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## Investigating the male contribution to household labor in Italy: does peers' behavior matter?

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## **Investigating the Male Contribution to Household Labor in Italy:**

### **Does Peers' Behavior Matter?**

Notwithstanding a large strand of research, the gender division of household labor (DHL henceforth) still remains a puzzle for social scientists. The research work developed so far has been guided by several micro- and macro-level theoretical perspectives that have their own merits and faults but do not fully explain why women continue to do so much at home, and men so little, particularly in the Italian context. However, understanding the processes leading to a greater gender egalitarianism is key to explaining current trends (and trend reversals) in family behaviors such as union stability and fertility (Esping-Andersen and Billari 2015).

In this study, we explore the possibility of considering an egalitarian DHL as a social innovation, which can be analyzed with the theoretical tools used to explain social diffusion processes. We focus our attention on an important mechanism of the diffusion of innovative ideas or behaviors, located in between the micro and the macro level: peers' behavior. To the best of our knowledge, this factor has never been considered by

previous research on the DHL, even if some attention has been devoted to the role of peers in the perception of housework fairness.

We concentrate on men's domestic behavior because the changes toward equality in the DHL that have occurred during the last few decades were mostly due to changes in women's behaviors rather than men's (Gershuny *et al.* 2005). So it is interesting to understand why men continued to do relatively little at home in contexts where women significantly increased their participation in the workforce and progress toward gender equality also occurred in other domains (see, e.g., for the Italian case, ISTAT 2015).

Analyzing the peer effect on men's domestic behavior is problematic, and is a stimulating challenge for three main reasons. First, the DHL is usually a private matter which is little seen outside the family. Moreover, it is not even a frequent topic of discussion, particularly among men (Himsel and Goldberg 2003). So, given the specific focus of this study, a first obstacle is the low level of visibility of peers' behavior. Second, at a more general level, research on peer effects must tackle several thorny methodological problems which are difficult to solve using observational data. The methodology proposed here, an experimental vignette design, is an effective strategy for dealing with both these issues. The third problem consists in a social desirability bias, which might seriously affect the men's answers about their domestic behaviors.

The analyses presented in this study are based on primary data collected in Italy. The Italian context is particularly interesting for our research question since the average DHL is still strongly traditional. An egalitarian DHL is thus an innovative type of behavior, and it is particularly in these early stages of the diffusion process that the example of peers counts most.

### *1. Old and new theoretical approaches to the study of the division of household labor*

The study of household labor and its gender division inside the family has a long history, since it dates back to the 1970s (e.g. Oakley, 1974; for a recent study see Dominguez-Folgueras et al. 2017). At the beginning, theoretical perspectives focused primarily on the individual or couple level, either with a rational choice (e.g., Brines 1993) or with a culturalist and symbolic interactionist approach (e.g., West and Zimmerman 1987). Both perspectives have their merits and drawbacks, as recognized by several scholars (Coltrane 2000; Lachance-Grzela and Bouchard 2010). The rationalist approach to the DHL failed to take into account the symbolic meaning of domestic and care tasks, which cannot invariably be considered as activities that all people try to avoid. Moreover, rational choice never explained why even in couples where the woman earns more or much more than the man, she still does more household labor, especially as regards

routine tasks. On the other hand, culturalist and symbolic interactionist approaches are not well equipped to explain *why* the DHL has changed across decades, albeit very slowly (e.g., Carriero 2008; Altintas and Sullivan 2016). In fact, it is difficult to account for this change while avoiding circular explanations (e.g.: because the meaning of domestic and care activities has changed). Some *exogenous* sources of change must be searched for outside culturalist perspectives, for example in institutional and economic changes involving labor markets, social policies, and education systems. That is why subsequent and latest studies (e.g., Fuwa 2004; Dotti Sani 2014; Tamilina and Tamilina 2014) adopted a comparative and institutional focus, looking at constraints and opportunities provided to women and men by societal contexts. In this way, scholars dealt with explanatory factors located at the macro rather than micro level, using individual characteristics as variables interacting with characteristics of the national contexts. However, studies based on the welfare approach (e.g., Geist 2005) revealed an effect of different welfare regimes on the DHL, but did not explain if this is due to the role of social and family policies, to that of the cultural context or to both these reasons together. On the other hand, studies addressing the effects of specific social and family policies on the DHL often come to contrasting conclusions (e.g., Fuwa and Cohen 2007; Hook 2010; Treas and Tai 2012 about the effect of parental leave). Consequently, the DHL still remains a puzzle for social scientists. Domestic behaviors and roles within

families are changing, but admittedly very slowly, especially men's, in spite of much faster changes in women's roles in the public sphere.

