“Do you Guys take Showers with your Children?”: Gendered Embodiment and the Legitimation of Italian Fathering Practices

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The last decades have seen a burgeoning of research on fatherhood. The emergence of research on fatherhood as a social phenomenon followed a rise of discourses in the Western world around so-called "new" fathers, more involved and willing to participate in their children's lives (Cannito, 2019; Dermott, 2008; Kim & Pyke, 2015; Miller, 2011b; Randles, 2018). Looking at fathers' involvement in their children's life from a gendered perspective, fatherhood has been interpreted as a specifically masculine experience, stimulating reflections on the gendered meanings of the transition to parenthood and involvement with children in shifting constructions of masculinities. Indeed, many scholars have shown that changes in the ways fatherhood is understood and enacted reflect meso- and macro-level changes in gender relations within and across societies (Bertone, Ferrero Camoletto, & Rollé, 2015; Crespi & Ruspini, 2016; Dermott, 2008; Grunow & Evertsson, 2016; Hobson, 2002; Kim & Pyke 2015; Miller, 2011b). Within this construction, several scholars (Connell, 1995; Doucet, 2013; Ranson, 2015) have looked at the involvement of bodies in material care as part of a re-signification of masculinities, potentially toward more egalitarian modes of gender relations.

In the Italian context, fathers' gendered embodiment in material childcare has received little scholarly attention. Despite this, scholarship on fatherhood in Italy has considered diverse issues and provided a nuanced picture of Italian fatherhood, taking into account different aspects and perspectives, including men's participation in care practices. Research has documented that a majority of Italian fathers agree that the "breadwinner" model, which sees the man as more involved in the public sphere of paid work than in the private sphere of domestic and care work, is still prominent (Della Puppa & Miele, 2015; Musumeci & Santero, 2018), though some also point out that Italian fathers are looking for intimacy with their children and value involvement in childcare (Bertone, Ferrero Camoletto, & Rollé, 2016; Magaraggia, 2012; Cannito, 2019). Despite this body of research

on fatherhood in Italy, little attention has so far been paid to narratives around the more mundane, day-to-day material childcare practices and their role in the construction of fatherhood. In this article, I begin to fill this gap.

This work aims at investigating men's participation in material childcare practices, with a specific focus on physical contact and the involvement of bodies considered as issues related to gender and masculinity. Drawing on thirty-three discursive interviews with Italian first-time fathers of young children (0-3 years old), I consider the intersections of involvement in material care practices and processes of meaning construction around fatherhood, through an analysis of men's understandings of embodied care and its implications for masculinities and parenting. In particular, I focus this analysis on the relevance of bodily contact and physical intimacy in providing care, and especially in practices traditionally identified as motherly or feminine. Investigating fathering practices and embodiment holds a dual potential: on the one hand, it provides useful instruments for rethinking men's roles as fathers and their place in gender relations; on the other, it can expose the lack of social and cultural legitimation of men's bodies engaging in care work and the persistence of hegemonic constructions of masculinity for understanding fatherhood, further legitimating gender inequality (even as it might simultaneously illustrate change).

MASCULINITIES, CARE PRACTICES, AND EMBODIMENT

This work draws on several theoretical perspectives. The broader framework lies in the literature on men and masculinities, according to which masculinities are configurations of practices structured by gender relations, and have an historical and contextual character (Connell, 1995). To make sense of fatherhood and gendered embodiment in fathering practices, I borrow from scholars who have looked at the issue with the help of both feminist care theory and phenomenology, which helps to highlight bodies' subjectivity (Hamington,

2002), as care, in its intersubjective and material character, implies an involvement of the body.

The interconnection between masculinities and fathers' experiences was explored in Raewyn Connell's (1995) theorization of masculinities and gender relations, in which she suggests that for a change in the gender order to occur it is necessary to adopt "degendering strategies" and that a re-embodiment of men is needed. Indeed, as Connell (1995) writes, "When pictures of men with guns are rare, and pictures of men with [strollers] are common, we will really be getting somewhere." This change involves a transformation in symbols and actions associated with masculinity, to be sure; but bodies are intimately involved as well.

