

Contemporary and “New” Fatherhoods: an Attempt of Redefinition Looking at the Case of Parental Leave

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n° 02-2018

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Il working paper riflette il testo originale presentato dall'autrice nel seminario del 29/01/2018 organizzato dall'Osservatorio MU.S.I.C. (discussant Chiara Bertone - Università del Piemonte Orientale e Luisa Stagi - Università di Genova)

Per la grafica della copertina si ringrazia Federica Turco

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I will use 35 interviews with heterosexual Italian fathers, among whom 25 used parental leave, to redefine “new” fatherhood. First, I will show that in all the interviews there are some elements that constitute a sort of common ground upon which contemporary fatherhood relies. Then, since masculinity and fatherhood are enacted in the daily life, I will focus on the actual practices performed by father. In order to better define the concept of new fatherhood, I will show the existence of different *fatherhoods*, combining two dimensions: the discursive self-positioning of men in respect to fatherhood and the actual practices of care performed with their children. To label a man as a new father, it is not sufficient his self-definition as “present”, but it is also necessary that he is also involved in innovative care practices and parental leave is not necessarily one of them.

Keywords: New fatherhood; plural fatherhoods; practices; self-positioning; parental leave

INTRODUCTION

In Italy, the debate on fatherhood and in particular on the so-called involved fatherhood is quite recent because of different reasons, among which the still traditional configuration of gender roles and relationships inside Italian heterosexual couples. However, in the last fifteen years, some things have changed and new expectations and practices of fatherhood are emerging.

In the present paper, adopting a performative perspective of gender, I will use 35 interviews with heterosexual Italian fathers, among whom 25 used parental leave, in order to explore their experiences of fatherhood and to redefine “new” fatherhood. In this article, I will use the adjective “new” instead of “involved” or “intimate” (Dermott 2008; Miller 2011) because in the Italian context it is more used, often in opposition to the “traditional” model of fatherhood, with the precise scope to mark the distance from the men of the past. However, it is still unclear when such an innovation occurred, what exactly makes this fatherhood a break with the past and if this Manichean vision is useful to represent actual experiences of contemporary fathers. At first, I will show that there are some elements common to all the interviews that constitute a sort of common ground upon which contemporary fatherhood relies. Then, since gender and, of course, masculinity and fatherhood are enacted in the daily life, I will focus on the actual practices (discursive and not) performed by father. In order to better define the concept of new fatherhood, I will show the existence of different *fatherhoods* combining two dimensions: the discursive self-positioning (Hollway 1984; Davies & Harré 1990; Baxter 2003; Harré *et al.* 2009) of men in respect to fatherhood and the actual practices of care performed with their children. To label a man as a new father, it is not sufficient his self-definition as “present”, but it is also necessary that he is also involved in innovative¹ care duties. I decided to interview also fathers who took parental leave because one could expect that this

¹ In this context, I will use the adjective “innovative” to refer to care practices that are not “new” in general, but that are new for the fathers who normally dedicate themselves to recreational activities and not care duties *stricto sensu*. In fact, in this article, innovative and routine activities will be used as synonyms.

kind of fathers more probably embody the ideal of the new father, however I will show that this experience is only in part significant. Even if it is true and possible that the experience of parental leave pushes men to describe themselves as involved and at the same time to perform innovative practices of fatherhood, it is not given for granted. Some men, in fact, during the period of parental leave, continued to be involved in paid work and/or delegate care work to other people such as grandparents. Conversely, some men who did not use parental leave are very devoted to their children and perform both routine and non-routine activities with them.

FATHERHOOD IN CONTEMPORARY DEBATE

In recent years, expressions like new/involved/intimate fatherhood have become more and more common both in the public and in the academic arena. This ideal has been echoed by numerous policy initiatives – among which the laws on parental leave – that encouraged and at the same time made recognizable paternal involvement in childcare duties (Dermott & Miller 2015).

However, even if some researches shows that fathers are more engaged in childcare practices, the gender revolution remains unfinished (Gerson 2009) and we are still far from a “masculinization” of the private sphere that should mirror the “feminization” of the public one (England 2010). This is particularly true for the Italian case. In Italy, in fact, the involvement of fathers remains more on the level of attitudes than of actual practices and “evidence suggests that in Italy the “new father” or “nurturing dad” is hesitant to emerge” (Bosoni *et al.* 2016, p. 131).

Three are the main issues that characterize the Italian case.

The first one concerns the time devoted to care. As pointed out by many scholars (Miller 2011; Bertone *et al.* 2015), the ideal of the involved father recalls the presence and the fathers themselves underline the importance of *being there* for their children. Nevertheless, this expectation strongly contradicts with their breadwinner role and their commitment in paid work. In fact, even if “involved fatherhood as a form of fatherhood was intended to contrast with the breadwinner model” (Dermott 2008, p.

24), in practice men continue to devote long time to paid work. Since masculinity in Italy continues to be strictly interwoven with breadwinning, fathers tend to give more importance to quality instead of quantity of time spent with their children to cope with the tensions between prevailing models of masculinity and innovative expectations towards fatherhood (Dermott 2008; Miller 2011; Murgia & Poggio 2011; Magaraggia 2012). However, in “new” fatherhood, breadwinning can be combined with other practices linked to the emotional but also physical intimacy with the child and men engage a language of caring, bonding and emotional, intimate connection (Dermott & Miller 2015). The aspect of intimacy is particularly interesting because it is one of the elements that are normally invoked by men to define new fatherhood and to distance themselves by their own fathers. The legacy of the previous generation is lumbering in the words of contemporary Italian fathers. In fact, they perceive and they define themselves as different from their own fathers, often described as both emotionally and physically detached and totally devoted to paid work. Therefore, contemporary fathers cannot identify themselves with the traditional model of fatherhood, but at the same time they lack of new shared models. Actually, they do not even feel the need to experience collective moments for the creation of new models of fatherhood: «the experience of a more involved fatherhood is described in its individualized dimension [...], legitimate by a changed social and cultural scenario, more than by the support of a male homosocial network» (Bertone *et al.* 2015, p. 171).

