

**Variations in work preferences in the transition to parenthood?  
Evidences from a qualitative longitudinal research  
on Italian couples**

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**Abstract**

This paper investigates the preferences and decisions of first-time fathers and mothers on work and participation in the labour market during the transition to parenthood by analysing interview data on 22 Italian couples. Each partner of each couple had been interviewed separately before and after the birth of the first child, for a total of 88 interviews. We consider individuals as being dynamic and interactive, having preferences that can vary over time, with regard to structural, institutional, and economic con-

straints, but also in relation to the different phases of their life course and in the interaction with partners. The four interviews per couple allowed us to reconstruct expectations, preferences, and behaviour on work in three stages of mothers' and fathers' life course: 1) pre-pregnancy period, which is reconstructed retrospectively during the antenatal interview, 2) pregnancy, 3) and finally when the son/daughter is about one and a half years old.

**Keywords:** parenthood, work, preferences, transitions, Italy.

## 1. Introduction

This paper analyses micro-level variations through time in work preferences and behaviour within female and male members of 22 Italian heterosexual couples interviewed in the period 2010-2015 in Turin (Northern Italy) during their transition to parenthood. Each partner of each couple (44 interviewees) had been interviewed separately before and after the birth of their first child, for a total of 88 interviews.

The birth of the first child may be a *turning point* around which individuals redefine priorities and preferences and roles regarding their participation and commitment in the labour market. Using the definition of Berger and Luckmann (1966) we could say that it is in fact a passage of a restructuring from being a couple to being a family, whose happening calls for a re-socialization process that involves both a social condition, that is, the availability of an effective structure of plausibility, and a conceptual condition, or the availability of an apparatus of legitimation. All this is not always available for couples in the Italian context and therefore it is sometimes necessary to refer to the cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger 1957; Schober and Scott 2012; O'Reilly *et al.* 2014) and adaptive preferences (Elster 1989), which can lead individuals to vary their opinions in order to reduce the conflict between preferences and behaviour.

## 2. Theoretical background and methodological approach for longitudinal qualitative data

The discourses of first time fathers and mothers are analysed both at a descriptive level and at a socio-cognitive level. The qualitative longitudinal analysis of all this data<sup>1</sup> allows us to observe the variations in expectations and behaviour in different phases of the life course (before and after the baby's birth) within the couple and comparing the father and the mother. The advantage of this methodological approach is to admit that individuals are dynamic and interactive, having preferences<sup>2</sup> that can vary over time, with regard to structural, institutional, and economic constraints, but also in relation to the different phases of the course of life and to the interaction within the partners in the couple. This approach calls into question economic and sociological theories on the labour market which assume that individuals' preferences are stable such as in the human capital theory (Becker 1964), which assume for example, that the level of education structures individual preferences in an almost deterministic way, or Hakim's preferences theory (2000), according to which women's preferences for differing combinations of family work and paid employment are the primary determinant of employment decisions, or sociological theories emphasizing the effect of one's education in terms of emancipation (Reyneri 2011). All these perspectives do not explain the variations in preferences along the life course, but presuppose a static actor over time. Moreover, they do not allow to look at the decision-making mechanisms of people.

Our idea is to analyse the variations of preferences and expectations of individuals during their lives by observing a significant transition, that of parenting, an event that can restructure the preferences within a couple. The individual is part of a new communications structure, and reinterprets the previous one in light of the new situation, con-

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<sup>1</sup> It stems from the project *Practices and Policies around Parenthood. Work-family balance and childcare in multicultural contexts* coordinated by Manuela Naldini and co-funded by the San Paolo Company and the University of Turin. It was also part of the international TransParent project coordinated by Daniela Grunow (Goethe University in Frankfurt) and Marie Evertsson (University of Stockholm).

<sup>2</sup> By preference we mean the possibility of ordering alternative choices according to importance, on the basis of the happiness, satisfaction, gratification, enjoyment, and usefulness that they provide. Preferences are the reasons for behaviour, i.e. attributes of individuals – other than beliefs and abilities – that explain actions (Bowles 2004) and are different from behaviours that are actions, modes of action due to preferences, in relation to the macro constraints posed by the system.



combine work and family. It follows that this approach may justify discrimination based on individual attitudes and choices (Semenza 2004); in addition to this, this approach appears static, tending to consider individual choices and preferences as not contextualized (and not depending on the characteristics of the job itself) and does not explain the variations in their choices over time.

All these prospects do not explain the variations in preferences along their life course, but presumes a static actor in time who, after obtaining a degree, does not change anymore.

Instead, these preferences are not immutable, and, as we shall see in the analysis of the interviews, they tend to be redefined also in relation to the institutional context, cultural reference models, and socio-economic constraints.

Theories of the life course (Elder 1995; Saraceno 2001) and the transition to adult life (Ahn and Mira 2001; Mills and Blossfeld 2003; Nazio and Blossfeld 2003; Pisati 2002) allow us to analyse the preferences variations with respect to work in relation to an irreversible event such as the birth of the first child. Work histories are the result of complex interactions, at the intra-individual and the inter-individual levels (Blossfeld and Mills 2001), and here we reconstruct the interaction with the partner, and their explanation requires an analysis of determining macro and micro factors (Bosco and Negri 2003; Contini and Pronzato 2003).

