

First-time fathers and child care. Persistence and innovation in the Italian fatherhood regime.

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Summary. This longitudinal qualitative study aims to disentangle what factors contribute to, and what decision-making processes lie behind, the reproduction or the reduction of gender differences during the transition to parenthood. The authors first reconstruct the ‘Italian fatherhood regime’, considering rights and obligations established by the state, reconciliation policies, labour market, and the family. Then they analyse the discourses of 17 Italian middle-class dual-earner couples living in Northern Italy interviewed separately before and one year and half after the arrival of their first child between 2010 and 2013 (68 interviews), focusing on the fathers’ intentions, expectations, and practices concerning parental leaves and childcare. The majority of interviews reveal the persistence of breadwinner masculinities. Nevertheless, even in the highly discouraging Italian context, some couples construct less gendered childcare arrangements. ‘Undoing gender’ processes are influenced by care ideals, the father’s work environment, an involving career-oriented mother, and the limited availability of other caregivers.

Keywords: fathers, Italy, childcare, parental leave, transition to parenthood.

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Introduction

International studies have shown that most of the changes in the gender system in recent decades have involved women moving into activities previously restricted to men, with few changes in the opposite direction (Moen, 2003; Sayer, 2010). A novelty seems to be the emergence of a ‘new paternity’ (Coltrane, 2009; Hook, 2006) characterised by the ideal of the “involved father”, who is “emotionally and economically engaged” (Dermott & Miller, 2015).

In Italy, women’s patterns of labour-market participation have changed as well, especially for the more highly educated women. However, dual-earner families prevail only in the Northern regions (Istat, 2011). The national context is still strongly marked by the cultural dominance of the male breadwinner model (Bosoni and Baker, 2015) and by a persisting traditional gender division of housework, reinforced by ‘familialism by default’ (Saraceno, 2010). Thus Italy is a clear case of what has been called the “incomplete transformation of gender relations” (Esping-Andersen, 2009) or the “stalled revolution” (Hochschild, 1989).

In Italy, fathers’ behaviour seems still predominantly shaped by the ‘traditional’ gender role-set, despite an increase in women’s labour-market participation (Rosina and Sabbadini, 2006; Zajczyk & Ruspini, 2008). According to Maggioni (2000), fatherhood in Italy is in a transitional phase: the traditional dimensions of the father’s role (authority, maleness, success, breadwinning) coexist with innovative characteristics of fatherhood. Innovative fathers are those who distance themselves from their experience as sons with their own fathers, those who are emotionally bonded to the child, and have autonomous relations with the child (Marsiglio et. al., 2000). According to Sabbadini and Cappadozzi (2011), both mothers and fathers in Italy devote much more time to childcare than in the past, consistently with the intensive parenting, and especially the mothering, model (Hays, 1996). Nevertheless, gender asymmetry still persists: although the contribution of fathers has increased, it is comparatively marginal.

Within this context, it is interesting to see whether the ‘traditional’ gender division of childcare is still the prevalent pattern among well-educated middle-class dual-earner couples living in the North of Italy, and to identify the decision-making processes which lie behind the reproduction or the reduction of gender difference in parenting, by focusing on the life-course phase of the transition to parenthood.

Background. Contemporary fathers and reconciliation practices

Qualitative studies in European and Western countries offer insights for a gendered ‘renewed analysis of agency’ and ‘intent’ (Miller, 2011) by identifying factors that induce fathers to *share caregiving* practices in specific individual, interactional, and institutional contexts. González et al. (2013) showed that the narratives of Spanish fathers-to-be on the ideals of paternal involvement influence the timing and meanings of fertility choices. Abril and Monferrer (2014) found that new attitudes to fatherhood in Spain emerged when the mothers had better negotiation skills, when household tasks were equally divided within the couple, and when the fathers exhibited an instrumental orientation towards work. Miller (2011) showed the importance of anticipating narratives for changes in men’s orientation to work and in aspects of masculinities related to children caring. She found that, although transgression of gender norms is imagined during the early phases of the transition, fathers’ practices then mainly comply with ‘patriarchal habits’ in the UK.

