

**Fathers, Daughters and Sons. The Construction of Gender and
Parenthood in Father-Child Relationships**

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to give a contribution to the debate on gender socialization of children and parenting, with a focus on fathers and the construction of gender and parenthood in discourses around interaction with and expectations from daughters and sons. Drawing from discursive interviews with first time fathers of children aged 0 to 3 years, an exploratory description of three different discourses will be proposed: desire for male or female children, gendered characteristics of children, and relationship with sons and daughters. Overall, the relevance of the personal gendered life experiences and characteristics of fathers in constructing appropriate parenting skills to act out with

daughters and sons emerges clearly in the interviewees' words, calling for further research on the specificities of father-son and father-daughter interaction.

Keywords: fathering, gender of children, construction of parenting

1. Introduction

The issue of the gender of children within a family has often been investigated from – at least - two different perspectives. From the perspective of family processes and structures, the gender of children has been related to “preferences” for reproductive behavior (for example, deciding whether have or not have other children according to the gender of the already born) or to the consequences that the sex of children may have on family behaviors, like divorce, post-separation custody, “absent” fathers providing and so on (see, among others, Paasch e Teachman 1991; Raley e Bianchi 2006; for Italy, Todesco 2010). Secondly, social and psychological researches have focused on the process of gender development and socialization.

«Early childhood is a time where socialization informs gender, and [...] early childhood can be seen as the launching point for gendered socialization» (Ingraham 1994, 325). As Blakemore and colleagues (2009) point out, gender development of children has been interpreted firstly through the concept of «sex (or gender) typing» (Ivi, 14), or the process of attaching object, activities, roles and characteristics to biological sex so that they align to normative cultural stereotypes of gender; this process has been looked at in relation both to how it occurs, and to the extent children show its results. As for children's understanding of gender and identification, another broad aspect of gender development (Blakemore *et al.* 2009), Aina and Cameron (2011), in their work on young children and gender stereotypes, highlighted how children begin to form concepts of gender beginning around age 2; between the ages of 3 and 5 years children develop their gender identity and begin to

understand what it means to be male or female, and by the age of 7 gender stereotypes become rigidly defined (Ivi, 11).

Developmental and social psychology have relied on different sets of theories to investigate how the process of gender development of children occurs, theories ascribable to biological, cognitive and social perspectives (Blackmore *et al.* 2009; Zosuls *et al.* 2011). Biological perspectives look at the side of “nature”, investigating the role of genes and hormones in influencing behavior (see for example Dragowsky *et al.* 2011). Cognitive perspectives deal with the knowledge that children develop on gender norms, stereotypes and roles, and with how such a knowledge influences their behavior; different theories fall within this frame, among which social cognitive theories, cognitive developmental theory and gender schema theory (Ruble *et al.* 2007; Blakemore *et al.* 2009; Aina e Cameron 2011), and developed to include identity theory (Carter 2014; Martin *et al.* 2017). Social perspectives, or theories of socialization, look at development from the perspective of “nurture”, focusing on how the differential treatment of children by family members, peers and other adults influence the construction of gender stereotypes in young boys and girls. This perspective stems from learning theory, «which examines the influence of reinforcements, punishments, and observational learning on behavior» (Blakemore *et al.* 2009, 16; also, Leaper 2000; Aina e Cameron 2001). Within the frame of theories of gender development based on socialization fall also social constructionist views on gender, according to which gender norms are socially constructed, contextually and historically, and they influence beliefs, behaviors and social interactions (Blakemore *et al.* 2009).

This study situates in the latter stream of research; from a gender socialization perspective based on social constructionism and with a focus on the family, as family is, as the place of primary socialization, the environment where children first face social interaction and learn, among other things, to «do gender» (West e Zimmerman 1987), I will attempt at answering to the following research questions: what are the mechanisms of gender construction in parent-child interaction, and in particular, between fathers and children, that is in the specific context of a masculine parenthood? How do contemporary

fathers interact with their sons and daughters, and how does the gender of children contribute to the construction of fatherhood?

These research questions emerge from the observation of a scarcity of investigations of the specificities of the father-child relationship in relation to the gender of the child¹. In the following paragraph, I will address the issue of parent-child relationships related to gender socialization, highlighting some specificities of fatherhood and fathering practices, and I will present the current study.