Today many choices have become reversible and behaviour with respect to the labour market may vary over time in relation to increasingly flexible contracts and the many family models. The decisions to be made are more interconnected and more complex and the roles are less predetermined, seen as necessary to reconcile family with both her and his work within the couple. We have observed how expectations and preferences in different spheres vary, in relation to an irreversible event, such as the birth of a child.

Other studies have explored this theme. For example, McRae's work (2003) provides an empirical examination of women's work histories following a first birth, their sex-role attitudes, and the relationship between attitudes and work history, and in the light of these analyses, the aptness of Hakim's Preference Theory as an explanation for the position of women in the British labour market is considered. The analysis of longitudi-

nal data fails to support the Preference Theory's central argument that women in Britain and North America (countries where women live "in the new scenario") have genuine, unconstrained choices about how they wish to live their lives. Instead, it is argued that a complete explanation of women's labour market choices after childbirth, and the outcomes of those choices, depends as much on understanding the constraints that differentially affect women as it does on understanding their personal preferences.

Cano-López (2014) also tested Hakim's theory by analysing variance of women's opinions, attitudes, and preferences toward work and the family throughout their lives and affirms that «there aren't three types of women but in fact all women are simultaneously ambivalent towards work and the family. Preferences aren't static, they are adjusted according to two factors: one is micro (maternity, death of a family member etc.) and the other macro (economic recession, reduction in salaries etc.)» and that «the analysis of the 23 biographies of women has shown a multitude of nuances that operate precisely against the affirmations of Hakim».

In order to better understand our approach we have to say that the couples interviewed belong largely to the 30-40 age group, a generation whose mothers were the protagonists of the growth in female participation in the work force from the '70s onwards<sup>3</sup> and above all, many of whom are university graduates, have made their entry into the labour market and their career transitions in a period marked by reforms of the labour market that have increased the spread of atypical, temporary work (Barbieri and Scherer 2009; Bertolini 2012) making it resemble «a kind of tournament where you go up and down in positions of different work, which does not allow for professional profiles and a unique identity» (Palidda 2009, 55). These interviewed couples, in about a third of which one partner has a temporary labour contract, are now making the transition to parenthood in a period of severe economic crisis (Bertolini and Musumeci 2014). In this context it is interesting to explore the roles both of structural changes, such as the flexibility and deregulation on which the labour market has insisted for decades, and cyclical changes such as the economic and financial crisis consisting of the historical background and time in which the transition to parenthood of the interviewed couples

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<sup>3</sup> Three-quarters of the respondents come from families in which the mother works or worked in the past.

occurs, to define/redefine the relationship, also symbolic and regarding values, of the individuals with work and with their family.

### **3. Work and parenthood in the Italian context**

In Italy, women's participation in the labour market has increased in the last decades. Yet the female employment rate (15-64 years) is lower in comparison to the male one, ranging from 46.1 to 47.2 percent in 2010-2015 (that is the period of our interviews) and among men it ranges from 67.5 to 65.5 percent in the same period<sup>4</sup>.

Motherhood and fatherhood have a different impact on the employment rates of women and men: the presence of young children reduces the female employment rate compared to that of women without children, while not significantly affecting (rather increasing) the male employment rates. In the research period 2010-2015, the employment rate of women aged 20-49 and mothers of one child ranges from 58.4 to 56.9 percent while that of women without children is 65.2 percent in the 2010 and 60.6 in 2015. Among men the impact of parenthood is "positive" in the sense that fathers in the same situation (one child) have a higher employment rate in comparison to the "non-fathers" ranging, in the same period from 83.8 to 78.7 percent; while among men without children it ranges from 75.6 to 69.7 percent<sup>5</sup>.

Many studies suggest that labour-market participation by women tends to be higher and less interrupted after the childbirth and during the child-rearing period in countries with not only family friendly policies but also a modernised and egalitarian gender cultural and social norms. Both policies and societal value also affect the gender division of unpaid (household and care) work<sup>6</sup>, which differ across countries also depending on the level of economic activity and income share of the partners, the couples' marital status, and their gender orientations. On the other hand, men's take up rates are lower if gender norms consider women as the main and "natural" caregivers, so that men flout-

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<sup>4</sup> Source: Istat online database [http://dati.istat.it/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=DCCV\\_TAXOCCU1&Lang=.](http://dati.istat.it/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=DCCV_TAXOCCU1&Lang=)

<sup>5</sup> Source: <http://appsso.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/nui/submitViewTableAction.do>.

<sup>6</sup> Women devote more time to unpaid work than men in Italy; for example, in 2014 the working mothers aged 25-44 devoted an average of 5 hours and 11 minutes to family work, while their male partners devoted 2 hours and 16 minutes (Istat 2014).

ing such norms face high penalties in their career advancements (Musumeci and Solera 2013).

Regarding public policies aimed at promoting and facilitating the reconciliation between paid work and childcare, in the period of the interviews in Italy the law 53/2000 allows mothers and fathers the rights (and duties) to childcare, providing them both with parental leave. It consists (at the time of the interviews) of a period of optional absence from work for a maximum of six months that the working parent can take, either all of it right after the baby's birth or a little at a time, up to the age of eight (or the twelfth year of the child's life, at the moment in which we are writing), and it is paid at 30 percent for a maximum of six months at a couple level, if taken within 3 years of child's life (six years at the moment in which we are writing).

