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This is the author's manuscript

Original Citation:

Availability:

This version is available http://hdl.handle.net/2318/1841093 since 2024-05-28T08:34:59Z

Publisher:

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12 October 2024

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Longitudinal Qualitative Research for Studying Work-Family Balance (Before and After Childbirth)

1. Introduction

In the dynamic of the relationship between families and social change, the transition to parenthood is a crucial phase, when the previous gender division of paid and unpaid work and the existing work-family balance within the couple must be re-examined from the ground up. In all Western countries, the social and cultural meaning of 'parenthood' has changed profoundly (Furedi, 2001; Faircloth et al. 2015; Daly 2015). Three major transformations have taken place (Long et al. 2018). The first concerns *if* one becomes parent, that is, becoming parents is no longer taken for granted, as it was in the past, but is the result of a "choice", of a 'wish'. Likewise, not becoming a parent, staying "child-free", as they say, is also a choice.
Second, *when* people become parents for the first time has changed. Postponing, and having fewer children, is one of the main characteristics of becoming parents nowadays. Third, *how* people become parents and child-parent relationships have changed. This transformation is two-fold. The rise of conjugal instability, on the one hand, and the spread of Assisted Reproductive Technologies, on the other hand, have increased the ways (and the opportunities) of becoming parents or experiencing parenthood over the life course. In addition, what has changed is the 'how', in terms of the essence (or the substance) of being parents, the cultural and social meaning of becoming a parent, or the "stuff" of parenthood, as La Rossa and La Rossa (1981) phrased it. This process has brought about what it is called the new 'culture of intensive' parenthood (Hays 1996; Faircloth *et al*. 2015), which mirrors the 'new childhood' culture (Qvortrup, 2005; Lister 2006). Nowadays, parents are expected to do much more than just raise their children and take care of them. How parents nurse or feed their children, what time they put them to bed, what they read to them or how they play with them, what rules they set, if, when and for how long they let them go out to play or leave them with grandparents or a baby-sitter: everything is thought out, pondered, and discussed; everything comes under the precise – but often contrasting – guidance of the experts (Musumeci and Naldini 2017).

This new "culture of parenthood" not only calls for "intensity", but it operates at different levels, and it throws light on stark cultural and social contrasts, affecting women in particular (Naldini, 2015b). On the employment side, motherhood and work have become two life experiences that women must balance and hold together. Women are expected to be in paid work and to reconcile work and family and both women and men are requested to conform to the "unconditional adult worker" model (Lewis 2006a). As argued by Hays (1996, p. xiii) the relationships between 'intensive mothering and the work place logic is not easy; limited access to parental leaves, not enough flexible working hours,

shortage of day-care centres and a lack of control over their workload may make it harder for mothers and fathers to respond to the changing needs of their families and the demands coming from being parents (Gornick and Meyers 2003).

To sum up, the changes in if, when and how to become parents, and above all the substance of becoming parents, take place as part of a social construction of parenthood that is permeated by the economic, cultural and institutional context where it concretely unfolds. And these contexts have undergone equally significant changes. The experiences and life courses of young men and women before the arrival of the first child have also changed, with a degree of convergence between the two genders that has never been seen before, in terms of the time and resources invested in education, sexual relations and intimacy, and training and work experience. Yet, it seems that to become first time parents mark a difference in the balance of work and family life. Timely, contemporary qualitative longitudinal research have become more widely available and an increasingly fruitful area of research especially when it comes to understanding and to assessing change and persistence of gender separate spheres in a life course perspective.

In this chapter after analyzing the literature on the relation between transition to parenthood and work family balance (section 2), I illustrate the theoretical and methodological challenges of a longitudinal qualitative study of transition to parenthood and work-family balance in the Italian context (section 3). Throughout the discussion of the main framework, the research design, results, and practices involved in data analysis two different broad issues will be addressed (section 4).

2. **Transition to parenthood and work-family life: what do we know?**

International studies on the changes in gender relations, between family and work, often speak of these changes as being a revolution, but one that is "incomplete" (Gerson, 2010), or "stalled" (Hochschild, 1989): a revolution that has stopped short at the threshold of the family home, since most of the changes have taken place in women's participation in paid work, but not in men's participation in unpaid household work. In addition, international studies on work-family gender differences have pointed to a major gap between attitudes and actual behaviors (Grunow and Evertsson, 2016). Men and women would like greater equity in both the family and the job market, at least at the level of social desirability, than they are in fact able to achieve. This gap, which in a certain sense holds out hope for change as well as providing fertile ground for contradictions, would also appear to emerge for men in the new models of fatherhood, an "intimate fatherhood" that calls for "involved fathers" and "caring fathers", but which is more often announced and desired than actually practiced, while mothers continue to shoulder most of the childcare – and most of the housework (Dermott 2008; Miller, 2005; 2011).