In our view, jumping directly from the micro to the macro-level led social scientists to pay scant or no attention to levels of analysis and explanatory factors located between individuals (or couples) and nations. As early as 1989, a prominent scholar like Coltrane wrote: "More data are also needed on the processes through which the kinship and gender composition of *social networks* influence divisions of household labor" (Coltrane 1989, our emphasis). Unfortunately, his invitation to also look at the level of networks and groups to which individuals belong remained unheeded. Indeed, to our knowledge, there are no studies about peer-group effects on the DHL. At most, scholars considered interpersonal comparisons in the study of perceived fairness about the DHL (e.g., Carriero 2011). One of the rare studies attempting to tackle an issue related for some respects to household labor, at a meso-level of analysis, is that by Treas (2011). She sheds light on the effect of the type of kin network on women's choice to turn to their husband, rather than to kin, for household help and emotional support (see also on this topic García-Faroldi 2015). Another kind of behavioral social influence that received some attention is the intergenerational transmission of family roles (e.g., Crespi 2003; Solera 2009). Parental modelling has been hypothesized to affect men's contribution to housework (Dotti Sani 2016). Parental modelling takes place when children observe the

parental gendered housework division; this modelling results in their socialization to appropriate gender roles, that in turn could partly affects their housework division in adult life.

And yet, the idea that social actors are influenced in their beliefs, preferences, and behaviors by the beliefs, preferences, and behaviors of others is almost a commonplace of sociology and social psychology, so it is surprising that DHL scholars did not try to take a small step over the family's borders before going to the macro level. At the theoretical level, one way to follow Coltrane's suggestion about the importance of social networks in the DHL is to make a link to the literature on the diffusion of social innovations. In our opinion, an egalitarian DHL within the couple is an innovative behavior that can be analyzed with the theoretical tools that are already used to explain social diffusion processes. This is in line with a strand of research (Nazio and Blossfeld 2003; Rosina and Fraboni 2004; Guetto *et al.* 2016) that has studied other innovative family behaviors such as divorce, cohabitation and out-of-wedlock childbearing using the same approach. This choice has been found fruitful. More than fifty years ago, Everett Rogers (1962) put forward a theoretical framework that can be considered a cornerstone of the research on the diffusion of innovations. This perspective is still the starting point of many empirical studies of this topic, included those cited above on the diffusion of innovative family behaviors (see also Palloni 2001). Rogers pointed out that the role of peers is

particularly relevant during the initial stage of the diffusion of an innovation. In the initial stage, an innovation spreads only among highly selected (usually highly educated) individuals through a mechanism of *direct social modelling* (Bandura 1977), that is, interpersonal communication and imitation within peer groups<sup>1</sup>. When the innovation becomes more common and widespread, other less selected individuals adopt the innovation, through a mechanism of knowledge-awareness of the available innovation presented by the media or inferred by observation of older generations' behaviors. In the case of the egalitarian DHL, the role of peers should be particularly important in countries where the average DHL is still quite traditional, because there this kind of innovation is in the early stage of its diffusion.

Rogers also pointed out that one of the characteristics of innovations that affects the rate of adoption is their *communicability*, i.e. the degree to which the results of an innovation can be made visible to other people. There are innovative ideas or behaviors whose results can be easily observed and communicated to others, while some

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<sup>1</sup> The kinds of social influence taking place among peers can be *informational* or *normative* (Deutsch and Gerard 1955), although it is typically difficult to distinguish between them empirically and not necessary, given that they often operate simultaneously (Nazio 2008).



innovations are less visible and less easy to share. Thus, communicability influences the probability that others see the advantages of an innovation and eventually decide to adopt it. Focusing on family behaviors, innovations such as cohabitation, divorce, and the birth of a child out-of-wedlock all have a very high degree of communicability. These relevant life-course events are highly visible to a person's social network. However, the same is not true for the DHL: this is essentially a private behavior that people cannot observe and learn directly from their peers, unless they communicate and talk about it with their friends, colleagues and relatives. A few studies (Gager 1998; Himsel and Goldberg 2003) focusing on the topic of perceived housework fairness showed that men rarely discuss household labor with their friends. Their ideas on how much other men (do not) share the housework with their wives are based on abstract and "average" models of man, often quite distant from reality. By contrast, sharing childcare can to a certain extent be more visible, as it may entail being absent from work (on parental leave) or reducing work hours. Clearly, an egalitarian DHL cannot spread only under the influence of peers, considering its limited communicability and men's practice of avoiding discussions about household labor. Low communicability, however, might be one reason for the extremely slow pace in the diffusion of egalitarian DHL.