The second issue deals with the relationship between fatherhood and masculinity. Of course, fatherhood calls into question masculinity and, in particular, hegemonic masculinity and its strong links with breadwinning. However, in Italy the reflection upon the changes in fatherhood has not been followed by a reflection upon the social construction of masculinity, both individually and collectively (Dermott 2008; Ciccone 2012; Magaraggia 2013; Bertone *et al.* 2015). One of the main effects of this lack is the absence of an appropriate vocabulary to talk about contemporary fathers. There are numerous labels to refer to men who perform care work (innovative, involved, present, caring, new, post-patriarchal and so on) that testify the lacking process of

questioning the criteria for defining masculinity which remains strictly interwoven with paid work and to the separation between public and private sphere.

“Italian fathers who actively participate in daily care work of their children do not even have a language to define themselves and use the hybrid term “mammo”² [...]. The need to coin new words in order to grasp a process of cultural innovation makes us understand how big is the discrepancy between the changes in fatherhood and those in masculinity” (Magaraggia 2013, pp. 195-196; author’s translation).

Therefore, the “double presence” of men risks to be described and experienced as devirilizing and the expression “mammo” perfectly exemplifies this supposed incompatibility between care and masculinity.

The last issue that characterizes the Italian case deals with the practices that fathers actually perform with their children. Many researches argue that men participate in the daily lives of their children mainly through play and recreational non-routine activities, leaving the physical ones (such as changing diapers, bathing the baby and so on) to mothers (Borlini 2008; Naldini 2015). Men, in fact, often assign to themselves a role of “assistants” of their partners, also because they are socially allowed to perform a more fluid model of parenthood selecting only some kinds of activities and deciding autonomously the terms of their involvement (Borlini 2008; Magaraggia 2012; Naldini & Torrioni 2015; Finn & Henwood 2009; Aboim 2010; Bertone *et al.* 2015).

In this scenario, the use parental leave by fathers has the potential for being a significant shift: in fact, it could represent a break in the commitment towards paid work and, at the same time, a redefinition of the relationship with care. In this sense, it could be read as a practice of new fatherhood or as the result of the new expectations that surround it.³

² The expression “*mammo*” in Italy derives from the word “*mamma*” (mother) and it is normally used to joke about fathers who care for their children especially if they use parental leave

³ I consider particularly interesting the relationship between the use of parental leave and new fatherhood but the exploration of this link goes beyond the scope of the present article. Here, I will just say that from the data of my research I can argue that in Italy new fatherhood is more the result of the use of parental leave and not the vice versa: the decision of a father to go on leave is generally due to external constraints and not to the will to be involved. However, the experience of a long and continuous parental leave produces important changes in the construction of fatherhood and masculinity especially in terms of the practices of childcare that fathers perform.

OBJECTIVES AND METHODS

The objective of the article is to redefine new fatherhood, showing at the same time the existence of different forms of fatherhood.

The main idea is to identify some elements that are common to all contemporary fathers and then to create a typology through the combination of two elements: the self-positioning of men in respect to their role as fathers and the actual practices of care performed with their children.

Since the notion of practice is crucial in this context, a linguistic warning is required. Interpreting gender as performative means to consider it as the result of different practices, enacted in daily life, which could be also discursive. In the present article, I will try to separate “actual” practices and discursive practices combining the doing gender theory of West and Zimmerman (1987) with the positioning theory of Hollway (1984), Davies and Harré (1990) and Baxter (2003).

In order to pursue my objective, I interviewed 35 heterosexual Italian fathers, all employed in the private sector, all with open-ended contracts, coming from different cultural and social backgrounds, among whom 25 used parental leave. I conducted semi-structured interviews, audio recorded, then verbatim transcribed and analyzed through Atlas.ti software. Participants were invited to sign an informed consent form and confidentiality and their privacy is guaranteed by changing all their identifying characteristics and their real names in quotations.

The characteristics of the sample are summarized in Table 1.

Tab. 1 Characteristics of the sample

Age	30-35	36-40	> 40
	8	12	15
Degree	Junior High	High School	Master
	5	10	20
Position	Blue-collar	White-collar	Middle Manager
	11	17	7
Type of Contract	Freelancer	Fixed-term	Open-ended
	-	-	35

	Full-time		Part-time	
	31		4	
Position and Contract of the Partner	Freelancer	Employee with Fixed-term Contract	Employee with Open-ended Contract	
	6	2	27	
		Full-time	Part-time	
	-	21	8	
Days of parental leave (n=25)	<30 days	30-90 days	>90 days	
	6	12	7	

Before presenting the results of the research, I want to reflect upon the possible perturbation caused by me, as a woman, interviewing men. The interview with a father and a man, in fact, could represent “both an opportunity for signifying masculinity and a peculiar type of encounter in which masculinity is threatened” (Schwalbe & Wolkomir 2001, p. 91). Some possible risks, linked to my gender identity (and also to my age), were to be relegated in a position of scarce authority and credibility; to increase the processes of management impression; to experience processes of objectification and sexualisation (Arendell 1997; Schwalbe & Wolkomir 2001).

However, the fact that I am a woman only partially interfered on the relationship and on the interview. On the one hand, my gender was made explicit in six occasions when we talked about motherhood with expressions such as “You [i.e. women] change completely when you become mothers” or with direct questions such as “Do you have kids?”, “Are you married?”. Only in one case, though, after the interview with the recorder switched off, one father questioned the reliability of my results stating that “Those fathers who told you that they do care for their children did that just to impress you because you are young and pretty” (field notes of the interview with Diego, 38 years old, high school degree, white-collar worker). On the other hand, in my opinion, my gender played a positive role in facilitating the display of their emotions probably because “women’s traditional positioning as attentive and empathetic emotional listeners [...] [allows] male interviewees to disclose without

feeling that their masculinity has been compromised” (Hanlon 2012, pp. 18-19). Three fathers, for example, cried during the interview thinking about the experiences lived with their children and almost all of the interviewees sincerely thanked me for giving them the time and the occasion to share and reflect upon their experience of fatherhood.

Finally, concerning social desirability, we have to remember that the social construction and expectations that surround fatherhood are far less normative compared to those surrounding motherhood. For a father, in fact, it is not stigmatizing saying that they prefer to dedicate to paid work instead to care work and that they are not involved with their children. On the contrary, the overrating of their commitment might be a real bias that I considered during the analysis of the data.

