

An exploratory study of the everyday lives of Italian families: household activities and children's responsibilities

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore how family members construct, reproduce, and socialize perspectives on family roles and participation in domestic work through their mutual negotiation. We analyse qualitatively the everyday interactions of eight Italian families, with a particular attention to the household tasks. Starting from the hypothesis that these activities are an opportunity to study how family members discursively construct family roles in relation to the notion of responsibility, the analysis is referred to three dimensions of children's roles and responsibilities in the household setting. The data confirm the importance of the household work interactions in order to provide opportunities of apprenticeship at home, and of participation in the life system of the family.

Implications of household work: an introduction

Household work activities are central to the organization of family members. Like many other activities in the home, the organization of chores contributes to the social order of a family. Through everyday communicative practices and activities, children are socialized into these processes and into particular family interaction styles. This paper argues that household work activities are crossroads where socialization and organizational practices meet. As showed by Fasulo, Loyd and Padiglione (2007), parents often encourage children to perform tasks not only for organizational purposes, but also for the socialization into certain skills and values as its own goal. Socialization goals that parents may feel are important to foster in their children, such as responsibility, interdependence or autonomy, are often imbued with cultural and familial ideologies and assumptions.

Over recent years a number of dual-earner families has led to a new configuration of the domestic work distribution among family members in working families worldwide. For example, in the United States a significant number of researches examined how working families attempt to balance work demands with household and parenting responsibilities (Hochschild, Machung, 1989; Schor, 1991; Hochschild, 1997), as well as in European countries there are studies that investigated the organization of household labour (Emigh, 2000; Des Rivières-Pigeon, 2002). Understanding how working families manage the division of labour inside the home emerges as key focus for scholars studying contemporary dual-income families (Klein, Izquierdo, Bradbury, Arcidiacono, 2005). Anyway, there is wide variation in how working families organise everyday household tasks, and the manner in which they coordinate their actions around these tasks will affect the quality of their lives.

In particular, the study of children's responsibilities involves a variety of issues: the development of pro-social or cooperative behaviour, the responsibility, the nature of parental control, the acquisition of gender role and the changes in concepts of childhood or child labour, from a sociological perspective. The negotiation of domestic tasks

involves both parents and children and it can construct an understanding of the family social organization in relation to individual and collective responsibilities (Blair, 1992). Household work can be considered as an arena in which children can negotiate their degree of participation and can develop an understanding of the whole family organization. In this sense, the study of household interactions provides an opportunity for examining the structure of apprenticeship activities at home. Through collaborative stances members accommodate, challenge, and socialize one another's perspectives on household obligations. Many studies show that mothers' participation in paid work slightly increases children's participation in household duties (especially in the area of baby-sitting), without altering their general involvement in activities with friends or outside the home. As in the analysis of socio-economic status, the interesting question is not whether children do more, but rather what they do and whom their tasks mostly affect.

Family work and responsibility

Goodnow (1989) notes that household work in many countries is "*more than a means of producing goods and services. It allows the work to be as well a vehicle for expressing love and affection, for claiming rights (the right to be 'looked after'), and for negotiating equity*" (pp. 39-40). Thus, more than being a series of simple instrumental tasks, household work represents a complex set of interpersonal exchanges that enable family members to achieve solidarity and cohesiveness (Folbre, 2001).

Recently, there has been a great interest in children's development of responsibility, because a lot of psychological studies on the consequences of children's household work are related with social qualities, as the responsibility. Cross-cultural studies of children's domestic activity focus primarily on the socialization of moral obligations, pro-social attitudes and skill acquisitions. It is also important to underline that the cultural background may influence the amount of household work that parents assign to children: Pontecorvo, Fasulo and Sterponi (2001) write that "*children are engaged in the process of becoming competent members of a social group as children, parents are engaged in the process of becoming competent members of a social group as parents*" (p. 344). For this reason the family is a system in which a change in the activities of one member should bring a change in the activities of others (Baszormenyi-Nagy, Spark, 1973). As Wittner (1980) proposes, families operate in the principle of exchange (e.g. children's work in exchange for support), with some special features to the offer of justification, namely "*kin acting in the name of family obligations and sentimental ties*" (p. 235). Other studies provide that household and family tasks are distributed differently among different family members (Goodnow, 1988): while some gender differences were observed in the distribution of particular tasks, much of the distribution was based on the age and on the status of those involved, and on the perceived ownership of the task. While work is an activity paid for with money, household activities do not emerge as a form of work but as an "orientation to work" (Engel, Marsden, Woodman, 1968).