At the empirical level, studying the influence of peers on individual behavior is particularly challenging (Palloni 2001). A first problem is that, in the absence of specific

data, individual's peers are inferred rather than investigated, since large-scale surveys do not generally include questions on peers' behaviors. To solve this problem, individuals with similar characteristics in the survey, or belonging to the same classroom or organization, are often considered as peers<sup>2</sup>. However, even if reliable information on peer behavior is available, the problem of causal inference from peers' to individual's behavior would be far from being solved. Indeed, assessing a causal impact of peers' behavior on individual behavior is very difficult outside laboratory experimental studies (see, e.g., the classic study on group conformity by Asch 1951). In observational studies, as the econometric literature on peer effects has shown (Manski 1993; Angrist 2014), the simple correlation between an individual outcome and the mean outcome of the membership group does not prove a causal relationship from the latter to the former. Rather, this kind of correlation is quite mechanical (a statistical artifact) and unrelated

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<sup>2</sup> Another possible solution is using small ad-hoc surveys, generally based on convenience samples, with specific questions on peer's behavior. However, this choice (adopted for instance by most of the few studies on the effect of peers on housework fairness) makes it impossible to generalize the research findings.

to the existence of a true connection between individual and peer outcomes<sup>3</sup>. This is the so called “reflection problem” (Manski 1993)<sup>4</sup>. A first issue related to this problem is that the relationship between individual’s and peers’ behavior suffers from reverse causation: the former can be affected by the latter, but at the same time the individual, as a member of the group, can affect peers’ behavior through his/her actions. Moreover, it must be considered that, without some source of *exogenous* variation in the composition of peers, the analyst cannot support causal claims because peers’ composition is most likely to be the object of individual *endogenous* choices. Individuals could make such choices, for instance, for convenience reasons, in order to have favorable benchmarks when evaluating own behaviors or attitudes. Therefore, the problem of self-selection can seriously bias the analysis. The reflection problem might

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<sup>3</sup> As Angrist (2014) demonstrated, any regression of individual outcome on mean group outcome produces a coefficient of unity or, if the group mean is defined as a leave-out mean, it is determined by a generic intraclass correlation coefficient.

<sup>4</sup> Individual’s and peers’ behavior can be compared to a person and his/her image reflected by a mirror. If the person moves, so does the image, but how to say whether the mirror image causes the person’s movement or reflects it? Without some understanding of optics and human behavior it is not possible to tell.

be one of the reasons, although perhaps not the most important, for the neglect of peer effects in household labor research.

## *2. Motivation of the study and hypothesis*

This study starts from an open question in the literature: why do women continue to do so much at home, and men so little? Previous time use studies showed that over the last few decades there has been a large disinvestment in housework by women that has not been paralleled by a corresponding investment by men (e.g., Altintas and Sullivan 2016). As regards childcare, both women and men increased their involvement, although in relative terms the former continue to bear most of the burden, especially for physical care work (Altintas and Sullivan 2017). Male domestic behavior has thus been quite resistant to change. For this reason, we focus our analysis on men to understand the slow pace of change in the gender DHL.

Our work improves on the existing knowledge in two main respects. First, we focus on a determinant of the DHL that has never considered by previous research: the role of peers' behavior. Peers are a relevant factor in the diffusion of innovative ideas or behaviors like egalitarian DHL is. But the DHL has been never analyzed using the social

diffusion process approach<sup>5</sup>. Second, we introduce a methodological innovation seldom used in family research (e.g., Auspurg *et al.* 2017): a vignette technique embedded in a survey-based experimental design. In our opinion, this technique contributes to addressing (see next section) the problem of the low level of visibility of peers' behavior in the case of the DHL, as well as the reverse causation and endogeneity problems affecting all the analyses dealing with peer effects. By showing randomized versions of the same story where peers' behavior is manipulated, we assess, through respondents' judgments, the likelihood that men's household labor changes as a consequence of peers' domestic behavior. This kind of evidence is certainly free from the reverse causation and endogeneity problems that would afflict observational data.

This study was conducted in an Italian context. Italy is of particular interest for the research question tackled here because of its strong traditionalism in gender and family roles. According to our calculations based on the 2008-09 Italian Time Use Data (the latest version available to us), only 14% of married/cohabiting men practice a non-traditional division of all domestic tasks (defined by a female share  $\leq 55\%$ ), and just a

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<sup>5</sup> In their recent work, Esping-Andersen and Billari (2015) applied a diffusionist approach to gender egalitarianism, but with the aim of explaining current trends in family behaviors (notably fertility recovery and union stability).

tiny 7% equally divide routine tasks such as cooking or doing the laundry (see Table 1). Women in an average couple do the great majority of domestic work (79% of all domestic tasks and 88% of routine tasks). By contrast, childcare is divided a bit more equally. On average, women with children spend 107 minutes/day on childcare against 45 minutes for men, yielding an average division of 72%, but more than a quarter (26%) of couples are non-traditional with respect to childcare<sup>6</sup>.