To understand changes in fathers’ dilemmas between exclusion and participation (Ives, 2014), it is also important to recognize the new meanings that parents attribute to gendered parenting practices. Kushner et al. (2014), on analysing how first-time parents in Canada “culturally framed meanings of motherhood and fatherhood” (*ibidem*, p. 25), showed that women’s view of mothering may include their responsibility for facilitating involved fathering. The authors also argued that current parental leave policies do not provide sufficient income to overcome the tensions between “provider (cash) and involved (care) father ideals”. According to Dermott (2008), the contemporary view of ‘good fatherhood’ is closely bound up with new ideas of intimacy, and in particular with the emotional relationship between father and child, so that the type of involvement is seen as more important than the amount of time spent on childcare.

Psychologists have helped to operationalize the new paternal practices by conceptualising behavioural involvement along a continuum. Amalgamating Russell’s, Palm’s and Palkovitz’s typologies, Habib (2012) described five types of roles:

1. *The remote role*: characterised by little interest in the child.
2. *The provider role*: the ‘traditional’ father’s role, in which the primary commitment is to being the ‘breadwinner’.
3. *The assistant role*: largely a helper to the mother.
4. *The shared caregiver role*: co-parenting, that is, sharing tasks and responsibilities more or less equitably with the mother.

5. *The primary caregiver role*: the father has primary responsibility for the child-care.

Sociologists have shown that the transition to parenthood is accompanied by a return to ‘traditional’ gender roles (Fox, 2009; Grunow et al., 2007).

This article aims to answer the following question. How does the institutional context and the couple’s resources support (or discourage) ‘innovative’ fathering imagination and practices?

We try to answer this question by referring to two theoretical approaches.

First, the ‘doing gender approach’ (West & Zimmerman, 1987) helps to identify and interpret changes and stability in paternal involvement in childcare by analyzing how men and women *perform* the gendered division of family and work responsibilities through everyday social interaction. These norm-oriented theories have mainly concentrated on how social actors try to adhere to, or deviate from, the dominant norms on the gender ‘appropriateness’ of maternal and paternal behaviours. These studies shed light on the active and performative process of ‘doing gender’ by analyzing situated conduct that links bodies and gender.

Accordingly, the changes in fathers’ involvement in Western societies have been conceptualized within the frame of the pluralization of ‘*masculinities*’ (Aboim, 2010; Connell, 1995), the broadest set of self- and hetero-perceptions, behaviours, and gender norms that affect men and their ongoing gender identity. Connell (1995) explained that a variety of ‘masculinities’ can coexist at the same time, although one of them tends to prevail or dominate.

More recently, Deutsch (2007) has shown the importance of conceptualizing unexpected kinds of behaviours as processes through which gender is ‘undone’, and not simply as different forms of masculinities.

Second, criticisms have highlighted the need to consider gender as a social structure in order better to specify the need for multiple levels of analysis of gender (Risman, 2009). The first ‘doing gender’ framework was closely based on interactional analysis (West and Zimmerman, 1987), and it was seen as incompatible with a structural perspective (Risman & Davis, 2013). More recently, the focus has been on specific practices of doing and undoing gender in institutional arenas (Connell 1995; Miller 2011).

Following Risman (2004), we conceptualize the gendered patterns of fathers’ involvement in childcare as embedded in the individual, interactional, and institutional dimensions of society, with specific processes and mechanisms at each level. Within this framework, the

analytical distinction between ‘fatherhood’ and ‘fathering’ is crucial, since it helps to identify the ideals, norms, and practices of fathers in specific contexts. From this perspective, also the concept of ‘fatherhood regime’ is very useful. According to Gregory and Milner (2005), a "fatherhood regime consists in a set of expectations, rights, duties established by state, family, policies and national work conditions" (see also González et al., 2013): ‘fatherhood’ is defined as the “cultural coding of men as fathers” and ‘fathering’ as a “set of practices carried out by fathers” (Hobson & Morgan, 2002). From this it follows that fatherhood is configured in different ways cross-nationally.

According to this approach, ‘doing’ or ‘undoing’ gender practices of fathering may be seen as the result of a compromise among opportunity-costs calculation, preferences, and ideal plans, *in specific institutional contexts*. It studies “how men perceive their own fatherhood” and “how external expectations influence modern involved fathering, men’s discourses, and behavioural patterns” (Plantin et al., 2003, p. 6).

