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WORK-FAMILY DECISION MAKING PROCESSES: HOW ITALIAN PARTNERS SWAP THEIR PERSPECTIVES (RE)PRODUCING THE GENDER AGENCY GAP

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WORK-FAMILY DECISION MAKING PROCESSES: HOW ITALIAN PARTNERS SWAP THEIR PERSPECTIVES (RE)PRODUCING THE GENDER AGENCY GAP

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ABSTRACT

The paper aims to explore what are the personal perspectives, towards past, present and future, through which 45 Italian partners with young children define the impact of social problems on the work-family fit and make their choices. The narrative analysis to life course shows a certain structuring of stories that is built around the parenting turning point, after which the personal perspectives within the couple are overturned compared to the previous stage. Despite the diffusion of gender equality values, the swap between the partners of interpretative repertoires based on the ability to operate their own choices tends to reproduce the traditional gender agency gap.

Key words: work-family decision making; gender agency gap; narrative approach to life course; precariousness; unfinished gender revolution.

1. Introduction

The paper aims to understand, within an interpretative approach (Schwandt, 2010), what the logics of actions are in the reconstruction of past, present and the projection of future, that Italian partners with young children do. The analysis is focused on the subjective perception of the concurrent work-family 'fit' along one's life course rather than the life course itself as a sequence of events. Personal perspectives are indeed the means through which subjects define the scenarios, the impact of social problems and make their choices (Brannen *et al.*, 2013). Respondents are Italian couples in which both the partners are precarious workers and have at least one young child. They are all university-educated and represent the unfinished gender revolution generation's children (Gerson, 2009), who assimilating the cultural achievements of social movements, aim to establish equal family relationships, in which both partners can pursue their professional aspirations and fully exercise the responsibilities of care.

This specific target is particularly interesting for a number of reasons. First, some findings suggest that the male breadwinner family model, albeit still the dominant one, would be to erode: although the number of dual earner couples is still remarkably lower both compared to most European countries (Saraceno & Naldini, 2011) as well as to Mediterranean countries (Naldini & Jurado, 2013), dual-earner families prevail in the northern regions of Italy, especially university-educated women (Istat, 2013). Interestingly, precisely in most educated dual earner couples men are more collaborative and involved in care work (Mencarini & Tanturri, 2009).

Second, labour market is marked by a «partial and targeted de-regulation» (Esping-Andersen & Regini, 2000) which affects only new entrants causing an effect of accumulation of risks at the household level (Grotti & Scherer, 2014), and which has not been off-set by adjustment of the welfare system to the new social risks associated with flexibility. In Italy, therefore, for the majority of the workers involved, especially if women (Villa, 2010), contractual flexibility tends to be tied to precariousness on several levels: temporary contracts, fewer employment benefits (training, holidays, career advancement, etc.), higher risks of unemployment, limited or no unemployment benefits, lower social security contributions, uncertainty of income, high flexibility in work performance, and limited organizational autonomy (Berton *et al.*, 2012). Moreover, whereas before the economic crisis of 2008 precariousness was mainly associated with bad jobs, in recent years hybrid experiences

have emerged, such as those of people with high educational qualifications, who are engaged in the knowledge work, but at the same time are exposed to the risk of unemployment, under-employment, lack of income and social exclusion (Lodovici & Semenza, 2012).

Third, “family-friendly” measures at company level are not widespread and many employees are unable to take advantage of them (Den Dulk, 2001). Moreover, national family policies are best characterized as «unsupported familialism» (Saraceno, 2010), since compared to other European countries the instruments of «supported familialism» as those of «defamilisation» are very scarce (Saraceno & Keck, 2011). In particular, precarious workers, especially if female, are excluded from almost all the work-family conciliation instruments existing in business practices or provided by the Italian government.

All these conditions tend to confer greater responsibility upon young partners to construct their working and family paths and this is especially true for Italian dual precarious couples who are left basically to cope on their own. In this context, exploring people’s margins of agency becomes of primary importance in shedding light on the micro-mechanisms underlying the decision-making processes between work and family during the course of life.

The analysis adopts a narrative approach to life course (Andrews *et al.*, 2008) and it contributes to the debate about decision-making processes between work and family within the couple. In my paper subjects’ decisions are not conceptualised either in instrumental and rational terms (Becker, 1981) or in terms of stable personal preferences (Hakim, 2000), since these conceptualizations don't address the issue of identity construction and the decision-making process. Rather, I put the results in dialogue with the resource bargaining theory, according to which decisions on the allocation of work and family tasks are the results of negotiations between the partners which get continually redefined in response to structural and relational changes (Brines, 1993). Since the narrative approach allows to grasp the subjective understandings of constraints/opportunities, I finally put my results in dialogue with a new line of studies that adopts the capability approach in the analysis of work-family balance (Hobson, 2013).

Before illustrating the results, I will present the theoretical framework and the research design underlying the analysis.

2. Decision-making processes within the couple: theoretical perspectives

The economic theory of Gary Becker (1981), by interpreting human behaviour as responsive to rational principles aimed at maximizing the utility of the family as a whole, not thematises the issue of identity construction, tends to obscure the procedural nature of decision-making, and ends to use gender in a prescriptive way rather than descriptive one. For these reasons, in my paper subjects' decisions are not conceptualised in instrumental and rational terms.