[Table 1 about here]

Accordingly, it can certainly be said that an egalitarian DHL in Italy is an innovative behavior at the very beginning of its diffusion. Given this fact, as stated by Rogers (1962), the role of peers should be particularly relevant here.

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<sup>6</sup> It should be noted that time use surveys rely on a data collection procedure where respondents fill in a diary on a given day. No time spent in household labor on a given day does not necessarily mean no time ever. However, since days are randomly assigned to respondents, we can confidently assume that figures reflect the division of household labor of Italian couples on average (although not of each single couple).

The empirical part of the study will test a single hypothesis, even if different analyses will be devoted to the two main tasks in household labor, i.e. domestic work and childcare:

*According to men, male propensity to participate more in domestic work and/or childcare increases if peers are more involved in these tasks.*

The hypothesis will be tested with respect to men's perceptions of other men's propensity, rather than to their own intentions of behavior, in order to lower the risk of a social desirability bias affecting men's answers on their domestic engagement (see the next section).

### *3. Data and method*

Our study combined a standard phone survey method with an online questionnaire containing vignettes or scenarios administered to the same respondents who were interviewed by phone. Vignettes are verbal descriptions of fictitious (but realistic) situations to be evaluated by subjects, often, but not necessarily, within an experimental research design (Wallander 2009; Mutz 2011, ch. 4). In this kind of design, vignettes contain one or more variable elements called factors (i.e., variables deemed to affect an individual's judgment about the vignette) that are randomly assigned to respondents.

Random assignment makes it possible to assess the causal effect of the factors on people's judgments. A strength of this method is that, unlike laboratory experiments, vignettes can be implemented in a survey in order to generalize the findings to a wider population, whereas laboratory experiments are usually based on small convenience samples which prevent any generalization. In this research, the vignette method made it possible to address the problem inherent in the measurement of any peer effect because peers' behavior is the object of manipulation and randomization. In other words, the peer group's behavior does not simply "reflect" individual behavior, and individuals cannot choose their peers. Moreover, vignettes make a private behavior such as the DHL "visible" to respondents. However, a limitation of the vignette method is that it provides attitudinal rather than truly behavioral data. We will discuss this issue in the final section of the study.

Our sample was randomly drawn from the landline telephone directories of four provinces of Piedmont (Torino, Cuneo, Novara, Alessandria), northwestern Italy. By means of a few screening questions, we sampled dual-earner married or cohabitating couples with at least one child under 13 years old<sup>7</sup>. The particular circumstances of this

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<sup>7</sup> It should be borne in mind that telephone sampling is getting increasingly prone to non-coverage error (Poggio and Callegaro 2012; Sala and Lillini 2015). However, for



target group, characterized by multiple sources of time pressure (from work and family responsibilities), made the choice of this sample highly relevant because it is among these households that the issue of DHL becomes particularly salient (see, e.g. Käsälä and Oinas 2016). Generally speaking, the most interesting research questions about DHL mainly regard dual-earner couples, in which the inconsistency between the labor market transformations of recent decades and domestic behavior is well represented. In male breadwinner couples, the DHL can be expected to be unequal and unfavorable to women. Female breadwinner couples are undoubtedly a very interesting case, but they are still too rare to be studied with quantitative analysis.

The female employment rate in Piemonte, though higher than the national average, is not very different from the north and central areas of the country (Eurostat 2018; see Labor Force Survey regional statistics). Moreover, as we have calculated from 2008-9 Italian Time Use Data, the division of housework among dual-earner couples living in Piemonte, as measured by the women's share of time devoted to routine tasks, is the

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specific target populations like ours it is difficult to find out alternatives at reasonable costs.

same (83%) as that of other north-central regions and only slightly lower than that of the more traditional southern regions (88%)<sup>8</sup>.

