Fatherhood and precarious work: a supporting relation between systems of meanings

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Abstract

Both care and work imply social norms about how men and women believe they ought to live their lives which reproduce or challenge the traditional link between gender and moral obligation. Since the recent and fundamental changes both to the organization of work and to the family, 'the right thing to do' regarding how to combine work and care today has to be renegotiated in uncertain and often contradictory situations.

This study puts the emphasis on the social negotiation of systems of meanings *versus* trades-offs, rational choices and strategies about how to combine work and family demands. Specifically, the paper investigates what kind of norms and prescriptions Italian fathers in precarious work attribute to fatherhood and paid work, and what kind of relation exists between them from a subjective point of view.

Within an interpretativist approach and from a gender perspective, the study tries to answer these questions through an analysis of 41 qualitative interviews with Italian couples with young children in which both parents are university-educated precarious

workers. The analysis shows that the emerging fatherhood model fits in well with the new conditions of labour market and with its prescriptions, by giving new social and symbolic resources to men.

1. Introduction

It is in the double boundary ô between productive and reproductive labour, on the one hand, and between male and female labour on the other ô that we can trace the origins of the Western male breadwinner model. Contrary to the usual practice in contemporary sociological research, I want to direct the attention to the fact that modern societies have resolved the dilemma between working and caring by dividing women and men into not only two different domains, but also two different moral categories. Women and men have been subject to different expectations to gain personal fulfilment, respectively by caring for children and husbands, and by sharing the rewards of their independent work achievements (Gerson 2002). In this sense, the modern model of work-family articulation lasted so long because it was based not only on a social boundary, which operated at the institutional and structural level, but also on a symbolic and ethical boundary that, in a gender-specific way, affected the individual as a cultural mandate.

Recent social changes ô both in the organization of work and within the family ô have challenged conceptual frameworks by unpicking ‑taken-for-grantedø assumptions about work and family as two distinct spheres of activity (Houston 2005). I refer to changes like the increased proportion of women (and particularly mothers) in the paid workforce, increased job insecurity and work-flexibility, rapid expansion of information technology allowing work portability and blurring of the boundary between public and private spheres, greater numbers of dual-earner couples, increased involvement in childcare activities by men, demand for public support for childcare and care for the elderly. They have produced new moral dilemmas and still under-explored sense-

making processes about the meanings of work and care. More specifically, the increased precariousness of work conditions tends to confer unprecedented responsibility upon individuals to negotiate the commitments between care and paid work and to make sense of work and care activities. This is especially true in Italy, where labour policies are little concerned with non-standard workers (Berton *et al.* 2012), and family policies are particularly lacking (Poggio 2010).

In this context, exploring people's margins of agency becomes of primary importance in shedding light on the micro-mechanisms through which actors make decision about the relation between caring and paid work. Following the interpretativist approach (Schwandt 2010), to understand a particular social action we must grasp the meaning that constitute that action. In this study, family and workplace are seen as sites of ethical codes and social norms, which are ‑taken-for-grantedø frameworks for thinking, acting and evaluating self and society (Blair-Loy 2010).

This paper aims to answer the following questions: what kind of norms and prescriptions are attached to precarious work and care by fathers? What kind of resources and constraints do they give to men? What are men negotiating (and what are they not) and with what social consequences? From a sociological perspective, the central fact is that this kind of analysis makes it possible to observe how the ethics of precarious work and those of fatherhood challenge a certain symbolic and social order in an innovative way with the actors being aware of it or otherwise.

After briefly presenting the theoretical framework, the focus is on the body of data and the type of analysis carried out; then it moves more extensively on the results of the analysis; finally, I present some interpretative ideas.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Precariousness in Italy: consequences on the work-family

In recent decades the Italian labour market has experienced a singular process of deregulation which is called «partial and selective de-regulation» (Esping-Andersen and Regini 2000). This term refers to a set of important labour market reforms which since the mid-1990s have liberalized the use of fixed term contracts and externals

collaborators, only affecting new entrants, specifically the younger cohorts and women, while leaving the legislation on insider workers and the terms and conditions of their open-end contracts largely unaltered.

These legislative changes have not been off-set by an adjustment of the welfare system to the new social risks associated with flexibility. Hence in Italy contractual flexibility for the majority of the workers involved tends to be tied to precariousness on several levels: temporary contracts, fewer employment benefits (training, holidays, career advancement, etc.), limited or no unemployment benefits, lower social security contributions, uncertainty of income, high flexibility in work performance, limited organizational autonomy (Berton *et al.* 2012; Clark and Postel-Vinay 2009). However, the risk of a temporary contract being linked to precarious conditions is significantly higher for women, because they are not only over-represented in all types of temporary employment, but also more frequently have less protected and more discontinuous contracts (Villa 2010), thus reproducing the asymmetry in the distribution of responsibilities between men and women.