The Italian ‘fatherhood regime’

The Italian national context has long been marked by the cultural dominance of the male breadwinner model and by an ‘unsupported familialism’ (Saraceno & Keck 2010).

In 2000 Law (no. 53) on parental leave produced an important policy shift. It defined childcare as a parental responsibility and not just a maternal one (Naldini & Saraceno, 2008).

According to this law, in force at the time of our empirical study, if the father takes at least 3 months of leave, he is entitled to have an additional month, but the low level of the income replacement rate (30%) discourages him from taking advantage of this entitlement if his income is higher than the mother’s income: in 2012, 89% of employees using parental leave were women and 11% male (Moss, 2014). Moreover, the duration of the parental leave is not the same for all workers: six months before the child is 8 for permanent workers; three months during the child’s first year for self-employed and temporary workers.

Paternity leave (compulsory and paid at 100%), in Italy, was introduced in 2012 (Law no. 228/12) and it is only for one day (optional for another two days on the condition that the mother forgoes two days of her own compulsory maternity leave) (*ibid.*).

If we consider the organization and regulation of the labour market, in Italy other phenomena contribute to hampering the reconciliation

between work and family life: the de-standardization and, in contradiction with Keynes' forecasts (Dore, 2005), the intensification of work schedules and rhythms (Crompton et al., 2005; Naldini & Saraceno, 2011) since the 1980s in most of the advanced capitalist countries in order to cope with increasing international competition. This strategy has also been made possible by the reduction of job stability that makes workers more vulnerable to pressure by entrepreneurs (Dore, 2005). In this regard, 'work-related stress' is increasing in Europe (EU-OSHA, 2013). The pervasiveness of work is also due to the increase in the time that people 'informally' dedicate to work also outside the 'typical' workplace and/or 'typical' working day. This intensification is partly due to the tendency of work to extend beyond its physical and spatial boundaries thanks to new technologies that make it possible to work remotely (Semenza, 2014), thus blurring the boundaries that separated, in the Fordist era, work spaces from non-work spaces, production spaces (the factory), and reproduction spaces (the family), and leisure (Crompton, 2006).

Also reconciliation policies at the company level are still poorly developed: the flexibilization of work schedules, part-time work, and 'family-friendly' measures are not widespread and/or many employees are unable to take advantage of them (Den Dulk, 2001; Fine-Davis et al., 2004; Naldini, 2006).

Hence, in Italy the dilemma of work versus family is still largely relegated to the private sphere, whilst the tensions between change in women's lives and "resistant institutions" (Gerson, 2009) and the issues of gender imbalance are not adequately addressed.

When does the father's choice of childcare practices reflect gendered preferences or economic constraints, and when do the expectation pressures of others (in particular the mother) prevail? Can gender-neutral caregiving practices or an egalitarian division of paid and unpaid work be envisioned and performed in the Italian fatherhood regime?

Method

In order to understand the social mechanisms behind the decision of fathers on whether or not to take parental leave in the Italian fatherhood regime, we analyzed the daily practices and motivations that induce fathers to be more or less involved in childcare. This analysis drew on a longitudinal qualitative study reconstructing the first transition to parenthood of 17 Italian middle-class dual-earner couples living in Turin and its surrounding area. The partners, two-thirds of them recruited through

gynaecologists or midwives, were interviewed separately before and a year and a half after the arrival of their first child between 2010 and 2013 (68 in-depth antenatal and postnatal interviews in total). At the time of the antenatal interviews, the majority of respondents were 30-39 years old, had a university degree, and a skilled job in the service sector. Only in 5 couples were both partners permanent employees, while in 12 couples at least one partner was a temporary worker (6) or self-employed (6). In half of the cases, the couple's net income was a maximum of 3000 euros, and the wage gender gap between her income and his was at least 500 euros.