The right to parental leave and the related economic benefits have been progressively extended to the self-employed and those enrolled in the separate Management formula (*Gestione Separata*)<sup>7</sup> but is limited to a period of three months to be enjoyed within the first year of the child's life; for permanent workers, instead, it is six months and can be taken up until the child is 8 years old.

This involves significant differences, as well as inequalities, in the opportunities for parents regarding the reconciliation strategies they can practice, and for children regarding the possibilities of obtaining care from their parents.

In Italy the great part of parental leave-takers are woman. Men only rarely take advantage of it.

Paternity leave has been introduced since January 1, 2013. Yet it is very short, it is compulsory for one day and optional for two days until the child is 5 months old.

Overall, the models of job "interruption"<sup>8</sup> prevailing around the birth are strongly characterized from a gender point of view: this is the recurrent situation among the interviewed couples and the woman plans before the birth, to suspend, and in fact, afterward suspends her job for a longer or shorter period to take care of the baby, for exam-

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<sup>7</sup> For a reconstruction of the evolution of the legislation see, for example, the Inps circular n. 77 of May 13, 2013.

<sup>8</sup> By this expression we mean the suspension of work linked to compulsory maternity leave, the use of parental leave, permits, and vacation time to care for the child.

ple, by taking all or part of her parental leave, permits, and vacation time, whereas the man rarely suspends his work (Musumeci *et al.* 2015).

#### **4. Data and method**

In order to investigate first-time fathers' and mothers' variations (or stability) in work preferences and behaviour over time, we have analysed 88 longitudinal qualitative interviews conducted in Turin (Northern Italy) and its surrounding area in 2010-2015 with 22 dual-earner couples before and one and a half years after the arrival of their first child, focusing on the narrative related to issues such as past work, present work, and preferences toward work.

Participants were contacted mainly through gynaecologists or midwives from the public healthcare services. The interviews were conducted by three expert interviewers (all post-Doctorate researchers) mainly at interviewees' home (some at their workplace or at the university). Each interview lasted about an hour and a half and was recorded and transcribed. The inclusion criteria for participants were to live in Turin or a nearby area, to be a heterosexual couple, both native Italians, both working (dual earner couple) at the time of the interview or until just before her pregnancy, with the female partner in at least the fifth or sixth month of pregnancy. For their participation in the research project, the interviewees signed a document and were rewarded with a token book.

The interviews addressed issues such as: educational and working paths; career orientation; the couple's history and relationship; support from kinship and social networks; their current and past day-to-day organization and division of domestic, family, and paid work responsibilities; the reasons that led to it and the events that have changed it over time; their ideals, plans and practices around the work-family balance; and their life plans for the future.

The four interviews conducted with each of the 22 couples (2 separated interviews to her and him<sup>9</sup> conducted during the pregnancy and after the pregnancy) have allowed us to reconstruct their expectations and preferences and behaviour with regard to work in

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<sup>9</sup> Each partner was interviewed alone.

the three stages of their course of life: pre-pregnancy work situation, which is reconstructed retrospectively during the first interviews, the second during the time of pregnancy, and the third when their child is about one and a half years old.

The *longitudinal qualitative analysis* allows us to observe entrances and exits from the labour market, and choices to re-evaluate working hours, thus their behaviour, but also the guidelines behind those choices, dictated by constraints and opportunities and how our actors interpret them. The findings of longitudinal qualitative research can *clarify the mechanisms, causes and consequences of change* by means of the analysis of individual narratives. Longitudinal qualitative research is also particularly helpful in capturing “*transitions*” (Calman *et al.* 2013).

At the time of the pre-birth interviews, the majority of our respondents belong to the 30-39 age group, have a university degree and a full time qualified occupation in the service sector; only 6 of the interviewees (4 of them women) out of 44 are working part time. Most of the people interviewed in our sample belong to the 30-40 age group, since in Italy the age at the first birth is late and also because in the younger cohorts, it is difficult to find employed people (we looked for dual earner couples) given the high unemployment rates. Moreover, in Italy the exit from the parental home follows a “latest-late model” (Billari 2004) which means that Italians leave the parental home on average when they are 30 years old (Eurostat). This situation has been exacerbated by increasing labour market flexibility which had as consequence the long time needed to try to consolidate a job position.

In half of the cases, the couple’s net income monthly is a maximum of €3,000 and the wage gender gap is at least €500. With regard to human capital resources, the qualifications obtained by the respondents are often congruent with respect to their current profession and have an adequate yield and marketability in the local labour market; however, mostly on the side of their professional qualification<sup>10</sup>, not always on that of job stability. In fact, a quarter of the respondents who have achieved at least a university degree (if not a PhD) (6/26) find themselves in the fixed-term employment condition. In

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<sup>10</sup> The positions held by the respondents include: social worker, lawyer, computer consultant, educator, nurse, engineer, teacher, and researcher.

particular, in comparing his and her employment conditions we see that, out of all the couples, in only 9 couples do both partners have a permanent employment contract; in 10 couples at least one partner has a fixed-term contract or is self-employed; in 3 couples, at least one is unemployed or working without a contract.

\* P=Permanent; T=Temporary; SE=Self-employed; U=Unemployed.

