

Beyond (but not too much) the male breadwinner model: a qualitative study on child care and masculinities in contemporary Italy¹

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This study draws on the results of qualitative research conducted in Verona, north-eastern Italy, collecting data from in-depth interviews and examining the ways in which different masculinities emerge in the sphere of child care. The presented research takes as its theoretical frame of reference the plural conception of masculinity developed by Connell during the last 20 years, analysing the dynamics of hegemony and subordination among different masculinities present in some families. The research contributes to the strand of men's studies which analyses the masculinities emerging from practices usually associated with fatherhood. Contrary to the findings of other studies carried out in Italy in the same context, the male breadwinner model seems to have lost strength and legitimacy. The research shows that a multiplicity of social actors (members of couples, educational personnel and users of the early childhood services, employers of parents, local and national institutional actors in the Italian scenario) are constructing and legitimising a 'male helper' model of masculinity, which seems more appropriate to the context of reference than other models of masculinity and which is emerging as the hegemonic masculinity in the considered social and geographical context.

Keywords: men's studies; masculinities; child care; male breadwinner model; childhood services; hegemonic masculinity

1. Introduction

For some years now, a broad and multi-faceted strand of studies has concentrated on how, in particular social and material contexts, sets of activities, symbols and meanings are defined and conceptualised as masculine. This body of analysis, usually termed 'men's studies', is concerned to understand how masculinity is constructed in different spheres of everyday life – working (Collinson and Hearn 1994, 1996; Bruni and Gherardi 2001; Martin 2004; Bruni 2012), domestic (Connell 2005; Nentwich 2008; Ranson 2012), sexual (Trappolin 2008; Connell 2009; Halberstam 2010), and political (Kimmel 1995; Bellasai 2011; Gregory and Milner 2011). Despite the heterogeneity of men's studies, the theoretical and empirical studies that form the core of this strand of analysis have jointly yielded a plural, dynamic and emergent account of masculinity by describing the ongoing changes in gender relations that animate the various areas of society.

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This study draws on the results of qualitative research conducted in Verona, a city of north-eastern Italy, to examine the ways in which different masculinities emerge in the sphere of child care. Its specific focus is on two aspects that have seemingly become central to the everyday lives of Italian families: child care in the domestic environment; and interactions with early childhood services (Bimbi and Castellano 1990; Piazza 1994).

The work presented belongs fully within the category of men's studies. It will consequently concentrate on (i) the ways in which masculinity is constructed in families with children; (ii) the outcomes of such processes, and (iii) the characteristics of the masculinities now emerging and those that, instead, are gradually losing legitimacy.

2. Exploring the masculine in child care: plurality, hegemony and subordination

A considerable number of men's studies have recently paid particular attention to fatherhood, this being conceived as a set of activities and experiences that call into question the traditional gender models that tie the 'male' to the sphere of waged work, and the 'female' to the reproductive and care sphere.² These studies have addressed two issues in particular. First, they have sought to understand the processes by which masculinity is constructed. To this end, they have concentrated on how – in different social and cultural contexts – expectations are established, and decisions are taken, in regard to child care. Some studies place particular emphasis on the ways in which parents decide what activities and competences are female, and what instead are male (Brandth and Kvande 1998; Emslie and Hunt 2009; Ranson 2012). Other studies have instead stressed that the construction of gender relationships is undertaken not only by mothers and fathers but also by other actors involved in their everyday lives (Murgia and Poggio 2009; Gregory and Milner 2011). Second, men's studies on fatherhood have concentrated on the features of the masculinities apparent in families with children. They have investigated whether these masculinities challenge or reproduce the dominant gender order and the asymmetries bound up with it (Brandth and Kvande 1998; Lewis 2001; Nentwich 2008).

This work takes as its theoretical frame of reference the plural conception of masculinity developed by Connell (1987, 1995) in the late 1980s and 1990s. This conception has been adopted by a large number of theoretical and empirical contributions focused on fatherhood (Brandth and Kvande 1998; Hearn 2004; Zajczyk and Ruspini 2008) and subsequently reformulated by Connell herself (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005); this perspective currently can be summarised by the following points:

- Connell defines masculinities as 'configurations of practice that are constructed, unfold and change through time' (ibid. 852), some of which are affirmed as hegemonic – that is, as the most legitimate and appropriate ways to be a man. The Gramscian concept of hegemony shifts the focus to the dynamics by which some masculinities become dominant with respect to others that are subordinate to them. According to Connell, some forms of masculinity achieve hegemony through the *complicity* of the subordinate masculinities which, by recognising its greater appropriateness, contribute to its dominance.
- In a recent interview, Connell has stated that 'there is always the possibility that another hegemony may arise from contestation of the previous hegemony Probably the most important idea is that different forms of cultural leadership may appear through the struggle among different groups, models and forms of social relations for the hegemonic position' (Magaraggia 2011, 84). Some hegemonic masculinities may be challenged by other, initially marginal, masculinities and subsequently become subordinate to the latter.

Given an open and dynamic concept of hegemony, therefore, it is necessary to determine whether there are ongoing changes able to subvert existing gender inequalities and, eventually, the patriarchal order based on them.