Using Atlas.ti7, the authors encoded recurrent themes and narratives on care arrangements, both planned (I wave) and implemented (II wave), and motivations. The coding style became more intersubjective and homogeneous within the research group by coding the same interview first individually, then in pairs of researchers, and then in the research group. The research group defined *Codes*, *Primary Documents* *Families*, and procedures. The *Codes* were organized hierarchically around nine interdisciplinary thematic areas: 1) resources and individual characteristics; 2) division of domestic and family work; 3) socialization and gender orientation; 4) maternity and paternity ideals and desires; 5) reconciliation strategies; 6) perceptions and attitudes towards gender differences; 7) parenting practices; 8) perception of the child; 9) 'transversal' codes. The interviews were analyzed by means of content analysis (Morgan 1993). In the first phase, a comprehensive examination of the interviews was conducted through the creation of synopses of individuals' and couples' characteristics, resources, ideas, and practices before and after the child's birth. In the second phase, the *corpus* of interviews was analyzed by using the analytical categories provided by Habib (2012), such as 'assistant' and 'shared caregiver', to identify patterns of fathers' involvement in caring activities. In the third phase, we identified and focused only on those couples in which the fathers were innovative, and we examined the social processes behind those practices.

Results

A first result was that discursive repertoires deployed to motivate decisions on whether or not to take leave (parental leave or infant feeding permission) were rather heterogeneous. A second result was that, although egalitarian gender attitudes prevailed, narratives on fathering practices such as 'assistant caregiving' largely predominated; only one interviewed father had taken parental leave and only a minority of the fathers had taken

feeding permissions (2 out of 17 fathers). Consistent with their planning (Musumeci et al., 2016) the typical pattern was that women took parental leave for one or two to six months (maximum by law), whereas men rarely reduced their working time. Couples seemed to take it for granted that the mother is the most suitable parent to take parental leave, consistently with the idea widespread among them that the presence of the mother is best for the child, and not necessarily of both parents.

The woman was seen as the figure with the greatest responsibility for childcare; and biological facts, such as breastfeeding, played a decisive role in this view. The father's role was seen as increasing in importance for the child's subsequent socio-relational development.

One of the arguments frequently used by fathers to motivate this kind of *doing gender* was that the work climate would be hostile to a parental leave request and that employers and colleagues would not expect such behaviour from a man.

Opportunity cost was recurrent in the mix of factors that parents cited as affecting the decision that the mother rather than the father should take parental leave, especially in relation to the current economic crisis (Bertolini & Musumeci, 2014). But in many cases, opportunity cost arguments were closely intertwined with cultural references and motivations with regard to gender roles; and in many fathers' references there were clear indications of traditional fatherhood cultural ideals, values, and beliefs – that is, of a 'prevalent' worker identity (Musumeci et al., 2016, Naldini, 2016)

Although the majority of the interviews with the first-time parents revealed the persistence of breadwinner masculinities, some couples [around 1/4] were constructing less gendered practices of reconciliation.

We investigate below the factors inducing the 'undoing' of gender and the main decision-making processes which allowed the father to reduce gender differences.

Pushing 'daddy in'

In the Italian fatherhood regime, strongly characterised by social norms which prescribe that the breadwinner is the father, and which conceives the mother/infant relationship as indispensable, it is interesting to analyze the factors pushing a few fathers towards 'counter-normative' behaviour. We will focus on the II-wave narratives of four couples.

A daddy on leave for... 'breastfeeding'

The Blumas and the Falascos were two couples which were 'egalitarian', at least before the baby's arrival, and in which the fathers took leave to feed the baby. However, in these two cases the factors pushing towards gender undoing seem not to have been the same, and not triggered by the couple's dynamics.

The Bluma's: A mummy who pushes daddy in?

Carlo and Carlotta Bluma were a 'gender equality'-oriented couple in terms of both the division of housework and planned, and then experienced, childcare.

At the time of the first interview, they were both working full-time. Carlo was assistant manager of a bank; Carlotta was a researcher without a permanent post. Because of the unstable job position of the mother-to-be (she was career-oriented and very much wanted a tenured post at the university), it was difficult for the couple, before the baby's arrival, to plan childcare and the paid-work balance.