SOME FEATURES OF CONTEMPORARY FATHERHOOD

In this section, I will explore some common elements that emerged in all the interviews. It is interesting to note that, even if the experiences of fatherhood of these men are very different, some features are indeed shared by all the interviewees and they represent of a sort of common ground upon which contemporary fatherhood relies.

How to be a father?

The first interesting result, congruent with the literature, is the lack of models of the interviewees in the construction of their experience as fathers. In fact, in the most of the cases, these men feel the need to express the big difference that separates them from their fathers described as totally devoted to paid work. When they recall their childhood, in fact, they insist on the absence of their fathers from home, an absence that is at the same time physical and emotional: the men of the past are described as very committed to paid work, rarely present at home spending time with them, and unable to express their feelings.

«I come from [...] a very traditional family where my mother did everything [at home] and my father worked, a figure, let me say, a little bit absent. I mean, education was completely delegated to the maternal role, my mother was completely devoted to us. I have to say that maybe some of my choices were affected also by that, by this paternal figure that I would have wanted more present» (Michele, 44 years old, master degree, white-collar worker).

«My dad was a great worker, nothing to say, but I missed some recreational moments with him, so the idea to work less and to spend more time with her [my daughter] helps me to be happier» (Adriano, 43 years old, high school degree, middle manager).

«In my family [...] my father used to work, was one of those men who worked until late evening, only my mother was there. I remember my mom, my grandmother, not my father, he used to work all day long, he did not show love for me as I do now with my children, at least when I was I child. For sure, I have given to my children far more affection than my father did with me [...]» (Mauro, 41 years old, junior high school degree, blue-collar worker).

In other cases, some of the interviewees do not mark the distance for the model of fatherhood learned from their fathers, but they perceive a strong difference from them due to the fact that they belong to different generations.

«No, I do not resemble to my father in parenting because I was born thirty years later [...]. However, I am learning from my father the way to love children which is very explicit [...]: my dad has been saying “I love you” to me from the day one to yesterday, he says that openly» (Christian, 31 years old, master degree, middle manager).

This absence of models from the past is mirrored by the absence of collective moments of discussion about fatherhood with other fathers in the present. Therefore, fatherhood seems a solitary process lacking of any reference points.

«**F:** I talk with some friends who have children, we exchange experiences, advices, so yes I talk with them. However if you ask me which is my model to be a father, I don't have one in my mind. I talk and I live day by day.

I: [So with your friends] you often talk about these themes such as fatherhood, children...

F: About children yes. What do you mean with “fatherhood”? No, we talk about the children but the practical issues, for sure not about feelings or emotions» (Stefano, 37 years old, master degree, white-collar worker).

Other fathers – friends or colleagues – are, in the best scenario, people who these men talk to for practical problems related to the “management” of children, but with

whom they are not able to build new collective models of fatherhood. In addition, in these social contexts they do not even have the possibility to elaborate the individual experience of becoming a father and the changes that this experience can produce in the personal biography. In fact, the homosocial male environments, such as the groups of friends and colleagues, remain fields in which men build and reproduce traditional models of hegemonic masculinity.

«Among fathers? /In the end among fathers we just mess around/ (laughing). I mean, we act differently when we are just men without our wives: there is a different kind of brotherhood, you know? [...] For example, this winter there was an ice-skating rink in the central square and we used to bring the children there, /but we used to share comments about the mothers that were there more than to talk about the children/ (laughing loud)» (Michele, 44 years old, master degree, white-collar worker).

In this scenario, the main points of reference for men are their female partners. Their wives/partners, in fact, are subjects to both compare and discuss with and sometimes fathers use them as a source of “inspiration” to learn parenting. Then, parenthood becomes at most a couple’s experience constructed case by case in everyday practice without “recipes”.

«So, first of all, the most important thing is the communication between parents, parents should talk to each other [...]. The child is important, of course, but the baby is fine if the parents are fine. [...] For the rest, there are no recipes, there are not» (Luca, 42 years old, master degree, white-collar worker).

So, as expressed in the quotation below, parenthood become a problem of managing cared duties and pursuing a balanced relationship between the two parents, a condition considered essential by all the interviewees to be good parents and fathers as well.

«I feel that a good father is good also because he has a good relationship with his wife. Love is the precondition for the good of the children, there is no such thing as recipes [...]» (Mauro, 41 years old, junior high school degree, blue-collar worker).

Another important result emerged by the interviews is that the presence is an essential feature of the contemporary “good” father. However, from the interviews it comes out also the more fluidity granted to the paternal presence in respect to the

maternal one. The central cleavage, in fact, is the quantity-quality of time spent. For many of the interviewees, to be a good father it is sufficient to be present, but not necessarily for a long time with the children: it is more important to spend “valuable” time with them.

«For sure, the presence [is essential to be a good father], but a presence that does not mean to spend long time with them, but it means also intensity of time. You do not need to be there for much time, but when you are with them you have to be focused and involved with the children and with the family in general» (Giovanni, 35 years old, master degree, middle manager).

Therefore, the importance of the presence of the father at home can remain on the level of attitudes more than practices. Clearly, this way of interpreting the presence is more common among fathers strongly devoted to paid work, maybe in an attempt to reduce the cognitive dissonance derived from the contrast between attitudes and practices. However, this aspect enlightens another important element. As pointed out by Dermott (2008), “[...] the role of “good father” is not defined in the same way as the “good worker”, where time equals commitment. This sets up a potential difference between “intimate fatherhood” and “intensive motherhood”, where one measure of “good motherhood” is committing a significant amount of time to childcare [...]” (Ivi, p. 62). Social prescriptions towards the time that a father must devote to children are actually less normative than the ones related to maternity and to the participation to paid work and they do not call into question the main characteristics of traditional masculinity.

Fatherhood and masculinity

From the interviews emerged also some insights on masculinity and its relationship with fatherhood and care work.

The social attitudes toward “new” fatherhood seem to have legitimized – at least in discursive practices – the idea that care work is not necessarily related to women and therefore emasculating. Almost all the interviewees point out that caring for the children (also by using parental leave) allow men to add something to their masculinity without questioning their virility.