- Initially, Connell (1995) specified that masculinities should be studied in well-defined social, cultural and material contexts, paying attention to the ways in which gender relations interweave with those of work, race and class to produce different types of interacting masculinity. Only subsequently (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005), however, has Connell specified that, in an increasingly globalised world characterised by transnational processes, the hegemony of some masculinities over others may come about at various levels: *local*, through everyday face-to-face interactions among families, organisations and communities; *regional*, through rootedness in the culture of a particular nation-state; and *global*, through derivation from transnational policies and economic exchanges.

The aim of this study is to contribute to the strand of men's studies that deals in particular with the experiences of contemporary fathers. By drawing on the theoretical work of Connell (Connell 1995; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005), the study will seek to determine whether and how masculinities now emerging in the sphere of child care challenge or reproduce the broader gender order that views masculinity and femaleness as two rigidly separate tracks entailing different opportunities and power resources.

The following analysis will concern a field of empirical inquiry which is at least partly innovative. First, the majority of studies on fatherhood have concentrated on the interweaving between work relations and those of domestic care. They have not given importance to the interactions of parents with their children and with the personnel of early childhood services. Yet the latter are by now extremely important for numerous families with children of pre-school age, and they can consequently be considered integral to the practices whereby parents ensure that their children receive suitable education and care. Moreover, emergent masculinities in Italian families with small children is a relatively new topic of research, given the modest development of men's studies in Italy (Ruspini 2012).

3. Context and methodology of the research

3.1 *Fatherhood in Italy*

A large number of studies, often quantitative, have concentrated on the distribution of care work between the members of Italian couples with children. They report that mothers devote a much greater amount of time to such work than fathers, both in double-income couples and, even more so, in those in which the mother is not in paid employment. ISTAT (2012) data show that, among Italian couples, in 41% of cases it is the woman who undertakes all the childcare activities in the household. In 32.9% of cases the percentage ranges between 51% and 99% of the workload, with a total of 73.9% cases in which the mother performs more than half the care work.

In recent years, various contributors have stressed the deepening of these inequalities, focusing on practices and representations that seem to characterise Italian fathers. Several studies have described the main features of the so-called 'new fathers': more involved in childcare, and in the emotional sphere previously attributed exclusively to mothers (Kollind and Björnberg 1996; Zanatta 2011). On the other hand, scholars have underlined how traditional fatherhood, in which fathers do not participate in childcare (or do it very partially), is still common (Bimbi and Castellano 1990; Ventimiglia 1996; Zajczyk and Ruspini 2008; Bosoni

2011). Zanatta, for example, shows that paternal roles have been changed with the organisation of the labour market and of familiar structures. The author argues how in Italy some remarkable changes (the affirmation of the nuclear family, the gradual entrance of women into the workforce, the diffusion of dual-earner couples and so on) have led to a partial overtaking of the male breadwinner model and to the engagement of fathers in childcare. Other contributors have analysed and developed policies to support families with children, with the aim to incentivise the participation of fathers in care work (Donati and Prandini 2008; Donati 2010).

Recently, various studies have focused on the role of Italian fathers in childcare at the macro and the micro level. Nevertheless, few works have shed light on the relations among fatherhood and masculinities. We aim to fill this gap, adopting men's studies perspectives that, above all in anglophone countries, have analysed how masculinities emerge, find stability and change.

3.2 Methodology

Presented in what follows are the results of research conducted in the autumn of 2010 on 14 families with children aged between zero and six years old, resident in a neighbourhood of Verona and selected, on the logic of purposive sampling, by size of the household and age of the children. To preserve anonymity each family was assigned a name corresponding to a colour.

The focus will be on 12 families characterised by the presence of both parents (in 11 of the families, both the father and the mother were in paid employment). Data were collected by in-depth interviews conducted in all but one case³ with the father and the mother separately. A total of 23 interviews explored the care activities performed by the parents together with other persons (educators working for the services attended by the children, family members, families present in the friendship network, institutional actors, etc.) and the meanings attached to them, with particular regard to the domestic sphere and that of early childhood services (Bimbi and Castellano 1990). It was decided to include two couples of immigrant origin among those interviewed – the Azure Family from Nigeria and the Blue Family from Albania – the purpose being to gain better understanding of how references to masculinity at *local* level (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005) interact with ones pertaining to *regional* and *global* levels (for example, the culture of the country of origin and of the country of arrival, national and supranational policies on migration, etc.).

Respondents – both native and migrant families⁴ – were contacted after 'snowball' sampling (Cardano 2003, 2011; Silverman 2007, 2008), starting from some families known by the researchers or from some families that social services have introduced to the researchers. They were selected on the basis of quality relevance and consistency, i.e. on the basis of some sociological and family characteristics, in the first place the household size, the number and age of children – as shown in Table 1. The key aim was not so much the representativeness of a quantitative sample, but rather a thematic deepening in relation to some sociological and experiential dimensions of the respondents.

The use of qualitative tools has been deemed the most appropriate to deepen and understand the meanings attributed by fathers and mothers interviewed to the everyday care work practices and to their style of mediation with the services for children (mediation methods: Silverman 2007, 2008).

Through the representations of the parents involved in the research, we have tried to grasp the meaning of their actions with regard to the distribution of care work, the experiences of the couple members in relation to this planning, the expectations placed on the partner, and the male

Table 1. Selection and characteristics of the respondents' families.