They were looking for childcare opportunities which would enable Carlotta not to leave her job, since Carlo was very much in agreement with Carlotta's desire to continue her career. Hence, at the time of the first interview, they had already explored the options concerning 'breastfeeding leave'. As in many other cases, Carlo and Carlotta could not consider the possibility of Carlo taking the parental leave option, even though his job would allow him to do so, because of the 'fatherhood penalty' that it seemed to entail, and which was entirely confirmed during the second interview, when it was clear that Carlotta's university scholarship did not entitle her to maternity and parental leave. As for most of our interviewees, the main reason for the father's decision not to take parental leave was an economic one strongly connected with the prevalence within the workplace of highly gendered social norms which prescribe that the mother can take leave, but not the father. Carlo believed that going part-time rather than taking leave would be more manageable or acceptable for his workplace.

As a result, after the child's birth, Carlo, who conceived the father's role as that of an 'assistant' to the mother, decided to take feeding leave. The bizarre name of the measure, and the fact that its use is not widespread among fathers, can be understood from Carlo's words:

"You're a freak. What is it with this breastfeeding? Then, it's strange that it's called breastfeeding...if it had another name... You can imagine in a work environment: "oh, breastfeeding". It provoked a bit of hilarity" (Carlo).

However, Carlo was not too bothered by the teasing, and in many ways he saw the positive side of the feeding leave. This decision, indeed, was strongly suggested to Carlo by Carlotta.

Moreover, at the time of the second interview Carlo was taking care of the baby full-time every weekend because Carlotta, disappointed with her job, was attending a training course. The baby was now 18 months old and was going to a crèche. Carlo was no longer assistant manager, although he did not perceive this situation as a direct consequence of his decision to take feeding leave.

The Falascos: 'Straddling' innovation driven by constraints and 're-traditionalisation'

Ciro Falasco (employed in an aerospace company) also took feeding leave. Although there were similar reasons for taking such leave, the narratives that Ciro and his self-employed wife Carla constructed were quite different from those of the Blumas.

Both the Falascos enjoyed their work. Although Carla's job more closely matched her qualifications, her monthly income was lower than her husband's salary. The couple agreed that the roles of mother and father are interchangeable. Despite gender egalitarian ideals and practices on the division of paid work and housework before the child's birth, Ciro, like Carlo, did not plan to take parental leave although he was entitled to it. Carla, like Carlotta, was not entitled to parental leave because she was self-employed. Ciro said that he wanted to take parental leave (a desire that deconstructed the traditional gendered expectations for fathers in Italy), but he would not do so, for economic reasons and so as not to penalize his career.

After the child's birth, Carla reduced her working hours so that she could spend more time with her son and let Ciro go to work. The child was looked after by the maternal grandmother while Carla was at work. After a month of paid holiday, Ciro stopped working overtime and took feeding permission for two hours a day. The father's working hours reduction was perceived by the couple as necessary to cover the 'care gap' that his wife and mother-in-law could not fill within the family-centred reconciliation

strategy preferred by Carla. This decision surprised colleagues and friends “because” - said Ciro - “the mother is usually the one expected to take care of the child the most”, but, counter-intuitively, it was accompanied by a change of ideals concerning the roles of father and mother between the first and second wave. In fact, Ciro started to think that the mother should spend “as much time as possible with the baby”, because there is a “special bond” between mother and child “not comparable with any other”, and the “child needs the mother”.

Carla also realized that the child wanted her presence above all. She also believed that her under-three year old child needed stable ‘reference points’ (such as parents or grandparents) rather than a peer group. For this reason, she rejected Ciro’s proposal to use a childcare service. Thus ‘traditional’ positions on parenting roles seemed to resurface. This couple’s discourse and practices, ‘straddled’ (Risman, 2014) innovative choices due to the mother’s employment requirements, and they ‘re-traditionalized’ practices, discourses, and ideals based on a belief about what is ‘best for the child’.

In fact, after the child’s first birthday (limit for the daily leave), the strategy that the couple planned to implement was greater involvement of the grandmother, and the father’s return to working full-time, while the mother would continue to work part-time, at least until the child’s enrolment at kindergarten at the age of three years.

Unexpected gaps between plans and practices

The Albizias and Polis were quite different couples in term of gender orientation. Nevertheless, both displayed fathering practices characterized by a gap between the childcare arrangement envisaged in the first wave, and the childcare strategies practised in the second wave.