> In Italy, family policies are best characterized as õunsupported familialismö (Saraceno 2011), where the dilemma of work *versus* family is still largely relegated to the private sphere while state involvement in this issue is missing and family (and the family network) is the main care and welfare provider. Reconciliation policy in Italy is also inadequate at company level, where õfamily-friendlyö measures are not widespread and many employees are unable to take advantage of them (Den Dulk 2001). Moreover, the childcare services are quite expensive and also scant in comparison to the demand (Saraceno 2011). The consequence is that the male breadwinner family model is still the hegemonic cultural model in Italy, at least at the institutional level.

Although recent policies have seen deregulation of the Italian labour market as facilitating conciliation of work and family demands, these policies underestimate the actual impact of precarious work on the distribution of responsibilities within couples (Poggio 2010). Indeed, precarious workers are excluded from almost all the work-family conciliation instruments provided by the Italian government or existing in business practices, despite the fact that these individuals may have the greatest need

(Saraceno 2005). Consequently, as some researchers have noted, for Italian couples consisting of young precarious workers, income uncertainty as well as the discontinuity and variability of working hours disrupt the work-family balance, so that such couples must constantly adopt new strategies (Salmieri 2009), with different social consequences for men and women (Carreri 2014).

Since today in Italy, as elsewhere in the Western world, job instability no longer tends to involve only the first phase of the long postponement that precedes family formation (Schizzerotto 2002), investigation on how the instability is embedded in the parents' mediation work between family and work can shed light on the phenomena that in the coming years will affect the many people who will face work and income uncertainty also after family formation. In other words, Italian parents in precarious work are a privileged *locus* of observation, a sort of magnifying glass through which to understand the consequences of job instability on people's lives.

2.2. *How parents make decisions about caring and paid work*

For a long time in the social science definitions of parenthood have been understood as historically variable and affected by the social, economic, and historical context in which people live (Apple and Golden 1997) rather than being seen as natural, universal, and unchanging (Glenn 1994). As a consequence, cultural models which define what is a 'good' father or a 'good' mother, change over time as some recent intensive studies show by comparing different birth cohorts (Blair-Loy 2003; Brannen *et al.* 2004; Gerson 2002; Marsiglio and Roy 2012), and gender norms come to play a crucial role in their explanation (Gerson 2010).

Although gradually, the symbolic order of gender has begun to crack due to the recent changes - both in the labour market an in the family - which are giving way to the emergence of potentially new cultural models of parenting (Zanatta 2011).

Unlike motherhood, the issue of fatherhood has historically received less emphasis in sociological debate, and only in the last years it has attracted the interest of scholars, both in the international context (Dermott 2008; Doucet 2004, 2006; Featherstone 2009; Hobson 2002; Miller 2011), and more recently in the Italian one (Bertocchi 2009; Magaraggia 2012; Murgia and Poggio, 2011; Zajczyk and Ruspini 2008).

These studies highlight a greater paternal involvement in the tasks of care and, to a lesser extent, in the household, without drawing an overlapping of the male figure on that of mother (Featherstone 2009), but rather by putting in evidence a construct and a discourse of fatherhood which is in the midst of change and full of contradictions (Doucet 2006; Miller 2011). First of all, they are contradictions between what has been called the "culture" of fatherhood, meaning the level of aspirations, and the "conduct" of fathers in family life, that is the level of daily practices (LaRossa 1988).

We have to take into consideration that in Italy if recent introductions at policy level are aimed at promoting an effective sharing of care work between men and women, on the other hand gender relations are markedly traditional and organizational cultures are based on a vision of (male) working commitment as a priority and alternative with respect to the (feminine) involvement within the family (Murgia and Poggio 2011). Fatherhood in our country is a new and complex research topic which needs for answers, especially in relation to family-work articulation in a deregulamented and insecure labour market.

Normative dimensions of the work-family articulation indeed are not only central within the family but even in the workplace (Gherardi 1997), in which a certain idea of "ideal worker" (Moen and Roehling 2005) is still a very strong and influential cultural model in the Western world although over time it has lost its structural roots (Reichart *et al*. 2007; Williams 2000).

According to this model, the 'good' worker should pursue his/her professional career working full-time and without a suspension after the formation of a family, that is, by following the path of a lock-step career mystique, as the authors call it (Roehling and Moen 2005). However, given the high fragmentation, flexibility and uncertainty that characterize the working practices and career paths on the one hand, and changes in family and gender relations on the other hand, the scenario becomes very complex, full of cultural contradictions and difficult to decipher. Indeed, we have also to take into account that, although some authors claim that the work has an increasingly decentralized role with respect to the definition of individual identity (Beck 2000; Sennett 1998), other studies show its central role, which is rather reflected in many and

complex new rhetorics of labour (Armano and Murgia 2012a, 2014; Armano and Risi 2014).