In the words of the interviewees, then, masculinity and care work seem to find a way to intertwine: care practices are not usually constitutive of masculinity, but they definitely can be integrated in the construction of masculinity hybridizing it.

«It seems that they are two separate worlds, as you feel compromised in your masculinity when you start acting as a father. I would interpret it in a more

positive way, like your being male gains a new dimension, a better one» (Michele, 44 years old, master degree, white-collar worker).

In respect to the use of parental leave, any interviewee maintains that this experience can be devirilizing for a father, and this idea is shared both by men who used parental leave and men who did not.

«At this point, in 2016 if someone thinks that you are a faggot if you use parental leave, he would deserve to be punched. Well, you can make a joke about the “mammo”, but I would not feel ashamed by using parental leave [...]. If my partner were a freelance, I would use it. I am not stealing anything, it is a right for everyone and I would use it without feeling more feminine [...]. I mean, I would not be afraid to be confused with a woman» (Diego, 38 high school degree, white-collar worker).

However, in the sample we find two different positions in respect to the virility issue. One group of fathers question the concept itself of virility judging it as a legacy of the past linked to a stereotypical social construction of masculinity and femininity. In their opinion, the idea itself that a man who cares for their children is less manly makes sense only in a cultural context in which the concepts of “virility” and “real man” have strong and well-defined normative contents.

«I mean, the man who wants to “do the man” without getting his hands dirty with female’s, mom’s stuff, I don’t believe in these things, they have never been mine» (Adriano, 43 years old, high school degree, middle manager).

«As I was saying before, this thing of “being a man”...if being a man means doing man’s stuff and not doing women’s stuff we have to clarify which things are for men and which for women. I mean, I do not think that to care for a child is a woman’s stuff, nor to do housework, there are no such a thing like women’s and men’s activities [...]. The use of parental leave does not undermine your virility, it actually gives you something more» (Paolo, 35 years old, master degree, white-collar worker).

«I do not like this rhetoric. I understand the good intentions also of people who call you “mammo”, but I really do not like the use of this commonplace [...]. I argued with some people because they use the word “mammo”. I think that the wonderful thing of the experience of parental leave is the experience in itself, the reasons for doing it have nothing to do with virility» (Christian, 31 years old, master degree, middle manager).

This group of fathers is composed mostly by fathers who used parental leave. It is difficult, though interesting, to say whether these critical attitudes towards gender

stereotypes associated to masculinity pushed them to use parental leave, or if these men talk in this way because they made a choice socially considered devirilizing and so they need to “justify” themselves and protect their (male) identity. For sure, it is evident that also these men often tend to describe their care engagement using the semantics of masculine strength, autonomy, bravery.

«This thing [the use of parental leave] makes you a modern hero, a man who decide to be there for his daughter, yeah, a modern hero» (Christian, 31 years old, master degree, middle manager).

«The decision was taken and it could not be negotiated: I went there [to my boss] with the form already filled out and I told him: “This is the request of parental leave, sign it”» (Adriano, 43 years old, high school degree, middle manager).

Those fathers who believe that parental leave and care work are not emasculating, but who remain more anchored to a traditional vision of masculinity using the “real man” rhetoric, instead, compose the second group. In their interviews, in fact, themes such as the responsibility of providing for the children more than take care of them and the idea of fatherhood as a challenge through which masculinity is proved are more common.

«I strongly agree with the idea that is for real men to care for their children [...]. I mean, contributing to family even when there are children is for responsible people» (Giovanni, 35 years old, master degree, middle manager).

«Taking care of children mean to be a real man because it is easier to leave them to themselves instead of taking care of them, absolutely» (Luigi, 33 years old, master degree, white-collar worker).

«The real man is not the one who did not take parental leave because he is afraid he cannot do it, it is a challenge and you have to accept and live it» (Manuel, 46 years old, master degree, white-collar worker).

Another aspect that calls into question masculinity is the display of emotions.

The majority of the interviewees showed scarce capacity of introspection and in response to the question “Do you feel changed after you became a father?” they described changes in their routines more than in their identities as men who are now also fathers.

This is particularly interesting because becoming a father seems a more “flexible” process than becoming a mother and provides men with “an ability to obstruct the process of change in ways not available to women when they become mothers. The identity of ‘mother’ is all consuming and is applied to women once they have a child in such a way that other dimensions of their identities can be overridden, whilst the identity ‘father’ enables other possibilities” (Miller 2011, p. 131).

Many fathers of the sample, in fact, affirm that they do not feel changed at all after the childbirth. While maternity is socially constructed as an all-absorbing irreversible experience in the life cycle, it is not the same for fatherhood. On one side, men feel less pressures in this sense; on the other, though, they are less equipped to do the introspective work of exploration of their internal changes and emotions.

Moreover, the difficulty of these men in describing the changes caused by fatherhood also relies on the, already mentioned, lack of collective moments of sharing and reflection on this experience among men. Indeed, the references to a collective ‘us’ are very rare in these interviews both as fathers and as fathers who used parental leave in case they did. But this lack is often experienced as a burden and a missing piece in their lives.

«I would like to share my experience with other fathers, talking to them, asking them how they did, how they felt. Actually, [...] I never had an exchange of views, but I think it would be good» (Adriano, 43 years old, high school degree, middle manager).

As a consequence, these men also experience loneliness in their practices of fatherhood and a lack of public recognition. In fact, some of them describe the discomfort linked to some moments spent with their children in public spaces where they were the only fathers.

«The strange thing is that sometimes I went to the park and I was the only father among all mothers or I went at the supermarket and I was the only father. So it is a little bit uncomfortable to be a father with his child in contexts where usually there are only mothers» (Carlo, 44 years old, high school degree, white-collar worker).

«I bring her [the daughter] everywhere: to dance class, at the swimming pool...but a father can't do such things. I know all the moms of the children from the dance class and they allow me to get into the dressing room to help her to

dress up because they are all 7, 8, 9 years old children. But we should have dressing rooms where a father can bring his daughter without using the male ones or without asking to other mothers to take a look at her because you cannot get in. I think we [men] should ask for more equity in this sense» (Riccardo, 38 years old, master degree, blue-collar worker).