2. Gender of children and parenting

2.1. Literature and theoretical background

As the focus of the current study is the family as the primary environment of gender socialization in early childhood, the issue of parent-child relationship with a special reference to gender is particularly relevant. Psychological research has focused widely on parental influence on children's gender socialization. Witt (1997), for example, highlighted that «parents encourage their sons and daughters to participate in sex-typed activities, including doll playing and engaging in housekeeping activities for girls and playing with trucks and engaging in sports activities for boys, [...] and fathers [are] found to reinforce gender stereotypes more often than do mothers» (Ivi, 255). Parent-child relationship has been investigated in psychological literature with focus on different aspects, like leisure and physical activity situations (Leaper 2000; Kindelberger Hagan e Kuebli 2007), emotion displays (Denham *et al.* 2010; Kennedy Root e Denham 2010; Van der Pol *et al.* 2015) and values transmission (Roest *et al.* 2010; Rittenour *et al.* 2014). The focus of this stream of research has been on the intertwining of gender of parents with gender of children, looking at gender specific behavior during interaction. While general tendencies in behaviors of mothers and fathers in relation to children cannot be detected, these studies point out – even

¹ On the contrary, Butler and Shalit-Naggar (2008) report that an active debate is ongoing on whether and how mother-son and mother-daughter relationships differ during childhood. An exception is Bucher (2014) who studied masculinity and homophobia in father-son relationships, focusing on fathers of gay sons on the one hand, and sons of gay fathers on the other.

if in an uncritical way - the relevance of the same sex parent-child dyad when it comes to values transmission, and fathers, unlike mothers, usually seem to adapt and change their behavior according to the gender of children, apparently giving a more consistent contribution to the reproduction of gender stereotypes.

Sociological research on gender socialization often focused on use of time and children's participation to family life, looking at gender specific differences in the organization of every day's lives of boys and girls, especially from puberty on. In the Italian context, several contributions (Belloni e Carriero 2006; Allegra 2002; Facchini 2002; Ricucci e Torrioni 2006; Ciccotti e Sabbadini 2007) pointed out how those activities that are related to family life, like participation to household chores, but also money availability and autonomy, are gender specific. All mentioned research show that starting from as early as the age of 6, girls are on average more involved than boys in domestic work, and are more likely to perform more stereotypically feminine activities like setting the table, washing the dishes, helping to cook and ironing. Allegra (2002), Facchini (2002) and Ricucci and Torrioni (2006) pointed out how the rules for children in the family, in different age spans, are gender specific. Ricucci and Torrioni (2006), looking at duties and rules as they are perceived and lived by sons and daughters up to 24 years of age, showed a general propension at reproducing and identifying with gender models and roles as transmitted by parents: 35% of girls, opposed to 25% boys, consider a duty the participation to household chores, while 36% of young men give more importance to respecting commitments (against 29% of young women) and cohabitation rules (respectively 63% and 56%). It seems then that girls feel more bounded to the stereotypically feminine domestic role, while boys are more committed to constructing an autonomous and respectable self in the public sphere; while children's behavior is gender specific, though, this line of research does not show specific influence by mothers or fathers. A more recent contribution for Italy by Demurtas and colleagues (2016) confirms the fact that girls are more involved in housework than boys, and get more involved in case of higher requests (like the presence of younger siblings), recognizing thus a pattern in the allocation of family time among boys and girls seemingly based on traditional gender

ideology. Interestingly, the authors observed also a specific parental influence: in families where fathers are more involved in household chores stereotypically attached to the feminine, both sons and daughters are more cooperative in the home. While this finding does not sustain the idea of the higher relevance of fathers' behaviors on sons', as the effect is observed in offspring of both sexes, the authors hypothesize that fathers more involved in family life and especially in "feminine" chores, thus breaking the rule of gender roles, represent a model of de-gendered participation to the well-being of the household that children may adhere to.