The resource bargaining theory provides a more detailed view of decision-making, interpreting the family decisions as the result of a series of negotiations, which depend on the resources controlled by each partner. According to this theory, women with higher levels of education who perform better-paying jobs, have greater bargaining power and are able to reduce domestic work and care, so that they can invest more in their working career (Brines 1993; Evertsson & Neramo 2007). The resource bargaining theory also assumes that the division of work within the couple doesn't happen once and for all, but is instead a process strictly dependent on the structural and situational changes that may occur over time (Crompton & Lyonette, 2005). This theory, already used successfully in the Italian context (Lucchini *et al.*, 2007), has the advantage of focusing both on the negotiation between the partners, who are in different power positions, and on the temporal dimension of decision-making over the course of life.

However, the resource bargaining theory does not take into account the subjective understandings through which individuals make their own choices: it can happen for example that a woman consciously chooses to devote herself to care/domestic work, because from her point of view she draws greater satisfaction and higher utility. It is from this premise that the “preference theory” is formulated by Catherine Hakim (2000). The author argues that women are in fact heterogeneous and that, in contemporary societies where gender equality principles are widespread, they have different preferences toward paid work and care: that is, there would be women «family centered», women «adaptive», and others «work-centered». Hakim assumes that the decisions are taken by women who are “free”, thus ignoring the structure of constraints/opportunities that affects what she calls «preferences».

Crompton and Lyonette (2005) and more recently Brannen, Nilsen and Lewis (2013) have shown how actors' choices depend on the subjective understandings of the constraints and opportunities available, which can vary according to the social groups of reference (Perrons *et al.*, 2007), social classes (Crompton, 2010), and normative beliefs related to

gender identity (Duncan & Edwards, 1999) for example.

Recently, the reflection in the field of work-family decision-making has gone further: inspired by Amartya Sen's capability approach, it has been taken into consideration the fact that the ability to imagine alternatives and the ability to put into practice what subjects would like are socially constrained (Hobson, 2011, 2013). This theoretical lens, until now mostly used in quantitative studies, if applied to interpretative and qualitative approaches, allows to grasp the gap and subjective tensions between the level of expectations and that of experiences, by focusing not only on the outcome of choices, but also, and especially, on the power of agency compared to cultural models and understandings of constraints/opportunities, so that individual agency is conceptualized as situated and individual capabilities as a process (Zimmerman, 2006). This approach is aimed at analysing the agency gap, that is the inequalities between people's power of agency, defined as the power to imagine solutions and alternative scenarios and the capacity to exercise them freely. Central to the agency-capability gap approach, as it is called, is the recognition that to own some individual resources (to be young, to have a certain human capital, partner's resources, family network for example), and to have at disposal certain institutional resources (social policies, organizational cultures, care services, collective bargaining, etc.) and cultural resources (gender equality principles for example) is not sufficient to obtain the desired achievements. The conversion of resources into substantive freedoms to make choices, the conversion of resources into functionings in Sen's terms, has to go through a sense of entitlement to make a claim (Hobson *et al.*, 2011), that is the cognitive and subjective dimension of agency which precedes the ability to exercise rights.

Evidently the liveliness of the debate on work-family decision-making processes confirms that the changes in the labour market and in the family, discussed above, call into question the traditional biographical paths, both on the side of working careers and on that of the familiar paths. In this scenario there is another perspective, the individualization theory (Beck & Beck-Gersheim, 2002), according to which are the subjects to draw up their own biographies, in a social context which is characterized by increasing risk and generalized uncertainty where structural factors and social conditions related to gender and social class are less influential: we would be moving from a «standard biography» to a «choice biography». However, it is a general theory, which has been criticized especially because it is not susceptible to empirical control and it tends to empty of analytical meaning the same category of life course (among others, Brannen & Nilsen, 2005).

3. Methodology and data

I conducted a narrative analysis on life stories because narrative practices are the privileged *loci* of sense-making. In this study, agency and structure are seen indeed as practical issues for people engaged in their local moral orders (Wetherell, 2005) in order to detect limits and opportunities to which respondents are subjected from their point of view. Respondents, identified by their theoretical significance and not because of their representativeness, are the partners of heterosexual dual precarious couples who have at least one child aged under 11, that is the age at which most parents see children as old enough to be on their own at times (Ford, 1996). These subjects represent the unfinished gender revolution generation's children (Gerson, 2009) since they are all university-educated and between 28 and 47 years old. To situate the narratives I selected couples living in and around a city in Northeastern Italy.

Specifically, my definition of precarious workers, besides the area of temporary and part-time employment, which falls within unstable work by definition in all its contractual variants, included "occasional collaborators", "false self-employed workers", and members of cooperatives. Although from the formal point of view these types of work fall outside the non-standard area, from the substantive point of view they share the most important features of precarious workers (temporary employment, little or no level of protection and contractual social security, high flexibility in work performance, limited organizational autonomy, etc.). By contrast, I excluded traditional self-employed workers (such as entrepreneurs and freelancers) because they have a generally higher level of employment stability than do employees with permanent contracts (Barbieri & Scherer, 2009). The research also covered respondents transitioning between jobs and those looking for jobs, because these periods are unavoidable in a precarious worker's career, and especially so since the onset of the economic crisis (Murgia *et al.*, 2012).