However, during the interview, also the fathers that explicitly admit their inability of introspection “inadvertently” started talking about some changes and affirmed that they feel grown up and more mature than before.

«I feel different. Let’s say better. More focused on things that really count, careful of relationships, of not being scared by emotions [...]. You become more human, yes, more human» (Luca, 42 years old, master degree, white-collar worker).

«For sure I feel different, the me of today is not the same me before the children. I can feel it, most positive things, I feel more mature, more profound, maybe also more peaceful» (Stefano, 37 years old, master degree, white-collar worker).

This reached maturity affects also these fathers’ habits and priorities leading them to conduct – as they say – more responsible and ‘sober’ lives.

«You know, my friends are right: I am changed. I am no more the one who hangs out with friends late at night [...], I can’t notice that but people around me say that something has changed, that I am more responsible, more calm, more quiet, more reflexive» (Emanuele, 40 years old, junior high school degree, blue-collar worker).

One of the most common elements in the interviews, in fact, is the sense of responsibility perceived by these men towards their children that pushes them to be more reflexive and less impulsive especially in frivolous occasions. On one hand, it is very interesting that all the fathers interviewed interrupted the most ‘dangerous’ sports or activities they used to do especially with their (male) friends and that normally contribute to enact and perform a normative, traditional model of masculinity.

«Maybe you have more sense into you, you avoid doing things such as downhill at night, because you are afraid, you think more, you are more responsible [...]» (Giacomo, 38 years old, high school degree, blue-collar worker).

«For sure you have to learn to manage your life, your duties, your priorities but [...] maybe the real big change for me is that in some moments I naturally act more prudently because you realize that you are no more on your own [...]. I give

you an example: I went to a bachelor party of a friend and we wanted to engage in a go-cart race and I have always been the more daring, but in that occasion on the start line I thought: “It is really worthy?”. It’s a small thing but that makes you realize that something has changed» (Angelo, 33 years old, master degree, white-collar worker).

On the other hand, this change in priorities and the more importance given to the children well-being is reflected by the fact that some of these fathers engage in practices of care that contradict with the social construction of virility and masculinity.

«I can’t swim but I wanted them to learn to swim so I used to bring them to the swimming pool on Saturday morning [...], but when we had to put them under the water I had to raise my hand and publicly admit that I can’t swim. So, you know, I had to go beyond my personal shame for them and their well-being because they are my priority» (Paolo, 35 years old, master degree, white-collar worker).

REDEFINING NEW FATHERHOOD

So far, it seems that the label of “new fatherhood” could be applied almost to every father who generically defines himself involved with his children. Besides, if every practice enacted in the present defines the innovation, this criterion is no longer useful to discern and to grasp differences among fathers. Potentially every interviewee of the sample could be considered as a new father.

In this paper, instead, I argue that new fatherhood results from the intersection between actual innovative practices performed by men and the discursive positioning of fatherhood as more central in male identity compared to breadwinning, as shown in Table 2. This idea derives from the recognition that “in the discourse of new fatherhood, fathering is an – increasingly important and increasingly demanded – additional requirement for paternity, but it is not an essential defining characteristic, as it is for maternity” (Lengersdorf & Meuser 2016, p. 156).

Moreover, in this way, instead of dichotomizing the experiences of fatherhood in “old” and “new” (or “traditional” and “innovative”, etc.), we can better describe the complexity of the changes (and continuity) in fatherhood that result in multiple models.

Tab. 2. Typology of fatherhoods: type of fathers and relationship with masculinity

		Discursive positioning of fatherhood in the construction of masculinity		Relationship with masculinity
		<i>Central</i>	<i>Peripheral</i>	
Practices of Fatherhood	<i>Traditional</i>	Neo-traditional Fathers	Breadwinner Fathers	Traditional Masculinity
	<i>Innovative</i>	New Fathers	Semi-traditional Fathers	Hybrid Masculinity
Fatherhood in Public Discourse		“New” Fatherhood	Traditional Fatherhood	

Concerning the self-positioning toward fatherhood in the construction of masculinity, a clarification is required. Some authors (Hollway 1984; Davies e Harré 1990; Baxter 2003; Harré *et al.* 2009) coined the concept of positioning to describe the way in which people position themselves and are positioned by others through discursive practices, and the way in which the individual’s subjectivity is generated through the learning and use of certain discursive practices.

“A particular strength of the poststructuralist research paradigm [...] is that it recognises both the constitutive force of discourse, and in particular of discursive practices and at the same time recognises that people are capable of exercising choice in relation to those practices. We shall argue that the constitutive force of each discursive practice lies in its provision of subject positions. A subject position incorporates both a conceptual repertoire and a location for persons within the structure of rights [...]” (Davies & Harré 1990, p. 46).

Among these discursive practices, Hollway (1984) explore those of self or reflexive positioning through which people locate themselves in the gender arena and, then, build and perform gendered identities.

In this article, I use this theory to explore the ways in which men position themselves in respect to other men, insisting more on their role as breadwinner or as fathers. Of course, the two “roles” not necessarily contradict and life is more than family and work, however the “separate spheres” approach still stands. Therefore analyzing the discursive practices of my interviewees, I could identify two groups in relation to the importance given to fatherhood (in opposition to breadwinning) in their identity

construction as men. For these reasons, I adopt the distinction between “practices of fatherhood” referred to actual practices performed with their children and “self-positioning” referred to discursive practices used to describe themselves as fathers and the effect of fatherhood on their identity construction.

However, even when fatherhood occupies a central position in the discursive construction of their identities, it does not mean that it replaced the importance of paid work. Especially in the Italian case, where changes in gender models are slower than in other European countries, it would be naïf to think that men replaced the role of breadwinning in their identity construction and in terms of time devoted to care instead of paid work. In fact, generally speaking, even the new fathers continue to devote more time to paid work than to care work. However, two clarifications are important. First, new and neo-traditional fathers insist a lot on the time pointing out that it is important to be present and to care for their children on a daily basis. As already noted by Dermott, in fact, “a good father-child relationship is possible as long as *some* period of time is given over to it: time is not irrelevant to men’s parenting” (Dermott 2008, p. 62).