Overall, two reflections emerge from this brief review of research on parental influence on gender socialization of children. Firstly, the relevance of the same-sex parent-child dyad is somewhat taken for granted, and often used as a starting point for research on parental influence on the socialization of children (Bucher 2014; Rittenour *et al.* 2014; Demurtas *et al.* 2016). In the value transmission process, gender is generally considered in relation to the sex role model of socialization theory, according to which fathers tend to transmit their values to sons and mothers to daughters, leading to a stronger identification of an adolescent child to their same-sex parent (Roest *et al.* 2010). Quantitative sociological research on gender socialization in the family, on its part, while shedding light on how the home is a relevant environment for the observation and the reproduction of gender specific behavior among children, in most cases does not provide insights on the mechanisms that sustain it, and often overlooks early childhood.

Secondly, it seems that fathers in some occasions make a difference when it comes to gender socialization (McHale *et al.* 1999; Demurtas *et al.* 2016).

The changing role of fathers in contemporary families has been object of study and debate for a few decades now (Dermott 2008; Petteri Eerola e Huttunen 2011; Miller 2011 for a history of research on fatherhood). Most research points out how fatherhood has, to date, received a number of labels, ranging from 'new' to 'involved' to 'nurturing' just to list a few (Dermott 2008), following the observation of a growing participation of fathers in childcare and a higher commitment to "being there" for their children (Hobson 2002; Miller 2011). In the Italian context, most contributions focus on how and to what extent

fatherhood has changed across the most recent generations, observing a still quite slow adaptation of both welfare policies at the macro level, and the allocation of household chores (including childcare) at the level of households, to the changes in family formation and the rise in women's participation to the labor market (Rosina e Sabbadini 2005; Ranaldi e Romano 2008; Tanturri e Mencarini 2009; Naldini e Jurado 2013). Overall, while some Italian researchers have pointed out some complexities in the relationship between parenthood and hegemonic views on masculinity (Magaraggia 2012; Della Puppa e Miele 2015), Italian fatherhood is often described as still bound to "traditional" views on gender roles, with the complicity of a family policies system that implicitly supports such views (Zaickzyk e Ruspini 2008; Murgia e Poggio 2011; Bosoni 2014; Baker e Bosoni 2015; Musumeci *et al.* 2015; Naldini 2015).

The starting point of all contemporary reflections on fatherhood is that, as a cultural and historical product subject to change, parenthood is not a "natural" experience, but rather it is learnt through acculturation into a particular sociocultural and historical context, and it is acted out in practice, through the performance of mothering and fathering (Lupton e Barclay 1997). As for the mechanisms and agents involved in the process of "learning" parenthood, different perspectives have proposed contrasting interpretations. On the one hand, recent sociological and psychological literature on parenthood (see, for example, Faircloth *et al.* 2013) interprets it as a project of construction of skills and knowledge more and more intensive, on which parents invest – and to some extent are bound to invest – time and energy, taking advantage of the help of experts as well. In Faircloth's overview of trends in the study of parenthood, parenting skills are increasingly represented as attributes of expertise and science that should be constructed outside the immediate child rearing relationship, when «a good parent is someone who has willingly embraced the science and the professional advice as well as accepted the social policies through which these views are promoted» (Ivi, xiv). On the other hand, and reflecting specifically on fatherhood, Dermott (2008) discussed some aspects of intimacy and fatherhood, drawing upon Giddens' concept of the «pure relationship» and of the democratization of intimate interactions, based on intimacy as «a matter of emotional communication, with others and

with the self, in a context of interpersonal equality» (Ivi, 127). Reflexivity, as Dermott (2008) explains following Giddens, is central to the project of the self, the process of individualization and construction of a “narrative of the self” typical of postmodern thinking. As uniformity of social categories like that of ‘father’ breaks down, «we might look at men constructing their fathering in diverse ways in response to their own biographies» (Dermott 2008, 130). This argument has been central in the investigation of other scholars as well. Williams (2008), for example, argued that contemporary fatherhood is a phenomenon affected by a process of detraditionalization in Giddens’ sense, whereby fathering is increasingly a response to personal biography and circumstances rather than being modelled on traditional ideal types of what it means to be a father. The suggestion, supported by empirical findings, is that fatherhood is becoming progressively individualized.