Family	Father's age	Mother's age	Father's job	Mother's job	Children	Children's age
<i>Yellow</i>	34	32	Sales representative – open-ended contract	Architect – Fixed-term contract	1	2
<i>Purple</i>	35	30	Office worker – open-ended contract	Part-time psychotherapist – Freelancer	1	2
<i>White</i>	52	37	Nurse – open-ended contract	Caregiver – Fixed-term contract	1	4
<i>Black</i>	38	33	Office worker – open-ended contract	Office worker – open-ended contract	1	4
<i>Brown</i>	40	37	Educator – open-ended contract	Office worker – open-ended contract	2	6; 2
<i>Blue</i>	44	40	Construction worker – Open-ended contract	Domestic worker – shadow economy	2	6; 4
<i>Green</i>	41	34	Vet – freelancer	Office worker – open-ended contract	2	6; 4
<i>Azure</i>	36	33	Labourer – shadow economy	Unemployed	2	3; 2
<i>Red</i>	35	33	Office worker – open-ended contract	Social worker – open-ended contract	3	7; 4; 1
<i>Violet</i>	36	38	Sales representative – open-ended contract	Journalist – freelancer	3	7; 4; 1
<i>Grey</i>	46	44	Bank manager – open-ended contract	Teacher – open-ended contract	3	17; 13; 4
<i>Pink</i>	37	39	Doctor – open-ended contract	Doctor – open-ended contract	3	6; 5; 2

models of reference (Cardano 2003, 2011; Silverman 2007, 2008). During the analysis – which was carried out using the content analysis method (Losito 2007; Cardano 2011) – particular attention was paid to description of the care of sons and daughters by the parents interviewed and to the meanings that they gave to those activities, and to the roles of the other actors concerned.

3.3 The research setting: the city of Verona

The city of Verona is the second largest city in the Veneto Region with more than 250,000 inhabitants. It constitutes a strategic hub from the point of view of connections – being at the centre of an important highway and rail junction – and is part of one of the most important manufacturing districts in Europe, which includes the provinces of Brescia, Mantua, Rovigo, Vicenza, Trento, Bolzano and Verona and which, with about four million inhabitants, contributes 12% of the national GDP.

Its economy consists mainly of small (sometimes micro) enterprises – although there are also major industries – and is equally divided between agriculture, industry and services.

The primary productive sectors are the wine sector, the fruit and vegetable sector and pork and poultry breeding. The industrial district of Verona has global importance with regard to the production of marble and granite, while other important sectors are furniture, textiles and footwear, and metals. The service sector is made up mainly of a complex system of logistics and transport, banking and insurance, tourism, trade fairs and exhibitions, and technology.

Being one of the richest provinces of Italy, which until a few years ago had a relatively inclusive labour market, Verona has attracted significant numbers of migrant workers and families. The proportion of migrant residents is over 14%, a rate nearly twice the national average (7.5%). The most significant national migrant communities are Romanian, Sri Lankan, Moldovan, Moroccan, Nigerian, and Albanian.

The thriving economy of the city suffered, from 2008 onwards, from the effects of the economic crisis, which is particularly deep in Mediterranean Europe and Italy in terms of loss of jobs, impoverishment of the population, and reduction of capital and economic means available to citizens, businesses and public administrations. As a result of this resources reduction the local political institutions have instigated serious downsizing with regard to social and family services and have imposed more restrictive access requirements.

4. Emergent masculinities: the breadwinner, the helper and the egalitarian partner

On conceiving masculinities as configurations of practices collectively constructed by men and women involved in the everyday lives of the families covered by the research, in what follows the testimonies of the fathers and mothers interviewed will be considered. Identified within this overall framework were forms of masculinity differentiated by both the care practices of the fathers and the meanings attributed by the interviewees to the father's participation in care work.

4.1 The marginality of the male breadwinner

The male partners in the immigrant families involved in the research divided child care work in markedly unequal ways. They thus constructed gender relations from which emerged a masculinity referable to the male breadwinner model widely analysed in the literature

(Becker 1981; McDonald 2000). This masculinity is mainly expressed through paid employment, while it is largely incompatible with all the practices that require close contact with children and with their physical and affective needs:

[We] wake up at half past six Then I go to work [at the building site] at 10 past seven. Yes, at seven o'clock, and I knock off at five o'clock. I stop at five, then there's the road back, and at half past five I'm at home I come home, I drink a beer and I'm here. 'I'm here', yes, but I also go to the bar, I mean . . . after an hour I come back, play with the children, build castles. So I do a bit . . . what I can, eh? Nobody does miracles. I'm here from six to eight, when I go to bed Life's made like this: the wife must stay at home with the children, and the husband goes to work. (Father, Blue Family)

Now that I'm working on the grape harvest, I get up at 20 past six in the morning, I wash, then I go to work. . . . When I return home my wife is preparing something to eat, I eat what there is. If there's nothing . . . whatever. . . . I'm with the children, then they go to bed. Now that they're at school and the kindergarten they go to bed earlier, but one month ago they went at 10 o'clock. . . . My wife is always at home, so she arranges things. (Father, Azure Family)