Couple (pseudonyms)	Age		Occupation		Monthly In- come in euros		Hours per Week		Type of Employment	
	W	M	w	M	w	m	w	m	W	m
Agnese & Angelo	36	36	Secretary	Manager	700	1700	20	14- 20	P/ part- time	P/ part- time
Fiorella & Francesco	35	38	Quantity surveyor	Workman	1000	1250	n.a.	40	SE / part- time	P/ full- time
Carlotta & Carlo	35	40	Researcher	Bank Manager	1600	1900	40- 50	40	T/ full- time	P/ full- time
Daniela & Davide	37	42	Manager in a non-profit company	Researcher	850	1500	30	40	P/ full- time	P/ full- time
Domenica & Domenico	34	41	Employee	Programmer	1400	2000	40	40	P/ full- time	P/ full- time
Fabiola & Fabrizio	34	36	School teacher	School Teacher	600	1300	8	18	T/ part- time	T / full- time
Gaia & Giacomo	27	27	Hairdresser	Gardener	1200	1200	60- 72	48- 60	SE / full- time	No con- tract/ full-time
Gina & Giulio	39	41	Social worker	Ict Consultant	1400	2250	36	40	P/ full- time	Se / full- time
Ginevra & Giuseppe	32	35	Aeronautical engineer	Corporate Officer	1660	1400	40	40	P/ full- time	T/ full- time
Giulia & Gabriele	31	36	School teacher	School Teacher	900	1400	12	18	T/ part- time	P/ full- time
Linda & Luciano	32	33	Administrative employee	Bank Employee	1200	2000	36	n.a.	P/ full- time	P/ full- time

Luana & Luigi	26	27	Kindergarten teacher	Physiotherapist	900	2000	35	40	P/ full-time	Se / full-time
Marika & Michele	37	45	Human resources responsible	Clerk in a public research centre	2000	2500	n.a.	40	P/ full-time	P/ full-time
Marta & Mirko	30	28	Accountant	Sports trainer	1200	1800	40	40-45	P/ full-time	SE/ full-time
Rachele & Raniero	33	36	Researcher	Mechanic Designer	1100	1650	36	n.a.	T / full-time	P/ full-time
Tiziana & Tommaso	34	36	Management assistant	Lawyer	1300	1800	40	60+	P/ full-time	SE/ full-time
Veronica & Vincenzo	33	38	Administrative employee	Employee in vehicle company	1200	1300	40	40	P/ full-time	P/ full-time
Ludovica & Lucio	30	38	Nurse (public hospital)	Hauler	1650	2000	n.a.	n.a.	P/ full-time	P/ full-time
Tina & Tino	36	40	Architect	Technical and commercial employee in real estate company	1700	1600	40	40	P/ full-time	P/ full-time
Viola & Vito	31	30	Architect (SE)	Sports trainer Sports	1250	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	SE- full-time	T / full-time
Simona & Simone	36	31	U	Editor	0	1300			U	P/ full-time
Tania & Tancredi	33	37	Educator	Teacher (public primary school)	1200	1200			P/ full-time	P/ full-time

Table 1. Socio-demographic characteristics of the participants (at the time of the prenatal interviews)

This condition is important to consider because it can affect not only the respondents' investment in their work but also the childcare-work conciliation strategies, since different employment contracts define opportunities of having access to different means of reconciliation. For example, duration of optional parental leave and the age of the child up to which the parent can use it are different for the fixed term employees, the self-employed, and permanent workers, as seen in the previous paragraph.

We combined two analysis methods: the use of a longitudinal synopsis for each couple and the cataloging and use of Atlas.ti software.

We used the synopsis as a short report of each interview containing the following information:

- a. background data such as age, educational status, income, working career, employment status;
- b. synthesis of the main issues emerging on different topics explored by means of the interview outline;
- c. quotations (extracted from the interview) in order to exemplify the synthesis.

Atlas.ti allowed us to extract excerpts of interviews related to specific codes on nine thematic areas and referring to different moments in time (e.g. preferences toward work before and after the transition) and therefore allowing us to compare, for example, two excerpts of interviews with the same individual on expectations and preferences with regard to work, but at two different times, such as before and after the birth of the child, the use of the synopsis allows us to bring specific excerpts of the interviewee's entire history, also allowing us to reconnect it with other events. In our case this is even more important, having to also compare the other partner's expectations and preferences in two specific times; the synopsis also allows us in this case to contextualize the excerpts in relation to the interviewees' history of being a couple.

## **5. Main results**

### ***5.1. Working conditions and careers before and after the child's birth***

None one of the respondents is at the beginning of their employment career; the majority have already far exceeded the stage of first entry in the world of work and several have mature careers (sometimes for more than decade), largely spent in their current job.

In some cases the current job is practically the only one they've had, since their previous jobs had been one or two at most, of very short duration and quite random.

However, the group of respondents with fixed-term or under-the-table jobs (8) is still in an intermediate stage of a path that is sometimes clear and defined (e.g. teaching and research) and sometimes still open and with an unpredictable outcome.

Looking at job continuity and the recurrence and length of unemployment spells, at the quality of the jobs, at the contract situation<sup>11</sup> and – when the information is present – at income, since the beginning of their career, we have identified that less than a third of respondents, at the time of the interview prior to the birth and at the start of their career have an *upward* career path, a few are *downward*, less than half are stable, and about one-sixth are “other”. However, between the time of pregnancy and that of the second interview about three-quarters of the respondents have an almost stable path.