When looking at fatherhood, though, an issue has often been overlooked in literature: how does the construction of fatherhood interact with the gender of children? Does having a daughter rather than a son, or vice versa, make a difference for fathering? Does it make a difference in the kind of process that fathers adopt for constructing parenthood?

2.2 The current study

In the attempt to investigate the issue, I draw from a total of 33 discursive interviews collected among first time fathers as part of my PhD project, the leading theme of which is fatherhood related to masculinity. Eligibility for being involved in the project was based first of all on the age of the child, 0 to 3 years, due to two main reasons. First, because of the specific material care commitment that an infant requires; second, because literature shows that the transition to parenthood and the first few years after child birth are crucial moments for the construction of gender, often resulting in a strengthening of traditional views on gender roles. Longitudinal studies on dual-earner couples facing and experiencing a transition to parenthood (Fox 2009; Miller 2011; Naldini 2015) pointed out how the birth of a first child tends to reinforce a specialization of behaviors based on gender, even among those couples who seemed more committed to egalitarian values before becoming parents.

As this specific population is of particular interest in the analysis of parenthood, all fathers in my sample are at their first parenthood, employed, heterosexual and in a cohabiting relationship with the mother of the child (in all but 2 cases employed as well), and of Italian origins. The interviews, based on a semi-structured scheme, have been collected between June and December 2016 in the cities of Torino and Cuneo and their surroundings (Piedmont, a North-Western Italian region)².

The interview scheme included questions about child care practices, retrospective reconstructions of desires and expectations related to parenthood, meanings attached to fatherhood, changes in self-perceptions after the birth of the child and reflections around reference and inspiration in the building of representations of fatherhood, but it did not explicitly include a reflection on the gender of children. Interestingly enough, this theme emerged spontaneously in the interviewees' discourses. The analysis of data has been conducted with reference to a transversal thematic approach (Della Porta 2010) with the aid of the software for the analysis of qualitative data Atlas.TI 7. I proceeded with a first round of coding looking for explicit comments about the specificities of having a daughter or a son; then, I performed a second round of coding only on those interviews where that issue had been problematized, this time further coding the specificities of having a daughter or a son, adding the sub codes: desire for boy or girl before birth; characteristics of child; relationship with child, and including other dimensions of analysis, namely childcare practices; accounts of love, affection, emotional and physical closeness; the meanings attached to fatherhood, and ideas around parental roles and gender.

This second round of coding has therefore been performed on a subsample of the original 33 interviews, composed of 15 interviews. Of these selected interviewees, 9 have a baby girl, 4 a boy, and one is the father of twins of both sexes. From the analysis of interview data, interesting elements of specificities in the narrations of fathers of sons on

² The average age of the whole sample is 37,5 years; 2 have a junior high school diploma, 10 a high school diploma, 12 hold a university degree, 5 a post-graduate degree or a specialization, and 4 hold a PhD. The subsample of 15 fathers here considered has an average age is 36,7; 3 of these interviewees hold a high school diploma, 7 a university degree, 3 a post-graduate degree or a specialization and 2 a PhD.

one side and of daughters on the other have emerged, which I will discuss in the next paragraph.

3. Results: gender matters

Three main discourses around the issue emerge in the fathers' words: a discourse around desires for male or female children before their birth, and whether this desire has been fulfilled or not; a discourse related to specific characteristics of baby boys and girls, and a discourse around specificities in the relationship with a male or a female child. Even though I could distinguish different contents, it must be made clear that the three discourses are tightly linked to one another and in some cases inevitably merge.

Among the sub-sample, six men recount having desired a child of a specific sex, and for most of them, the child born was of the opposite sex. Four men out of these six longed for a boy and had a girl, one wished to have a girl and had a boy, and only one says he wanted the girl than was eventually born. The motivations for these different desires lay, in few cases, in cultural reasoning around the consequence for the extended family of giving birth to a son (Witt 1997): for example, Oreste, a 42-year-old self-employed event planner, father of a girl of two, explains:

The discourse around the baby boy is... [*snorts*] mainly related to the fact than in my family, and when I speak of family I mean the family... with my father's surname, so... ehm, it's eight- my father has eight brothers, and sisters, ehm... who had children whom then had nephews, in all my father's family, among, so we are talking about around 25 nephews, /all females/ [*articulating*]. There's only one boy. So they are all very worried about the... the continuation of the surname.