Reproduction of the male breadwinner model comes about through the involvement of fathers in a well-defined set of social practices to the detriment of others. The father of the Blue Family, for example, sought to avoid places (education and play services or domestic spaces allocated to child care) and activities (dealing with early childhood services, child-minding arranged with other families, etc.) that might be incompatible with traditional socially constructed gender models. According to the interviewee, crossing these thresholds and participating in such practices would be a 'miracle' because of his work commitments – although these were only slightly heavier than those of his wife. The use of this term is indicative of the extent to which, to the interviewee's mind, the majority of activities to do with child care were irreconcilable with his masculinity practices. The paid work of his partner – who took part-time jobs 'off the books' – was regarded as an important help, but not as essential for maintenance of the family (during the interview the father always referred to 'one wage'). In fact, both spouses took it for granted that, if necessary, it should be the mother who absented herself from work to look after the children.

At this point, however, it is necessary to consider the living conditions of the families – both of them immigrant – referable to the male breadwinner model. First, the Blue Family and the Azure Family possessed scant social resources. They consequently had to care for their children almost entirely on their own. In both couples, moreover, the first migrant member had been the father and husband. He was therefore the only spouse who possessed the resources needed by the couple to find its bearings in the immigration country, thus contributing – at least initially – to the reproduction and reinforcement of gender asymmetries.

Second, it should be stressed that the partial social isolation of the two interviewed couples was at least partly caused by immigration policies on entry, residence and family reunification. These policies significantly hinder reconstruction of the kinship networks that support immigrant families in caring for their children (Groenendijk et al. 2007; Corsi 2008; Kraler 2009; Strasser et al. 2009). They consequently made it difficult for the mothers interviewed to ease their care workloads, and therefore prevented them from attenuating their strong and demanding bond with domestic work.

Third, it is important to note that, because of discriminatory employment conditions, the couples interviewed often had scant economic resources and contractual guarantees, which prevented their full access to local early childhood services: for example, after-school clubs or additional municipal services:

[At the nursery school] if you're in regular employment, you qualify for early-opening hours at the kindergarten. As far as I can understand, you take your work contract and show them that you don't have the time [to look after the children]. But I'm irregular, and it goes on like this. In the shadow economy. It's the same with the kindergarten: when it closes on the thirtieth of June, I can't take him any more ... not like the others who work legally. For me it stops there. (Mother, Blue Family)

There thus arises the paradox whereby the most vulnerable social groups (like the immigrant families more exposed than others to precariousness, social exclusion and informal employment) are unable to access services supporting the reconciliation of work, reproduction and care.

The fact that the two families closest to the male breadwinner model were families of immigrant origin is therefore certainly not a coincidence. The construction of this masculinity involved not only the fathers and mothers of the families considered, but also their employers, the families with which they interacted, access to early childhood services, the local institutions that organised them, national and supranational legislators, cultural constructs in the country of origin, etc. In particular, work, inter-family and institutional relations seemed to heighten the economic and social marginality of the immigrant families considered, and consequently the reproduction of a masculinity that, as we shall see, other families regarded as obsolete and, partly, also by at least one of the two families referable to the male breadwinner model. In fact, it should be pointed out that while the father of the Blue Family represents a strongly patriarchal style of masculinity and a strongly asymmetrical relationship between the genders within the couple, the father of the Azure Family hopes for more job stability for himself and the possibility of entry into the labour market for his wife. This would lead to more balanced care work distribution within the couple – approaching the *helper model* that will be analysed below. The Azure father, that is, claims to aspire to greater cooperation in the care work, including within the tasks related to mediation with social services. However, the structural material and social vulnerability that affects his family – as migrants – forces the couple to reproduce the experience of the *male breadwinner* model because of their precarious nature of their everyday lives.

4.2 *The helper: constant provision of care work*

The majority of the families interviewed recognised the importance of participation in extra-domestic work by both partners. The mothers had jobs for which the working hours were usually only slightly fewer than those of the fathers. For their part, the fathers involved themselves in the care of their children by taking them to early childhood services, thus constantly flanking them as they grow up and perceiving themselves (and being perceived) as 'valid helpers' of their partners.

There therefore emerges a masculinity that had accomplished entry into the sphere of child care, and into its practices, even if such entry appears cautious and limited:

Well ... if my husband works in the morning, I have to get our son to school. If instead he works in the afternoon, sometimes he gets our child to school and I make the bed calmly and I tidy up the house before going to work. ... [Then] I cook the dinner and we eat and that's it. ... I have a very good husband who helps me a lot both in the kitchen and with our child. (Mother, White Family)

I see them [the kindergarten teachers] for five minutes in the morning twice a week. The relationship isn't a close one. A quick chat and then I leave. ... My wife goes to the meetings. They sometimes have meetings to tell us how the kindergarten is doing, or isn't doing. But I haven't been to any of them. ... I send the mother [*laughs*] ... I once promised myself that I'd go to a meeting, but I've never been to one. (Father, Purple Family)

Unlike the father of Blue Family, for example – who represents and naturalises his absolute distance from the burdens of care work in any form – the White Family father 'follows the

direction' of his wife in the care work and supports her, though performing the most fulfilling and enjoyable tasks (this is a significant element) while the partner takes care of the more burdensome and less rewarding ones. More generally, unlike male breadwinners, the *helping* fathers contribute actively to the care of their children. Within the couple, however, they are (and described themselves as) assistants to their partners, who continue to perform the role of *organisers* of family work (Ventimiglia 1996).