In subsequent revisions to and critiques of Connell's theoretical concept, especially the notion of hegemonic masculinity, and proposals of new configurations of masculinities and shifts in gender relations and/or the gender order (e.g., Anderson & McCormack, 2018; Arxer, 2011; Bridges & Pascoe, 2014; Demetriou, 2001; Duncanson, 2015), this suggestion has been primarily taken up by Elliott (2016) in her theorization of "caring" masculinities. The idea of "caring masculinities" is theoretically based on feminist care theory, which draws from the concept of the ethics of care (Held, 2006; Tronto, 1993) as an alternative to classic moral theories, according to which social actors are independent and rational. The ethics of care, instead, proceeds from the premise that individuals are interdependent, and that relations of care—in which a person is classed either as caregiver or as care receiver (Tronto, 1993)—are unavoidable across the course of one's life.

Drawing upon this theorization, 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 those being cared for, highlighting the inherently *relational* character of care. As Held (2006) points

out, care (both a practice and a value) relies on factors like sensitivity, knowledge and trust—all factors that can be learned. In Elliott's (2016) theorization, caring masculinities are

> "masculine identities that reject domination and its associated traits and embrace values of care such as positive emotion, interdependence, and relationality. [T]hese 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" (2016, p. 240).

As a framework, Elliott's caring masculinities provides an analytical lens for examining men's experiences that require engaging with care and bonding, such as fatherhood.

Indeed, other scholars have drawn attention to fathers who do perform material care on their children in an exceptional way, such as stay-at-home dads or fathers taking long parental leaves, to investigate different conceptualizations of the father's role as related to changing masculine identities. For instance, the embodiment of care has been the central focus of Ranson's (2015) work on Canadian stay-at-home fathers, documenting that material childcare work consists of a set of bodily practices that can be learned. In Ranson's perspective, fathers' embodied caregiving and their progress in acquiring competence in caring practices has feminist potential and could lead to the de-gendering of social structures through men's participation in hands-on childcare. Ranson observes how, due to the imperatives of "true masculinity," fathers have been socialized to "suppress their bodies" (2015, p. 3) so that the physical experience of 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. Here, Ranson draws on Lupton's (2012) notion of "interembodiment," which refers to the relational dimensions of embodiment, and the

concept of "skinship" developing through this intertwining and intimate relationship between infants and their caregivers.

Consistent with other work, Ranson also found that fathers develop strong attachments to the children they nurture and come to appreciate care work as work in itself, recognizing its dignity and its difference from any other kind of work. An appreciation of care work emerges clearly from Hamington's (2002) account of fathering his child as well. From a philosophical perspective, Hamington expresses faith in the possibility of a "moral revolution" to take place starting from men involving their bodies in care – what he calls "embodied care" (2002, p. 271). According to Hamington, embodied care, along with the reiteration of care practices that allow the touching bodies—of the caregiver and the care receiver—to learn from each other, gives men the chance to take on a different place, not just in families through fathering, but in broader social relations. This place, according to Hamington, implies accessibility and kindness and considers the body as the primary gate to new ways of relating with others based on intersubjectivity and reciprocity.

Not all work on involved fatherhood, however, has documented this gendered shift. For instance, Doucet (2006, 2016) discovered processes of "internal complexity and contradiction" taking place among the stay-at-home fathers she interviewed. While these fathers living and working for sustained periods as primary carers are in unique positions to create new configurations and understandings of masculinity, Doucet found that her interviewees were quite keen, in their narratives, to distinguish themselves as men, heterosexual, masculine, and fathers as distinctly opposed to mothers. Doucet observes that these fathers spoke as embodied subjects and agents in their parenting by emphasizing physical activities with the children, which drew on notions of masculine embodiment as "strong, physical and muscle-bound" (Doucet 2006, p. 711). According to her, embodiment has moral dimensions as well: caring for children involves networking around one's own

children, other parents and other children, and these networks are often dominated by mothers. As a consequence, fathers may feel their presence to be potentially disturbing, as men's bodies and presence are more likely to be interpreted as potentially aggressive and sexually threatening. Here, for instance, men in Doucet's (2006) study spoke about fears of "moral" judgement or suspicion.