Though there is an extensive literature on the representations, the "discourses" and the experiences of motherhood and fatherhood at the international level (Hobson and Morgan 2002, Miller 2010; 2011, Timescapes 2011), and, more recently, in Italy (Ruspini, 2006; Murgia e Poggio 2011, Magaraggia 2013; 2015), few scholars have focused on how crucial the transition to parenthood is, not only because of the major symbolic and material redefinition it entails in men's and women's life courses, but also because of the macro-level implications for demographic and economic equilibrium that have been emphasized in the literature (Ferrera, 2008 Esping-Andersen, 2010), and its

repercussions on inequality, and on gender inequality in particular. As a number of international studies (Fox 2009; Grunow and Evertsson, 2016) have pointed out, however, this move towards convergence slows and stops at a certain point in the life course, and specifically when the first child is born. Pronounced asymmetries between men and women come to the surface or are reinforced upon the arrival of the first child. This, indeed, is a major decision that calls for an intense, continuous process of adaptation: a re-definition of the priorities assigned to work and the family. Though the scenario doubtless differs from that faced by past generations, becoming parents in western societies today still means different things for men and women, because the investments that they make – or that are expected of them – in paid work, housework and childcare are still different. As several international studies have shown (Fox 2009; Grunow et al. 2012; Grunow and Evertsson, 2016; 2019), it is in the period between expecting a baby and the first years of the child's life that gender expectations show their full force, and some of the most significant processes in the social reproduction of gender inequalities come into play. This is the period when new models can be tried out, "undoing gender" and making room for change, since it is during this life-phase that previous gender roles an allocation of paid and unpaid work, the existing work-family balance are re-defined. Precisely because this period is so crucial, the focus must be on the dynamic and on the development of what happens in the couple before and after childbirth in term of work and family life. In order to understand the dynamic and the change over time we need to collect and analyze longitudinal data (Naldini, 2015a, 2015b).

3. The Longitudinal Qualitative Study of couples in Italy: theoretical and methodological challenges

Against the backdrop of change and continuity described in studies of the transition to parenthood and in studies on gender division of balancing work and family, the study that I use in this chapter, as the basis of a number of theoretical and methodological reflections, has been conducted in a specific institutional context which has been labeled 'familism by default' (Saraceno and Keck 2010). This context is far from being family-friendly (Fine-Davis et al. 2004; Naldini and Saraceno 2011), not only for mothers, but also for fathers (Magaraggia 2013; Murgia e Poggio, 2011; Musumeci and Santero, 2018). Italy is a social and cultural context defined by norms, values and orientations that support specific ways of representing, thinking about and "staging" motherhood and fatherhood, encouraging gender-specific expectations and practices (Bertolini et al. 2016; Naldini, 2015b). Within this institutional and cultural context, and despite the fact that the life course of young women and men are becoming more similar, two main questions were raised. First, how does the arrival of a child contribute to reproducing gendered divisions of labor? When are these divisions undone?
Second, why do more democratic and egalitarian models of relationships in the couple and the family fail to translate into a more equal division of housework and parenting practices? And thus, in a more gender balance between work and family life. What kind of study and which type of methodology are more suitable to answer to these questions?

3.1. Project and Research Design

The study I am going to discuss in this chapter stems from a wider research project which focused on the transition to parenthood in dual earner couples in order to understand how male and female gender

models are "done" and "undone" (Naldini, 2015a). To do so, it employed different analytical lenses (those of the sociology of the family and of sociology of work, developmental and psychodynamic psychology, and, lastly, demographics) and both quantitative and qualitative investigative tools. The transition to parenthood was the primary object of the research project, with a focus on the changes in what is expected by and from future parents and new parents, as well as the interdependence between the spheres of family and work, and between the gender "convergences" – or lack thereof – between men and women, fathers and mothers, between family and work. The research design sought to establish a dialog between qualitative and quantitative research as well as between different theoretical and disciplinary perspectives.[1]

3.2 Theoretical Frameworks: gender approach and a life course perspective

Given the complex nature of the phenomenon, and given the characteristics of the research group, the study could not draw on a single, uniform theoretical corpus (Naldini, 2015b)[2]. However, certain perspectives undoubtedly came to the fore in guiding our work, and were used to explain the production and reproduction of gendered divisions of family and work responsibilities.

First, we used a **life course perspective** which combines the micro dimension of the paths taken by the individuals and the couple with the macro dimension of the surrounding contexts. Analyzing the transition to parenthood with a life course approach (Elder, 1985; Saraceno, 2001; Elder 2003), means going beyond "individualist" paradigms. The multidimensional approach to the life course helps in capturing the notion of time implied in social change, and in bridging the micro and the macro and the complex relationship between economic and institutional systems of life courses of individuals and families. Social change, as seen from the life course perspective, implies the notion of time and lies at the intersection of three axes: individual time, generational time, and historical time. Conceptualizing and measuring the life course as a bundle of interdependent trajectories, marked by events and turning points, whose development is intertwined with the trajectories of other "linked" individuals, is very important when the unit of analysis is couples' "trajectories" during a transition.