The masculinity constructed by the parents considered, and by other actors with whom they interacted, was characterised not only by the fathers' child care practices but also by the interpretations that they gave to them. In this case, the fathers left the bulk of care work to their partners, helping them only with the more pleasant, relaxing and creative tasks (Zajczyk and Ruspini 2008). Although the mothers too had jobs, they undertook the most demanding and fatiguing activities, *helped* by the fathers with the most satisfying ones. This diversification along gender lines seems to have been reflected in the work of mediating with children's services – activities such as taking and collecting the children, exchanging information about the child with the teaching staff, or attending meetings on management of the services. Although the helping fathers co-participated in mediation with the services, their interactions with the practitioners and educators were mainly superficial in that they acted as a *bridge* between the family and the service (Cacace and D'Andrea 1996). The fathers reported the information received from the teachers to their partners, who performed the tasks requiring greater emotional involvement and more profound affective commitment.

Sometimes helping fathers go beyond the *bridge* role, participating in some activities proposed by childcare services. In particular, it is interesting that various fathers are involved in activities aimed at improving and enriching the infrastructures and the offerings of nurseries:

We had to build something, invent it. It was about creating something, something that would remain [in the nursery] in the years to come. We built it with tools, with screws. They [the children] painted the animals then we hung their pictures. So, there was a pinwheel with some sticks. At the end of each stick hangs the picture of a kid and they make it turn it around . . . (Father, Brown Family)

School productions are a war machine! We let women have their moment of glory there so that the tired wives amuse themselves a bit in the evenings. But we, the husbands, are a group . . . we are now painting the wooden windows [of the school] . . . We have organised a couple of dinners out-of-doors . . . beautiful moments . . . (Father, Green)

Helping fathers, unlike breadwinners, sometimes enter into nurseries' spaces, interacting with other parents in specific projects. Contributing to the improvement of childcare services seems to be acceptable for helping fathers and their masculinities, but with some limits. Both extracts underline that the boundary between 'male' and 'female' activities is well defined and that fathers must not cross it. They participate in school life with skills and practices generally considered as belonging to the masculine sphere, such as painting windows or working with wood. In the case of the father of the Green Family the gender division in parental involvement is particularly clear: 'wives need' to organise recreational activities, in order to relax, and 'husbands' contribute to the maintenance of school infrastructures. Moreover the interviewed fathers seem to claim that these activities are especially useful for mothers, while men play a secondary role.

It is necessary to determine the extent to which this timid assumption of child care by the fathers challenged the dominant gender order and its hierarchies. In this regard, it is useful to consider the following interview extract:

Father: I ask myself . . . how we could cope if we both had fixed working hours. If my wife worked from eight to four every day, it would be a disaster . . . Fortunately, my wife works shifts, so she has

five working days. She perhaps works two mornings, has a day off, and then works an afternoon and a night.

Interviewer: Did this interchangeability of work schedules begin after the birth of your son, or was it already in place as, let's say, a piece of luck?

Father: I repeat, she's a nurse, and so she works shifts, she's always worked shifts ...

[*The wife, who is cooking, interrupts*] After the second child I asked to go part time! Because otherwise it would have been impossible ... even if I took on more shifts, even working on Saturdays and Sundays, so that I could be at home more during the week. Excuse me for interrupting, but that was perhaps an important thing to say ... (Interview in the home of the Red Family)

I had to quit my job in *** [*a town around 120 kilometres away*] because with three [*children*] ... I had my last pregnancy and then I said: 'Look, I'll get the pregnancy over and then I'll quit'. If it had been up to me, I would still have gone back and forth to *** because I liked the job. But, logically, with three children, what can you do? If I'd been a man, I would certainly have done it. Yes, if I'd been a father, I would still have done the commuting. But a mother is ... I mean, I quit work because I was conscious of my duties as a mother: Otherwise, women who want to work and don't want to quit, usually don't have children. (Mother, Violet Family)

As made explicit by the extract from the interview with the mother of the Violet Family, fathers are presumed to possess the right and duty to work in tiring and satisfying jobs which distance them from the sphere of child care. By contrast, 'being a mother' entails relinquishing such work to perform a role requiring dedication and proximity to the needs of the children. Likewise, thanks to this 'privileged' relationship between the mother and the children, after the birth of the latter the father of the Red Family could continue in full-time work while the wife had to ask for a part-time contract.⁵

The testimonies just reported exemplify two assumptions which, despite the (partial) demise of male breadwinner masculinity, continue to be the basis of everyday behaviour by parents and contribute to the reproduction of gender asymmetries. On the one hand, in fact, both the *helping* fathers and their partners considered extra-domestic work to be primarily a male activity essential for construction of the masculinity which a man cannot evade, and a family duty which a father cannot shirk. On the other hand, according to the parents interviewed, care practices are mainly the responsibility of women. As a consequence, the mothers had to look after the children, at least partly forgoing paid employment, which was perceived as only a source of additional income. The assumption relative to paid work was therefore matched by the assumption that care work is 'naturally' female: a social construct reproduced without the consent, but rather with the *compliance*⁶ (Bourdieu 1998), of mothers and the women in their relational networks.