Between October 2010 and February 2011, we conducted phone interviews with 1656 individuals from 828 married and unmarried couples (both members included, response rate 42%) using a structured questionnaire about the division of domestic and care tasks, perceived fairness, gender roles, and paid work. During Spring 2013, individuals were contacted again to collect their email address. We were able to reach 1365 individuals from the initial sample (82%), to whom the online questionnaire with the vignettes was sent. Eight vignettes were included in the questionnaire, two of which were used in this study. 676 individuals (50% of the email list or 41% of the initial sample) gave valid responses to all our crucial variables. As can be expected, the considerable drop in the number of cases did not occur entirely at random. Indeed, actual respondents were positively selected by education, as is often the case with all survey modes. For other important characteristics, such as gender and housework division, the differences

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<sup>8</sup> The discrepancies in estimates of housework division between the Istat sample (see above) and our sample (see Table 2 below) are largely due to differences in data collection methods (time-use diary vs. questionnaire).

between the initial and vignette sample were negligible. In this study, the analyses are based on 313 men from the vignette sample (descriptive statistics of vignette and telephone survey samples are given in Table 2).

[Table 2 about here]

Unlike the so-called factorial surveys (Wallander 2009), where subjects are given multiple versions of the same vignette, respondents in our study evaluated only a particular version of each vignette (between-subject design). The main advantage of this design, given the large number of cases, is that the effects of various factors can be tested without the sensitization and carryover effects resulting from multiple evaluations of the same vignette (Greenwald 1976).

#### *4. Vignette texts and factors*

The first vignette concerns the division of housework and presents the following situation to respondents (varying factors in italics):

Beatrice and Riccardo, 34 and 35 years old respectively, form a family and (*do not have children / have a child / have two children*). Both spouses (*finished compulsory*

*education / have a high-school diploma / have a university degree*). Beatrice spends *(a couple of hours a day less than / the same number of hours a day as / a couple of hours a day more than)* Riccardo at her job and contributes to family income with approximately *(700 / 800 / 900 / ... 1800)* euros per month. Beatrice takes care of almost all the housework and this situation creates some tension with Riccardo. Riccardo talks about this matter with his male friends and finds that *(most of them do almost nothing around the house / most of them take charge of about half of the housework)*. Imagine 100 families like those described above. How many people in Riccardo's shoes would decide to get more involved in housework?

The main factor manipulated in this vignette is the behavior of Riccardo's friends at home. This can take on two states: most of friends do almost nothing or they share the housework equally. In this way respondents are made aware of the character's peers' behavior. The other factors (spouses' education, wife's work hours, her contribution to family income, and the number of children) were chosen to introduce variation in key variables that can affect the DHL and influence respondents' judgements about the likelihood that Riccardo will increase his housework involvement<sup>9</sup>. However, in this

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<sup>9</sup> As regards wife's income, we chose to operationalize it as absolute rather than relative income on the grounds of Gupta's studies (2006;2007) highlighting the importance of women's absolute earnings to buy out domestic services.

study we did not make specific hypotheses about them and focus instead only on the peer behavior factor.

It should be noted that the question following this (and the next) vignette does not ask respondents to say how they would act if they were in that situation. Rather, it asks them to say what other men would do. By phrasing the question in this way, we aimed at avoiding the social desirability bias inherent in asking men about their willingness to increase their contribution to housework. We have the strong suspicion that almost all of the respondents would agree with the idea of doing more at home, if we directly asked their own intentions of behavior. The reason is that the male domestic contribution has become a sensitive issue in current public discourse emphasizing gender equality. Our suspicion is supported by some data from the survey in which vignettes were embedded. Almost all the men (83.1%) declared to devote more or about the same time to housework than the “average” Italian man. One of the reasons for which so many among our male respondents declared to do more at home than other men is probably the effect of a social desirability bias. Given the formulation of the vignettes, we assumed that, by implicitly identifying with the vignette’s character situation, respondents expressed more sincerely their idea about the pressure that peers generally exert on men. Paraphrasing Thomas’ theorem, we can say that if

respondents perceive the peers' behavior as a real source of influence, it will be real in its consequences.

The second vignette regards childcare and specifically the option, for a new father, of taking parental leave paid at 30% of his salary (the actual substitution rate for parental leave in Italy). Here is the text of the vignette:

Lucia, 30 years old, and Antonio, 38 years old, are a couple and both are full-time workers. Lucia holds a high school diploma [*as well as Antonio/ while Antonio does not / while Antonio has a university degree*]. When they have their first baby, Lucia does not want to give up her work completely during the child's first year, so she asks Antonio to give her substantial help by taking around one month's parental leave (parental leave is a period of optional absence from work that both parents can take to care for their child, during which period a parent receives 30% of his/her salary). Since the couple earns a good family income, this choice would not involve excessive financial loss. Antonio works for [*a private firm/ a public administration*] and he is [*very / not very*] attached to his job. At his workplace [*no father / one father out of ten/ two fathers out of ten... all fathers have taken parental leave to care for their children*].

Imagine 100 families like those described above. How many people in Antonio's shoes would decide to take parental leave?