Second, the partners of this group of interviewees are all employed full time (except for three) so their commitment to paid work is also quite high. Moreover, some interviewees pointed out the importance of the paid work of both parents in educating children to gender equality, when accompanied by an equal sharing of care duties. Therefore, breadwinning is considered important not (only) in their construction of masculinity, but it is considered important for both parents and for the family in general.

«I only partially agree with those who maintain that quantity [of time spent at home] does not count, but only the quality does. I mean, it could be ok but not if you spent one hour a week with your child. Moreover, because for me it is natural not to see male activities and female activities of housework, with the daily example I try to impart this values [...], yes with the example on the daily basis so they [the children] think that sharing housework is normal. In the same way, I think also paid work is important for the education of children and children cannot be an alibi for not committing to paid work and this is valid for both parents» (Angelo, 33 years old, master degree, white-collar worker).

That said, when fatherhood is more central in the interviewees' construction of masculinity, a redefinition of the relationship with paid work somehow happens.

Concerning the second dimension linked to the actual practices of care, I distinguished in innovative and traditional. Of course, this distinction is useful in relation to fathers: there are no such a thing as innovative practices of care in absolute, but there are practices that fathers in general do not perform. Especially in Italy, fathers tend to perform recreational non-routine activities with their children, leaving the physical ones (such as changing diapers, bathing the baby etc.) to mothers. Therefore, I labeled some interviewees as semi-traditional and new fathers only when they performed regularly, on a daily basis, routine activities of care giving. Since I adopted a performative conception of gender talking about practices of fatherhood calls into question also masculinity. For this reason, it seems that these fathers perform a hybrid (Demetriou 2001; Arxer 2011; Bridges e Pascoe 2014) or inclusive (Anderson 2005) form of masculinity.

The concept of hybrid or inclusive masculinity refers to men's selective incorporation of performances and identity elements traditionally associated with marginalized and subordinated masculinities and/or femininities. In this case of study, the practices are those of routine care giving usually delegated to and carried out by women.

The relationship between hybrid masculinities and fatherhood and between hybrid masculinities and hegemony is beyond the scope of the present article. However, it is worthy to underline that being new fathers does not necessarily means being new, more egalitarian partners in heterosexual couples. Some authors (Demetriou 2001; Arxer 2011; Bridges e Pascoe 2014) clearly explained how recent changes in performances of masculinity often work to obscure gendered inequality and represent a new form of hegemony. Hybrid masculinities, in fact, often symbolically distance men from hegemonic masculinity while fortifying existing social and symbolic boundaries in ways that hide systems of power and inequality.

The four types of fathers

Crossing the two dimensions mentioned above, a typology of four types of fathers emerges.

Breadwinner fathers (6 out of 35) are the most traditional in the sample.

As we can argue from the quotation below, taken from an interview with a father of a six-month daughter, for these men the commitment in paid work has the absolute priority over the other aspects of his life and they do not even describe it as a form of care practice in a broad sense. Some authors, in fact, interpret the devotion to paid work as a form of taking care for a child providing material wellbeing, however in the case of this group of fathers breadwinning has the mere function of building a solid traditional identity as a working breadwinner man. It is surprising to note that the strong sense of responsibility expressed towards paid work is completely absent when they talk about their children and their role in the family.

«My working time ends at 5 p.m. [...], but I have never got out of the office at 5 p.m.. Anyone told me to do that, it's just me, frankly it's a personal choice. I mean, I think it is worthy to stay longer at work, to commit more. Of course, you cut your time on the side of the family, but you have to do it because if you want to do things right you have to stay longer at work. It is right to stay longer at work, to clock in when it's time it's not in my DNA » (Luigi, 33 years old, master degree, white-collar worker).

When a change in the relationship of these men with paid work occurred is in terms of increasing their commitment in paid work and the experience of becoming a father (without fathering) becomes just an additional source of virility that reinforce their construction of masculinity.

«Also at work [...] the fact that I am a family man gave me more authority and more confidence. For sure paternity changed me in this sense, but you should ask to people more attentive to emotions, I am not good in elaborating my feelings» (Salvatore, 35 years old, master degree, white-collar worker).

Similar accounts are common also among fathers who used parental leave. Some men, as the one of the quotation below, decided to use parental leave because at work it was not an intense period and they worked anyway from home on a daily

basis. Therefore, the choice to go on leave was not the result of a change in priorities, nor a real interruption in paid work.

«My colleagues used to call me during my leave period because I told them to, it's in my nature, I told them to call me whenever they needed. If I couldn't answer immediately I called them back soon. The fact that we had a reduction of the workload played a role in my decision to go on leave and in any case my colleagues called me and I worked from home several times during the month I spent home on leave» (Filippo, 40 years old, master degree, white-collar worker).

It is also interesting the fact that these men, among all the interviewees, are the most satisfied of their work-life balance and for the allocation of time strongly unbalanced in favour of paid work (whose demands are, however, considered not negotiable). When they complain, it is because their partners “force” them to cut at least the time devoted to spare time to spend some time in family.

«Honestly time goes fast; I work almost 10 hours per day, sometimes even more, then I have to sleep at least 8 hours, so I spend the most part of my life in here, at work [...]. But I think this is normal in our society, I don't know if it's right or wrong, it's just like that» (Nicola, 43 years old, master degree, middle manager).

«With work shifts I have some free days during the week and I could go pick up the children at the nursery, but – I want to be honest – I do not really want to do that, I prefer to rest or to do some works in the house [...]. I am satisfied [of my work-life balance], but in any case I couldn't do otherwise, I have no choice and my wife is very good even if she is close to a nervous breakdown, but it means that the family is working» (Davide, 36 years old, high school degree, blue-collar worker).

Moreover, these fathers are not only absent in their children's life in terms of quantity of time, but also in terms of practice performed. Almost all of them declared that they rarely or never spend some time with their children and/or do care giving activities such as changing diapers, bathing the kids, put them in bed and so on.

«100% my wife and 0% me, as all the men in the world! Well, now I do something sometimes, I can change a diaper, I can feed her [my daughter], but I prefer that it's my wife in charge [...]. I think women are more gifted in these things. Sometimes I give my daughter a bath but if I do it two times my wife does it one hundred» (Diego, 38 years old, high school degree, white-collar worker).