Re-interviewed about a year and a half after the birth of their first child, in 14 out of 22 couples conditions of employment have partially changed for at least one of the two partners. The most common changes are the reduction of working hours and the consequent reduction in pay, especially for the mothers; instead, some of the fathers’ income had actually increased. This is in line with previous studies on the Italian context. What is new is that some fathers had lost their jobs. In particular, among the women eleven have the same situation, five have become part-time, one asked for flexible time, two are working more hours, two have become unemployed and one is self-employed. Among the men, sixteen have the same situation, one became unemployed, five reduced their working hours. After the birth of the child, namely the return from mandatory suspension or optional leave, all the mothers are employed, often returning to their former job, except for two (Fabiola and Simona are unemployed). Four have gone from full-time to part-time within the same job they had before the child’s birth (Carla, Marika, Marta, and Jolanda).

Others, who continue to work full time, would like to do so (for example, Rachele or Veronica). Carlotta, a precarious researcher, has dramatically reduced the time devoted to work than before for reasons not dependent on her will and childcare. Another (Agnese) has gone from vertical to horizontal part-time, working a total of two hours

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<sup>11</sup> In particular, if in time a situation of instability has evolved to one of stability.

more per week than before to facilitate the care-work conciliation. Another interviewee (Gaia) passed from self-employment to becoming an employee.

As for the fathers, 6 cases recorded more or less significant changes in conditions of employment after the birth of the child, but only a few (2) have to do with the need or desire to obtain time for childcare. Carlo, who returned after 9 months of leave for breastfeeding, was transferred to another larger bank branch and no longer has the role of vice-director which he had at the branch office where he had worked before the birth of his daughter, but that of an employee. Giulio, a self-employed computer consultant reduced his working hours (from 40 to 30 hours per week) and thereby his income (about 40%) to take care of the baby while his wife works.

### ***5.2 Behaviour and preferences (in)consistent with each other at different times***

If we look at preferences of men and women during the pregnancy regarding the expectation of paid work after the birth of the baby, sometimes these appear to be inconsistent with their previous choices. Generally at time “zero”, we find women who were very work-oriented when they entered the labour market. This is consistent with the theory of human capital and emancipation if we consider that 2/3 of respondents are university graduates. This attitude is consolidated during their cohabitation and marriage, although at this stage we observe a distinction between couples that are structured in a more or less egalitarian way regarding family work and paid work (Bertolini and Musumeci 2015).

The couples interviewed during the waiting period before the arrival of the baby exhibited a predominantly “egalitarian” model in terms of preferences and practices both as to their current work commitment (time 1) (that is both female and male partners are strongly oriented towards work) and as to the division of domestic and family work (that tends to be shared equally inside the couple). It is during pregnancy that we see the first big variation: in the interviews we observe a greater variation of preferences of women towards the family rather than work. For example, Rachele said:

When I graduated and started working at the university, perhaps I was more ambitious. Now with marriage and pregnancy, perhaps I also point to other things in the

sense that [...] I also want to build my life outside of work, I have my family, I want to have a baby and others if they will come, also even by sacrificing my working career. [...] the choice to try to have a child before a job stabilization, was because it is more important at this time for me (Rachele, 33, tertiary education, researcher, I wave).

Or Luana:

The only career goal, in quotation marks, at first was to think that I could open a kindergarten and therefore be autonomous. Then, thinking of a family, of having children, I said “maybe it’s better to lose it” because it logically takes a lot of self-reliance and is very demanding work. First I would prefer to have children and to care for them [...]. YES, WE say that I’ve left a little by losing, in quotation marks, my career for family, I have given room to the latter (Luana, 26, secondary education, kindergarten teacher, I wave).

Whereas men are oriented more towards work to procure a higher income. For example, Davide stated:

It’s more or less since \*\*\* (partner’s name) has been pregnant that I have tried to move a little more independently with the contacts I have set up in these years of work to look for other small jobs that can be done. This is a path I had started to follow and that is a kind of professional growth. [...] since I knew that \*\*\* (partner's name) was pregnant [...] I have been giving it a little more importance because it could be a good channel to develop new activities and, of course, to earn more money. (Davide, 42, tertiary education, researcher, I wave)

Here we find the first difference compared to Becker’s theory: in fact, in several cases we found a variation of preferences for women from time 0 to time 1 and a continuity of preferences for men. Women, also the highly educated, who are work oriented until the time of pregnancy and who have invested in their job career, express preferences or a variation of preference for family orientations during the pregnancy. This is particularly significant if we consider that we do not find the same in other countries (Grunow

and Evertsson 2016). We find a sort of cognitive dissonance from previous choices and preferences during the pregnancy that could be explained by referring to the theory of life course in the Italian institutional and cultural context. In Italy, the prevalent family model is still the breadwinner model, even if ideals to be involved in the childcare to some extent are spreading among the fathers. So according to cultural expectations, a good mother is someone who, even if she likes her job, invests more in taking care of the baby. At the same time, when the couple plans how to organize their family life in the passage from couple to family, they need to take into account the institutional constraints, such as the very short time for paternity leave, the very little support from institutions in terms of childcare services; moreover, the culture and the organization in the workplaces are not always family friendly. Cultural and institutional constraints interact with each other: even if fathers (if employed with an open-ended contract) are entitled to take breastfeeding permission or optional parental leave, this can have consequences in terms of career if he takes it. This is because the social legitimacy for men to take time off work to take care of their children is very low in Italy (as mentioned in the second paragraph).