Second, we adopt a **gender** approach. The category of gender, as you all know, is applied in many areas of study. Seen as both a 'social construction' (Piccone Stella and Saraceno 1996), and as a structure centering on the reproductive arena which is constructed in relationships and everyday

[1] The project is entitle ' Practices and Policies around Parenthood. Work-family balance and childcare in multicultural contexts", and is funded by the University of Turin and by the Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo as part of the "Progetti di Ricerca Ateneo 2011" framework, Principal Investigator Manuela Naldini). It is also part of the work of a European network, the TransParent International research cooperation for studies on the transition to parenthood, http://www.transparent-project.com. Specifically, the qualitative investigation was based on two studies: 1) a longitudinal qualitative survey of the transition to the first motherhood and fatherhood with interviews of dual earner couples carried out at two points in time, before and after the birth of the child (90 interviews with Italian couples and 28 with foreign-born couples); 2) a qualitative study with "homosocial" focus groups (i.e., five focus groups involving fathers and two focus groups involving mothers) with children aged 0-6. The study was carried out in Torino and its metropolitan area.

[2] Rather, we opted to apply multiple theoretical perspectives that operate at several micro and macro levels of analysis. Essentially, we took a multidisciplinary approach (the study involved psychologists and a demographer, as well as sociologists) to the pursuit of multiple approaches.

practices by 'doing gender' (West and Zimmerman 1987; Connell 2006), it is central to any discussion of motherhood and fatherhood.

The transition to parenthood is a particularly important area for investigating how gender roles change – or do not change – in contemporary societies, which in other respects show many similarities in what men and women experience along the long road to adulthood (Deutch 1999; Grunow et al. *2012).*

It is in this stage of the life course, with the arrival of the first child, that men and women find themselves having to redefine, not only their own identities as women who are about to become mothers and men who are about to become fathers, but also their priorities as regards work and the family in an institutional and cultural context that assigns different roles to mothers and fathers.

In the attempt to adopt an integrated theoretical framework inspired by the life course and gender perspectives while drawing together all of the various micro and macro factors and cultural, institutional and material factors, we anchored our efforts in the work of the scholars who have focused on integrative approaches (Connell, 1987; Risman, 2004).

Specifically, we took the analytical tack suggested by Barbara Risman (2004), who argues that gender should be considered as a social structure, on the same plane as politics and economics. According to Risman, gender is thus embedded in every aspect of society, and is multidimensional in nature, though analytically we can distinguish between three different levels at which it operates. These are also the levels at which gender inequalities are "done" and "undone".

The "gender as social structure" approach helps to explain that the gender structure is multidimensional and has consequences on three dimensions: 1) at the individual level, for the development of gendered selves; 2) at the interactional level, as men and women face different cultural expectations; 3) at the institutional level, where both cultural norms and regulations regarding resource distribution and material goods are gender specific. These three levels must be considered in conjunction, both in trying to explain the mechanisms that produce and reproduce gender, and – above all – when the goal is also a greater "gender parity", which means redressing the imbalance in power between men and women in society. Gender, in fact, structures and differentiates opportunities and presents different constraints for men and women.

Using Gidden's first formulation (Giddens 1984) and Connel's (1987) application of it, Risman argues that the concern should be with social structure as both constraint and created by action. "We must pay attention both to how structure shapes individual choice and social interaction and how human agency creates, sustains, and modifies current structure. Action itself may change the immediate and future context" (Risman and Davis, 2013, p. 12).

In other words, we blend the integrative "gender as social structure" perspective proposed by Risman (2004; Risman and Davis 2013), which focuses on social processes that may explain the gender structure, with the time-sensitive life course approach (Elder 1995; Elder 2003).

3.3 Methodology: Longitudinal Qualitative Study (LQS)

In order to understand change over time, it has become more widespread to collect and analyse longitudinal qualitative data. As recently reported by Thomson and Leod (2015) there has been considerable investment in QLS, both in substantive research projects and in investigating its

methodological innovations and challenges but only in some countries, mainly in UK (Corden and Millar, 2007b; Miller 2011) and published literature reviews and mappings of the field (Corden and Millar, 2007a; Holland et al., 2006). National funding commitments have given rise to a stream of work that is both qualitative and longitudinal (Elliott, Holland and Thomson, 2007; Timescapes, 2011; Shirani and Henwood, 2011; Neale, 2015). There are other important national traditions which include biographical research in Germany (Heinz & Krüger, 2001; Rosenthal, 1998) and France (Bertaux, 1981; Bertaux and Thompson, 1997), longitudinal youth studies in Australia (McLeod and Yates, 2006; Woodman and Wyn, 2015) and educational and social work research in Norway (Helgeland, 2010). In this line, to gain insights in couple processes, the collection of qualitative longitudinal interview data on both partners of couples at least at two points in time becomes crucial (Miller, 2011). This approach enables researchers to analyse how interviewees nested in couple's experience, anticipate and respond to changes. The comparison of different couples who face similar changes in their lives allows to identify similarities and differences in ways of reacting to a similar situation and to find reasons for these similarities and differences.