Starting with a network of personal contacts and using the snowball sampling method, I interviewed parents separately in order to grasp differences between the partners and bring out their sense-making processes. Between April 2012 and April 2014 I did 45 home-based qualitative interviews, sometimes in the presence of children, and this facilitated a more thoughtful and confidential approach. At the time of the interview, the effects of the economic crisis were being strongly felt in Italy, and the unemployment rate was very high, especially

among young people and women (Istat, 2013).

The interviews were fully transcribed and analysed using a qualitative analysis software, Atlas.ti. From the analytical point of view, the objective is to understand, in a gender perspective (Connell, 2009), *whether, how* (structural analysis), *why* (contextual analysis), and also *when* (in correspondence of such events), the narrative practices of men differ from those of women. To do this, I focused on the temporal dimension of the positioning (Davies & Harré, 1990), which is not established on a permanent basis, but is subjected to constant change depending on the time perspectives (if it refers to the past, present or future), the structural changes and the events that take place during biographical course, to the extent that these are mediated by the subjectivity of the actors (Riessman, 2001).

I therefore tried to figure out whether and how the narrator presented himself/herself as an active agent of his/her choices or if he/she gave to other people or external factors the power to conduct the action, with a specific reference to some phases that were found relevant in the narratives collected: the beginning of the story, the stage of life devoted to training and entry into the labour market, the initial experience of parenting, and future prospects. I analysed the narrative peculiarities of life stories collected, here treated as texts; more precisely the linguistic dimensions I focused on were: the *incipit* (mode of starting), the plot (organic whole of meaning), the turning points, which are events or decisions that according to the respondents redirected the individual paths (in this analysis, parenting is the event that more than others is seen as a turning point), and the *excipit* (mode of closing).

All names are pseudonyms.

4. RESULTS

4.1 The analysis of *incipit*: volitional self of women *versus* fortuitous self of men

One of the most distinctive features of the women's stories is nearly the same way to start the narration. Specifically, the opening words of the *incipit*, as an important element in the discursive production of self, is in the form of the *volitional self* (Gherardi & Poggio, 2007). With this kind of beginning, the women interviewed give way to the description of a fairly linear training program that, not without hard work, aims to professional

achievement, which is pursued with tenacity and ambition by the narrator, often since the years of high school, as stated in the following excerpt.

Ever since I was a little girl I wanted to do something related to medicine. With this in mind I've chosen all my education, since high school biological/medical related. I took a university degree in Biology, I graduated within the five year time frame and my thesis was on a genetic disease, which is what had caught my attention during high school years. (Carlotta, a 33-year-old mother of one child working on an annual research fellowship)

Paying particular attention to the *positioning* (Davies & Harre, 1990), I found that the women narrators, in the first part of their stories, are the absolute protagonists: they have clear their professional goals, they are resourceful, independent, and proud of it. Often texts contain sentences that begin with “I did” or similar, and that emphasize the narrator's power of agency. In addition, this opening words supports a narrative construction of the self of which the professional perspective is the main theme and a representation of the events as steps of a necessary path, where intentionality plays however a key role (Gherardi & Poggio, 2007). In the quote below, Erika, who at the time of interview was in transition from a research fellowship to another one, the three pregnancies appear as incidental episodes that interfere with the working career delaying the achievement of her professional goals.

I'm a doctor and I graduated in Medicine in 1986 with top marks, I then took a specialization course in internal medicine and during this course I fell pregnant with Maria. I finished my five-year course plus one year which I had to catch up on because of my pregnancy and then I started researching on a very specific field, and from then on I received a grant which allowed me to carry on with my research. I then received a one year research bonus which allowed me to work on a new field, rheumatology. During this time I fell pregnant with Antonio but I carried on working anyway and during my speciality course in rheumatology I fell pregnant with my third child Lidia, so I had to stop working for 5 months, which was compulsory. I then finished my fourth thesis on August 30th. (Erika, a 46-year-old mother of three children transitioning between jobs)

On the contrary, the opening words I found in the stories of men interviewed are in the form of the *fortuitous self* (Gherardi & Poggio, 2007): the story begins with a

suspended condition, then the entry in the labour market is presented as the result of fortuitous coincidences or otherwise unplanned events. The stories are often characterized by changes of direction and lack of planned choices.

I work in Padoa, almost by chance because I entered a open competitive exam for a full time research post, but as we all know these competitions are fake so one goes just to try them out. By chance I met a professor who's now my employer. (Federico, a 38-year-old father of one child working on an annual research fellowship)

The *fortuitous self* is presented as a contingent product, which is located in a discontinuous temporal perspective, often unplanned, where a series of events breaks the linearity.

I was an estate agent for a year so, as you can see, I did something completely unrelated to my education, that's why I think it this has nothing to do with political science or with my master's degree. I haven't planned anything because it's an in-between job, so if I'm lucky with this job I'll be okay for one more year. (Marco, a 35-year-old father of one child transitioning between jobs)

Overall, the analysis of the *incipit* revealed a picture in which women and men place themselves on the narrative scene symmetrically: women expose almost unanimously a *volitional self* and only exceptionally a discursive construction of the self more decentralized, conversely men's stories begin almost always from a *fortuitous self* and only in rare cases by a volitional one. However, this is only the beginning of the biographical narrative. As will be showed in the following pages, the *positioning* (Davies & Harre, 1990) has a processual nature, and so it changes in the life stories according to the different time frames of reference.