This regards the expectations. But what happens when the baby is born? What is the behaviour of the new fathers and mothers? In some couples we find another inconsistency: the behaviour that follows the birth does not reflect the preferences expressed at the time 1 of waiting.

Then we analysed the behaviour at time 2, after the birth of their first child, which are different from the preferences expressed in time 1, when the women were still pregnant. Below are some examples from the interviews examined. In some couples, we find an inconsistency in preferences between time 1 and behaviour at time 2.

For example, Gaia, twenty-seven, before the birth, declared her preference to leave her job, even though her hairdressing shop was established and fairly productive economically and despite the precarious economic condition of her husband, a gardener without a contract. Her intention to stay home and «be a mother» for two or three years to ensure the child's maternal presence which is considered essential for its own good, does not coincide with her real behaviour after the birth of her daughter. In fact, Gaia had decided to leave the store, but she returned to work a few days after giving birth.

Her preferences expressed in wave 1 appear to be based on a full-time mother and a male breadwinner family model, despite her own objective working conditions and his do not lead you to think that this is the most rational strategy from the economic point of view:

<i>1. Preferences - Present work (I wave)</i> <i>Quotation</i>	<i>1. Behaviour - Present work (II wave)</i> <i>Quotation</i>
The only thing is that we chose that I'll stay at home, and will almost certainly leave my shop, I'll leave my company and stay home and be a mother, perhaps for two or three years and then after that, we will see. Or I'll open another store or look for another job [...] it's also right that / mom is Mom and Dad is the breadwinner / (marking and emphasizing) that is to say that the roles are not too reversed. [...] I would like to breastfeed and spend time with her [...] I don't know [...] it seems more like mother stuff to me.	<p><i>And you went back to work after how long?</i></p> <p>R: Oh, actually I gave birth on Wednesday and on Monday I started again. With her in her baby buggy. Sure, it's a bit crazy but we needed this, also I no longer have my mother, my mother-in-law works on, so I needed to bring her.</p> <p><i>I: And so you went right back to work.</i></p> <p>R: Yes, actually at this time I'd go around to the homes of customers, to be able to keep [...] keep them all. [...] And then I went around a bit with her, working a bit at people's homes, then I found a good job and then she started going to nursery school.</p>

Table. 2. Gaia' s Interview

The comparison between the two excerpts allows us to observe an inconsistency between preferences at Time 1 behaviour and that at Time 2. In fact, after a year we discovered that she actually sold the business, but returned to work after a few days initially under the table at customers' homes and then she found another job as a permanent employee.

In addition, in our research we also have his quotations and his interview excerpts relating to his attitude towards her work as well as towards his own.

As to the attitude of her husband towards her work, he explicitly asked her to work fewer hours, but she maintains a full-time schedule, essential to her profession to which she is still attached, and she is satisfied with the compromise found in the family of nursery school.

The husband, Giacomo, worked without a contract as a gardener with his father-in-law, and in his preferences before birth there was the search for a permanent job for more security and job stability.

We know also from the second interview that the work situation of the husband didn't change a lot in the second interview. Then it is possible that she also needed to continue to work, due to instability of her husband situation. So the situation is dictated by necessity and economic constraints, rather than by a variation in preferences.

In this case, too, there are different preferences before and after the birth. Indeed, later he declares his intention to open a Vat number and do free-lance activity, with the aim of being freer and more flexible in managing his work time so as to devote more time to his daughter and his wife:

Ah! Definitely not to be employed by someone else any more, but be the owner of something, to have people who work for me, and so I will be able to have a little more time for my daughter, for my wife (Giacomo, 27, primary education, gardener, II wave).

Then in some cases, external constraints push the couple toward a new model of family and even if they express expectations very linked to the traditional cultural context, they move toward a model where the husband discovers the pleasure of the caregiving.

It could also be that there are unexpressed preferences, because of the cultural constraints, toward work commitment even in the role of mother, from the future mother that helps to go in this direction.

In other couples, both preferences and behaviour seem to vary from time 1 to 2, from the time of pregnancy to the time of parenthood.

Fabiola is a precarious middle school teacher married to Fabrizio, who is also a precarious teacher. As for her ideals, Fabiola says:

I'd even stay part-time for my entire life (smiles), in the sense that I would like to until the kids have grown up, but naturally you don't refuse the job because, but I think it's ideal for me, for the way I am, since I want to care for the children, for

me it's ideal, it would be ideal (Fabiola, 34, tertiary education, school teacher, II wave).