The mother of Violet Family, subjected to a long process of socialisation of the subordinate role 'traditionally' attributed to women within the family and society, has internalised and naturalised for herself the role of dominated subject within the gender relations in an even more effective way than her husband (Bourdieu 1998). The father of the Violet Family, in fact, despite his dominant position within the family and the society, would seem to dissociate himself – at least partially – from this taken-for-granted privilege.

As in the case of the male breadwinner model, therefore, gender tracks do not seem to have been disrupted by the interactions that constantly take place in the domestic sphere and that of children's services. Rather, the couples just considered seem to have found a way to follow the tracks appropriate and legitimate for a society in which labour-market participation by women and equality between the sexes have become – at least formally – values to be pursued.

The masculinity of the helper, unlike that of the male breadwinner, allows partial entry by fathers into the sphere of reproduction and care, even though it is interpreted as emergency help for the men's partners, and it is certainly hegemonic over the other masculinities emerging from child care practices (Connell 1995). The hegemony of this masculinity is due to the legitimacy accorded to it, first by the couples that reproduce it, who regard it as suited to the social context and the couple's needs, and second by the couples in which other masculinities arise and which deem it to be a valid model:

This problem will come up when we find steady employment. In fact, we're thinking ... if I find a job and also my wife finds one, I can talk to my boss. It depends on whether it goes well! I mean, I can say: 'Could you give me this schedule, this shift?' Like that, understand? ... I've seen many of my friends do it this way: they've reached an agreement with the boss ... I've some friends who always work afternoons, for example, because they've got children. (Father, Azure Family)

The father of the Azure Family – who is referable to the male breadwinner model – seemed to want full-time jobs for himself and his partner in the near future, and consequently a more symmetrical organisation of their everyday lives. In this case, paid employment for both members of the couple was a goal to be achieved for economic reasons, so that the interviewee was also prepared to meet his partner halfway by negotiating working hours with his employer. The masculinity towards which the interviewee tended, after many years in Italy, resembles that of the helper. In this case, the masculinity of the male breadwinner is tied to that of the helper by a relation of *complicity* (Connell 1995) in which, although some actors reproduce a certain masculinity, they recognise another one as more legitimate, thus granting it hegemony.

4.3 *Towards an equitable masculinity: the difficult challenge to the gender order*

We now come to the case of a family which, at least partly, had superseded the assumption that practices traditionally considered female (in this case child care) pertain to mothers, and those historically and culturally constructed as male (the need and duty to invest the bulk of one's time in paid work) pertain to fathers. Here, the boundaries between male and female seem to blur, casting doubt on those assumptions:

I have three towns in my zone of responsibility. If I'm in Z I stay overnight, but it doesn't often happen. If I'm in Y, I scramble to get home. If I'm in X, I'm more relaxed ... *** is at the office until half past five or six, so I always go and pick the child up from the kindergarten, at four o'clock ... When I pick him up, if the weather's good enough we go to the park to play. Or if I have things to do, I take him with me and so we do them together, him and me ... [*If the child is ill or on holiday*], we divide things between us ... one day her, one day me. Also because ... since we're both employees we have contractual obligations, because if you always do it ... they get rid of you. (Father, Yellow Family)

Well, I wake up at around a quarter to seven ... We always leave home in a mad rush. I take him to the kindergarten ... I think it's important because otherwise *** [her partner] goes to pick him up, so I want to take him ... I come home and they are there. Recently, I've also been involved with something else, another activity that I'm embarking on, in the sense that it's something new ... and that also takes up quite a lot of my time. I sometimes come home after half past six, even eight, it depends on what I have to do. I get home and they're here playing, or they've gone to the playground, it depends. We all eat together ... and we usually put him to bed late, because I also want to spend some time with him. (Mother, Yellow Family)

The two testimonies present some notable differences from those reported thus far. First, the mother, an architect employed by a large firm, returned home from work after the father, a pharmaceuticals sales representative whose workload was lighter than that of his partner.

Second, after the birth of her child, not only did the female interviewee not reduce her working hours, she also began some independent practice in addition to her usual employment.

Thus gainsaid is the assumption that, when a child is born, it is necessarily the woman – regarded as better suited and more inclined for child care – who must partially or totally leave paid work. In this case, working full time and pursuing a satisfying career do not seem to be exclusively male necessities. Likewise, ‘scrambling’ to reconcile work and child care, and thus be able to manage a *double presence* (Balbo 1978; Bimbi 1985), no longer seems to be a strictly female prerogative. In the Yellow Family, the decisions taken by the partners on distribution of the care work weakened the preferential relationships observed in the other couples between paid work and masculinity, and between care work and femaleness. As shown by other studies (Nentwich 2008), the boundaries between male and female become blurred: the partners recognise that both of them must invest time and energy in work, and each of them endeavours to enable the other to reconcile work and family.

The family considered therefore resembles the equity model (Micheli 2002) in which the relations between gender identity and specific roles disappear, *challenging* the rigid gender tracks discussed above. The corresponding masculinity can also be termed *equitable*: in fact, the father of the Yellow Family devoted a substantial part of his time to practices regarded as female by the other couples (working shorter hours than his partner, going to pick up the child from school, talking to the teachers, etc.), just as the mother did not question her full-time job and her professional career in general.