With specific reference to highly qualified precarious workers in the service sector, however, we can draw some recurring issues in terms of subjective experiences such as the phenomena of "domestication" (Bologna and Fumagalli 1997), "free work" (Armano and Risi 2014; Beverungen *et al.* 2013), "passionate work" (Ballatore *et al.* 2014), informality, invisibility of the work and reputation mechanisms (Cucca and Maetripieri 2014), positions of subordination and blackmail but also forms of self-employment (Armano and Murgia 2012b), identification in the work and self-exploitation (Armano and Murgia 2013), the phenomena of mismatch with consequent de-skilling (Murgia *et al.* 2012), and little or no ability to predict the life trajectory (Murgia 2010).

In this changing cultural scenario in which, both within the family as in the labor market, normative frameworks about what is the 'right' and 'proper' way of parenting, working and their combination, are far from being defined, from a gender perspective (Connell 1987) within an interpretativist approach (Schwandt 2010), I try to answer the following questions: what kind of social norms are attached to precarious work and care by fathers? What kind of resources and constraints do these normative frameworks give to men? Finally, what are men negotiating (and what are they not) and with what social consequences? The interpretativist approach makes it possible to investigate the attribution of moral responsibilities according to gender (Gerson 2002), thus avoiding prescriptive use of the concept of gender and the public/private dichotomy (Ferree 1990).

In this paper, the emphasis is on moral and social gendered understandings, with people negotiating their identities and reputations as a certain sort of person with particular ethic and competencies. Indeed, the symbolic order and moral commitments, often gendered, attached to work and family, are not captured by the work/family literature language of individual trade-offs and strategies, and by narrow rational action assumptions (Blair-Loy 2010). More importantly, still under-explored is how employment instability is incorporated into the symbolic horizons and normative beliefs that underlie the mediation work that people perform between work and family.

3. Method and data

3.1. Sampling strategy and data body

To investigate the systems of meanings attributed to family and work, I conducted an in-depth analysis of interview data because discursive and narrative practices are the privileged *locus* for sense-making. By using this method, I obtained more direct access to the cognitive world of people and of the manner in which they represent and make sense of the situations and events they are experiencing. The cognitive and cultural schemes that inform õdiscourseső are the same as those which structure experiences and subjective perceptions, they organize the memory and constitute the frame through which people steer their lives in the future. This is especially true within the family which is built and maintained through cultural repertories and a variety of discursive and narrative practices. Not necessarily family membersøexperiences get shared buy the system of meanings, that is the way in which experiences are recounted (Dallos 1997).

In the research reported by this study, the questions and the theoretical framework directed the selection of people to interview. My respondents were heterosexual couples in which both partners were precarious workers and had at least one child aged under 11, the age when most parents see their children old enough to be left on their own at times (Ford 1996). This specific target enabled me to observe what happens in the lives of people who have to balance the rigidity imposed by the times and needs of a child with the improvisation and adaptability that an unstable job necessarily entails.

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'[1], the so-called 'false self-employed workers'[2], and members of cooperatives[3]. Although these types of work from

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[1] Collaborations are fixed-term contracts stipulated between a firm and a self-employed worker to perform a specific job/service for remuneration. These self-employed workers generally belong in the ‑semi-subordinateø area, which has characteristics midway between those of dependent employment and self-employment.

[2] It is widely recognized that firms make growing use of false self-employment (also termed 'dependent self-employment', 'economically dependent work') in order to attain flexibility at reduced labour costs and taxes. The position of these workers is practically the same as that of collaborators.

[3] Social cooperatives are established with the aim of carrying out an economic activity using the labour of the members. In Italy cooperatives often work on commission and provide public services for reasons

the formal point of view fall outside the õnon-standardö 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 from this definition traditional self-employed workers (such as entrepreneurs and freelancers) because they have a generally higher level of employment stability than employees with permanent contracts (Barbieri and Scherer 2009). The research also covered subjects in-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).

In order to situate the narratives, I selected couples living in and around a city in north-eastern Italy (Verona). Overall, the weight of õnon-standardö work is very significant in this empirical context (Veneto Lavoro 2014). Verona, along side with Venice, is the city with a more developed service sector in the Veneto region, a sector in which õatypicalö contracts are the most used. Moreover, unemployment and under-employment rates are growing in Verona, especially those related to the youngest workforce (Veneto Lavoro 2014). Finally, it must be noted that the slight fertility increase recorded by Italian women in recent years is concentrated in the North of the country, and it is especially so in the North-east where dual-earner families prevail.

The couples consist of people aged between 28 and 47 and they are all university-educated. This specific target is particularly interesting today because the traditional protection effect of higher education against the risks of unemployment and underemployment seems to have been eroded by the crisis (Lodovici and Semenza 2012). The composition reflects a recent national trend, too (Murgia *et al*. 2012).