3.3.1 The Italian Longitudinal Qualitative Study

The longitudinal qualitative study reconstructs the first transition to parenthood of 22 Italian middle-class dual-earner couples living in Torino and the surrounding area. A total of 88 in-depth antenatal and postnatal interviews were thus conducted between 2010 and 2013. In terms of sample strategy we followed the TransParent project strategy[3], that is, we used a theory-based sampling approach, since previous research suggests that in many western countries couples initially have an egalitarian division of paid and unpaid work. Therefore, the sample was intentionally biased towards 'gender oriented' couples. Both partners were interviewed separately. The first time before the baby arrival and the second time when the child was one year and half. The four interviews per couple allowed us to get information on different topics: 1) pre-pregnancy period, which is reconstructed retrospectively during the antenatal interview, 2) pregnancy, 3) and finally when the son/daughter is about a year and a half.[4]

The couples had been identified through a sampling strategy that started with contacts and formal requests for collaboration with different organizations and institutions of the Turin area (Hospital Birth Centers, Counseling Services, centres of midwives and gynecologists). All interviewees were born in Italy. The majority of respondents (23 out 44 interviewees) were university graduates (five of these respondents also had a PhD) and this was most common among the women in the sample. The educational level of our interviewees was significantly higher than the average in the Italian population in which only 25 per cent of women and 16 per cent of men have tertiary education (Eurostat, 2010-2011). Female and male respondents in dual-earner couples had fairly similar employment positions in terms of "power resources". Most women enjoyed a similar or higher position than their male partner in terms of education and standing in the labor market. Despite this, men tended to earn more than their partner (with a few exceptions).

[3] See Grunow and Evertsson 2016.

[4] For full information on the sample characteristics see the section Methodological Appendix, pp. 229-243, in Naldini (ed) 2015.

3.3.2 Interviews analyses and analytic strategy

Transcription of the taped interviews conducted during pregnancy (first wave) and after birth (second wave) form the basis for the analyses of couples 'transition to parenthood' in Italy. The in-depth interviews were analyzed using a content analysis approach (Smith, 2000), which identified issues relating to work and care balance, couple's gender ideology and the sharing of child care, over-time between-couples and within-couple. After creating a code book shared by the research team (consisting of 4 sociologists and 2 psychologists), the interviews were coded using Atlas.ti software and subjected to content analysis. The analysis of these data is complex, because time and couple dimensions need to be compared separately, and in their interaction (change is within couples and over time).

The work was carried out in two stages. In the first stage, we drafted a synopsis for each couple. The synopsis was a sort of 'short summary' of the main issues emerging for the different topics (for instance, it was summarising how housework was shared before the baby's birth and plans for the first year after the birth). In the second stage, we identified men's and women's arguments concerning "doing gender" (gender ideology) in different areas, for instance sharing housework, preparing for the baby's birth, and planning child care. Using Atlas.ti7, the research team encoded recurrent themes and narratives about work, couple's history, care arrangements as planned (I wave) and implemented (II wave), and motivations. The coding style became more intersubjective and uniform within the research group by coding the same interview first individually, then in pairs of researchers, and then in the entire research group. The research team defined codes, primary document families, and procedures.

The interview coding process consisted of: *(1)* assigning codes to quotations; *(2)* classifying analytical categories for entire interviews into primary document families; *(3)* creating 22 longitudinal synopses ('case profile'), one for each interviewed couple, in order to summarize individual stories and make comparisons between men's and women's narratives and between the first and second waves; *(4)* creating a file containing the information from the time-use diaries (1st wave interviews), the batteries of questions about the couples' lives and their use and assessment of services (2nd wave interviews), the interviewees' sociodemographic characteristics, the aliases and the interview dates.

The list of codes and primary document families, the structure of the synopses ('case profile'), the working descriptions of each analytical category used and the general coding procedures to be followed were tested and defined intersubjectivly (see Methodological Appendix in Naldini 2015a).

The method used to define the codes was developed through a theoretical and methodological exchange with the research group of Italian team and then confronted with the other research groups involved in the TransParent project. A code book was prepared to keep track of all analytical and methodological decisions.