Finally, Doucet observes that there are parenting situations in which bodies do matter and others in which they do not: when a father is attending to children by performing all kinds of material care, even the most hands-on activities such as 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 spaces in which women are more dominant, and there, in public, is where men's bodies matter the most (see also Doucet, 2009a, 2009b). These problematic aspects are also at the center of Gabb's (2013) reflections on gendered bodies and parenting. Disagreeing with Doucet when she claims that bodies sometimes matter and sometimes do not, Gabb argues that gendered bodies always matter, and are crucial in shaping perceptions and practices of fatherhood. Gabb contends that physical intimacy is always at risk of being misunderstood, and certain interactions are more at risk than others: one case in point is family bathing, which involves nudity and therefore must be framed non-sexually, involving displays of social appropriateness.

According to this body of scholarship, if it is possible to say that men are indeed capable of engaging with material childcare practices involving bodily contact and intimacy, an important question emerges: what happens when they do? On the one hand, a relevant involvement in care might mean for men to appreciate care work in general, to review the boundaries of their bodies, and eventually, maybe, to embrace an ethics of care. On the other, men's gendered embodiments, embedded in a gender order based on

hierarchical relations within and between genders, implies that performances of certain practices will be situated and understood as problematic. These contributions are fundamental to the investigation of the object of this paper. As will become clearer in the results section, reflections on the potential of fathers' participation in hands-on material care practices for a revision of broader gender relations have guided my research question, but the concerns that some scholars have expressed for the problematic aspects of men's gendered embodiment are operating here as well.

DATA AND METHODS

The data are composed of semi-structured discursive interviews collected in 2016 on a sample of thirty-three Italian fathers, and a focus group organized in 2017, in which five of the thirty-three interviewees were involved. The fathers who participated in the study were all heterosexual cisgender men living in two (mainly urban) areas of Piedmont, a region in north-western Italy, employed and living with the mothers of their children (in most cases the women were employed as well). The sample was constructed in three ways: personal acquaintances, snowballing, and an institutional channel, the Integrated Educational System Service 0-6 years of the Educational Services Office of the City of Turin. This office put me in contact with directors of municipal public nursery schools, who promoted my research within their facilities and provided me with contacts of fathers willing to participate. After completing the interview, I asked respondents whether they would be available to participate in a focus group as I was interested in investigating processes of meaning constructions around fatherhood in interactions with other fathers. Originally, eighteen fathers expressed their interest. Due to time restraints and incompatibility with working hours, only five of these eighteen men were able to participate in the focus group.

I took a few characteristics into account in selecting a sample of Italian fathers. First, I collected men who had only one child, whose age had to fall between zero and three years. I did this because young children require a specific commitment to material care practices, and fathers' participation in those practices is the specific focus of this article. Additionally, longitudinal studies on dual-earner couples facing and experiencing a transition to parenthood show that the transition to parenthood and the first few years after childbirth are crucial moments for the construction of gender, often resulting in a strengthening of traditional views on gender roles (Fox, 2009; Miller, 2011a; Naldini, 2015). Therefore, a deeper focus on fathers' experiences in the first years of their children's lives illuminates this critical period of time in examining the gendered aspects of material and bodily involvement of fathers in childcare practices.

The interviews and the focus group were all conducted by the author, audio recorded and transcribed. All interactions were in Italian, and I translated excerpts presented in this article into English. The interviews were semi-structured, and they addressed four primary themes: (1) everyday routine experiences of fathering, (2) retrospective examinations of the first emergence of their desire for parenthood, pregnancy and preparation for the arrival of the child, (3) narrations of the experiences and representations of fatherhood and motherhood, and (4) considerations of references for the construction of representations of fatherhood.

After transcription, I analyzed the data with a thematic approach, first selecting sections of the interviews 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). I relied on the qualitative analysis software Atlas.TI to identify and retrieve quotations, and codes were created on the basis of recurrent themes and contents during the process of analysis. To synthetize information on the interviewees and create

individual profiles to cross with the thematic analysis of the interviews, I produced 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 depictions of fatherhood.

The single focus group was analyzed with the same content-based principles. Though, as I was only able to organize one focus group, I am not able to analyze the recurrence of themes in homosocial interaction around fatherhood. However, I was able to capture how some of the themes addressed in individual interviews were (or were not) mobilized by fathers in interaction with other fathers. For these reasons, I focus primarily on the content rather than the shape of the discussion and the relational dynamics that took place among the participants (i.e., Cardano, 2011; Frisina, 2010).

