi racconterebbe come immaginava che sarebbe stato?
10. Quando ha scoperto che sarebbe diventato papà, ricorda come ha reagito?
11. Si è preparato in qualche modo all'arrivo del/della bambino/a?
12. Si è confrontato con qualcuno sul diventare padre (o sull'aver un figlio)? (partner, pari, famiglia di origine sua o della partner, esperti – pediatri, educatori -, forum, libri?)
13. Da quando è nato suo/a figlio/a, ci sono stati dei momenti, o degli episodi, che le hanno fatto sentire di essere “davvero” un papà? (Oppure è qualcosa che si vive giorno per giorno?) se sì: me li racconterebbe?
14. Cosa significa per lei essere padre?
15. È sempre stato così (ha sempre avuto la stessa opinione/la stessa rappresentazione di cosa significhi essere padre) o ci sono stati dei cambiamenti?
16. Pensa che quest'idea potrebbe cambiare in futuro?
17. Ci sono delle cose che vorrebbe fare come padre, ma che ancora non riesce a fare?
18. E invece, che cosa significa secondo lei essere una mamma? Pensa che ci siano differenze?

19. Saprebbe dirmi che cosa o chi ha ispirato il suo modo di intendere la paternità (e la maternità)?

20. Parlando di modelli e modi di intendere la paternità, le è mai capitato di vedere in televisione qualche rappresentazione di figure paterne? Ha mai notato in che modo i papà vengono rappresentati? Qualcosa che ha visto in tv, qualche pubblicità, o film o serie tv l'ha mai colpita o l'ha mai fatta riflettere sul suo modo di essere un papà?

3. Interview schedule – 2nd version

1. Per cominciare, mi piacerebbe che mi parlasse un po' di suo/a figlio/a, che mi raccontasse la “vostra” storia e me lo/la descrivesse un pochino.
2. Mi descriverebbe la sua giornata di ieri?
3. Chi si occupa del/della bambino/a?
4. Come è emersa questa divisione? È cambiata da quando è nato il bambino fino ad oggi?
5. La sua routine quotidiana è cambiata da quando è nato il/la bambino/a? In che modo?
6. Mi piacerebbe che mi parlasse un po' del suo lavoro.
7. Mi racconterebbe qualcosa della sua famiglia di origine? Dov'è nato? Ha fratelli o sorelle? I suoi genitori cosa fanno o facevano? [e simili]
8. Prima di avere questo bambino, le era mai capitato di desiderare di diventare papà o a immaginarsi di avere un bambino?
9. [Se sì:] Si ricorda quando ha iniziato a pensare che le sarebbe piaciuto diventare papà? Mi racconterebbe come immaginava che sarebbe stato?
10. Quando ha scoperto che sarebbe diventato papà, ricorda come ha reagito?
11. Cosa ricorda del periodo della gravidanza?
12. Si è preparato in qualche modo all'arrivo del/della bambino/a?
13. Si è confrontato con qualcuno sul diventare padre (o sull'aver un figlio)?
14. Da quando è nato suo/a figlio/a, ci sono stati dei momenti, o degli episodi, che le hanno fatto sentire di essere “davvero” un papà? (Oppure è qualcosa che si vive giorno per giorno?) se sì: me li racconterebbe?
15. Come descriverebbe il suo rapporto con suo/a figlio/a?
16. Cosa significa per lei essere padre?
17. È sempre stato così (ha sempre avuto la stessa opinione/la stessa rappresentazione di cosa significhi essere padre) o ci sono stati dei cambiamenti?
18. Pensa che quest'idea potrebbe cambiare in futuro?
19. Ci sono delle cose che vorrebbe fare come padre, ma che ancora non riesce a fare?

20. Come si sente ad essere diventato papà?

21. E invece, che cosa significa secondo lei essere una mamma? Pensa che ci siano differenze?

22. Saprebbe dirmi che cosa o chi ha ispirato il suo modo di intendere la paternità (e la maternità)?

23. Parlando di modelli e modi di intendere la paternità, le è mai capitato di vedere in televisione qualche rappresentazione di figure paterne? Ha mai notato in che modo i papà vengono rappresentati? Qualcosa che ha visto in tv, qualche pubblicità, o film o serie tv l'ha mai colpita o l'ha mai fatta riflettere sul suo modo di essere un papà?