On the other hand, Biagio, a 28-year-old employee father of a girl, seems to have broken this tradition:

I wanted a girl, opposite to many dads who want a baby boy, despite I have origins... from the south [*using the Italian word 'terrone', which originally had a derogatory meaning*], so you know, the son... I wanted a girl, I was certain it was a girl, and... very happy to receive a... pink news

The discourse on desires for baby boys or girls intertwines and overlaps with that on specific characteristics of children and with the reasoning on experienced or expected relationships with them. Especially for those whose desire of having a son was not fulfilled, indeed, this reasoning draws upon discourses around the characteristics of the child, based on gendered expectations, and, following from this, about the specificities of a relationship with a boy or a girl. This reasoning opens way for a reflection on expected and acted out interaction between fathers and sons or daughters, and on the cultural references laying in the background of these discourses.

In general, by the men in my sample, daughters are thought to be more communicative, more sensitive, and whinier, while sons are expected to enjoy more outdoor and physical activities and to be less sensitive and easier to manage than girls of the same age, with clear references to implicit and taken for granted cultural norms around masculinity and femininity. Some fathers recount how their daughters can make perfectly clear what they want, ascribing this characteristic to the feminine ability to communicate, or have a particular interest in dresses and jewelry; others tell of baby boys who apparently love car rides and need to be involved in physical activities.

Oreste, for example, when talking about his desire for a male child, adds to his explanation that «I've practiced a lot of sports, I'm sporty, and I enjoyed the idea of having a son... with whom... to have... a... relationship very much based on activities, on sports». Nicolò instead, who is a 40-year-old shopkeeper and wanted a girl, is eventually relieved that his child is a boy, because «[it is] /much better a baby boy at this age/ [*smiling*] less, let's say, less, less whiney, less fussy than a baby girl of the same age».

The specific characteristics of boys and girls, whether they are expected or – less frequently – directly observed, are an important starting point for reflections around the

relationships that these men can build with their children. A discourse of boys very fond of their mothers and girls in love with their fathers, maybe based on popular understanding of Freudian psychology, is very common in the whole subsample of the men who brought out gender in their recount of experiences of fatherhood; for example, the father of a two years old boy describes him as «very, very, very close to his mum, that's maybe because of the male- I mean, the fact that's a boy so he's very close to his mum» (Cosimo, a 31-year-old employee). On the other hand, many fathers of girls are waiting for the special love for dad to bloom, even though sometimes this seems to be a ready-to-use script for describing the experience of having a daughter, like Angelo, a 28-year-old employee father of a girl, points out:

Anyways it is always a little loaded with stereotypes... like this, that... anyways, “for... for daddy, ah, you will always be the most beautiful”, or... other similar things “and he will always be... at home in his armchair waiting for you”

This “daddy’s girl” discourse declines in different ways. It could be expressed in the tendency to spoil, cuddle and never contradict or disappoint a daughter’s wishes, like for Dario, a 37-years-old employee with a girl of three, who blames himself a little because «I concede her too much, no?, this is the classic thing... of a father with his daughter [*laughs*] like, he hangs off her words and whatever she would like to do it’s ok».

Secondly, it could extend to anticipations of future interactions with teenage daughters to be jealous of. For example, Bruno, who is 32 years old, works as a municipal officer and has a daughter aged two years and a half, tells me:

Yes, I am already jealous, I already panic now when I imagine future moments, no?, when I project her to the adolescence period. It scares me, that’s it. (...) I hope it will not be like that so not to smother³ her too much, not to make her life impossible, but I

³ In the original interview, Bruno uses the Italian verb *castrare*, literally “to castrate”, to mean the action of repressing, smothering, undermining his daughter’s freedom.

think I can... I can be sure of the fact that right now I would be a jealous father, if I project myself to my daughter's adolescence.