<p><i>1. Preferences - Present work (I wave) Quotation</i></p>	<p><i>1. Behaviours - Present work (II wave) Quotation</i></p>	<p><i>2. Preferences - Present work (II wave) Quotation</i></p>
<p>I: <i>Have you ever thought of not working or reducing your work commitment to better combine family and work?</i> R: I'm thinking about it now [...] if it were possible I would like to devote at least a year to my daughter and my husband, my family. Something temporary. I: <i>Have you thought about how the professional and daily life of your partner will change?</i> R: There will certainly be a priority; even while dedicating ourselves with professionalism to our work – not that one wants to overlook it – but in my opinion the perspective will change when you return back home; the main thought will be devoted to the family, without excluding the partner. Family as a priority especially in the important moments. Surely change something will change from how it is now.</p>	<p>I took the obligatory maternity leave and then I made a choice, but for the type of school that called me, I made the choice instead of not asking for anything, even though I could have had the right to ask breastfeeding leave I didn't ask, but by choice [...]. On the other hand it is that work can also be used to disconnect a little bit and still have a life that's a little more individual, that is, find a part of your life that has completely changed, that's all.</p>	<p>I: <i>Is it important for the woman/man to go back to work soon?</i> R: Well, I think the woman would need to spend more time at home, however, devote most of her time to the family, I'm not saying she shouldn't have a job, but one that's a bit shorter, also for her husband's serenity when he gets home. I mean, I remember when *** (husband's name) would find us both at home, because I did not work, in the sense that it was his day off, he was more pleased, so in any case, for the man's peace of mind, then the man can go to work, even hoping for a job that allows him a little bit more also in the relationship with his children.</p>

Table 3. Fabiola's Interview

She already expressed this orientation in Wave 1 but with much more uncertainty also because she didn't know if the schools would call for substitute teachers after the child's birth. When the child was 5 months old, instead Fabiola went back to work after

having received a job offer in interesting schools and appropriate to her reconciliation needs; she also enrolled in Pedagogical Sciences to attempt a teaching or educator position with a more secure contract. The interviewee says that after all, the fact of going back to work soon after her compulsory maternity leave was useful for finding the aspects more related to her individuality as a woman rather than as a mother. Therefore, for her work is a source of identity. We once again find *behaviour and preferences in Time 2 that are different from those stated in the first interview*.

However, in another part of the second interview the *male breadwinner* model reappears quite strongly, to ensure the man's peace of mind. In this sense, an inner tension to the person themselves emerges, also due to the impact of different social tensions in different directions. The cultural model imposes a mother who is present, but overall, for whose identity it is important to go back to work. *So we again find the preferences expressed in time 2 to be inconsistent with those previously expressed*.

Fabiola's husband also works as a fixed-time teacher. Before the birth of his daughter, he claims to aspire to a permanent contract in a public school where he would feel more protected and wants to integrate his income with extra work by exploiting a degree in engineering. His preferences vary after the baby is born. At Time 2 he says he prefers having less job security, but spending more time with his family.

Fabrizio agrees on the fact that his wife works part time. He, like Fabiola, expresses a variation of preferences. At Time 1, he states that he would like to invest everything in work (*male breadwinner* model), and then he says he appreciates his work flexibility. The couple stressed the precariousness of contracts but is also satisfied that these make it possible to spend more time with family than their friends who perform other jobs.

Has there been a variation of preference due to socializing with their child?

In the first interview, in many couples the paternal contribution to childcare is envisioned as collateral; it is declared by both the mothers and the fathers that the future role of the father is mainly to provide assistance and support to the mother, a secondary role in the intentions and practices (Bertolini *et al.* 2014).

Contrarily in the imagination of the expecting couples, the «good mother» is she who, even though she loves his job, decides to reduce her work commitment to devote herself to the care of the child, often suspending her job through parenting leaves as

long as possible and whenever she can use them (Bertolini *et al.* 2016), and then asking for part-time or reducing the number of working hours.

<i>1. Preferences - Present work (I wave)</i> <i>Quotation</i>	<i>2. Preferences - Present work (II wave)</i> <i>Quotation</i>
<p>R: She wouldn't want me to be away from home so much in the sense that she would want that I was here more than away. [...] And so there are discussions, quarrels, in quotation marks, but these are brought from outside. That I have so much to do, that is, I am pretty much exploited and she does not [...] just like me [...] because then I say to her [...] actually I don't like it either.</p> <p>I: <i>Do you intend to improve your working position? How? And your partner's?</i></p> <p>R: Yes, above all to have a permanent contract.</p>	<p>This job, let's say sure, does not have the certainty of having the right amount of time with my family. So at this time there is no middle ground, one has to choose one side or the other, and I chose that one (smiles), that is, I prefer to have less certainties but spend more time with my family [...].</p>

Table 4. Fabrizio's Interview

Sometimes preferences vary because of constraints that do not allow to put into practice behaviour that is coherent with the previous preferences expressed. In the case of Rachele and Raniero Cerfoglio, quite an equalitarian couple, he would like to be involved in the care of the baby. For example, Rachele (33, researcher, fixed-term scholarship) was entitled to maternity leave but not parental leave. She wanted her husband to take parental leave but she said:

[I don't think he would take it [parental leave], anyway, because men don't usually go on leave at his workplace [...]. Taking parental leave can have a serious impact on my husband's future career] (Rachele, 33, tertiary education, researcher, I wave).

Moreover, the widespread culture in the workplace considers the mother as the most appropriate provider of childcare. Many interviewees reported that the work climate, employers and colleagues would be hostile to a "father at home".

In the case of Carlotta and Carlo Bluma, he took nine months off for breastfeeding leave. After returning from this period, he was transferred to another bank branch (bigger) and no longer has the role of vice-director which he'd had in the branch office where he worked before the birth (but is simply an employee).