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The following sections are devoted to the presentation of the main findings of the study in terms of fathers' participation in childcare, their narratives around the meanings attached to it, and specific issues of gendered embodiment in fathering. Here, I summarize the ways Italian fathers in this sample expressed affection and emotional attachments through embodied practices of care for their children. Subsequently, I examine the ways Italian fathers described embodied fathering practices they perceived as gender transgressions or described being interactionally made to feel as though they had transgressed the boundaries of acceptable and culturally intelligible masculinity.

Childcare practices, bodies and affection

In this section, I explore fathers' narratives around childcare practices, with the aim of reconstructing the meanings attached to childcare and its relevance in the embodied construction of fatherhood. My interviewees demonstrate that when men regularly perform material childcare practices, and when these are laden with – and express – affection (Hamington, 2002), they express recognition of their own place in a unique and exclusive relationship with their children.

To investigate the interviewees' participation in routine care practices, I asked them to describe in detail their previous day, or the most recent standard working day in case the day preceding our meeting had been non-standard for some reason. Through this, I elicited narrations of activities they usually performed, but also of those activities that were unusual, or unusually acted out by themselves or their partners, and therefore opening discussion on the ways care work was allocated within the couple (and, occasionally, among external actors). Only a minority shifted their involvement in paid work in terms of reducing working hours, and none were the primary caregiver of their children.

Despite this, most of the fathers reported being regularly involved in some daily material care "instrumental" practices (Tanturri & Mencarini, 2009) such as feeding, dressing, changing, washing, and putting their children to sleep. When describing their involvement in material care practices, an interesting connection with physical closeness, bodily involvement and affection emerged in the fathers' descriptions of this work, especially in the relevance ascribed to bodily contact and the expression of physical affection in the construction of a father's role based on intimacy (e.g., Dermott 2008).

Across the interviews, care practices and physical contact were described in three different ways. First, fathers discussed engaging in material childcare without explicitly mentioning physical contact. Second, fathers stressed care activities involving physical

contact, and especially material expressions of affection such as hugs and kisses, but without overlapping. Finally, another group of fathers addressed care practices and physical contact together and as overlapping. In this latter case, taking up one third of the sample, bodily contacts between father and child, experienced during material care activities, were described as laden with emotional and affective content. Two interviewees, Vincenzo and Armando, illustrate this clearly. Vincenzo is a university professor, and also explained that thanks to his flexible working hours, he is regularly involved in routine care activities. For him, becoming a parent has been an experience full of emotional meanings, a time when he can finally openly express his affection, in his words "an affective re-signification." In telling me about his day, he recounted:

> 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, professor)

Here, Vincenzo explains how embodied interactions with his son help to center him and put him at emotional ease. Similarly, Armando, a self-employed electrician who - in contrast to Vincenzo - works long hours outside his house, speaks about childcare 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 a relationship, it's something that, let's say… (…) 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, electrician)

Vincenzo and Armando are two different cases. They describe embodied care practices in different ways and their different working conditions shape their involvement in childcare. They also have different educational backgrounds, and therefore different cultural instruments with which to make sense of this relationship and transformation. So, they rely on different words in their narration. Nevertheless, these fathers seem to convey similar kinds of meaning in their embodied practices of fathering: physical contact embedded in care practices plays a fundamental role for the construction of a unique and un-mediated relationship with their children (Hamington, 2002). For these men, material care is not just "women's work," or inherently distant from their capabilities, even if Armando's "Yes, I like it" might imply that he also understands the work or his feelings about the work as not fully compatible with masculinity. Rather, material care, for these men, exists as an activity that contributes to defining their being parents: caring "about" their children equals caring "for" them (Tronto, 1993). While Vincenzo and Armando are only two of my respondents, 11 interviewees expressed similar sentiments regarding the affective and emotional content of embodied care practices, and a total of 19 fathers in my study explicitly recounted showing affection to their children in a physical way.