Qualitative longitudinal data on couples offer a huge potential but also demand a complex strategy of analysis in order to take into consideration the various levels of interest. However, as we will discuss later on, the analysis of these data is complex, because the couple and time dimensions need to be compared separately, and in their interaction (change within couples over time). In the analysis we have considered the unfolding of individual stories over time, with two specific points in the time

(before and after the baby birth, even though with retrospective information). Nevertheless, the guideline of interview is structured around the reconstruction of couple's life during the time with a retrospective approach, and prospective approach as far as the first-round interviews is concerned. Following participants as they journey through time can provide a more dynamic sense of their changing identifications and the emergence of new influences on their thoughts and actions. But many analytical challenges when you have to analyse and compare data within and between couples over time emerge. In the next paragraph the main results of the study are presented and relevant methodological issues discussed.

3.4 Main Results[5]

A life course perspective put light on the importance of time, change and continuity within individual lives as well as the interrelationship of individual experience (and/or couples and family experience) and their social context. It emphasis the micro-macro links, highlighting the ways in which particular historical periods and locations shape the experiences of age cohorts as well as differences and inequalities between individuals (couples/families). This is why before discussing the main findings at the micro level, to understand the transition to parenthood as a 'the subjective experience of personal change' of these parents we need to put couple's narratives in their institutional context.

The Italian institutional context

The transition to parenthood structures women's and men's lives differently according to the institutional context, specifically, the cultural, the labor market and family policy contexts, in which the parents find themselves and which is particularly influential for balancing work and family. In recent decades, Italian families have changed hugely: young people tend to stay longer in the parental home, postpone marriage, have their first child later in life and have fewer children (Aassave et al., 2002; Sobotka and Toulemon 2008; Olàh, 2015). In the early 90s, Italy (together with Spain) was one of the first European countries to drop to lowest-low fertility rates (Kohler et al., 2002), a level where Italy remains until today. As regards women's participation in the workforce, Italy is still below the European average, though dual-earner families prevail in the northern regions of the country, where 60% to 70% of mothers with very young children are in the labour market (ISTAT, 2011). There are several circumstances related to the institutional context which make it difficult for young Italian couples in transition to parenthood to combine family and work and to embrace gender equality in doing so. First, the increase in the numbers of working women has not resulted in a more balanced division of household responsibilities and childcare between men and women (Eurostat, 2008; Istat, 2016). In other words, women's growing involvement in the world of paid work does not seem to have changed the expectations and obligations connected with women's role as caregivers, particularly for small children. In this 'traditional' model of complementary roles and separate spheres, we have a gender culture that sees fathers primarily as earners and mothers primarily as carers. Second, all Italian research points to the centrality of the family in taking care of small children (Istat 2012). Attitudinal data show that in Italy mothers and fathers are still subject to very different expectations as regards child care. For example, in the various cross-country surveys such as the ESS, ISSP and WVS, some of which are also comparable across time, Italy is the country with the highest

[5] The main findings of the research has been published in Naldini 2015 (ed). In this paragraph I summarize some of the main findings relying on all the chapters of the volume. In particular, I rely on the chapters based on the qualitative longitudinal data, chapter II, III, IV, V, VI and VII.

percentage of respondents who state that they agree that pre-school children are likely to suffer if their mother works, even though Italy also has one of the highest rates of nursery school attendance (3-6). Third, labor market changes during a time of economic recession have resulted in an increasing number of young adults (and women) who are employed in non-standard jobs, especially in part-time and temporary employment (Bertolini et al 2016).

Fourth, Italy is an example of the Mediterranean welfare model, where in the absence of strong state involvement, the family (and the women within the family) is seen as the main provider of care. This 'unsupported familism' (Saraceno and Keck 2010) means that there are few services such as childcare facilities, and little effort has gone into developing work-family balance policies. Though Law 53/2000 on parental leave has brought about a major policy shift in the latter area by defining childcare as a parental, rather than solely maternal responsibility, it has several shortcomings, especially for parents-to-be or for parents who have an unstable job trajectory. The parental leave replacement rate is only 30% of pay for a maximum of 6 months for each parent. Moreover, although the new law introduces a "use or lose" quota for the father, the rate of take-up by fathers remains very low (Koslowsky, Blum and Moss 2016). Non-standard work contracts, which mainly affect men and women of reproductive age, are excluded from some measures protecting motherhood or supporting work-family balance, and where entitlements do exist, they are difficult to implement (Bertolini, 2006). Moreover, there are relatively few childcare services such as nursery schools for children under 3 years of age. Even in regions, i.e., Northern Italy, and municipalities where coverage is higher, the figure remains well below the 33% "Barcelona target" (Istat, 2014; Naldini and Santero 2019). Work-family balance policy in Italy is also inadequate at company level, where flexible work schedules, part-time work and "family-friendly" measures are not widespread and/or many employees are unable to take advantage of them. Hence, in Italy the dilemma of work versus family is still largely relegated to the private sphere, managing family and work is mostly left up to women, and the tensions between changes in women's lives, resistant institutions and the issues of gender imbalance are not addressed. The couple's narratives in our study must thus be set against the background of Italy's gender norms, welfare policies and maternal labour market attachment which are grounded in the male breadwinner family model and in the type of "unsupported familialism" which features the Italian welfare state.