In the statements of some respondents the difficulty of putting their preferences into practice is clear, because of an organization and a culture of gender and parenting in the workplace perceived as little "family friendly".

Sometimes, because of constraints they have adapted their preferences, and in these cases, they sometimes discover new preferences. For example, because of the economic crisis, some fathers become unemployed and take care of the baby, rediscovering that they like the caregiving.

In the case of the Poli couple, the pregnancy had taken them "by surprise" because they had not planned it. In their couple, there was a (partial) gap between plans and practices. Rather, following a "constraint", i.e. the unexpected unemployment of the father when the child was born, in this couple the concrete childcare arrangement was characterised by an involvement of the father that was higher than the couple had planned on in the prenatal interviews (Time 1): in fact they had planned to enrol their baby at the crèche very soon, after the end of Ginevra's compulsory maternity leave. But given Giuseppe's forced unemployment, the baby went to the crèche only part-time, so that he took care of the baby for the rest of the time.

[The return to work] was heavy, heavy, heavy, because I felt a bit guilty, but probably more conditioned by the fact that all those I knew took four months more off, they felt guilty. So many people who told me: "but bring her to the crèche, poor thing! She's so little." In the end, in my opinion, it's a good thing to take some space for yourself, because when I was not working, there was only her, her, her, and now I'm doing things for myself and then doing things together (Ginevra, 32, tertiary education, aeronautical engineer, II wave).

In this case, at time zero they were both work-oriented. In the period 1 of pregnancy she seems more oriented to family than him, but after the birth of the baby, also due to economic constraints, he discovers the pleasure of taking care of the baby. At the same

time, she discovers that, even in the role of mother she can like her job, but she must suffer the disappointment for putting the baby in the crèche so early.

In the sense that in any case not having a secure job, that is not having a job [...] is a very heavy thing, very difficult to deal with. But the fact that she is there (the daughter) fills the day and gives you the opportunity to enjoy many times during the day. Surely it is something that allows you to face everyday life well, in a positive way. Then of course she is also a flywheel to make sure that one gets busy, that one does not stop, that one does not get tired, just because her presence is enough to make sure that we do not have a break down (Giuseppe, 35, tertiary education, corporate office, II wave).

Sometimes in the second interview, behaviour coincides with the preferences expressed in the first interview, and in many cases we find unexpected behaviour.

Therefore, it has been observed that even carefully planned decisions can clash, especially when the mother has her first child, with the new reality in which she finds herself catapulted after the birth. And so the period prior to returning to work is often characterized by doubts about her choice, by fears and anxieties, desires and orientations, and also a strong burden of conflicting emotions.

## **6. Conclusion**

In this paper we reflect on the strategies used in a longitudinal qualitative study to explore preferences toward work, following participants from the antenatal to the postnatal period.

The analysis of our interviews seems to suggest that it is not realistic to consider women's (and men's) individual preferences toward work and family as opposite poles of a continuum, as Hakim's theory states.

The longitudinal qualitative analysis presented here does not allow us to identify much more than time sequences, given the paucity of numbers to which it can be applied. However, it does allow us to monitor two levels in time: that which we have

called the preferences, particularly how these preferences form in relation to the interpretation of the macro (economic constraints and cultural norms), and the individually owned resources (human capital, economic, social, and personal background), but also how these vary over time as well as that of their behaviour and allows us to put them in relation to each other in time.

In this sense, the question arises of how to analyse the transitions of the subjects. For example, if I do not find consistency between the different moments, I have to think back to the actor model: a static actor model, with equal preferences, is no longer sufficient but the preferences vary, including in relation to external constraints and personal experiences.

Theories of the life course and the transition to adult life give us analytical tools to interpret the preferences variations with respect to work in relation to an irreversible event, taking into account micro and macro level. At this respect similar analyses had been done in others countries using a qualitative longitudinal methodology (Grunow and Evertsson 2016). Results show similarity but also differences with Italian case. The variations of preferences are stronger in Italy, underline probably a specific situation on tension in our countries regarding model of family and expectations about gender roles in our countries

Looking inside the couple in different times, separating preferences and behaviour, also allows to find a changing in gender model and in family models that we cannot observe by quantitative analyses or qualitative cross-section analysis.

The new families are in transition towards a new model, and even if quantitative data sometimes reveals a very static situation, we find inside this new family, tension, interaction, a new way to organize work and care, a new way to interact, negotiation of a model inside the institutional and cultural setting and economic constraints. Using this lens, we can see that Italian families are in movement and are putting into practice a new model of families that institutions often don't take into account, such as fathers who would like/desire to be more involved in the childcare. Using a qualitative longitudinal approach allows us to find tensions and variations of preferences of men and women situated in time ad space and in relation to the macro context; changes of society

in these tensions and variations of individual preferences; a society in movement. This requires a need of legitimation of new behaviour.

The (new) fathers seem to have a low “sense of entitlement” to ask for legitimacy and innovation in institutions and workplaces which they perceive (especially the latter) as hostile to a male worker who “expects” to make his own job and working schedules more reconcilable with the time for the childcare, but the institutions and labour market must look at these changes.

A limitation of this study can be that the pre-pregnancy preferences are reconstructed from the moment of pregnancy; so the information about the pre-pregnancy period could be vitiated, in a certain way, by changes in perspective that have already occurred at the time of the first interview.

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