Sometimes, this specific issue can be related to implicit references to heteronormativity and characteristics of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995), like in Oreste's case again. He speaks of himself as a man who had many relationships before meeting his current partner, and tells me that his ex-girlfriends reacted with irony to the news that he would become the father of a girl: «they told me “this is the... divine law, the circle is closed, ehm... at last there will be a woman that will... that will make you lose your mind and who- and who will... who will make you fall madly in love”».

Lastly, it could manifest itself in the difficulties related to disciplining a girl, with whom the option of physical punishment seems inconceivable (unlike with boys), or at least for dad, maybe mum could do the job, according to Ignazio, a 35-year-old engineer father of a 10 months-old girl: «Maybe to- to a baby boy you can even give a spank, but maybe not to a baby girl, how... I mean, indeed I always say that to my wife, I say “if ever there'll be the need to give some spanks, eh that's your job, because I don't...” »

Ignazio is worried about how to educate a girl because he grew up as a boy, and as he was raised as a boy, his mother had a harsh approach to discipline, and therefore he cannot take advantage of biographical instruments to learn how to properly educate his daughter. A similar reasoning can be found in the words of Raimondo, a 41-year-old self-employed father of a girl of two, who claims, about how to educate boys and girls: «to a boy I would say “you broke my balls”, you understand? But “to you, how do I tell you this?”». The relevance of the personal gendered experience of the fathers in describing or imagining a relationship with a son or a daughter is very evident in the words of the majority of my interviewees. Many think, indeed, that fathering a baby boy is somewhat easier, because they can expect from their sons a similar life path, similar experiences, and therefore they can draw from their own experience of growing up as men some useful instruments to understand and be there for their sons. Fathering a daughter, instead, has a specific difficulty, besides the ones ascribable to the “daddy's girl” discourse: men do not know

how a woman is 'formed'. Raimondo highlights this issue very fondly: answering my very first question, a general request for a description of his daughter and a narration of their history together, he claims that «she is also teaching me what...how, how a woman is formed, no?, I mean...that for a father this is also an... ehm... interesting topic [...] I am understanding how a feminine personality is formed». Across his account, the specificities and difficulties of being the father of a girl are constantly pulled in the conversation, and again, a recourse to heteronormativity is very evident, this time taking on the responsibility of contributing to the emotional and affective development of a daughter when it comes to relationships with men: «I know that she will have the first love for a man with me, and so I have to teach her to love those persons who lo- who love her, no?, not to fall in love with assholes, you understand?»

The discourse of the difficulties related to fathering a girl could also be overturned when daughters are expected to have specific characteristics which may make it easier to interact with them, but only in those cases when the father describes himself as affine to those characteristics, namely sensitivity and emotionality, stereotypically feminine. Fabrizio, for example, a 34-year-old manager father of a 6-months-old girl who describes himself as a very emotional person, reflects on the gender of children, claiming that while with a son it would have been possible to have practical comparisons between his behavior and his own, and draw from these comparison terms for educating him, on the other hand «towards a daughter you might be more sensitive because you are facing a more sensitive person compared to a boy». Following a similar reasoning, Massimiliano, a 45-year-old employee father of a two-months-old son, claims he had always wished to have a daughter instead, because, in his words, «males have a different reasoning which I find sometimes degrading [...] I am much more a female inside me, and... [...] maybe that is why I was expecting... or I wished for a girl, in the sense of really creating a... a complicity, paradoxically, with... with dad».

4. Discussion and conclusions

Overall, in my sample fathers of daughters raised the issue of the gender of children more frequently than did fathers of sons. The discourses around this issue often revolved around differences and similarities with themselves, with their own personal experiences and characteristics, and how these would represent a resource or cause doubts of inadequacy. Among fathers of sons, the opinion that it is easier to take care of a little boy because they share the same gender is quite common. Some of them speak of a similarity of interests or of a – premature – complicity, and anticipations of what they could do together as their children grow often revolve around sports or ludic activities in general. On the opposite, fathers of daughters generally find their task more insidious, as they do not have the experience of “being females”. The few exceptions to this “rule” are those fathers who find it – or would have found it - comfortable to deal with girls due to their own personality traits that they ascribe to stereotypical femininity. Other ways, if, on the one hand, fathers wait for their daughters to stereotypically “fall in love with dad”, on the other sometimes the only feminine experience they acknowledge or recognize themselves into is, overturning the perspective, the dynamic of male (hetero)sexually predatorial behaviors, which they project on their daughters anticipating concerns and jealousies that will arise when they will be teenagers, with a clear reference to a substantial heteronormativity in the construction of gender of girls in particular. Still, having a son or a daughter, across my sample, does not make a difference when it comes to participation to child care or expressions of emotion, affection and physical closeness. Material care and the emotional involvement related to fatherhood are both experienced to various degrees, but regardless of the gender of children. The discourses that emerged in the father’s words are then mainly anticipations or expectations of future (possible) interactions and relationships, often revolving around the reproduction of gender stereotypes.