4.2 The analysis of plots: the adventure story *versus* the comedy

I found in women stories typical images and atmospheres of the adventure novel, in which the plot proceeds through challenges and tests of endurance, while in the case of men stories are discursively constructed on coincidences and opportunities seized upon, almost

tracing the plot of a comedy. Literary genres not only underlie different experiences of men and women but also, and especially, different subjective understandings of structural and situational contexts. These play a key role in the analysis presented because they are the basis of decision making.

Women stories: the challenge, resistance and sense of guilt

In the first part of the narrative, women tend to emphasize the burden of individual responsibility. The pursuit of a career is constantly exposed to a series of junctures and alternatives that respondents face with conviction. The choice points are numerous, but they are mainly concentrated in the period preceding the maternity: choosing what kind of higher education to attend, choosing the university studies, deciding what type of job to look for and under what conditions, whether and how to maintain it, taking the choice to have children.

The narratives of women emphasize the intentional and planned dimension of their decisions, which are often at odds with the expectations of the social context and are presented in terms of a challenge to the symbolic order of gender, which traditionally assigns the productive domain to men and the reproductive one to women. Some narrators, for example, point out that already the choice of studies has been a challenge with respect to (gendered) expectations by the birth family. Gabriella, originally from a town in the South of Italy, decided to move to the North for university studies, thus becoming the first among her friends and relatives to move away, and marking, as can be easily infer from her words, a first *turning point* (Clausen, 1998) in her biographical:

Not only I didn't know anyone within my circle of friends who had moved up north, but also in my family nobody had moved away from home. And this was the real tragedy. (Gabriella, a 36-year-old mother of one child working on an annual research fellowship)

The image of the challenge is also present in the description of women working careers. For example Juliana, who at the time of the interview was unemployed and mother of two young children, said that while she was working in Caracas at a famous restaurant in the role of head chef, she was offered the opportunity to spend a period of internship in Italy in a well known restaurant. Juliana chose to accept, because after moving in different restaurants in Caracas in order to work with the most famous chefs in

town, this seemed a further challenge that she could not pass up.

The restaurant owner had told me he knew a chef in Italy who could give me the opportunity to train in a restaurant. And of course I thought to myself: "I want to go!" I worked really hard to gain experience with all these chefs in one city, of course I can move to a different country and take on this challenge, learn another language! (Juliana, a 36-year-old mother of two children and unemployed)

In this way, women interviewed followed what elsewhere I named «never say no prescription», which forces precarious workers being constantly available and never refusing a job offer, investing in multiple jobs because no one is certain, as well as broadening their networks in order to find possible new employers (Carreri, 2015). The challenge therefore presents a content of diversity compared to who are considered, sometimes explicitly, the *other mothers*, that is, those that respond to the more traditional model of motherhood, as Cristina says: «*I think also about other mothers I've met who live... It's not like I don't live for my son. I also live for him, but there's me, too!*».

However, women stories report several episodes of resistance against the same model of worker, who should never say no, which to a certain extent and in certain periods aspire to achieve. Below I present an excerpt from the interview with Claudia, a mother of 29 years with a one-year son, working intermittently with several project contracts, where such breach is quite pronounced and intentional. Moreover, it constitutes a break with her parents, especially the mother, who does not agree with her daughter's career choices.

What my parents perhaps can't completely grasp, my mother especially, is the working situation our generation is facing. I mean that what they thought being normal, training with a company for a while to then land a permanent contract with them....is not the same for us. We could be temporary all our lives!

They offered to Claudia an important job, from which she would benefit a certain visibility and a high reward. Claudia was very happy as long as she learned that the customer had found a network of volunteers willing to do that activity for free. At this point, Claudia had to decide whether to perform the work without any remuneration to be competitive with the volunteers or give it up.

I didn't have the chance of competition, that is I was either working for free or I was out of the picture. At that point my mother told me: "You could have said you were working for free! So I replied: 'It's not fair, I'm a professional. Why should I be working for free to be competitive with some voluntary workers, which are certainly students?" "Because I could have put this job in my curriculum!" Yes, it's true. I would have this great cooperation in my cv, but I would have always remained the one doing it for free. These people would obviously wonder why I want to be paid next year for something I did for nothing last year. And my mother didn't understand this part. I don't feel very supported on this. (Claudia, a 29-year-old mother of one child working as an occasional collaborator)

The two *topoi* described, that of challenge and that of resistance, although in apparent contradiction, are often both found in the stories of women interviewed, so confirming the fact that highly educated mothers in precarious jobs struggle to position themselves consistently with respect to the contradictory cultural models at their disposal. They betray the expectations of the traditional model of motherhood by distinguishing themselves from the *other mothers*; but at some time they violate the expectations of the ideal (male) worker model, indirectly emphasizing the elements of difference from men. The rhetoric of guilt (Garey & Arendell, 1998) is indeed recurrent in the texts of women, who often feel inadequate in front of an unattainable model of "super-woman".

I've been a little depressed lately, I don't seem to be able to do well what I need to do. And as far as my little daughter is concerned sometimes I feel I don't give her enough attention with everything I have to do. (Elena, a 30-year-old mother of one child working on a temporary contract)

Men stories: I'm a lucky precarious worker!

Unlike women, men interviewed, in telling me their story before the birth of children, told to have had little control over events. Before children, the training and the entry into labour market, as well as the transitions between different jobs, rather than representing necessary and sequential goals to be achieved, are considered intertwined processes along which the construction of biography knows continuous reconsiderations. The plots are described as being marked by fortuitous events respondents have not planned or were not

conducted as expected, and that are often represented as opportunities they do not have missed.