3.4. 1. The private, family-based and "de-politicized" conception of childcare

What are the main findings that emerge from our longitudinal analysis of work-life balance strategies before and after the birth of the first child? Are parents' childcare plans, strategies and ideals/values about care before the birth in line with childcare practices after childbirth? How do parents account for their choices? And what are the main mechanisms that contribute to "doing" or, alternatively, "undoing" gender? In the figure (fig. 1) is provided one example of the analytical framework used to analyze changes over time in a before-and-after approach which emphasizes differences between 'then' and 'now'. Specifically, the framework is applied to childcare strategies and gender practices before and after childbirth.

Fig. 1 Childcare strategies and gender in practice Before and After Childbirth – An Analytical Framework

Type of couple **BEFORE**	**Plans for childcare arrangement** **BEFORE**	**Childcare strategies in practices** **AFTER**	**Gap between** **BEFORE--AFTER**	**Time Dynamic of childcare arrangement**	**Why**	**How**
(in)Equality in his/her attitudes and behaviours towards domestic and paid work	Who in term of gender and what – actors and institutions involved in the care When – timing of different phases of childcare arrangements	Who in term of gender and what – actors and institutions involved in the care When – timing of different phases of childcare arrangements	-Between plans and practices -Between values/ideals and practices	-Static -Dynamic (expected change for the future)	Motivations for the choices and the shift in the choice (what they think about)	Mechanisms (at couple and institutional level) explaining "doing" and "undoing" gender

As for the substantial results, the first finding of the longitudinal study on the transition to parenthood is that the childcare arrangements that are expected, planned and put into practice are heavily influenced by the parents' ideas about what is "best for the baby" both before and after birth.

Before birth

Expecting mothers and fathers plan for the future thinking about what's "best for the baby". The mother's presence in the first 12 months is considered "best for the baby". The prevailing model is that of the mother's *indispensability* (and *irreplaceability*): the mother must stay with the baby as much as possible, especially because the couples believe strongly in the importance of breastfeeding for as long as possible. The father's presence during the first 12 months is regarded as a *support for the mother's role*. The *experts* in this field are the mothers. This is the dominant discourse in the justifications advanced for planned or enacted work-life balance strategies, and which would appear to underlie the main mechanisms of dichotomous gender construction which result in an asymmetrical division of roles between mother and father (Bertolini et al. 2016).

After birth

Work-life balance practices: temporary and negotiated solutions to the childcare dilemma. In most cases, work-life balance practices after the child's birth correspond to those planned by the expecting couple. First 12 months. In the first year of the child's life, it is generally preferred that the mother and family be responsible for childcare. After the first 12-18 months, there is a shift towards work-life balance strategies that are more open to involving non-family members and the use of home-

based mini daycare centers, part-time baby parking or nursery schools, and plans are made to enroll the child in kindergarten at three years of age (Musumeci et al 2015).

3.4.2. Fathers' presence is "circumscribed"

A second finding is that future fathers, even **before the child's birth**, move away from the old male breadwinner model. For example, they begin to show a great deal of emotional involvement already during their partner's pregnancy.

After the birth, in any case, fathers' and mothers' narratives, like their care practices, indicate that the father's presence in daily child care is "circumscribed", and that an "alternative" model of fatherhood struggles to take clear shape. On the fatherhood front, then, both the longitudinal interviews and the focus groups (Bertone et al. 2015) where fathers and mothers discussed fatherhood reveal areas of continuity and many breaks with the past, some of which are counter-normative (fathers who take the so-called "breastfeeding leave", or fathers who cut back on their work schedules), as well as significant variability in motivations and behavior, and a group of fathers who are coming to grips with men's "dual presence" in the workplace and the domestic sphere.

There can be no doubt that fathers' counter-normative behavior is still heavily penalized, especially at the workplace, as shown by the analysis of the few cases of "innovator" fathers, both when the father's greater involvement in child care stems from subjective reasons or bargaining between the couple, and when he finds himself at home with the child through no choice of his own and, at the end, finds it tiring but rewarding.
The "discourse" on the changing representations of fatherhood is blended with an unchanging "essence", where the differences between male and female are seen as "incarnate" and thus inscribed not only in the body and in the biological differences between men and women (as witnessed by the importance assigned to breastfeeding), but also in men's and women's differing experiences and lessons learned regarding the ability to deal with care and the emotions (Naldini and Torrioni 2015).
The study shows that expectations and antenatal practices bear heavily on the processes of "doing gender", both in orienting the couple's adaptation to co-parenthood, and in whether childcare is shared more equally. Fathers' resistance to greater involvement tends to make mothers expect less of them in the long run, in a relational and institutional context where it would appear that greater participation cannot legitimately be expected.