Two reflections emerge from this excursus in the narrations of neo fathers dealing with boys and girls. First, the overwhelming recourse to personal experience and personality in building one’s parenting style apparently supports an interpretation of parenting skills as

constructed with a main reference to personal biographies, as pointed out by Dermott (2008) and Williams (2008). The thesis of the ‘individualization’ of fatherhood, though, is problematized by the observation that such recourse to direct experience is very much true as far as the construction of gender in interaction with children is concerned. It looks evident, indeed, how the notions of masculinity and femininity permeate the experiences of parenting of the interviewees, not only in terms of capability of representing a gender model for children (both sons, directly, and daughters, in opposition), as already observed in literature (among others: Raley e Bianchi 2006; Halpern e Perry-Jenkins 2016), but in fact constituting a resource for the construction of one’s parenting skills. In the case of a son, indeed, such skills are (or will be) built based on the personal experiences of growing up as males, and thus potentially re-constructing and reproducing in generational transmissions the same features of masculinity already experienced. Vice versa, elements of uncertainty and possibly of difficulty in the educational processes rise when facing interaction with a girl, apparently because of the lack of suitable biographical instruments to draw from, as their gendered experiences are not comparable. If a performative interpretation of gender and parenthood is used as a lens, then, an explanation for the same-sex transmission of values and socialization could maybe be found in the fact that the gendered life experiences of parents provide them with the instruments for the very act of parenting. Those few cases who seem to be performing a different masculinity in terms of expressing a tendency to sensitiveness and emotionality, in their considering such an attitude more suited for fathering a daughter than a son, do not but define a range of possible behaviors, once again based on stereotypical representations of gender: expressing emotions and building a deep bond is possible with a girl, not with a boy (or maybe harder). While referring to personal gendered biographies, thus, fathers do refer to essentialist interpretations of gender and are in fact to some extent committed, if unconsciously, to reproducing the same stereotypes that informed their own socialization. Both when imagining a relationship with a son or a daughter based on traditional representation of masculinity and femininity, and when expressing a detachment from hegemonic representations of masculinity, like Fabrizio and Massimiliano do, all these fathers base

their legitimation of fathering behaviors according to dichotomized and exclusive gender categories. If on the one hand, then, it is possible to say that fatherhood is indeed individualized and reflexive, because parenting skills are constructed on the basis of personal biographies, on the other hand such an interpretation does not seem to include the construction of gender in the relationship with children, and reflections on the gender of children make this problematic emerge.

Overall, this research has some very evident limits. First of all, the gender of children had not been explicitly brought up by the interview scheme. This led to the creation of a subsample of interviewees who problematized the theme, therefore decreasing the number of interviews useful for this analysis. Due to both of these reasons, the findings reported in this paper cannot have but an exploratory nature, and call for further research on the theme. Interview data can only report accounts of expectations and stereotypes attached to the gender of children; moreover, the findings here reported are mainly based on narrations around anticipations and projections, as data on practices of fathering do not seem to be informed by views on the gender of children. Richer data coming from participant observation would be desirable in order to obtain deeper insights on how children are socialized to gender in father-child interaction and how this process is related to the intertwining of masculine identities with the father's role. Observational data would maybe also help to disentangle how much of these stereotypes really compose the fathers' construction of gender relations, and how much instead are simply ready-to-use scripts for informal conversations around children, an issue very difficult to sort out by means of interview data. Finally, further research on the influence of gender of children on the construction of parenting (both mothering and fathering) would be needed.

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