Starting with a network of personal contacts and using the snowball sampling method, I conducted 41 home-based interviews, sometimes in the presence of children, and this facilitated a more thoughtful and confidential approach. I considered the sample to be completed when it reached theoretical saturation (Strauss and Corbin 1998). I

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linked to greater flexibility in the management of work organization, and especially in the ability to reduce or terminate services and interventions with less difficulties. The employment relationship can be stipulated as for an employee or self-employed person or in the 'semi-subordinate' area. However, the member of a cooperative often shares the business risks but does not take part in decision making.

transcribed and analysed ô using a specific software for the analysis of qualitative data, Atlas.ti ô 41 qualitative interviews which lasted 1 to 2.30 hours each. The interview material used for this analysis regards questions about family situation, current job, work and care demands, the importance of work and family life, career and family history. I encouraged respondents to give their answers in relation to flexibility and work instability giving space to their understanding of situations and justifications for their decisions.

Finally, I specify that the collection of interviews, systematization of the information, and analysis of the texts were closely intertwined, and not consecutive to one another (Charmaz 2003). All names quoted here are pseudonyms.

3.2. Analytic Strategy

The linguistic dimensions I have primarily looked at concern the productive capacities of discourse. More specifically, they are the cultural repertoires, ideological dilemmas and subject positions.

The concept of cultural repertoires is derived from Gilbert and Mulkay's (1984), who worked within the sociology of scientific knowledge and refers to a cluster of terms, categories and idioms that are closely conceptually organized and drawn upon to characterize and evaluate actions and events (Potter 2012). In other words, they are relatively coherent ways of talking about objects and events, and part of any community's common sense, providing a basis for shared and contested social understanding (Edley 2001). In this sense, cultural repertoires, as discourse more in general, are both constructed and constructive (Potter 2012).

The second analytic concept for organizing and analysing data is ideological dilemmas, first appeared in 1988 (Billig *et al*.) which itself builds on the notion of cultural repertoires. The authors argue that in a given culture or society common sense is characterized by inconsistency, fragmentation and contradiction. The notion of ideological dilemmas implies that different interpretative repertoires of the same social object are themselves constructed rhetorically in an unfolding, historical, argumentative exchange in which there are contradictions and opposing positions. But we have to

consider that as there may be some cultural contradictions between fatherhood models and paid work demands and prescriptions, there may also be a supporting and reinforcing relation between these ideologies. The different interpretative repertoires of the same social object could be indeed rhetorically constructed and discursively articulated not as competing arguments but rather as mutually supported beliefs.

The third analytic concept, that of subject positions (Davies and Harré 1990), connects the wider notions of cultural repertoires and ideological dilemmas/supporting ideologies to the social construction of particular selves, meaning the individual 'locations' within a discourse. Who we are always stands in relation to the available narratives of a culture (Riessman 2001).

4. Results and discussion

4.1. Normative dimensions in fatherhood and precariousness: cultural repertoires

From a gender perspective I found that respondents attach specific commitments to paternity, crafting moral prescriptions which challenge traditional views of gender.

With a specific focus on fatherhood in mind, I found that men tend to consider establishing a relationship with their children as central to their personal development also requiring close involvement on an emotional and educational level (Dermott 2008). This cultural repertoire (Potter 2012) contrasts the traditional view of care, according to which mothers have the sole responsibility for a healthy physical and psychological development of children (Hays 1996; Falcinelli and Magaraggia 2013; Macdonald 2011). For example, Luca says he is dissatisfied with his work schedule because now that he is working all day he cannot take care of his three-year-old daughter as he did before, when he had more flexible working hours and especially when he was unemployed:

> I want to be with my daughter. This job takes me away far too long. I've spent a lot
> of time with my baby, for me it was a fortune...a huge fortune. It'll stay with me all
> my life. When we moved, Silvia (*his wife*) was working [...] and I was here for four
> months alone with the baby... So now that I only take her to school in the mornings

and then I see her at 7.30 in the evening. I can't do it! I'd prefer to earn less if I could see her more. (Luca, a 35-year-old father working on a temporary contract).

Similarly Francesco explicitly synthesizes what makes him feel a 'good' father, that is, to be present as much as possible in his daughter's life. He says:

Knowing that I'm participating [in my daughter's life] helps me a lot, in feeling like a dad...This is very important indeed. It helps me very much. [...] Sure, I hope to be successful one day, certainly to improve my economic situation, to make Emma (*his daughter*) and Luisa (*his wife*) peaceful, of course. But, really, for me it is essential in my opinion, more so nowadays, the presence of a parent... I mean of both parents in a child's life, it is certainly important. I have seen many [family] situations where yes, there was great wealth, but in reality the child was happier with a little less but a bit more participating dad. The quality, as they say so often, the quality of time counts but also the amount does! (Francesco, a 34-year-old father working without contract).