I am a salesman in a photographic shop. I used to go there as a customer and then, almost by chance, they offered me this position and I thought to myself: these day and age it's an opportunity I can't pass on, so of course I took it. (Luca, a 37-year-old father of one child working on a temporary contract)

Exactly a year ago, I had been there two/three weeks, I had the chance to meet a girl who has a family owned printing company. She looked at my jewellery and said: Well! Do you make them? Excellent! I need someone to draw next year calendar". (Bruno, a 40-year-old father of two children working on temporary contracts)

Often the plots are rhetorically constructed on coincidences: some choices, which are taken with determination and awareness, are clearly present, but still the emphasis instead of being on the individual power of agency, it is placed on uncertainty and incidental dimensions. The most significant peculiarity of men's texts is the tendency of narrators to perceive their own narrative as a *privileged* story or a more *fortunate* story than that, according to the respondents, the collective imagination attributes to precarious worker.

So we are very lucky: we are precarious workers from a job's perspective, but a lot less precarious than other workers who, for example, can't afford to buy a house and so on. So I consider myself really lucky in as much as we can always find a job, even though a temporary one. (Giovanni, a 47-year-old father of three children working on a temporary contract)

I must be honest and say that I'm living all this quite light heartedly because I have a certain financial security, which gives me peace of mind, so I don't have to constantly worry about money. But I'm well aware that this is a major problem for most people. My point of view is truly privileged. (Fabio, a 36-year-old father of one child and unemployed)

For economic reasons, for example because they own an apartment or because they feel confident in their skills and have a moderate security to remain active in the labour market or even because their job provides some continuity, men interviewed tend to

perceive their paths as favoured by fortune or by their privileged position.

4.3 Parenting: what kind of turning point? Decision-making after the birth of children

Below I try to shed light on the micro-mechanisms that in a subjective perspective explain, so to speak, the trend of those trajectories that longitudinal studies show clearly. In case of men, indeed, to have children has a positive effect on the career (Kaufman & Uhlenberg, 2000), so that the employment rate of fathers is higher than that of their peers without children. Conversely, women who work in precarious conditions and become pregnant in Italy, are likely to remain trapped in precariousness or even worse in unemployment, especially in recent years due to the economic crisis (Istat, 2014). How do the respondents' expectations and goals change at the birth of children?

Motherhood: what kind of turning point? Losing the bearings and getting lost

I found that motherhood fits into a training and professional career breaking the linearity: before the birth of children the stories of women aim for a *telos*, which is the achievement of certain professional goals, while the experience of maternity makes such purposes look as distant possibilities or even dreams. The experience of motherhood leads in fact the women interviewed to downsize their availability to make sacrifices in the name of a particular working career. «*Let's say my threshold of doing sacrifice in the name of this work has gradually downsized*», said a woman. If at first the women stories resemble the novels of adventure in which the narrator is the undisputed heroine, upon the arrival of children the volition vanishes and the future remains bound to a series of conditions which are unforeseeable and external to the narrator, who also hypothesizes to accept alternatives earlier firmly excluded.

Claudia, for example, after a long and hard training has acquired a certain professionalism; she is indeed nicknamed by her husband «the repository of qualifications». In the first part of narrative, definitely she holds the reins exhibiting a discursive identity which is self-centred and built on episodes of declared resistance, as seen above. But when she was invited to think about her future, Claudia considers the possibility of doing the “reverse course” with respect to the objectives she had previously reported to have.

It goes without saying, that the moment we have our second child I'm prepared to get any job, possibly part-time, so that I don't get completely depressed, just to ensure a regular income. I thought of taking on an admin position, anything really, because I thought I'd be happier if I had a job that gives me a fixed income so that I know I can count on that money each month and with that I can, for example, pay for the children kindergarten. But it's not easy to find this kind of job. (Claudia, a 29-year-old mother of one child working as an occasional collaborator)

Similarly, evolves the story of Luisa, which contains in its first part the opening words of the *volitional self*, as well as the *topoi* of challenge and resistance. Luisa invests a lot on her training as a jurist in order to undertake a diplomatic career, even refusing other job offers. She recounted to have always been very sure of what she wanted to do: to give priority to her professional career. However, with the birth of her daughter, she says to be uncertain about the future: «*I have to figure out what I want to do and especially what I can do*», she said. Actually she is forgoing the diplomatic career and hypothesizes to accept a «*normal job*», preferably part-time, in order to be able to combine work and care activities, in much the same way as said Claudia (see above).

There is in these cases a feeling of “giving up” putting at stake the professional skills, giving instead more importance to having “whatever job” can provide a form of income. The determination with which women pursued their educational and professional goals, that characterizes the first part of stories, seems to vanish here. In doing so, women reproduce the dominant structure of gender. Through the narration, more or less consciously, processes that create and maintain gender differentiation (Silberstein, 1988) are activated, as we read in the text of Gabriella, in which she claims to have disinvested a lot in her career since the birth of her son, but she can not say whether it was forced to do so or it was a personal choice corresponding to her wishes.