The peers' behavior in this case is given by the rate of parental leave taking among the character's co-workers. As in the first vignette, other secondary factors were included in order to introduce variation that likely affects parental leave taking by fathers. We deliberately did not manipulate the substitution rate because we wanted to keep the story as realistic as possible for the Italian context. As above, we did not make specific hypotheses about secondary factors.

Respondents' judgments consist of subjective probability estimates about the vignette character's behavior. Given the numerical nature of these variables, we analyzed data by means of linear multiple regressions. The only explanatory variables included in the models are the vignette factors<sup>10</sup>. Given the randomized research design, respondents' characteristics such as age or education do not need to be controlled for because they are randomly distributed across vignette's factors. Therefore, they cannot bias the effects of the factors on the vignette's evaluation.

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<sup>10</sup> Our analyses are focused only on the main effects of peer behavior, without considering possible interactions with other vignette's factors, as such interactions are beyond the scope of this article. The pairwise combinations of the peer behavior factors with the other vignettes' factors are shown in Appendix.

## 5. Results

Results from analyzing the first vignette are presented in Table 3. The coefficient of the peers' behavior variable indicates that when friends share housework equally (instead of doing almost nothing at home), the expected probability of an increase in the character's domestic behavior rises by about 6 percentage points. This effect is entirely in line with our hypothesis applied to domestic work, even if not so large in magnitude.

[Table 3 about here]

From the analysis of the second vignette, reported in Table 4, we obtained another confirmation of our hypothesis. The coefficient of peers' behavior is also positive and significant in the case of parental leave taking. For each 10% increase in the proportion of colleagues who already took parental leave, the expected probability that the character will also take leave rises by 1.8 percentage points. Given the range of the peers' behavior variable, this implies that the probability can rise up to 18 points in the hypothetical case that the proportion of leave takers changes from none to 100%. Here



as in the previous case, the effect is significant and in line with the hypothesis, even if it is not very large<sup>11</sup>.

[Table 4 about here]

To sum up, both vignettes' findings support our hypothesis: according to our male respondents, men's propensity to devote time to domestic work or childcare increases if peers spend more time in these tasks.

## *6. Discussion and conclusions*

This paper focuses on a never-studied determinant of the DHL: the peers' behavior. We consider an egalitarian DHL as a social innovation, and as such it can be studied. Our findings are in line with expectations, even if the effects are small in magnitude. What

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<sup>11</sup> We also ran another regression after recoding the proportion of colleagues into three categories (0%-30%, 40%-60%, 70%-100%). Results (not reported but available upon request) show that the probability of taking the parental leave does not further increase when the proportion of colleagues is 70%-100% instead of 40%-60%.

are the possible explanations? It must be considered that the visibility of peers' behavior is doubtless an important factor affecting the diffusion of innovations, but it is not the only one: according to Rogers (1962), other relevant factors also matter. In the specific case of the diffusion of an egalitarian DHL, two of these factors work *against* the adoption of the new behavior, particularly in the Italian context, and consequently contribute to lowering a possible positive effect of the peer group. This is an important issue for the discussion of our findings, as it contributes to explain their low magnitude. The first factor is relative advantage, or *readiness* condition (Lesthaeghe and Vanderhoeft 2001): the degree to which an innovation is superior to previous ideas or behaviors it supersedes. Rogers stated that this is often the most important factor affecting the rate of adoption. From men's point of view, it is hard to find an immediate relative advantage from increasing their housework time. This choice would produce a reduction of paid work time, with a consequent loss of income, and/or of time devoted to leisure, personal care and rest, all activities that people are usually happy to engage in. The main plausible reason for men to do more at home could be the increase in their partner's satisfaction because of the lightening of her domestic tasks, which could have a positive effect on the couple relationship and, in the long run, on union stability. However, many (or at least some) women do not seem really interested in receiving more help with the chores. According to a well-known paradox highlighted by much

research (see, e.g., Kawamura and Brown 2010), most women are satisfied with their housework division even if they do most of the domestic tasks. Thus, an egalitarian male domestic contribution is not a necessary condition for their satisfaction. As regards care work, the picture differs to some extent: spending time with children can be a greater source of personal and emotional gratification than spending time in cooking and cleaning the house. The relative advantage of the former is thus larger than the latter. However, not all men are probably really interested in the gratification derived from care work, and those who actually are (the so-called “new fathers”, young and well-educated people, e.g., Ruspini 2011), mostly engage in interactive play activities with their children rather than in routine physical care. The lack of relative advantage in adopting an egalitarian DHL probably weakens the expected peer effect in our findings. The second factor working against the diffusion of an egalitarian DHL is compatibility, or *willingness* condition in the terms used by Lesthaeghe and Vanderhoeft (2001): the degree to which innovative ideas or behaviors are consistent with existing values, past experiences and needs of the potential adopters. An innovation that is scarcely compatible with the cultural norms of a society will have a slower diffusion than a compatible one. Italy has a traditional culture as regard housework and more in general gender roles, and low levels of gender equality (European Institute for Gender Equality 2015). This is also attested by the Italian female employment rate, among the lowest in