Crossing bodily boundaries: issues of legitimation

Participating to childcare practices means, in some cases, crossing the borders of what has been called the "feminine province" (Hauser, 2015) of caregiving, and bodily contact is a predominant feature of this province. The most pervasive and commonsense view of parenting roles, usually based on naturalized and essentialist understandings of gender, implies that (biological) motherhood brings a revision of bodily boundaries, made fluid and permeable by pregnancy and breastfeeding, not required by fatherhood (Lupton & Barclay, 1997). Just as Armando situated his enjoyment of intimate care work as possibly understood as at odds with his masculinity ("…Yes, I like it), this analysis of fathers' narratives of their engagement with territories of intimate, "motherly" contact with their children highlights how fathers' involvement in certain bodily care practices can expose the tension between hegemonic understandings of masculinity and emerging models of caring fatherhood.

Invading motherhood

Some scholars (e.g., Hodkinson & Brooks, 2018; Ranson, 2015) have highlighted that a high participation of fathers in childcare could be summarized as doing "everything but breastfeeding." Indeed, breastfeeding, according to most of my interviewees, is an activity that mothers themselves consider relevant for their own experiences of mothering and are not eager to delegate. For some interviewees, their involvement in bottle feeding with expressed milk or formula was due to the impossibility for the mother to breastfeed naturally. For a few, though, it could also be a part of a routine involvement in childcare. Massimiliano, a new father whose child is only two months old, illustrates this kind of involvement. His story makes it clear, though, that feeding a newborn child implies the need for a legitimation that is not always readily available: in 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 his first month he had a colic and there we could understand that he was whining about that. Now when he cries, it's usually 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 "you are such a pretty mommy" *[laughs]*, And once he was done I put him down in his cradle, (…) and then he started whining again, I held him up again and I kept holding him in my arms until he fell asleep on me… he often falls asleep on my chest because he feels my warmth, my heart. At night, too, sometimes I put him on my chest. (Massimiliano, 45, son aged 2 months, employee)

Massimiliano's story is uncommon among fathers in this study 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 and soothing his child. What is most interesting, though, is that he is aware of the fact that his crossing boundaries with mothering could be questioned: his father reminded him of it, by seemingly disparaging him jokingly as "a pretty mommy." While Massimiliano laughed when he shared this, he is also demonstrating his understanding of this kind of care work as transgressing gendered boundaries around fatherhood and motherhood. And this work also illustrates the power of interactions that work to effectively police the gendered boundaries of fathering for men.

Different scholars (e.g., Magaraggia, 2012; Steinour, 2018) have pointed out the relevance of language for the definition of fathering practices in relation to masculinity. As Magaraggia (2012) points out in discussing Italy, the lack of specific terms to define a "male caregiver" encourages fathers who participate in childcare to rely on androgynous language, as care is invariably attached to femininity, even at the level of language. Massimiliano's child is too young to interact, but he is very involved in childcare, so he confesses he finds it hard to define himself a father: rather, he thinks of himself as a "male babysitter." This has dual implications: (1) designating the babysitter role as requiring a gendered qualifier implies a feminine role, and (2) this framing symbolically works to resituate mothers as primary parents and fathers as "helpers." According to Magaraggia (2012), the diffusion of neologisms such as "*mammo*" (in Italian, the grammatically masculine form of "*mamma*"—mom) 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" (ibid., p. 80). Bottle feeding a child represents, especially in the eyes of a father from an older cohort, as Massimiliano's case shows, an "invasion" of a feminine field: for Massimiliano, it meant being called a "pretty mommy," in an emasculating definition of fathering (Steinour, 2018). Similar feelings of "trespassing" in mothers' territories, when describing care practices (even if with different degrees of involvement) and father-child relationships, have been expressed by 21 men in my study.

Skin to skin

According to these interview data, bodily involvement takes on special relevance in defining fathering practices and the meanings men attach to them. Expressing affective attachment through the performance of material care, and a recognizable investment in the latter, might

initially seem a manifestation of "caring masculinity" (Elliott, 2016). And, as I have shown, this is an important component of what is happening. Despite this, physical closeness is still, however, a controversial theme, especially when proposed in interactions with other men, as my focus group of Italian fathers demonstrates.