Extending the term "work" to adults' household activities, we can found several changes in research and theory, because it can be difficult to consider children's household activities as a work. There are evidences that in many cultures boys and girls do different kinds of household work (Goodnow, Bowes, Warton, Dawes, Taylor, 1991). Parents often adopt the idea that this work should not be for money, because jobs and money have to be separated from household work (Warton, Goodnow, 1995). In household settings, children pay attention to the difference between their work (in which they are directly involved) and the others' work (in which they are part of others' space). A relevant distinction (Goodnow, Delaney, 1989) concerns self-care tasks, that focus on

what is “own”, on looking for the “own space” or taking care what directly caused, and family-care tasks concern what is own, eventually focusing on the effect of the work on the others. White & Brinkerhoff (1981) provide five reasons of the work: developmental (the work can contribute to the development of the responsibility); mutual obligations; extrinsic (the parents need helps); task learning (children need to develop the skills); residual (for example children learn to ask the allowance). All these categories are linked to the importance of work activities for a general responsibility in the family context.

Examining the household interactions: some inputs

Researchers are increasingly turning their attention to the household activities, examining how working families manage work demands and time pressure when they negotiate home life and life away at work (Klein, Izquierdo, Bradbury, 2004). We can affirm that in working families, while women are generally the primary caretakers of children, gender is used to determine roles in most workplaces. Thus, in some cases there is a disjuncture in gender roles and expectations between home and workplaces within individual's lives. The value of household work is not only instrumental, but it is also interpersonal and it can be a source of disputes when family members' interests are at odds, as well as a process of constructing solidarity and cohesiveness within the family. Household chores are activities that can prepare children for their future lives and help them to develop an understanding of the value of work. Through family disputes about household tasks, children get socialized into ideologies of work, family roles, and notion of responsibility. Psychologists interested in family processes have examined family interaction using observational methods in controlled laboratory settings. In this study, we hope to gain new insights into family interaction: we approach this work with the idea that the processes of chores' negotiation in the home will be illuminated by combining principles used in psychology and anthropology, in order to explore the complexity of the family lives.

We try to study children's household work as an area of the everyday socialization: each situation is marked by a leading activity, which defines goals and methods by the artefacts and by the forms of participation expected by the more expert and the less expert parties (Leont'ev, 1981; Wertsch, 1981). For these raisons, we present a research study that highlights a possible way to understand roles and responsibilities in everyday household activities. By the study of family interactions, we can see how conversation practices help us to consider the socialization as a process in which both caregivers and children acquire different levels of competence and of knowledge through their interactions. Parent-children activities show how family members discursively construct their family roles and responsibilities: Ochs and Taylor (1995) show in particular how emerging participant roles are constructed through the sequence of talk between parents and children, in which the authority plays a central role.

Methodology

The research project on the everyday lives of working families

This study is part of an international collaborative project ² developed by the UCLA Center on Everyday Lives of Families, based in the United States (Los Angeles), involving an Italian as well as a Swedish site (respectively located at the University of Rome “La Sapienza” and at the University of Linköping). The project is based on an extensive ethnographic fieldwork in the domestic life of families. The methodological orientation comes from linguistic and cultural anthropological analyses of social interaction. The primary goal of the research project is to undertake qualitative analysis of the everyday lives of middle class families and to examine their everyday challenges.

This paper draws on data exclusively collected at the Italian Center on Everyday Lives of Families: the data may be understood as *capta* in naturalistic settings, which allow in-depth analyses of the role assumed by the participant members of the families we observed. The main purpose of such an international comparative perspective on family life is that it can illuminate commonalities and differences in how working families handle the complex home and family demands across different cultures and reveals the unique working family patterns characteristic of each country, which may in turn suggest alternatives to existing local strategies for balancing family and work demands.

Participant families

The three centers have similar goals and criteria for the selection of participants. The Italian Center on Everyday Lives of Families documented a week in the life of eight middle-class, dual-income families in Rome. To be eligible to participate in this study, families were required to be homeowners with a monthly mortgage or with a monthly rent and they had to have at least two children living at home, with at least one child between 8-12 years of age. Families were recruited through fliers in schools, and on occasion through teachers who were personal acquaintances of the research team. After an initial meeting with the research team, both parents (and children over eight years of age) signed the consent forms of participation and received the instructions concerning the timing and procedures of the study in their own houses.