Men tend to make an explicit reference to the cultural model of the father as the breadwinner but at the same time they distance themselves from it. In fact, they point out that the economic contribution to the family maintenance is surely a basic requirement, as it is clear from this extract from Francesco's words: «*Sure*, I hope to be successful one day, *certainly* to improve my economic situation, to make Emma (his daughter) and Luisa (his wife) peaceful, *of course*». However, the economic contribution is perceived as a basic commitment, albeit essential. In fact, it plays a minor role in the understanding of what makes a father a 'good' father. The requirement that makes the difference is rather how much time a father spends with his children. As Luca says: «I'd prefer to earn less if I could see her more often». This social norm challenges traditional views of paternity and more generally of gender and is rather ascribable to the model of «responsible father» (Doherty *et al*. 1998), which prescribes that the father is increasingly engaged in a nurturing role. "Responsible" suggests an "ought to", a set of desired norms for evaluating fathers' behaviour. The term also conveys a moral meaning (right and wrong) because it suggests that some fathering

could be judged õirresponsibleö (Doherty *et al.* 1998). In particular, it does not put the emphasis on the male traditional responsibility to ensure the economic livelihood of the family, which is still present, but rather on the father's responsibility to build a strong and intimate interaction with the child and be a part of the everyday family life. Moreover, this cultural repertoire (Potter 2012) puts the emphasis on the amount of time devoted to child care. As Francesco's narrative goes on:

> The quality of course, however if one can get both quality and quantity [of time] it is not bad, I'm sure, in the sense that I see Emma (*his daughter*) and she seems a pretty serene little girl. I really perceive that when we are both present, this gives her a great happiness. (Francesco, a 34-year-old father working without contract).

The presence of the father in the everyday life appears to be a salient feature of this new idea of fatherhood. The anthology of the labels used in the literature to describe the 'new fathers' such as 'protective fathers', 'innovative fathers', 'intimate fatherhood', emphasize how the father's presence is central in the new cultural models of paternity. However, it is not clear in the literature which are the subjective understandings of the paternal presence (Daly 1996). From the analysis of data, it seems that the emphasis is on the quantitative dimension of time, indicating the primary duty 'to be' or 'to be available' just in case the children and the partner need it. The presence seems to be understood in terms of quantity of sharing of domestic space and time with children. For example, Thomas, aged 41 with a four-year-old son who, at the time of the interview, among various jobs, teaches at university on a project contract, says that he has always looked for a flexible job, intentionally avoiding õstandardö work as an employee because, amongst other advantages, it gives him more time to spend with his son, meaning that by working partially at home he can be often available if his partner and his son need help:

> Again, there are many positive aspects, because I am at Alessio's (*his son*) disposal. Unfortunately, children often get sick when they are young and being at home has some advantages because I can give Cristina (*his partner*) a hand, so that Cristina, who is often at home, is not completely alone. If she had a husband who left home

in the morning and returned in the evening... But, if I'm here, nothing stops me from picking Alessio up from school... (Thomas, a 41 year-old father working on a temporary contract).

In this study not only the family but also the work domain is seen as a site of normative dimensions (Gherardi 1997; Moen and Roehling 2005). In most of the interviews collected, the specific content of the work is an important resource for personal identity. I found that the repertoires draw inspiration from the «work devotion scheme» formulated by Blair-Loy (2003). This is a middle-class, traditionally masculine, twentieth-century model of devotion to a managerial career developed in part due to the pressures of late capitalism but with a normative force of its own.

In line with the prescriptions of that cultural scheme apparent in the respondents' narratives there is a great devotion to work and an emotional investment motivated by the content of the work and a passion for the profession. It is important to consider the particular composition of the respondents: they are young-adults, highly-qualified workers and with a strong motivation to pursue their professional careers. Many respondents complain about the lack of fulfilment and attribute the cause to the temporariness and uncertainty of their employment contracts, which often do not allow them to see the results of their work. In the interviews collected, in fact, the lack of gratification does not appear to be due to material and economic factors, but rather to the impossibility to see the results of their own work.

As Mattia says, a 43 year-old teacher employed on a temporary contract and father of two:

Iød prefer to have a permanent contract, not for having a permanent job, but rather in order to have continuity with the activities I do at school. That is, I'd rather have the guarantee of remaining in the same school for a few years, in order to work better and make things better. (Mattia, a 43 year-old teacher working on a temporary contract).

Apart from the fact that respondents show determination in pursuing their own careers and justify it in terms of their passion for the content of their job (Ballatore *et al.*

2014), other aspects emerging from data analysis must be highlighted. The prescriptions of the scheme of devotion to work are indeed particularly severe and assume different nuances for the precarious workers interviewed. I found that the major difference is the kind of loyalty workers need to show to their employer: whilst in the «work devotion scheme» analysed by Blair-Loy it is explained by confidence in one's career advancement, in the case of the precarious workers interviewed this loyalty stems from the lack of future prospects that induces the respondents not only to build good relationships with employers but also constantly to broaden their networks in order to improve their chances of future employment. The discontinuity of work and the lack of stability and family protection that distinguish precarious jobs ô especially in Italy (Berton *et al.* 2012) ô force the precarious workers to juggle multiple jobs in order to ensure a reasonable economic security for themselves and, consequently, to achieve more confidence. Many respondents tell of having to juggle several jobs and having to õsellö their skills in order to create a network of potential employers, since no one provides permanent positions. The respondents feel compelled not to refuse a job offer because *«opportunity knocks but once»* as many declare and to invest in multiple jobs simultaneously because none is certain. I interpret these powerful normative prescriptions as an emerging variant of the «work devotion scheme» formulated by Blair-Loy (2003) (Carreri 2014).