Europe: in 2016 only Greek women had a lower rate, and Italian women are much more likely to be full-time homemakers than women from other European countries (Bettio *et al.* 2013; Eurostat 2018, see the Labor Force Survey Main Indicators). Current Italian cultural values do not yet support an egalitarian DHL, and this contributes to explain the low magnitude of our findings. It is also necessary to consider the important role still played in Italian society by the Catholic Church, whose doctrine supports a traditional gender division of roles and responsibilities within the family (Voicu *et al.* 2009). Moreover, according to Rogers the diffusion of an innovation is quicker if it is not so far from previously adopted ideas or behaviors. However, as is clear from the data presented in the section devoted to the motivation of this study, an innovation like an egalitarian DHL is very distant from the current domestic arrangements of the great majority of Italian couples.

In sum, two relevant factors affecting the rate of adoption of an innovation are expected to work against the diffusion of an egalitarian DHL, thus reducing the expected positive effect of the peer behavior. This helps to understand why the effects found in our analysis are in line with the hypothesis, but not so large in magnitude. Another reason, but only related to the peer effect on childcare, must be considered. As already mentioned, in Italy the substitution rate of parental leave is very low, only 30% of the salary. This fact discourages men from taking leave, since they are often still the main

breadwinners in the family (Kaufman 2017). Thus, even a positive example by peers has a limited effect in comparison with the concrete possibility of a strong reduction in the family's standard of living. All in all, our results do not mean that the peer effect on the DHL does not count at all. On the contrary, in our opinion the peer effect is not negligible, since it encourages greater male domestic contribution notwithstanding the negative effect of other important factors influencing the adoption of an egalitarian DHL and the poor substitution rate of Italian parental leave.

A limitation of our work should be acknowledged. It regards the correspondence between the respondents' actual domestic behavior and their evaluation about the domestic choices of the vignettes' characters in an abstract situation. In this case, the strength of the vignette method lies in the manipulation of theoretically relevant factors affecting the respondents' opinion about a hypothetical behavior, in order to assess their causal effects. However, since vignettes depict hypothetical situations, it cannot be taken for granted that the same factors will act in the same way in real life situations. In other words, the vignette method has a problem of external validity. Some research has shown that vignettes are related to real-life behavior (e.g., Horne 2003; Ganong and Coleman 2005;2006; Hainmueller *et al.* 2015). However, there can be no doubt that the nexus between respondents' vignette evaluations and their actual domestic behavior has still not been fully specified. Other scholars have pointed out this problem (Bernstein

and Crosby 1980; Kluwer 1998), but they nevertheless maintained that the advantages of the vignette method outweigh its disadvantages (see also Duncan 2008 for good reasons to prefer causally robust methods despite their external validity problems). In line with this reasoning, we think that vignettes are worth further application in the housework domain, in particular when investigating peers' behavior.

In conclusion, the findings of this study show a significant effect of peer behavior on men's propensity towards household labor. The small size of the effect reveals that in the Italian context the road towards real change in the male domestic and care contribution is probably still long. In our expectations, peers should count more in countries with fewer gender inequalities than Italy. This is also in line with the theorization put forth by Esping-Andersen and Billari (2015), according to which the diffusion of gender egalitarianism should be quicker in less stratified societies, where barriers among different social groups are lower. In these countries there is more compatibility between their cultural norms and an egalitarian DHL; accordingly, this innovation is more meaningful and produces less insecurity in the potential adopters. Therefore, it should be important to focus more scholarly attention on the peer group effect on the DHL in different institutional and cultural contexts.

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Table 1. Daily minutes spent in household labor, mean division of household labor (woman's share) and % of non-traditional couples in Italy

	Women	<i>N</i>	Men	<i>N</i>
All domestic tasks <sup>a</sup> (time)	322	10590	99	10546
Woman's share <sup>b</sup>	79%	10369		10369
% non-traditional couples (woman's share <= 55%)	14%	10369		10369
Routine tasks <sup>c</sup> (minutes)	276	10590	38	10546
Woman's share <sup>b</sup> (%)	88%	10325		10325
% non-traditional couples (woman's share <= 55%)	7%	10325		10325
Childcare tasks <sup>d</sup> (minutes)	107	3295	45	3267
Woman's share <sup>b</sup>	72%	2779		2779
% non-traditional couples (woman's share <= 55%)	26%	2779		2779

Source: 2008-09 Italian Time Use Survey, authors' calculations.