The Albizias: A compromise between ‘maternal ideal of care’ and the work opportunity trade-off

Giulio Albizia was a freelance worker in the IT sector. He was 41 and he no longer wanted to achieve new goals in his professional life. Gina was a social worker with a very fulfilling job. Although they displayed ‘traditional’ attitudes and a gender division of housework during the first interview, they thought it likely that the father would be actively involved in caring for the baby, if needed and for a ‘short period’ (if the mother

could not). They were both, but especially Gina, planning the mother-centred care arrangement during the child's first year. Gina would take parental leave for up to 10 months after the baby's birth and then she would work part-time. Giulio described the father's role during the first wave as "a support role" ("giving Gina a hand"). He was not entitled to parental leave. Both were persuaded that the 'best for the child' was to be with the mother, and the parents, during the first two to three years of the child's life with a supportive, but secondary, role of the grandparents (the ones available were quite old).

In the Albizia case, childcare practices were different from those that they had planned.

Gina had no other option, after having taken full parental leave, but to return to working full-time (her request for part-time had been rejected). Thus, when Gina returned to work, the daughter was with Giulio for most of the day, and for some hours with the grandparents. Giulio had substantially reduced his working time, and he had spent a large part of the day with the baby since she had been 10 months old. What were the main factors pushing for an 'undoing' of gender in this case?

First: *Care-ideals and beliefs*. Both parents strongly believed that maternal/parental care was best for the child. Subsequently, these ideas determined Gino's decision to reduce his working time to care for the child.

At the time of the second interviews, the ideas about the father's role had changed to some extent.

Gina was still convinced that the mother has a 'natural' privileged relationship with the baby and a special ability to respond to the baby's need. Nevertheless, Gina emphasized the positive aspects of the father's unexpected care-taking of the baby during the day:

"...according to me it's good, because she [the daughter] has a further reference model to take into account [...] she has experienced much more father time than babies normally do" (Gina).

Job constraints and job opportunities were re-shaped within a work context that was not too risky for both parents, and within a life-course phase that was not too work-demanding. A within-couple re-balance and trade-off between job constraints and job opportunities occurred in the Albizias' case. Giulio could reduce his salary thanks to the high flexibility and autonomy of his job, and because he had other earnings that enabled them to afford the situation. Moreover, Giulio stated that he was in a new phase of his life-course, and to some extent, he could benefit from the late

parenthood life-course combined with a solid professional achievement. He declared himself satisfied and very lucky, but he did not conceal the fact that he was very tired.

The Polis: The woman's better employment position and the construction of 'gender-neutral' caring practices

After the child's birth, Susanna Poli took maternity leave and parental leave for three months; then the child attended a crèche during the afternoons. Simone took care of the daughter in the mornings after the mother went to work.

Differently from the other three cases, the Polis believed that the roles of mother and father are completely interchangeable: a significant factor in pushing Simone towards sharing the parental role during the first year.

But a complex combination of factors explain why the couple developed this innovative (in Italy) shared caregiving model.

First of all an asymmetric employment position in favour of Susanna (a very work-oriented aeronautical engineer earning more than Simone), and consequently *her greater negotiation power*: she was the main breadwinner because Simone had lost his job during the transition to parenthood.

Before losing his job, Simone imagined taking care of his daughter for up to 40% of the time, compared with 60% of the mother. After the non-renewal of his contract, he was sure that the division was fifty-fifty. In the first interview, Susanna had envisaged the care work being divided between 35% for him and 65% for her. But after the child's birth, according to Susanna, caring was biased towards Simone, who, in her opinion, devoted more time to the care of their daughter except when they were both at home. During the second interview, Simone defined work as an important aspect of life, but put it in second place after childcare. Simone also said that if he could, he would take a period of parental leave after the birth of the child. Susanna had not changed her attitude to work as a key part of her life and her desire for career advancement.

A second important factor was the presence of egalitarian gender roles and practices before the child's birth (e.g. service-oriented care arrangements planned in favour of the mother's return to work). In addition, also in this case the grandparents were not available, because they lived far away from the couple.