Data collection and instruments

In order to achieve the research goals, we have taken an innovative approach to the study of family life, integrating perspectives from cultural and linguistic anthropology, ethnoarchaeology, psychology, applied linguistics, and education (Arcidiacono, Pontecorvo, 2004). We employ a range of data collection methodologies which include semi-structured interviews and questionnaires, mapping and photographing the families' homes and belongings, tracking of family members' activities and uses of home-space, but mainly the video-recording of daily activities. Each family was recorded over the course of a week for approximately a total of 20-25 hours per family. Three researches were engaged in four days (two weekdays and the weekend) of video taping and tracking of family members inside their homes. Interviews and field observations were then transcribed integrally³; we also made use of ethnographic field-notes in order to mark the activities carried out in the settings (Ochs, Graesch, Mittmann, Bradbury, Repetti, 2006). Diverse features of everyday family life are being studied in order to document how working parents and their children manage and collaborate with each other in and across a spectrum of activities. The team employed discourse analytic methods to closely examine participant interaction following the prescriptions of Conversation Analysis (Sacks, Schegloff, Jefferson, 1974) and Discourse Analysis (Antaki, 1994; Edwards, Potter, Middleton, 1992). The main part of this analysis is carried out on the transcripts; when relevant passages are identified by a subgroup of the team, they are further examined by going back to the audio and/or video data, in order to be discussed analytically by the research group as a whole.

Goals of the study

In this paper we aim at studying how families construct, reproduce, and socialize perspectives on family roles and participation in the domestic work through their mutual negotiation. The goal is to analyse how family members discursively construct family

³ Cfr. Appendix 2.

roles in relation to the notion of responsibility, according to the “participant categories” perspective (Edwards, Stokoe, 2004), in order to look at the categories that participants use as resources for their discursive participation in the everyday family interactions at home.

A qualitative analysis: different levels of household activities in family

The analysis we presented in this section is exclusively qualitative: the following excerpts are derived from the video data corpus of eight families, and they concern various interactions referred to household tasks. In the analysis we found different levels of the household work management: family members engage themselves in a large range of ways during the everyday activities at home. For this study, we focus our attention on roles and responsibility that children show as participants in household work, and the interactions that involve both parents and children.

A way to manage household work: how family doing things?

Some of the most significant challenges that working parents face when managing households and raising children involve negotiating responsibilities, trying to meet the different needs. Our data allow us to consider each family member’s routine, their resources, and their attitudes toward their home lives. Parental ideologies and the way in which actual everyday interaction unfolds affect many other critical experiences of family life.

In the Italian context, the activities that participants play into the kitchen are frequently characterised as educational practices in which mothers can recruit the collaboration of daughters. The excerpt below is carried out from a family during a Saturday video-recorded activity at home: the mother and the elder child are in the kitchen, engaged in cooking. As we observed in our ethnographical research, in this family the mother usually manages this activity. In the excerpt 1 the child shows an interest on this work, by helping the mother.

Excerpt 1: “Doing things right”. Participants⁴: Mom (Renata), Carla (7 years)

69. Mom: no honey otherwise if you squirt out ((while cooking))
70. **Carla: what are these?** they look like sausages to me,
71. Mom: actually these are peeled (.) peeled tomatoes
72. Carla: peeled head (bold head) ((the beginning of a nursery rhyme))
73. Mom: more or less
74. Carla: sorry, what’s that?
75. **Mom: the sauce the tomato juice. so since you told me you were so interested in cooking**
76. Carla: ring around the rosies, a pocket full of posies, ashes! ashes! >we all fall down!< ((singing))
77. **Mom: the sauce should be made like this**

In the excerpt 1 the mother’s cooking activity attracts Carla’s interest (turn 70 “*what are these?*”); the child is just come into the kitchen when the mother is cooking a sauce. By a linguistic joke with Carla (turns 72-74), the mother uses this opportunity to instruct the child about the activity due in the kitchen. In turn 75 she refers explicitly the interest in the concerned activity (“*so since you told me you were interested in cooking*”): for the

⁴ All names are fictitious.

daughter, cooking is a very interesting activity while she is producing a joyful nursery, and the interaction could be developed into a continuous exchange of remarks. We can show that the mother takes this opportunity, starting by a child's declaration of interest that is not really expressed by Carla (turn 75). Anyway, the child accepts the mother's proposal and the collaborative/instructive interaction can start and continue, as shown in the following excerpt (referred to the same video-recording, few minutes later).

Excerpt 2: “This is a yummy sauce!”. Participants: Mom (Renata), Carla (7 years)

116. Mom: **look come here** I put the onions in
 117. Carla: delicious
 118. Mom: **a little bit of oil**
 119. Carla: mhm mhm
 120. Mom: **as here I am making the sauce** the one with basil
 121. Carla: yummy
 (...)
 129. Carla: do you want some? ((*stirring with a spoon in the pan*))
 130. Mom: **yes but without spilling it all over as you did before**
 131. Carla: no:
 132. Mom: °step aside°
 133. (21.0)
 134. Mom: **enough enough en- enough**
 135. Carla: ok
 136. Mom: ok now you put it on the stove and stir it every now and then to avoid sticking and this is a yummy sauce

In the excerpt 2 the kitchen is assumed as a place of collaboration between the mother and the daughter, considering the relevance of the joint activity. The specific context is an opportunity to create a real process of teaching that characterizes the mother-child interaction: the mother shows step-by-step her skills to Carla, who assumes the role of a learner. The language used by the mother is very simple and helps her to describe the actions she is playing.