Neo-traditional fathers (4 out of 35 interviewees), instead, discursively position themselves as highly committed to their role as fathers, but they tend to perform

traditional practices of care. The peculiarity of this group of fathers is that they consider breadwinning as practice of care in a broad sense, as pointed out by the father of the following quotation.

«You have to be an example and, therefore, the commitment in paid work is necessary in this sense to provide for your family, to pass down values such as responsibility and ethic of work that children could maybe replicate also bringing wellbeing to the entire society» (Giovanni, 35 years old, master degree, middle manager).

Therefore, for this group of fathers paid work remains very important in their life, but they consider it as a form of care giving for helping children to grow up with positive values: in this case, paternity helps them to redefine the meaning of paid work which becomes a fundamental part also of the father-children relationship. Somehow, it seems that this way of interpreting breadwinning is also a way to reduce the cognitive dissonance that derive from describing themselves as committed to their role as fathers, but at the same time devoting the majority of time to paid work. These fathers, more often than the others, have some difficulties in keeping a work-life balance and sometimes they express feelings of guilt for not being more at home. However, the presence at home does not encourage these fathers to engage in innovative practices of care giving: they usually perform recreational activities or practices of house work to support their partners who remain the primary caregivers.

«When I come back home, since my wife has been all the afternoon at home with the children, we try to exchange so I spend some time with the babies, usually I play with them [...]. Anyway, it is very hard to keep aspirations at work high as well as the ambitions in the family. I mean, I want to be a present father and an active father» (Giovanni, 35 years old, master degree, middle manager).

Semi-traditional fathers (5 out of 35), similarly to breadwinner fathers, describe themselves as very committed to paid work, which remains the main pillar in the construction of their identity.

Moreover, these fathers are only partly satisfied of their work-life balance because they feel to have only a good work-family balance to the detriment of free time and of their personal recreational activities and hobbies. These men, in fact, feel unchanged

after the experience of becoming fathers, however they perform on a daily basis all the routine activities of care giving and are interchangeable with their partners.

«At the beginning, honestly, it has been quite traumatic because I used to have my habits and all my hobbies and it seemed to me to be in a sort of cage [...]. However, my wife couldn't breastfeed so I decided to use parental leave and I could care for him all day long without her, also feeding him with powdered milk [...] and I learned day by day his needs. But I used to have many hobbies, I was not used to stay at home and all these things now are gone» (Federico, 41 years old, high school degree, white-collar worker).

New fathers (20 interviewees out of 35), more than the others, redefined their relationship with paid work in favor of paternity, especially when they used a long and continuous parental leave and/or decided to cut their working hours.

«When I started working part-time my quality of life incredibly increased. The reduction of the salary is nothing compared to what I am experiencing now in terms of personal satisfaction. If I look at my day, during which I go out cycling with the little baby, then I help my daughter to do her homework, we make a cake for mommy who comes home in the evening...I think that I am super lucky [...]. There is no career that counts more than that!» (Michele, 44 years old, master degree, white-collar worker).

«For example an option that we are evaluating is that she [the wife] starts advancing in her career, changing role at work, while I take the part-time so she can come back to the full-time » (Carlo, 44 years old, high school degree, white-collar worker).

Paid work remains important in their biography, but all these men declared that, now they have become fathers, they are less willing to work overtime and they complain about the (practice and/or "moral") demands coming from their work environment. When they work part-time, they are more likely to be satisfied about their work-life balance. The ones working full-time point out the contraction of the time devoted to hobbies and friends, but they do not put into discussion nor live with distress their commitment with their children and the fact that the entire time free from paid work is devoted to them.

Therefore, while for breadwinner fathers the importance of paid work raised precisely *because of* they became fathers, for new fathers paternity reduced the centrality of paid work in their identity construction. Then, what means to be a father is very different in these two groups: for the former, paternity is a way to reinforce the

traditional construction of masculinity; for the former, instead, it is an occasion to call it into question.

New fathers, in fact, are involved in actual practices of care and perform all the activities of care giving, included the routine ones such as changing diapers, bathing the babies, feed them with milk, wean the children when they grow up. Moreover, they feel very expert in care giving and describe themselves as “autonomous” in taking care of their children: their role, then, is not of assistants of the mothers.

«We [my partner and I] have always thought that she [my daughter] shouldn't rely more on one parent than on the other, she should see us as two parents but equal and interchangeable [...]. In fact, I change diapers, I am not one of those fathers who says no to these activities, I do housework, I feed her [...], I put her to bed. It used to do these things at the beginning and I still do so we don't have specific roles, we are interchangeable, in fact if she need to go to the bathroom, to eat, to sleep we are both there» (Riccardo, 38 years old, master degree, blue-collar worker).

Parental leave has a great potential of change in this sense because fathers who used it for a long continuous period describe a strong change of status in care giving and in the relationship with the child. During the period of leave, in fact, they acquired many relational and practical skills because of their role as primary caregivers that allowed them to become interchangeable with their partners. In this sense, it seems that “new fatherhood” is more a result of parental leave than a pushing factor to use it.

Another interesting aspect emerged from the interviews with new fathers is related to the importance of creating an emotional bond with the child also through a strong physical connection.

Even if today it is more common and socially accepted that a father expresses openly his feelings and emotions, the construction of a physical intimacy with a child is a difficult goal for a man.

As men, even before as fathers, many of them did not have the occasion to learn the fundamental codes of the body and of the expression of feelings because of the hegemonic construction of masculinity embodied by the previous generation of fathers.

For this reason, the performance of practices of care that so deeply involve physical contact and intimacy represents a big change from the past and from the most part of Italian fathers.

«Well, I prefer to change diapers to my daughter on a daily basis as well as spend time and cuddle her, I literally spend hours with her playing and cuddling her in bed and I don't feel ashamed. It is so beautiful when you see her smiling, when you come back home and she hears your voice and recognizes you, it's beautiful and it's so natural [...]. Because the father who does not spend time with his children loses so many things [...]. My children are always with me, I bring them everywhere, actually now the older brothers are starting to detach, that's why you have to stay close to them, now with the little one I hold her tight because in ten years I will not be able to do it anymore» (Mauro, 41 years old, junior high school degree, blue-collar worker).