Other research work has pointed out how the experience of the focus group is a protective setting that may allow men to make visible practices of intimacy with children that question some traditional boundaries of masculinity, such as the relationship with one's own body and emotions through contact with someone else (e.g., L. Allen, 2005; Ferrero Camoletto & Bertone, 2016). Yet, focus groups of men are also opportunities to examine masculinity in interaction. Indeed, speaking about one's body while talking with other men about children and childcare can cast doubt on 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 childcare was introduced by one of the participants, Raimondo, in what sounded like a request for legitimation from other fathers. The following transcript from the group interaction provides extremely useful insights and cues for the interpretation of fathers' embodiment in care practices:

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

Oreste: Yes, yes.

Saverio: Yes.

Raimondo: Even if 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]*

(…)

Raimondo: And doesn't it occur to you to doubt whether it is healthy to…

Saverio: Yes, yes, it occurs to me, it's occurred to me.

Oreste: No, I had a 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 OK with it…

Rodolfo: (…) 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!

This discussion is marked by the breaking of two symbolic gendered boundaries: one is that of men's bodies, that can, apparently, be engaged in intimate contacts with children, contacts that imply mutual nudity; a second boundary is that of legitimate discourses in homosocial interactions: speaking with other men about showering with their daughters is possible. In this discussion, however, these gendered boundary transgressions were simultaneously authorized and upheld. Firstly, with humor, a very powerful instrument for constructing complicity (i.e., Ferrero Camoletto, 2013), the men jokingly justified an intimate embodied parenting practice (bathing with children). Secondly, as already observed for breastfeeding, by referring to mothers' roles in authorizing that kind of contact, thus sustaining an understanding of women as mediators of fathers' relationships with their children (Donatiello & Santero, 2015).

In what has been received as a less relatable narrative by the rest of the group, Raimondo explained how his interest in physical closeness with his child was hard to accept in his family environment:

> **Raimondo:** For example, I remember caressing my daughter in order for her to enjoy it, you know? To really make her feel… *[mimics a caress]* and my sister-in-law was shocked, as if to say… well, (…) like, a pedophile, you know?

Raimondo is the father of a very long desired 2-year-old girl. He was very reflexive about his experience as a father during our interview, and – a unique case in my sample – he took a 4-month break from work in order to take care of her, together with his partner, after her birth. His account of public display of physical contact could be interpreted, with Doucet (2006), as a consequence of the domination of women in childcare: men's embodiment can be interpreted as potentially aggressive and sexually threatening, especially when enacted in public. In Raimondo's case, caressing his daughter in the presence of his sister-in-law put him under a gaze that made this controversy emerge. Similarly, the absence of comments from other participants in the focus group about his story signaled a lack of available discourses to oppose this framing. As these data show, consistent with previous research, the relationship between masculinity and embodiment in relation to childcare is complex. If, on the one hand, hands-on care does make way for a revision of the boundaries of fathers' bodily 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 (Gabb 2013).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In this work, I investigate men's bodily involvement in childcare in a national context, Italy, in which fathers' participation in childcare practices is still far from comparable to mothers'. The implications of fathers' gendered embodiments in fathering have been less examined by existing scholarship on fatherhood. Contrary to most international research, the fathers in my sample are not stay-at-home, primary caregivers, who decided – for whatever reason – to step away from "traditional" arrangements based on masculine provider roles and feminine caregiver roles—a model still prominent in Italy. They are, instead, mostly full-time workers, some of them are the sole providers in their households, and the vast majority did not take any significant break from work when their first child was born. Yet, in their narratives of daily routines, I identify some important hints of how hands-on care might transform the meanings attached to fatherhood in Italy; of how problematic, from a gender perspective, some care practices are in reproducing gender inequality; and of the ways Italian fathers navigate different and sometimes conflicting expectations of their involvement in hands-on care. According to these data, embodied care practices are sets of bodily practices and behaviors that, as other scholarship on care work has demonstrated, can be learned. It also seems, however, that gendered embodiment, and specifically the cultural and symbolic meanings that men's bodies carry, makes it harder for men to engage in certain care practices, especially in public.

Most of the fathers whose stories I collected are, to some degree, involved in hands-on care even when most of their time is dedicated to paid work, and many described their participation in material care practices as having a role in the construction of their experience of fatherhood as first and foremost aiming to develop an intimate relation with their children (Dermott, 2008).