3.4.3. De-traditionalization and naturalization: re-interpreting the constraints

A fourth finding of the study is that the material, institutional and cultural constraints typical of Italy have considerable weight, both in dissuading innovative behavior on the part of fathers, and in reinforcing the idea that mothers are irreplaceable and in encouraging a sort of "motherhood mystique" which pushes woman – and men too – to rationalizations that draw on the repertories of "naturalization" to restore the equilibria of a couple that sees itself as egalitarian.
The idea of nature, the body, instinct – especially in connection with breastfeeding – is ever-present and powerful, as well as being a readily accessible explanation, to justify her choices at home and his choices at work, to justify the "natural" differences between men and women as regards work and the family in the first years of the child's life.

Though mothers expect more from their partners both before the child's birth and after its first year of life, they tend to justify the partner's limited participation, and consider themselves "lucky" if the partner does housework or takes care of the child. Women do not call for departures from male gender practices, as even those who start from non-conventional positions tend to imagine their partners' behavior as taking place within familiar boundaries. They do not object, or at least not much, if their partners do not take paternity leave (except for a few examples of counter-normative behavior), they do not expect their spouses to be better or at least as good at taking care of the child as they are, they do not expect that their partners sacrifice working hours or their career in order to stay with the child.

In a life course analysis, which deals less with the individual life course than with 'linked lives', the constraints (the economic crisis, for instance) seem to be re-interpreted differently for men and women.
On the employment front, in a period marked by economic crisis and labor market reforms that have resulted in more atypical and unstable jobs, the arrival of a desired child would appear to reduce mother's individual freedom on the labor market. On the other hand, however, it can be a resource that helps mothers, and future mothers in particular, to cope with the dissatisfaction that the workplace can bring. Thus, while for women the economic crisis seems to have aggravated gender divisions and pushed mothers to be more invested in the family sphere, for men it appears to have reduced father's freedom as regards their involvement in childcare (Naldini and Torrioni 2015).

3.4.4 Variability

Though the sample involved in the survey was quite uniform in terms of cultural resources and social status, the study reveals a number of signals of change, and thus of variability in behavior.
Among the mothers, we have on the one hand a group of women who during the transition to motherhood redefined their priorities in favor of the family, finding a balance by applying for part-time work or reducing their job commitments, and on the other hand a group who decided, despite the uncertainties and difficulties, to stay in the labor market, not simply out of need, but also from strong personal motivations and a sense of identity rooted in their professional or non-domestic lives.
As for fatherhood, the study revealed areas of continuity and many breaks with the past, some of which are counter-normative (fathers who take the so-called "breastfeeding leave", or fathers who cut back on their work schedules), as well as significant variability in motivations and behavior, and a group of fathers who are coming to grips with men's "dual presence" in the workplace and the domestic sphere (Naldini and Torrioni, 2015).

4. Potential and Pitfalls of the Qualitative Longitudinal Study

4.1 Potential

Collecting and analyzing longitudinal qualitative data is increasingly used to understand change over time (Saldana 2003; Brannen 2002; Thomson & Lead, 2015; Miller, 2011). The longitudinal study envisioned a great number of theoretical and methodological challenges. First of all, because Italy, unlike the English-speaking world and several other nations, has no tradition of Longitudinal

Qualitative Study (LQS). As a matter of the fact, the study discussed here is the first longitudinal study of the transition to parenthood in Italy. Methodologically as well as theoretically, the study illustrated in this chapter attempts to adopt an approach that blend a gender perspective with a life course one. The study is adopting a gender sensitive approach, not only because men and women are seen in "action" and in the midst of change, but also because they are put to the test in the joint analysis of the transition to parenthood the dynamic of time change. Indeed, in-depth interviews with mothers and fathers before and after the arrival of the first child enable us to make effective use of an approach based on continuous comparison over time between men and women in an effort to interpret the similarities and differences between the two genders in terms of desires, values, choices, relationships, feelings, practices and experiences.

The life course perspective, and in particular one of the key principles in the analysis of transitions, that of "linked lives" (Elder 1995; Elder 2003), proved useful in the longitudinal analysis of the interviews. This is especially useful in couples' narrative, where it is possible to see that the work-life balance strategies adopted in daily life are enacted at the level of the couple and the family. In other words, the notion of 'linked lives' shed light on the interconnections between the father's and the mother's work and childcare careers and the two partners' different trajectories, and to see how they relate to the biographies of their own parents (in the latter's role as grandparents). In addition, the life course perspective make it possible to set the couple' accounts and their narratives into their socio-economic, cultural and institutional context characterized by specific gender ideology, welfare state policies and maternal labor market attachment.