Ironically from the point of view of the weight that my job has on my life I've certainly disinvested lately. I don't know if I've been forced to do so or if it sort of happened because now he's here (our son) I couldn't tell. But in any case I let things go a lot more, not without frustration though, or without feeling inadequate. (Gabriella, a 36-year-old mother of one child working on an annual research fellowship)

Motherhood appears as a *turning point* (Clausen, 1993), in which the narrator loses the

bearings and gets lost and from which the continuation of the story is neither obvious nor supported by the discursive construction of the *volitional self*, which is capable of self-direction. Regarding the gender *positioning* the narrators inevitably do by telling their own story, we can say that after the child birth the male model of attachment to work becomes less and less practicable, the traditional social expectations weigh more and become more onerous support alternative scripts of motherhood.

Fatherhood: what kind of turning point? Finding the way

I showed that the women interviewed, upon the arrival of children, hypothesize to do the “reverse course” and come to terms with the trade-off between jobs that give identity and jobs that pay the rent, which many highly skilled young people in Italy are facing (Murgia & Poggio, 2013), opting ultimately for the second option or otherwise saying open to consider it. As for the men in the sample, the birth of a child, although often representing a *turning point* (Clausen, 1993), takes a totally different meaning: the texts are more strong-willed because men decide that it is time for a change, they “engage top gear” with the objective of making order and giving greater coherence to their trajectories with respect to both their professional ambitions and fatherhood models, without necessarily going down in the just mentioned trade-off. In fact, in the men's stories if the narrator is presented almost as a contingent product with regards to training and professional paths, at the birth of children, the actors seem to have more control over their trajectories: some reinvested on studies done in their youth and then abandoned for years, looking for a more profitable and continuous job, as Giovanni:

Giovanni: I've been going over my philosophy degree since last July. I've taken an open competitive exam and passed it.

Interviewer: Congratulations.

Giovanni: Thanks! I hadn't looked at a History book for the past twenty years! The idea of trying for an open competitive exam to start working in education certainly answers the need to have a more secure job, a state's job, a job which can allow me more free time to spend with my family. In the past I used to think: if anything happens I don't have anyone depending on me. It felt good. Then Mirko (my first child) arrived which has meant a real change. Having to look after him. (Giovanni, a 47-year-old father of three children working on a temporary contract)

This turning point is even more emphasized in the stories of those who decided to change not only or not so much in order to invest in a job that gives greater continuity and stability, but rather to convert his professional figure into a new professionalism, which allows him to be more involved in family routines (Kaufman & Uhlenberg, 2000). Fabio had been working on research grants at an institution for eight years, until the project he was working on finished funds ahead of schedule and he found himself unemployed just when his wife was expecting their first child. At this point, Fabio decided to exploit this period of stand-by as an opportunity to reinvest on himself and turn into a new profession. He decided to attend a master, after which he conducted an unpaid internship, which at the time of the interview had not yet been concluded. Fabio, who said to be happy with this change, took this decision having a clear objective: to get a job which at the same time meets his professional interests and allows him to be a father and a husband participating in family life.

You need to have an objective, what's yours? Do I want a family or do I want a career? I made this change because I wanted a job which I like and at the same time could give me the opportunity to say 'I don't live to work but I work to live'. At the beginning my job was all consuming, but I was living alone so I could manage my time quite easily. Then everything changed: I want to give the right amount of time to my job and the right amount of time to myself and my family too. (Fabio, a 36-year-old father of one child and unemployed)

From the choice of having a child, Fabio reassembles a new order, mediating between family and work in the manner he considers most appropriate. The processes of sense making, underlying the *turning point* (Clausen, 1993), bind on the one hand to a more traditional model of fatherhood, in which the father assumes the greatest economic burden of the family, and on the other hand to an innovative idea of paternal role, which argues that a “good” father should take care of children and participate to family life, while not giving up the financial responsibilities.

4.4 The analysis of *excipit*: hopeful-discouraged open end versus confident open end

The last element of the life stories on which I put the attention is the kind of epilogue that closes the story and reveals the way in which actors perceive their future (Mische, 2009). As Zimbardo and Boyd wrote: «*Beliefs and expectations of the future in part determinates what happens in the present by contributing to how people think, feel, and behave*» (2008, p. 137). In fact, although the final of the stories is always open, in the sense that - in a context in which the family institution becomes more easily reversed and the labour market is deregulated - the future is not so certainly programmable by the actors, the analysis has shed light on different narrative modes between women and men to prefigure the future (Brannen & Nilsen, 2002). These narrative peculiarities reveal different perceptions of what women and men can or cannot do, based on structural, cultural and relational constraints, that appear to inhibit the capabilities (Hobson *et al.*, 2011) of the mothers, but not those of fathers.

The analysis has revealed the presence of several types of epilogue in the stories of women. More often the *excipit* is constructed on some hopes, through which the respondents are projected into the future. These are no real plans or projects they have scheduled, but expectations that they wish will be realized and that are hung to some contingencies. I call this way of closing with the label «*hopeful open end*». What characterizes this type of *excipit* is the presence of a set of expectations, especially regarding the working career, upon which the narrators do not trust completely, but still hope to occur for a variety of reasons related to previous experiences, efforts and investments made or opportunities that may arise from their network.