Yet, it is worth looking more closely at those situations when men engage in what Gabb (2013) refers to as the "risky" business of physically and emotionally engaged parenting, by either crossing borders with the most celebrated cornerstone of naturalized mothering (breastfeeding) or by bringing to light the thorny issue of men's bodies in intimate contact with children's. The fathers whose stories I present here, and who discussed these kinds of gendered boundary transgressions in their parenting practices, are also atypical, at least for the Italian context, in the ways they think of themselves as "involved" fathers. Massimiliano, for example, plans to take a few months of parental leave, and Raimondo took a four-month break from work when his daughter was born. In their accounts of material care and bodily involvement, they all struggled in different ways and to different degrees with legitimating their interpretations of fatherhood. This kind of legitimacy is interactionally produced, and the fathers in this study discussed not being fully granted legitimacy from peers and significant others alike, alongside with what has been noted to be a more general discomfort at seeing men in culturally femininized roles and spaces associated with parenting (e.g., Doucet, 2006; Steinour, 2018). Considering these fathers' narratives, it may seem therefore that some practices might be most enacted when nobody is watching: as Jacqui Gabb put it, "intimate fathering should be *done*, but *not seen* to be done" (Gabb, 2013, p. 652, original italics).

On the one hand, then, consistent with previous research, fathers' involvement in routine, material care practices, and the experience of touching bodies through care, can play a role in revisioning cultural meanings attached to fatherhood. The men who are involved seem to comply with an ethics of care that recognizes interdependence and the relevance of a relationship built and maintained through care. On the other hand, however, men's trespassing in territories culturally understood as women's realms or feminizing, those that imply a notion of the permeability of bodily boundaries, raises and exposed

gendered boundaries surrounding authority and legitimacy in parenting: around male bodies, around the cultural representation of acceptable masculinity, and around the bodies of children as well, who are "safer" in women's hands (Willett, 2008).

In these men's narratives, women appear to be situated as primarily policing those boundaries. Indeed, women are often likely to be presented in this way, consistent with the notion of "maternal gatekeeping" (i.e., S. M. Allen & Hawkins, 1999; Hauser, 2012), within which men's bodies are denied cultural legitimation for their involvement in care. It is not the aim of this paper to advocate for misunderstood, well-intentioned caring fathers. Rather, my aim is to widen the discussion of what could be interpreted as a double standard in existing social and cultural policing around embodied parenting practices (Faircloth & Murray, 2015). For women, mothering is supposed to be an overwhelming, totalizing activity (Hays, 1996), and the body's involvement in it is often ground zero for the very definition of proper motherhood (Naldini, 2015). Conversely, for men, social prescriptions around proper fathering have wider margins of tolerance. "Good fathers" are such when they are involved enough in childcare practices to demonstrate an interest in the well-being of their children as well as an investment in gender equality within the couple (Hodkinson & Brooks, 2018), but only as long as they respect certain levels of physical distance.

Men's bodies in caring, intimate contacts with children's are socially and culturally framed as problematic—not because they are inherently unfit for caring, but because *their* care work (particularly when embodied) exists in tension with cultural understandings of masculinity that cast doubt on the legitimacy of the existence and displaying of those caring capacities. Not only, then, is gender always at stake, but it is at stake in certain practices more than in others. This is not (or not only) because women do not allow men access, but because some practices expose more than others the lack of cultural instruments of

legitimation, and especially that of naturalizing the physical connection between adult men's bodies and children's (Lupton & Barclay, 1997).

These are important findings, but there are some limitations to this research. The sample of white, heterosexual, mostly middle- to upper-class men makes analyzing racial dynamics in these findings challenging and this was not a part of my analysis. Additionally, this work examined fathers' narratives of participation in childcare practices rather than observing those practices, and mothers and partners were not interviewed. While this choice was based on the intent of investigating men's own ways of constructing and representing their experiences of fathering, observational data would have helped establish the extent to which fathers render their bodily involvement in childcare practices accurately and how they construct meaning around gender and parenting through different constellations and patterns of involvement in care. Finally, I believe that further research on spaces, both private and public, where parenting practices are performed, and men's and women's use of those spaces from a gendered embodiment perspective, would add useful contributions to the discussion on masculinities, parenting and the legitimation of men's bodies caring for children's.

Declaration of interest

The author declares no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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