Fabio explicitly emphasizes the importance of reputation mechanisms (Cucca and Maetripieri 2014), that is making yourself known in the workplace (which is new for him) and to «leave a good impression» in order to trigger a word of mouth among the major players in the employment sector thus increasing the chances of being contacted for a job in the future. Fabio, who at the time of the interview was looking for a job and in the meantime was doing an internship, recounts:

> For now there are no...ehm clear prospects. I hope that the work I'm doing is evaluated positively, and I don't aim to work within the company [...] but rather I aim to make myself known and leave a good impression in order to get some kind of publicity directed at firms and by those who work in clinical engineering [...]

You know, it's an opportunity to work. A chanceö. (Fabio, 36 year-old father looking for a job).

Alongside with this norm, which prescribes to keep up multiple jobs at the same time, another element defines the culture of precarious work, namely the complete availability according to which one must be readily available and can never refuse any job offer.

Especially in my previous job I was called even at ten in the evening, I answered the phone but did not leave the house, there could be phone calls to schedule work for the following day for example. But, of course, I answered the phone because it was my boss calling and he could have fired me if I had not! (Marco, a 35 year-old father looking for a job).

As Marco recounts, if one does not give full availability to the employer he can be dismissed. In this sense, job precariousness makes blackmail by the employer more likely (Armano and Murgia 2012b). The following extract gives a vivid and evocative image of what kind of availability is required. Bruno says that when they call him for a job consisting in the distribution of leaflets he has to drop anything he is doing because he has just enough time to get dressed and leave the house.

Bruno: They call me the same day, at 10.30 am, or rather between 10.30 and 11.30 in the morning and they say: "Be there now". So if you had a plan, you have to give it up. You respond: "Okay, I'm going". Do you understand?

Interviewer: So you have to give them your full availability?

Bruno: Yeah, Yeah!! Well, it's not that they have told you so, itøs just obvious. At best, sometimes they tell me: õ[...] Be there tomorrow. Be there tomorrow morning!ö.

Interviewer: The best scenario is, they warn you the day before.

Bruno: Right. Yes, but this happens once out of ten calls. Most of the time they call you and you answer õokayö. And they call at 11 of the same day! Watch out! You have just enough time to get dressedö (Bruno, a 40-year-old father working on temporary contracts).

Such situations are quite common in the narratives collected. For example, Francesco remembers a specific situation in which he had planned a trip with his girlfriend but the same day they called him for a business meeting in the evening and he had to give up his plans. Francesco, who lived in Florence at that time had reached Louise (his current wife) in Rome and had planned ô with some difficulty of 'interlocking' each other's commitments ô a trip to the beach to celebrate his birthday. But that evening he had to be in Florence for a business meeting. Francesco says that he had no choice. He had to give up their trip. In the next extract we can read how he remembers that episode:

It's a difficult thing to explain even to relatives. [...] In that situation, you cannot say no, because then you lose that job. You can say: õOh well, I do not do it!ö However, you do not know when the next opportunity will be. And in any case these are lost contacts, right? Because then the problem is always the same: you have no choice. I mean, you can never say no! It's ugly, but it is a situation that has been developed over the years, [í] because the work over the years has always decreased and therefore every job turned down is lost, there are fifty other people like me, that is, if they do not call me they can call someone elseö (Francesco, a 34-year-old father working without contract).

4.2. The relation between fatherhood and precariousness: a contrasting or a supporting one?

After having described the system of meanings and normative beliefs attributed to precarious work and fatherhood, I try to understand what kind of relation exists between them from the subjective point of view of my respondents. It is an under-explored issue that in this study leads to innovative results which are understandable in the light of the peculiarities of new fatherhood norms. Indeed, when job uncertainty concerns men attached to it, in the narratives of both men and women, there is a positive value to the extent that it facilitates greater investment in the family, in terms of identity, as well as time and energy, so that the man can fulfil his paternal commitments. For example, during the interview Carlo claims not to want to have a job for life with a full-time contract, because his profession is his passion, and even if he has to move in various cities in Italy or abroad, often for a few days, on the other hand his work allows him to care for his child during periods in which there is less work, and in his opinion to enjoy much more time than fathers with a õstandardö job may have:

Carlo: So if they said: 'I'll give you a permanent job today here in Verona, where you can work your hours and then you can see your son from 6pm to 8 the following morning, every day'. I would not take it, I would not change my life.
Interviewer: You wouldn't accept it, would you?
Carlo: 'No I wouldn't. Absolutely not. Maybe in a few years' time when we're really in dire straights I'd bite my nails. But for now that I can still afford to live decently with this job I can still juggle both things together very well, which are the joy of having a son and enjoy him with plenty of free time, which I have a lot more than a standard parent, and at the same time to have the opportunity to pursue my hobby, which I don't think may people have the luxury to say so, that is to earn doing what they enjoy the most. So when I get home after a day of work I have a smile on my face and I'm never angry. It's great to be able to have both these joys. If I had a permanent, guaranteed job here in Verona I'd not be so happy and therefore I would't be a present or a happy father' (J. Carlo, a 35-year-old father working on commission in the arts).