The Italian research team had the opportunity to discuss and develop coding and analysis processes in an innovative and flexible way[6]. Collecting four interviews per couple allowed the research team

[6] The research process and practices are fully discussed in the final report on the LQS on transition to parenthood (see Methodological Appendix in Naldini (ed) 2015a, pp. 229-243).

to analyze how interviewees experience, anticipate and/or respond to change during the transition to parenthood, within the changing Italian context during the period 2010-2013. In addition, comparing different couples who face similar changes in their lives makes it possible to identify similarities and differences in ways of reacting to a similar situation and to find reasons for these similarities and differences. At the end of this research journey, it should be emphasized that qualitative longitudinal data on couples offer enormous potential but also call for a complex analysis strategy in order to account for the various levels of interest. One of the strong points of this study has been the flexibility and potential for continuous conceptual and theoretical development and innovation throughout the research process.

4.2 Limitations

Though the longitudinal qualitative study of the transition to parenthood in Italy provided the research team with a valuable learning opportunity, it also presented a number of pitfalls and several limitations some of which are typical of longitudinal research (Ruspini, 2002; Cotter et al. 2002; Thomson et al. 2003; Thomson & Leod 2015), while other are challenges more specific of the complexity of the data collected. Typical limitations of LQS include the large investments of time and money as well as the long waiting periods involved in conducting interviews, in this specific case the research team had to consider a 'reasonable' time, before and after the birth of the child. Other common limitation of LQS encountered in this study was the large numbers of personnel required and the research personnel turnover. Also, participation attrition and the difficulty of maintaining contact with participants were serious challenges (in the first wave we had 27 interviews in the second wave 22 interviews). Beyond the limitations in qualitative data collection, what is most complex in QLS is data analysis. Typically, pitfalls of these analysis are found in the absence of analytical closure, because data might not reach 'saturation' or because the analytical possibilities might seem endless (Thomson & Leod 2015). Specifically, in the Italian LQS those shortfalls became even greater due to the multidimensionality and complexity of data collected. From the reading the interviews appear evident as the stories told by the interviewees can vary among couples as well as by gender (mothers and fathers) and it is not always obvious whether more weight should be given to the couple-specific experience or to the gendered experience. In other words, you have various dimensions to take into account, since a sort of multi-perspective analysis is open to the researchers. You have individual cases that may be analyzed cross-sectionally (in the first and/or the second wave), and individual cases that may be analyzed longitudinally. As a matter of the fact, handling these data involve several complex tasks. You have the 'relational unit' ('the couple' data) which facilitate in-depth over-time within-couple perspectives as well as in-depth over-time between-couple comparisons. Related to that, you have to take into account that single interviews are available as separate text files but they need to be matched during the analysis by both person ID and couple ID

over time. You may analyze data for similar groups of respondents or for different 'types' of respondents, cross-sectionally or longitudinally (cfr. Vogel et al. 2016).

Conclusion

Qualitative longitudinal interview data on couples have become more widely available in a variety of European countries (see Fox, 2009; Miller, 2011; Naldini, 2015a; Dominguez-Folgueras, 2018; Grunow and Evertsson, 2016; 2019). Nevertheless, the challenges of collecting and analyzing such data systematically for an international scientific readership have rarely been addressed. The greatest challenges in studying, as in the case illustrated in this chapter, the transition to parenthood do not arise only in designing research, fund-raising and collecting data, but in analyzing the mass of complex, multidimensional data collected from the couples over time. Longitudinal qualitative data are extremely rich, and make it possible to study changes overtime. This study with a 'before-after' approach, illustrating the process of change and detailing the complexities of the journey. Two broad issues emerge from this study. The first issue can be told as the one of complexity and multidimensionality of handling these data. The possibilities for qualitative longitudinal interviews of couples might seem endless and data might not reach 'saturation', the stories told by the interviewees can vary among couples as well as by gender and it is not always obvious whether more weight should be given to the couple-specific experience or to the gendered experience. The second important issue to be addressed is the following: how to foster conceptual and theoretical development that can open up opportunities for methodological innovation in cross-national/transnational or cross-border comparisons of couple's interview data ('couple cases') from different institutional contexts (countries/languages)? In this perspective, discussing the methodological and analytical issues involved in qualitative longitudinal interviews brings us back to the need to understand social change as contextual and multi-faceted. Social change, as Ryder put it in 1965, is possible because one cohort succeeds another, because people are born and people die. At the same time, we can say that social change over time takes place only when different cohorts of women and men have different life courses, different life stages and different ways of living their different ages and transitions, different strategies in combining work and family before and after childbirth. The changes in the rules and demands of the job market, in legislation, so as in gender culture and ideology, in socialization models, in maternal attachment to the labor market, in social policies and in how family obligations, all change the context in which the new cohorts of parents find themselves. Contexts also change because each cohort of parents tries out new routes, new events, and fields different strategies that call for new answers. To this end longitudinal qualitative data are increasingly a fruitful area of research especially when it comes to understanding and to assessing change and persistence of gender separate spheres in a life course perspective, but a more systematic reflection on how to deal with multi-perspective longitudinal qualitative interviews is needed.

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