To be noted, however, is that the father’s everyday interactions with his partner, with other families and with the teachers only partially challenged the dominant gender order. Consider, for example, the following interview excerpt:

Personally [*when I go to pick up my son from the kindergarten*], I always read the register carefully, so that I don’t have to ask ‘What have you done today, how did it go?’ more than is necessary. I see some mothers there [*imitates a female voice*]: ‘So today, this, and this’ . . . But I read the register. If I see something written in it, I don’t know, ‘loose stools’ or something like that, I say to myself ‘I’ll stay on a bit longer’, but otherwise I try to get away . . . With the other parents . . . I’m a bit of an oddity as a father, because they’re almost all mothers. Personally, I tend to mind my own business, so that I know the names more of the children than the mothers: ‘Ciao, ciao’, a quick chat. It’s obvious that I may have to talk about something but . . . I tend to mind my own business. (Father, Yellow Family)

On the one hand, this father rejected close contact with the parents and teaching staff; on the other, once he had collected his son, he played with him or looked after him while attending to other tasks. These practices are frequently performed by fathers because they contribute to reproducing a masculinity uncoupled from physical care for their children, and instead assign them the role of ‘ferrying’ the children from the family sphere to the public one, introducing them to the public places that will be part of their everyday lives as they grow (Brandth and Kvande 1998). Matters would have been different, for example, if the interviewee had accepted daily discussion with the teaching staff and the other parents, thus showing that a father can also be at his ease in activities requiring empathy with the needs of their children and a willingness to show his emotions to others – anxiety, worry or pleasure at the child’s behaviour. The masculinity evidenced by the case of the Yellow Family is therefore tied to the helper model by a contradictory set of relations in which the man is at the same time an antagonist and an accomplice.

The two interviewees, in fact, challenged the nexus between masculinity and paid employment. They showed that fathers too reduce their work commitments in order to devote

time to child care, and also that a woman, once she has become a mother, can pursue a career in the labour market. Hence the father, with the collaboration of his partner, produces a masculinity that *challenges* the masculinity of the helper and in general the gender asymmetries that it reproduces, in the decisive aspect of the distribution of power in gender relations within the private sphere. At the same time, however, the couple continued to reproduce the taken-for-granted assumption that, in the public sphere, care work – at least in regard to mediation with early childhood services – is more appropriate for mothers than fathers. This father did not include his family strategies – shared equitably with his partner – in a dimension of collective socialisation, thus refusing to recognise it. In his dealings with the kindergarten teachers and the other parents, he behaved in a way partly similar to helping fathers. He therefore implicitly conferred legitimacy on their behaviour and was their *accomplice*.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The research reported by this study has identified different forms of masculinity – sometimes consistent with the dominant gender order and sometimes antagonistic to it – which interact to establish bonds of hegemony or subordination between them. The considered masculinities seem to emerge from wide social processes that involve not only children's parents, but also their employers, educators of childhood services, other families, local and national institutions and so on. It is important to retrace these heterogeneous processes, distinguishing among *local*, *regional* and *global* levels in which hegemonic and marginal masculinities are constructed (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005).

First of all our research focused on the local level, where the interviewed parents are involved in various face-to-face interactions with other families, organisations and communities:

- (1) **The division of care work in the home.** Quantitative data have often shown how Italian couples, despite an increasingly frequent women's *double presence* (Balbo 1978; Bimbi 1985), are characterised by an unequal division of care work (ISTAT 2012). The research shows that dual-earner couples tend to reproduce the 'helper model', in which fathers are, on a day-to-day basis, involved in the more pleasant, relaxing and creative tasks (Zajczyk and Ruspini 2008). Moreover, when a child is born, in these families it is taken for granted that mothers have to reduce their involvement in the sphere of waged work. If the breadwinner model explicitly reproduces and reinforces the asymmetries between men and women in the division of care work, the helper model does not seem to challenge gender hierarchies, but instead reproduces them in forms more appropriate to a society in which, at least formally, equal opportunities in the extra-domestic sphere are recognised as goals to be achieved.
- (2) **The relations with(in) childhood services.** Fathers who reproduce helper and equitable models are involved in childhood services, but their involvement seems to be strongly conditioned by gender stereotypes. The case of the helpers is particularly interesting. On the one hand these fathers, playing a simple 'bridge role' between home and services (Cacace and D'Andrea 1996), renew the stereotype according to which women are more suited to the child's needs and sensitive to the feelings of others. On the other hand, when fathers go beyond the *bridge* role, they are involved in gendered activities, participating in school life with skills and practices generally considered as belonging to the masculine sphere. In this way mothers continue to play a central role in childcare services, creating with educators (mainly women) female communities that take care of

children's needs, while fathers hold a secondary role. At the same time, however, the research revealed some aspects related to the regional and global levels, which contribute to the co-construction of the different styles of masculinity.