The fact that men are often at home has consequences not only on the involvement of fathers in daily activities of child-care in terms of clock-time but also, in a broader perspective, it allows them to establish a close and deep relationship with their children. According to the men and women interviewed since working at home makes it possible to involve children in the parents' activities, fathers and children can get to know each other much better than 'standard' working parents. In the words of Emilio, this is clearly explained: he reckons the fact he has many jobs and he works at home makes it easier for his son «to be part of the family» than what happens in families where both parents leave home in the morning to go to the office and go back in the evening.

It is something that regarding Francesco (*his son*), even when he grows up...it is something that I am happy about. I mean, the fact he knows his parents do so many things, even different and original. And in my opinion in comparison to many other types of jobs [...] they [his and his wife's jobs] may also be jobs that involve him and can help him to be more part of the family. [...] He may know us much better, so to say' (Emilio, a 31 year-old father and a false self-employed worker).

Then Emilio refers to the benefits that his son Francesco (aged 1) has and will draw from the fact that he can directly be involved in his father's job, such as take part in the guided tours in India his father arranges for tourists. The advantages mentioned by Emilio refer to the father-child relationship (which is a close and deep one) and the possibility to feed Francesco's cultural upbringing and pass on to him the passion for his job. As we read:

> He (*his son*) will have the opportunity to travel with me to India, with us I mean ô even with Giulia (*his wife*) I hope ô and learn about some realities that are very spectacular for a child. If India is something very strong for a grown-up, what effect will it have on a baby! I have seen so many children in India and they go crazy because of the colours..the smells...the animals..all these things that India immediately presents you with, which are very attractive and stimulating. So in our conditions from a child's education point of view we can offer him more, much more than if we were working...letøs say...in more institutionalized occupations or in officeö (Emilio, a 31 year-old father and a false self-employed worker).

The fact that many respondents work (at least partially) from home or, as in the Emilio's case, can involve children in their work, is interpreted positively by men and read in terms of the benefits that this condition entails. This understanding that precariousness allows men to have greater flexibility and therefore to spend more time with their children characterizes the women' narratives as well, when they talk of the impact that their partners' employment status has on the family domain. It seems that even female partners acknowledge the social norm which prescribes that 'good' fathers must spend a considerable amount of time with their children. Claudia, a precarious worker and mother of a baby, says her husband's job allows him to be a more active and present father compared with other fathers in õstandardö employment. At the same time it gives her a little more time to devote to activities outside the home:

> This is a good thing compared to other dads, because he doesnøt work from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. every day, so maybe he is present in the morning or all week and then the

week after he's totally absent. However, how can I say, it's more difficult to schedule things, but as far as child rearing is concerned, in my opinion, it's easier because he has, all in all, more time to be with him. Especially the time when he is awake. Whilst, for example, the problem I see with my sister is that her husband, who is a standard worker, sees his children only in the evenings, when they go to sleep... Our routine is also useful for me because if I have to study, he can be with Marco (*the son*)ö (Claudia, a 29 year-old mother working as an occasional collaborator).

This analysis shows that in the narratives of both men and women, when uncertainty and work flexibility concern men, discourses put the emphasis on the benefits that precariousness gives men by enabling them to establish themselves as fathers. Looking at the respondents' sense-making processes also from the opposite point of view, that is regarding the effects of fathering norms on the way men understand and deal with work precariousness, the relation between precarious work and fatherhood is again considered positively.

I found that work precariousness seems to benefit from fatherhood. Parenthood makes some symbolic and social resources available to fathers which help them to deal with the uncertainty of the labour market. Being fathers enables men to deal with the temporary nature of employment contracts in a new perspective and with a greater coping capacity than women, for whom motherhood continues to be represented as a real obstacle to a career, especially in conditions of job insecurity. As Giovanni recounts:

This has been a time in which I've been doing so many things...in fact I feel so much more motivated!...also because there is the family...I mean, because children definitely give you a completely new perspective..Well, then you're just rooted in care...in life...in what it means to liveö (Giovanni, a 47 year-old father of three children working on temporary contracts).

Giovanni tells how having children has given him a new perspective and how being a father represents a source of motivation to work more and better. To

understand the nature of these resources that fatherhood puts into play, it is useful to take the story of Fabio, who in the following extract shows how the father's responsibility gives him the strength needed to cope with the hardest times, like the one he is in at the time of the interview. To be a 'good' father, to be a good example for his son, as he says, he tackles unemployment with confidence:

> My bank account is dwindling rapidly, however until I see it to zero I will not worry excessively and I will most certainly not get demoralized because besides having a wife I have indeed a child at home, to whom I owe, I must give. I want to be a good example for him. So it's pointless to get stressedö (Fabio, a 36 year-old father looking for a job).