As far as the job at the research institute I don't get to know the timing of this job till about a month before. I can hope to be working every year from about January to May because in the last three years it's been like this. This is only a hope, though, it's not a certainty, meaning that usually they call me. The same happens during the summer. When the contract ends at the end of May I normally expect them to call me back also for July. But, as I said, till about a month before I don't know where I am.
(Claudia, a 29-year-old mother of one child working as an occasional collaborator)

Having started my own project from scratch, having developed it, you feel the responsibility of having something growing in your hands which one hopes one day

will bring up a group of people working on that project. We're going to be here for a year with two hopes: one to learn new things and two of creating some instruments which can be really useful to obtain an excellent level in research, we'll see in a year's time... (Barbara, a 35-year-old mother of two children working on an annual research fellowship)

In some stories, the tendency of women to minimize the ability to direct their own paths of life after the birth of children reach an extreme point, that induces them to look at the future with great distrust, as if with the birth of children, past experiences become resources hardly to be used for their future choices. While in the case of the «*hopeful open end*» women, while not drawing real plans, nourish hopes through which they can project themselves into the future, in this *excipit*, the future vanishes and becomes, in their perception, an extension seemingly *ad infinitum* of the present (Nowotny, 1994), as we read in following quote.

Interviewer: As far as the future is concerned do you have any job and family plans or expectations? On a long term prospective what do you see?

Mary: I prefer not to look, because I think I'll start studying and then I invest time and money which are not coming back. And then? Where am I? Back to square one again, because there's no work. That's the problem.

Interviewer: Do you prefer looking at today then?

Mary: I'd say so, it might not be very nice but I prefer to do so. (Mary, a 41-year-old mother of two children and unemployed)

This epilogue, which I call «*discouraged open end*», contains neither plans nor hopes. The narrator looks with distrust and disillusion at her future and consequently gives up “to intervene” on it (Brown & Michael, 2003).

We arrived last year at the end of August, I was five months pregnant and I didn't even try to look for a job as I thought, they will certainly see my belly and say: "What are you after?" And now I'm looking after my seven months old baby and I am still not looking for a job. (Monia, a 40-year-old mother of two children and unemployed)

The women who close their story with the «*discouraged open end*» not infrequently have experienced periods of unemployment, sometimes long. This kind of epilogue is

indeed expressed by respondents with evident frustration: «*So I find myself here trying to start a new life at nearly 40, and I'm still trying to have a stable life. I have nothing nowhere...*», says Juliana, a 36-year-old mother of two children and unemployed.

Overall, the *excipit* in women's stories is characterized by the «*hopeful open end*», or in other cases by the «*discouraged open end*». There are then a few epilogues in which women expressed to be capable of looking in a longer range: this ending is always open, but the women interviewed seem to face the future with confidence by developing some strategies consistent with the training and professional paths so far. In these stories, then, motherhood is not a *turning point* (Clausen, 1993). This third type of *excipit* is used by women who are the most qualified within the couple or have attained a more solid professional position than their partner/husband. This result, in addition to highlighting the important impact that the level of education has on the perception of control of the life course (Mirowsky & Ross, 2007), seems also to confirm the bargaining theory, according to which women are able to remain in the labour market after maternity leave, if they have the resources that guarantee them a high bargaining power with partners (Lucchini *et al.*, 2007).

This type of *excipit* that I call «*confident open end*», though in the case of women texts is an exception, in the case of men's stories it is the most commonly used final. As I tried to show above, fatherhood is often a turning point in which men interviewed take control over their trajectories in order to ensure to have a certain working continuity and to be an involved father. Respondents seem to succeed in this goal, so that in the epilogue of men's stories often the narrator looks at his future with confidence:

Perhaps next summer we won't be in this situation any longer because as from December, that is in a month's time, I'll go to India for 3 weeks, I'll take a group of people I have organized through the company, so the trip will give me good money, so if this first trip is not a complete disaster I will have another trip in June and another one in September, that way I'm covered for the summer. Then my wife's business is growing a lot and she'll have a lot of requests from the markets, plus she'll do weddings with the other project she's working on so I think this year will still be a little hard but after the next few months it'll be a lot easier. (Emilio, a 31-year-old father of one child working as a "false self-employed worker")

I've been in this company for nearly two years now and I see a lot of prospective for my

future, I mean long term plans because I know for example that they have career plans for me. So I see a much safer future for my children, that's for sure. (Pietro, a 41-year-old father of two children working on a temporary contract)

Many of men interviewed, although they are not at all sure to be able to maintain the same job in the long term, they look at their future with some confidence, as an interviewee said: «*I feel pretty comfortable*». However, I also found some cases that perform a different *excipit* from a much bleaker future, which can be framed in what I called above «*hopeful open end*». This type of ending is adopted by those men who are in a particularly insecure position, weaker than that of their partner, or by those who have not developed alternative strategies having invested all on a single, precarious and not very profitable profession, such as Paolo, who sees no alternatives to his profession of musician.