Notes: <sup>a</sup>: it includes shopping; <sup>b</sup>: excluding couples where both partners spent zero time; <sup>c</sup>: cooking, cleaning, tidying, washing dishes, laundry, ironing; <sup>d</sup>: calculated on couples with at least one child aged less than 14 years.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of vignette and telephone survey samples (men only)

Variable	Vignette sample			Telephone survey sample		
	M	SD	Range	M	SD	Range
Age	43.10	5.78	29-63	43.12	5.62	29-67
Less than secondary educ.	0.25	0.43	0-1	0.30	0.46	0-1
Upper secondary educ.	0.47	0.47	0-1	0.45	0.50	0-1
University educ.	0.28	0.45	0-1	0.25	0.43	0-1
Monthly net individual income	2129.80	973.22	500-5000	2055.36	946.74	500-5000
Weekly work hours	45.24	9.75	14-98	45.52	10.28	12-105
Husband's % of routine tasks	30.11	16.50	0-96	29.16	15.98	0-96

Table 3. Regression analysis of vignette 1: effect of peers' behavior on male housework involvement

	Coef.	Std. Err.	P value
Friends' domestic behavior (ref: do almost nothing)			
Friends share housework equally	5.68	2.48	0.023
Wife's paid work time (ref.: 2h less than husband)			
Same hours as husband	1.76	3.01	0.558
Two hours more than husband	-3.34	3.04	0.273
Children at home (ref.: none)			
One child	-3.30	3.02	0.275
Two children	-5.66	2.97	0.057
Spouses' education (ref.: both tertiary educ.)			
Both less than secondary educ.	3.79	2.91	0.193
Both secondary educ.	1.67	3.07	0.587
Wife's income (centred)/100	0.06	0.36	0.875
Constant	43.59	3.52	0.000
Adj. R2	0.02		
N	313		

Note: dependent variable is the perceived probability (0-100) that the vignette character will increase his housework participation.

Table 4. Regression analysis of vignette 2: effect of peers' behavior on male parental leave taking

	Coef.	Std. Err.	P value
% colleagues who already took parental leave (*10)	1.79	0.41	0.000
Husband's attachment to work (ref.: high)			
Low	8.40	2.73	0.002
Work sector (ref: private firm)			
Public administration	6.07	2.72	0.026
Husband's education (ref.: tertiary educ)			
Secondary educ.	-3.17	3.40	0.352
Less than secondary educ.	3.10	3.34	0.353
Constant	41.99	3.84	0.000
Adj. R2	0.09		
N	313		

Note: dependent variable is the perceived probability (0-100) that the vignette character will take one month's parental leave.

## Appendix

Table A1. Vignette one: pairwise combinations of peer behavior and other vignette factors (frequency distributions)

		Friends do almost nothing	Friends share housework equally
Children at home	Two	50	56
	One	44	51
	None	52	60

		Friends do almost nothing	Friends share housework equally
Spouses' education	Both less than secondary educ.	48	62
	Both secondary educ,	43	47
	Both tertiary educ.	55	58
Wife's paid work time	Same hours as husband	50	53
	Two hrs less than husband	39	67
	Two hrs more than husband	57	47
Wife's income (€/month)	700	13	7
	800	5	17
	900	9	18
	1000	9	16
	1100	11	6
	1200	15	13
	1300	13	18
	1400	10	14
	1500	11	13
	1600	14	15
	1700	16	13
1800	20	17	

Table A2. Vignette two: pairwise combinations of peer behavior and other vignette factors (frequency distributions)

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Husband's attachment to work

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% colleagues who already took parental leave	High	Low
0	15	21
10	13	15
20	9	9
30	12	18
40	9	14
50	23	8
60	13	11
70	7	19
80	19	14
90	15	18
100	15	16

Husband's work sector

% colleagues who already took parental leave	Private firm	Public administration
0	20	16
10	13	15
20	12	6
30	13	17
40	10	13
50	16	15
60	16	8
70	16	10
80	12	21
90	18	15

100                      11                      20  
 Husband's education

% colleagues who already took parental leave	Less than secondary educ.	Secondary educ	Tertiary educ
0	11	15	10
10	13	5	10
20	8	3	7
30	11	9	10
40	6	7	10
50	11	12	8
60	12	8	4
70	8	12	6
80	14	12	7
90	7	11	15
100	12	10	9