Even Fabio's partner, acknowledges the positive and crucial role the child plays on the way Fabio is facing unemployment.

> Knowing my husband, if there had not been Fabrizio (*their son*)..ehm..probably [this situation] would have harmed him more [...] in the sense that, if it hadnøt been for Fabrizio, I think he (*her husband*) would have had more moments, how can I say, in a bad mood etc... Fabrizio is for him (*her husband*) a source of strength ô as far as I can understand ô to go onö (Emma, a 35 year-old mother working on a temporary contract).

This analysis of discourses about fathers shows that, in the narratives of both men and women, a positive value is attached to job flexibility as it facilitates a greater investment in the family, in terms of identity, as well as time and energy, and enables men to fulfil their paternal commitments understood in the normative framework of the «responsible father» model (Doherty *et al*. 1998). Therefore, the relation between precariousness and fatherhood seems to be a positive one even when the analysis takes into account the reverse processes to the extent parenthood makes new symbolic and social resources available to men in terms of social recognition, reputation and identity, which help them to deal with the uncertainty of the labour market with more confidence than mothers do.

To conclude, for male precarious workers the analysis does not highlight «ideological dilemmas» (Billig *et al.* 1988) at the level of normative and cultural frameworks which are relevant in reconciling work and family life, but rather a supporting relation between innovative systems of meanings that challenge the traditional ideology of separate spheres and are still being negotiated.

4.3. What are men negotiating?

In this paper I tried to show what kind of cultural and normative frameworks (on the side of paid work, child care and their combination) inform the male practices of work-family balance and how they reproduce or challenge the traditional ideology of separate spheres which attributes to men the professional duties and to women those of care. Moving the analysis to a higher level of abstraction, it is possible at this point to 'interrogate' the cultural repertoires (Potter 2012) I have found in order to make visible some elements and to stimulate a broader sociological interpretation. Two questions are central. Firstly, *who* is implied by a specific cultural repertoire? Secondly, and more interestingly, *why* do the respondents perform certain scripts rather than others? By this way, I can detect men's primary subject position (Davies and Harré 1990) and make the role of power (Connell 1987) in fostering the link between gender and moral obligation more visible. This analysis allows to focus our attention on the positioning (Davies and Harré 1990) of respondents in their social and cultural context (Riessman 2001), showing how texts can legitimize the dominant systems of meanings and the status quo of traditional practices or, conversely, delegitimize and challenge them.

The analysis shows that in men's narratives the stress is on how important it is for them to be present at home and to spend time with children in terms of identity. They are trying to establish themselves as fathers, that is they are basically negotiating their paternal role and paternal power starting from the subject position of worker. Indeed, men tend to compare themselves and be compared by their partners with the male breadwinner, the one that guarantees the economic livelihood of the whole family at the expense of participating in family life. As I have illustrated, they perceive themselves primarily as workers who must economically

contribute to the family; but this is interpreted as a basic commitment, which plays a minor role in the understanding of 'the right thing to do'.

However in the negotiation of systems of meanings between the very demanding social norms of precarious work and the new fathering expectations, surprisingly men don∉t seem to have to face cultural dilemmas and contrasting situations. The fatherhood model, which is ultimately that of «responsible father» (Doherty *et al.* 1998), fits in well with the new conditions of the labour market and with its prescriptions.

The new fathering model is indeed rapidly growing and it is supported and admired also at the family level, since women play the role of maternal gatekeeper supporting their partners in their renewed exercise of fatherhood. This analysis shows that precariousness and work flexibility put into circulation and redistribute not only constraints (as it's widely shown in literature) but also symbolic and social resources, at least for this specific target ô highly-qualified men ô as if the new liberalism unintentionally tended to promote gender equality on the side of men rather than that of women. In this regard, the role of policy, and more specifically the recent enlargement of the right to parental leave for fathers with Law 53/2000 (Nunin 2011) is probably playing, at least from the cultural and symbolic perspective, an important role in influencing fathering, especially with reference to how to conceive child care and who should be responsible for it.

When precariousness concerns men, there is such a positive meaning attached to it, so much so that it allows men to exercise their paternal role. From this situation they gain a kind of power (paternal power) in terms of reputation, social recognition and identity. If we look at reverse mechanisms, they also seem to go in favour of men as paternity gives them some symbolic and social resources which help them to deal with the uncertainties arising from an unstable job with greater confidence. Child care brings them personal development and fulfilment, a kind of «cultural prestige» traditionally linked to mothers (Crouch and Manderson 1993), but also feelings of liberation and transformation.

The analysis suggests that in the new liberalism fathers have lost the breadwinner role but they have won something else in terms of symbolic and social resources,

reputation and social admiration. It would be useful and interesting to explore what kind of understandings and decisions are made available by the likely alternative cultural repertoires of women or of men from lower social classes.

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