For future prospective I hope my wife finds a job, it would be fantastic, it would make me happy for her as it'd take a little weight of my shoulders, I hope she finds a job she's happy with, that she likes, if it's possible of course: and I hope my orchestra gets a grant, that I can get a better contract and I hope I don't fall ill. This is perhaps my biggest wish, otherwise we're all in trouble. (Paolo, a 39-year-old father of one child working on a temporary contract)

5. Discussion: positioning along life stories

The trajectories of respondents do not reflect choices and preferences that remain stable during the biographical course (Hakim, 2000), rather they are subjected to a continuous process of experimentation, in which resources and perspectives underlying social action are differently declined in the past, present and future frames. To some extent, this suggests that working and family careers are characterized by a progressive individualization. However, this does not mean that biographies are constructed by individual choices which the subjects take themselves albeit in uncertain conditions (Beck & Beck-Gersheim, 2002). The analysis showed indeed that there is a certain structuring of life stories on the basis of gender. In particular, child birth is a turning point, after which

the trajectories within the couple are swapped compared to the previous stage: before parenting women are combative, determined and perform subjective positions of command, while men tend to present themselves more as marginal actors in the construction of their training and working paths; conversely, after child birth, mothers hypothesise the reverse trend compared to the initial goals or exhibit a rethink, and their course of action appears to be more tied to the structural context; while men tend to “engage top gear” with the objective of making order and giving greater coherence to their trajectories with respect to their ambitions and cultural models. Parenting marks the temporal boundary between before and after in the stories collected, beyond which partners’ life paths appear reversed.

The life narratives can be read through (at least) three keys of interpretation, which are closely related: a) the gender dimension (Connell, 2009); b) the subjective time perspectives towards the past, present and future (Brannen, 2002); c) the concept of *turning point* (Clausen, 1993). Through them, it has been shown that not only the power of agency is not the same for men and women, but also it varies depending on the time windows of the biographical course, particularly in correspondence of the *turning points* considered decisive by respondents. In so doing, this analysis sheds light on the temporal dimension of *positioning* (Davies & Harre, 1990).

Through the narrative approach to life course, it has been showed that men and women exhibit different degrees of self-direction of their paths depending on the time frame of reference: women describe the past in volitional terms, while men appear to have more control over the present and when projecting into the future. This means that among respondents circulate the same interpretive repertoires focused on the ability of choice, but they are used by men and women in their biographical re-enactment in different periods. Contrary to the individualization theory (Beck & Beck-Gersheim, 2002), in this study, gender and in particular gendered ideologies (Connell, 2009), as motherhood and fatherhood models, are crucial in the study of life stories. The *turning point* (Clausen, 1993) represented by parenting functions as a division between the time perspectives. This event not only marks a *turning point* along the individual course, suggesting, in opposition to the theory of individualization, the existence of some phases along one’s life course, but it also represents a fairly systematic *turning point* within the couple, because it tends to overturn partners’ life courses, thus indicating that some mechanisms of negotiation work (Brines 1993; Evertsson & Neramo 2007), albeit often implicitly (Wiesmann *et al.*,

2008).

At this point I ask why the interpretative repertoire based on individual agency and the ability to operate their own choices is taken both by men and women, but in specific and different time perspectives. Specifically, I ask what kind of resources are perceived as exploitable by women and men, mothers and fathers, in different periods of their lives.

A first aspect to consider is that the rhetoric of choice, in various studies appears to be accessible for people with a certain educational background which gives them the resources to think they can build on their own their biography (Brannen *et al.*, 2002). Moreover, we have to consider that the weight and influence of these resources are however relative, because they are defined during the course of couple relationship. Therefore it is useful to refer to the resource bargaining theory (Brines 1993; Evertsson & Neramo 2007; Lucchini *et al.*, 2007), according to which the decisions about the division of responsibilities between the partners are the result of negotiations, which are strictly dependent on the resources hold by partners, primarily the level of education.

Nevertheless this study, given the homogeneity of the target along this dimension, sheds light on the fact that high education is not sufficient by itself to explain the variability of narratives. For example, looking at the way in which subjects perceive the future (Brannen & Nilsen, 2002; Mische, 2009), this research suggests that experiences of unemployment can have a pejorative effect on the subjective perception of what mothers can do and, especially, can not do, in other words on their capabilities (Hobson *et al.*, 2011). With regard to the past perspective, the argument of the educational background may only partially explain why women describe in volitional terms their careers. At a finer level of analysis, looking at the narrative resources and not only at the outcomes of choices, the combative and adventurous rhetoric that characterizes women stories makes sense only if we take seriously into account the ideologies based on gender (Connell, 2009).

In the first part of the story, women, relying on their educational background, professional skills and cultural resources through which to test innovative gender *positionings*, try to destabilize the hegemonic cultural models. They try, proceeding by trial and error, to leave the female/male dichotomy: on one hand, for instance, women claim the need to have a working career to be “good” mothers, on the other hand they do not completely adhere to the male ideal worker model in times of job insecurity who can never say no. However, they found great difficulty in resisting the traditional script and following alternative repertoires,

especially after having children.

As shown in other studies (Becker & Moen, 1999; Grunow *et al.*, 2012; Van der Lippe, 2000; Wiesmann *et al.*, 2008), in this analysis only after the birth of children the narrative plots tend to reproduce the traditional gender agency gap, especially in the case of women for whom the structural constraints appear to weigh more and restrict their ability to combine family and work as they would like (Hobson *et al.*, 2011). After having children, it seems that personal resources on which women rely in the first part of their story are less worth, while in the men's narratives, it seems that individual resources, such as the educational and professional ones, weigh more after parenting, besides the fact that, as shown elsewhere, they can rely on their partner's resources for most of their family tasks (Carreri, 2015) and on symbolic and cultural resources they get from the “new” experience of fathering (Carreri, 2014). The process of emergence of the gender agency gap is thus comprehensible by shedding light on the ongoing variability of personal, relational, institutional and cultural resources perceived as available and exploitable by respondents.

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