The father of this quotation is very committed to his role as breadwinner, and during the interview he expressed traditional gender attitudes also in respect of the division of parental leave (that he did not use), however in his discourse many features of new fatherhood are present. First, the importance of *being there*: the time free from work is devoted to childcare and, since he works on shifts, he spends a lot of time with his children. Second, he tries to spend also time of quality with the children with a high practical and emotional involvement: two features described as fundamental to define himself as a good father, but also for his identity construction as a man.

Third, this father performs all the practices of physical care giving especially with his two months old daughter on a daily basis.

As mentioned above, it is important to remember that being a new father does not necessarily mean that we have reached an equal co-parenting, even if it represents a big change in the "normal" sharing of care activities between mothers and fathers inside heterosexual couples. Indeed, "[the] ideal of good fatherhood is based on a strong relationship between father and children, not [necessarily] a gender equality model of parenthood" (Dermott 2008, p. 112).

However, it is interesting to note that in the case of new fathers the relationship with femininity and with their partners is peculiar. Their partners are not only model of parenthood to be inspired by, but they become the only parameter to engage in care

giving. Since in homosocial fields they cannot build and discuss about practices of fatherhood, they have to look at motherhood to find a source of inspiration.

«We decided with the pediatrician to feed the baby with artificial milk so in practice I breastfed him myself [...]: with my son basically the mother it's me, no offence for the mom» (Emanuele, 40 years old, junior high school degree, blue-collar worker).

«Well, sometimes I engage in discussions that are typical mom talk, but you know we live in an epoch where we, fathers, we are dedicating to the job of mothers that is consolidated and well known by women since centuries! We are becoming fathers, actually we are becoming mothers, in quotes, from the 20th century!» (Gilberto, 34 years old, high school degree, blue-collar worker).

Therefore, somehow, it seems that the only option available to these men is to define themselves and to be defined as “mothers” or “mammi” in reason of the lack of alternative models of masculinity and fatherhood in the present and from the past. This fact also depends on a language that is still anchored to a traditional vision of masculinity strictly interwoven with paid work and to the separation between public and private sphere, and that does not offer to men alternative words to qualify themselves otherwise (Magaraggia 2013).

«I really wanted to be there, to be very present at home [...]; however the risk is to become a “mammo”, which is in my opinion useless for the wellbeing of the family. I think it is necessary a present father, which is a profound innovation, because my father used to work too much and was never at home [...]. However, to understand what to do with the baby and how to be a father today is a complicated process for a man» (Simone, 37 years old, master degree, middle manager).

CONCLUSION

The objective of the article was to suggest a redefinition of new fatherhood pointing out the existence of multiple types of fatherhood. From the interviews with 35 fathers, among whom 25 used parental leaves, three main results emerged.

First, all the interviewees share in their discourses some experiences and features of fatherhood that constitute a sort of common ground upon which contemporary fatherhood relies. Three are the characteristics present in every interview. The first one is the importance for a father of being there for their children. However, presence

is described in very different ways insisting more on the quantity or the quality of time spent at home, a fact that proves the more fluidity granted to fathers compared to mothers in their involvement with the children. The second one is the lack of models of fatherhood: the models of the past (of their own fathers) are considered obsolete but these men are not able to collectively build new ones inside homosocial environments. The third characteristic that constitutes contemporary fatherhood is the perception of compatibility between masculinity and care: anyone of the interviewees considers less manly a man who engages in practices of care giving. However, these fathers describe also very different practices and ways of experiencing fatherhood that make difficult to recognize only one type of fatherhood. Therefore, the second result is that the label “new fatherhood” risks becoming useless to grasp the changes that are occurring in fatherhood and undermining the variability in fatherhood. For this reason, I crossed two dimensions to create a typology of fatherhoods: the discursive self-positioning of men towards fatherhood and the actual practices performed by them with their children. The performative character of gender, in fact, allows investigating the different ways in which men build their identities (as men and fathers) through discursive and actual practices. In this way, it is possible to redefine new fatherhood and especially to understand what is different from the fathers of the previous generations and from other contemporary fathers. Since the presence is considered a fundamental feature of new fatherhood, it is also important to distinguish attitudes from practices: what is new in “new fatherhood” is not only the way in which fathers discursively talk about themselves, but also the way in which they perform it through the commitment in innovative routine practices of care giving. It is interesting, though surprising, that not all the fathers who used parental leave can be labeled as new fathers. In fact, even if parental leave has the potential to redefine the centrality of breadwinning in the male identity construction in favor of paternity and to push men to perform innovative practices of care giving, it is not giving for granted. Some of the fathers who used parental leave delegated care giving to other people (for example to grandparents)

during the period of leave, continued to work from home on a daily basis, or did not engage in routine care activities leaving it to the partners.

The third result deals with power in heterosexual gender relations. In fact, the distinction between actual and discursive practices is useful to better define “new” fatherhood, but also to unveil some gender dynamics of power.

On the side of “actual” practices of care, men who engage in innovative practices of care perform also a form of hybrid masculinity that does not necessarily put into question hegemony. Social expectations about fatherhood are still less normative than the ones surrounding motherhood: men, in fact, continue to be more flexible in their commitment at home both in terms of time and practices performed. Moreover, their involvement in care duties is often described using a heroic language marking their role as pioneers of modern fatherhood. Finally, the fact that men underline that they look at their partners to learn parenting has a double implication. On the one hand, it could be a recognition of their competence; on the other, it could be a way to naturalize women’s attitudes for care giving and to justify their major commitment with children.

On the side of discursive practices, it is evident that men can talk about themselves in very different ways compared to mothers. Some men, in fact, can describe themselves as involved fathers without being involved in actual practices of care, nor changing their habits, nor redefining their role in society, at work or in the family. This fact makes clear the possibility of men to describe themselves as “modern” fathers, though leaving the unbalanced gender distribution of care work (and the power associated to it) unchanged. Men can even openly define themselves as not involved with their children and they feel free to express it with no sense of guilt, a fact that enlightens the higher flexibility granted to men about their involvement in care work and the different social expectations that surround paternity compared to maternity.

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