A third important factor can be seen in the importance of Susanna's everyday practices and discourses aimed at actively socializing Simone into a shared caregiver role. Simone explained that Susanna strongly wanted to share all aspects of the child's care. There was a *mother 'pushing daddy in'*. Simone said that he had accepted this shared approach and that he had gradually learned to perform the same tasks as the mother. He had found that men could acquire appropriate care skills through practice.

I think, in some ways, men are unable to take care of children/ (laughing), but just as an instinct, not as the ability to do it, because if you try, you can do it. At the beginning I said "I don't know what clothes this little girl should wear"/ (smiling), and instead slowly you understand that they are things that a man can do. So slowly I learned to do the same things that she does. [...] the only thing that I can't do is breastfeed, of course" (Simone).

The Albizias and Polis cases show that a more shared model of parenting can be achieved either by egalitarian couples or by traditional ones. These two cases also show that 'innovative' fathering practices were conditioned by 'unexpected' circumstances. It is not single factors *per se* which are important, but rather how they combine with the sequence of expected and unexpected external events.

Conclusions

According to the international literature showing that the transition to parenthood is accompanied by a return to 'traditionalization', the majority of the 17 Italian middle-class dual-earner couples living in Northern Italy during the transition to the first child tended to reproduce a traditional gender division of childcare. The typical pattern was that women took parental leave for one or two to six months, whereas men rarely took it or other forms of leave and reduced their working time. One of the arguments frequently used by fathers to motivate this kind of *doing gender* – and which called into question the overall 'fatherhood regime' described above – was the prevalent culture in workplaces which regards the mother as the most appropriate provider of childcare and activates mechanisms of 'fatherhood penalty'. Many interviewees said that the work climate would be hostile to their request for parental leave and that employers and

colleagues would not expect such behavior from a man. Opportunity cost was recurrent in the mix of factors that parents cited as affecting the decision that the mother rather than the father should take parental leave (it was so especially in relation to the current economic crisis); the low economic benefits and substantially no well-paid quotas reserved to men do not encourage fathers to use them. But in many cases opportunity cost arguments were closely intertwined with cultural references and motivations with regard to gender roles; and in many fathers' references there were clear indications of traditional fatherhood cultural ideals, values and beliefs – that is, of a 'prevalent' worker identity.

Nevertheless, even in the Italian 'fatherhood regime', some couples construct less gendered childcare arrangements: in certain cases from before the baby's birth; while in other cases, a more equitable sharing of childcare between the partners emerges in an 'unexpected' way.

Innovative fathering and shared caregiving practices result from choices, reactions to unexpected events (i.e. the father's job loss during transition to parenthood, or rejection of the mother's application for part-time), negotiation between the couple's ideals and plans and contextual constraints, and negotiation within the couple on the division of family and work responsibilities, characterized by the combination of the following factors:

1. **Work environment/conditions:** These seem to play a reverse role according to the gender. The father is more likely to have an innovative practice if the mother cannot (or is not entitled to) take parental leave or other kinds of leave. A condition for 'undoing gender' is that the father has a certain degree of freedom to decide about his work, or if he perceives a low 'fatherhood penalty'.

2. **A care ideal** which prefers mother/family-centred strategies and shows a sort of hostility towards out-of-home care during the first years of the child's life.

3. A **career-oriented mother-to-be/mother** who 'pushes daddy in'. Also a male identity not too closely tied to work is an important factor inducing fathers to challenge the predominant view of the man as the main provider.

4. **The lack (or limited availability) of grandparents.**

As we have shown, it is not single factors *per se* which are important, but rather how they combine with the sequence of expected and unexpected external events.

In summing up, rather than policy support for fatherhood, given the scant generosity of parental leave in Italy, what is apparently important for

activating ‘innovative practices’ also in the context analyzed is the mother’s inability to benefit from reconciliation policies (in particular parental leave), and/or her ability to negotiate the involvement of the father in childcare responsibilities, in a context in which couples prefer care of the child in the first years of his/her life to be centred on the family.

The results suggest that considering both the context and the couples’ practices and discourses helps to interpret the slow cultural changes around the fathers’ involvement in reconciliation processes.

Notes

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¹ For a different, post-structuralist, perspective on doing and undoing gender see Butler (2004).

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