4. Official request for cooperation – Educational Services Office



DIPARTIMENTO DI CULTURE, POLITICA E SOCIETA'

Alla cortese attenzione del
Responsabile dei Servizi Educativi della Città di Torino

Oggetto: Progetto di Dottorato di ricerca in Sociologia e Metodologia della Ricerca Sociale *Fatherhood and Masculinity*. Richiesta nominativi padri per interviste.

Nell'ambito del progetto di tesi di Dottorato di ricerca *Fatherhood and Masculinity*, nel corso del XXX ciclo del programma di Dottorato in Sociologia e Metodologia della Ricerca Sociale attivato in convenzione dalle Università Statale di Milano e di Torino, portato avanti dalla candidata Eugenia Mercuri e supervisionato dalla sottoscritta, è prevista un'attività di indagine.

Si tratta di un'indagine conoscitiva sulle esperienze di paternità contemporanea da parte di uomini italiani al primo figlio di età compresa fra gli 0 e i 3 anni, volta ad esplorare alcune dimensioni della genitorialità al maschile e basata su interviste discorsive.

Poiché gli educatori e le educatrici degli asili nido sono quotidianamente a contatto con bambini di età inferiore ai 3 anni, saremmo grate di ricevere la loro preziosa collaborazione nell'individuazione di padri potenzialmente interessati a partecipare allo studio, che abbiano le seguenti caratteristiche:

- Al primo figlio o figlia (età 0-3 anni)
- Di qualunque estrazione sociale, livello di istruzione e professione
- Eterosessuali e attualmente in coppia con la madre del figlio/a
- Di origine italiana

La informiamo che i dati raccolti saranno sottoposti alla normativa vigente sulla protezione dei dati personali (D.L.196/2003) e saranno utilizzati esclusivamente ai fini della ricerca in oggetto.

Per comunicare i nominativi e per ulteriori informazioni può contattare:

Eugenia Mercuri

Cell. 349-0992974

eugenia.mercuri@unimi.it

RingraziandoLa per la preziosa collaborazione, porgiamo cordiali saluti.

Data

La relatrice
Prof.ssa Manuela Naldini

5. Declaration for interviews



DIPARTIMENTO DI CULTURE, POLITICA E SOCIETÀ

Il sottoscritto _____

Dichiara

Di aver compreso le informazioni in merito al progetto di Dottorato di ricerca *Fatherhood and Masculinity* fornitemi dall'intervistatrice e candidata Eugenia Mercuri, di cui è relatrice la Prof.ssa Manuela Naldini, e di acconsentire a rilasciare l'intervista ai fini della compilazione della suddetta tesi di dottorato.

Data
Luogo

Firma

6. Declaration for focus group



DIPARTIMENTO DI CULTURE, POLITICA E SOCIETÀ

Il sottoscritto _____

Consapevole che i dati raccolti saranno sottoposti alla normativa vigente sulla protezione dei dati personali (D.L. 196/2003) e saranno utilizzati esclusivamente ai fini della ricerca in oggetto,

Dichiara

Di aver compreso le informazioni in merito al progetto di Dottorato di ricerca *Fatherhood and Masculinity* fornitemi dall'intervistatrice e candidata Eugenia Mercuri, di cui è relatrice la Prof.ssa Manuela Naldini, e di acconsentire a partecipare alla discussione di gruppo ai fini della compilazione della suddetta tesi di dottorato.

Data
Luogo

Firma

7. Individual synopsis

Fantasy name for privacy:

Socio-demographic info		
	<i>Him</i>	<i>Her (when present)</i>
Age		
Education		
Profession		
Couple story		
Age of child		
Work		
	<i>Him</i>	<i>Her (when present)</i>
Contract		
Working hours		
Income		
Transition to parenthood		
	<i>Him</i>	<i>Her (when present)</i>
Parental leave/work arrangement before birth		
Parental leave/work arrangement after birth		
Care arrangements (who/when/external help)		
Childcare practices		

Journey to fatherhood	
First emergence of desire	
Pregnancy	
Birth	
Becoming a father	
What is fatherhood	
How is fatherhood depicted	
Notes	

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