- (3) **Reconciling work and family life.** The Italian labour market seems to play an important role in the reproduction of masculinities that reinforce the asymmetries between men and women. First, 'helpers' rarely have working hours compatible with those of childhood services, not only for a gendered division of care work in the home, but also because employers rarely recognise them as caregivers (giving them parental leave, part-time, flexible hours and so on) (Murgia and Poggio 2009). At the same time, mothers of these families, on the birth of a child, reduce their involvement in paid work, placing themselves in part-time and/or low-paying positions. Second, in the case of families referable to the male breadwinner model there is an intersection (Browne and Misra 2003) between different factors of possible discrimination: gender and migrant status. Mothers of these families do not work or are employed in the informal sector, with few possibilities to access services supporting the conciliation of work, reproduction and care.
- (4) **A family structure legislatively imposed on migrant families.** Both the national legislation on immigration and family reunion in Italy (the 'Turco-Napolitano Law' and the 'Bossi-Fini law') and the European Law on family reunion (European Directive 86/2003) have created a *dependency* relationship around the migrant that reunites the family in the country of immigration. The first migrant member is often the father, consequently the responsibility for the reunited family's well-being and for the family members' socio-economic and administrative status are concentrated on him: an *economic and material dependence* is created because he has to play the role of 'sponsor' for his family members (Strasser et al. 2009) and a *socio-relational dependency*, because the reunited family members are not included in social networks, circles of friendship or family ties different from the ones of the migrant that has reunited them. In addition, the national and European legislation on family reunion define who the family members admitted to the family reunion are (for example: the spouse, the underage children and so on). As a consequence, the migrant family is a legislatively 'nuclearised' family that cannot use the care support of the extended family members. In this way, the legislative framework favours the reproduction of the male breadwinner model, where the mother has mainly the role of caregiver, while the father is completely absorbed in the extra-domestic sphere.
- (5) **Migration dynamics and family practices.** Finally, despite the fact that the experience of migration often involves profound changes within families and couples, the internalisation of cultural and family habitus – socio-historically determined – of the migrants' societies of origin may influence their family and care practices, and with them the styles of masculinity, in the society of immigration (Tognetti Bordogna 2004). Some family and care practices, represented as 'typical of their society of origin', may constitute a way to 'feel at home' in a strange – and sometimes *hostile* – social context.

In line with part of the literature (Gregory and Milner 2011), the research has therefore shown that the set of practices that distinguish male from female are constructed by a group of actors much broader than the members of the couple. The research showed that a multiplicity of social actors are constructing and legitimising a *male helper* model of masculinity, which seems

more appropriate to the context of reference than are the other models of masculinity, and which is emerging as the hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995).

Moreover, this article has sought to contribute to the development of men's studies in Italy. In fact, as recently noted (Ruspini 2012), Italian studies on masculinity are developing only very slowly because of a complex set of factors ranging from the still limited presence of women in the public sphere to the scant institutionalisation of gender studies at universities. Consequently, in both the academic and public arenas, the ways in which masculinities emerge and change have been little studied, and this has contributed to a 'neutral' and immutable conception of the male (Piccone Stella 2000; Ciccone 2012). This article, therefore, has furnished a plural and changing depiction of masculinity by examining the dynamics of interaction among the manifold masculinities reconstructed, and by describing ongoing changes in the context considered.

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Notes

1. The present article is the outcome of joint and indivisible work by the authors; however, if individual authorship is to be assigned, Francesco Della Puppa wrote the introduction and paragraphs 3.2, 3.3, 4.1, 4.2; Francesco Miele wrote paragraphs 2, 3.1, 4.3 and the conclusions.
2. This asymmetrical interdependence in organising the division of labour – which characterises the construction of gender identity models – has prompted several scholars to explore how the relational economy of parental couples is structured, and how their affective-sexual, material and symbolic exchanges are patterned. The social shaping of this relational economy has been synthesised into the concept of the gender contract. For detailed discussion see Pateman (1988); Bimbi and La Mendola (1999); Santi (2003).
3. In the case of the Azure Family, of Nigerian origin, it was not possible to interview the mother, because the researchers and the potential interviewee did not share knowledge of a language that would allow direct communication.
4. It should be noted that the neighbourhood of Verona where the research has been carried out does not present particularly significant rates of immigrant residents. Despite this, we still contemplated the presence of some immigrant families within the snowball (i) because of their actual presence in the neighbourhood – even if quantitatively marginal; (ii) because the structural condition of social material and administrative vulnerability suffered by immigrants in Italy strongly influences the access of these families to child-care services and, therefore, the everyday organisation of care work within these parental couples.
5. The interview excerpt shows that the sphere investigated by this paper has close connections with the sphere of procreative choices. For detailed discussion see Bimbi and La Mendola (1999) and, more generally, De Sandre, Pinnelli, and Santini (1999).
6. This implicit accord recalls Bourdieu's notion of *symbolic violence*, which refers to a 'gentle' and phenomenological form of violence, enacted by the dominant with the internalised compliance (in the sense of explicit or implicit compliance) of the dominated and reproduced through imposition of a specific vision of the world, its social orders, its cognitive categories, and the interpretative structures through which reality and the asymmetry between dominant and dominated are conceived. It is exercised by concealing, or better *naturalising*, the power relationships underlying the relation in which it is configured. Bourdieu identifies masculine domination and the symbolic-material subordination of women as 'the prime example of this paradoxical subjugation' (Bourdieu 1998, 1).

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