Technical expertise: recruitment and collaboration

In the process of children's socialization to the household, there is a kind of labour that is managed by fathers, because they are “experts” in some specific tasks (e.g. fixing, assembling, etc.). The responsibility that children assume during the household activities is related to the parents (as experts), to the nature, to the goal of the works, and to other aspects, such as the genre and the culture.

In the following excerpt, the father is engaged in a manual repairing work: he takes the opportunity to recruit the younger child who is not collaborating with the mother at the same time, even if she's in the kitchen with the sister (cfr. excerpt above). The interaction between the father and the younger child is an example of educational collaboration that is build in the contingency of the activity.

Excerpt 3: “Knowing the technical terms”. Participants: Dad (Flavio), Carla (7 years), Elisa (3 years)

62. Dad: so what are you up to? are you staying here with mom or are you helping me?
 63. Carla: we stay here [with mom
 64. Elisa: [I- I want to help you

65. Dad: are you coming to help me? Then come, let's go get the tools and let's fix your toy chest ((making his way to the girls' room))

66. Elisa: ()

67. Dad: here we are. these are the tools ((entering the girls' room with the tool-box))

68. Dad: so here () the toy chest that we are going to fix now.

69. (7.0)

70. Dad: so if I ask you to pass me a screwdriver, will you know which one it is? shall I show it to you? ((to Elisa who nods))

71. Dad: oh these are the screwdrivers ((showing the tool to Elisa)), and these are pliers ((showing them)) and this is a ((showing a hammer))?

72. Elisa: I don't know

73. Dad: ro::

74. Elisa: >lling pin<.⁵ ((see note below))

75. Dad: a rolling pin, right... no, it's a hammer isn't it?

76. Dad: and this, what is it then ((handling the cover of the toy chest))

77. Elisa: [this is broken

78. Dad: [it's the cover that we have to fix

79. Dad: how is it broken? where is it broken?

80. Elisa: yes this one ((pointing at the cover)) is from my, this one here

81. Dad: you mean it's got broken up here. ok this can be glued. it's not broken, it's only that I have to complete assembling it. it's not broken

82. Elisa: this doesn't work
(...)

108. Dad: we're going to put this here. mhm what do you think Elisa? ((Elisa nods))

109. Dad: mhm? ((Elisa nods))

110. Dad: eh?

111. Dad: listen, can you please pass me a pencil? it should be around here. a blue pencil with a yellow cap. like this one, can you pass it to me please?

112. Elisa: this one? ((handing the pencil to the father))

113. Dad: yes thanks.

114. Dad: but will you put your things straight later on?
(...)

127. Dad: I'm looking for the little drill. did you see it by chance? here it is

128. Dad: () so

129. (5.0)

130. Dad: let's do it this way. when I ask you, you pass me the tools. ok? ((Elisa nods)) I would need a little nail and you can get little nails here. here we go. can you get this one here please? so, you get it while I am measuring again

⁵ In Italian, there is a pun: the father suggests the first syllable "ma" of the word >martello<, which means hammer, but the girl mistakenly continues >ttarello<, making it a rolling pin, the tool frequently used by the mother in the kitchen to make pasta or pizza.

131. (4.0)
132. Dad: so, can you pass me the hammer? ((time: from 17:11 to 17:37 Elisa is helping DAD with his work))
133. Dad: how come that there is another nail here? can you please put it back?
134. (19.0)
135. Dad: **but will you come back to help me afterwards?** ((addressed to Elisa who is leaving the room)) otherwise how can I work all alone?

In excerpt 3 we can observe the activity between the father and the younger daughter: firstly, the father is “recruiting” the daughters to assist him, formulating his directive as a rhetorical question (turn 62 “*are you helping me?*”). Carla rejects his invitation to work yet (in fact “we” are said to stay with mom), but her little sister declared that she wants to help him. The father accepts their choices and continues with instructions on the proposed activity (turn 65 “*let’s go...*”). The father-child interaction is based on an educational collaboration: during the sequence, the father directs the activity, explains the procedures and shows the instruments; anyway Elisa tries to help her father in a playful way (see turn 74). From turn 77 on, Elisa gets involved in their joint work activity and is apparently valuing it as much as her father does, in fact she engages in a task oriented dialogue about she organizes repair work. In the second part of the excerpt, the father attempts to secure Elisa’s participation (turn 108 “*what do you think Elisa?*” and turn 110): she is not very motivated to help with a purely mechanical work (e.g. passing the tools), she was asked to do. We can also observe the father’s appeal to his daughter’s need to be responsible by putting the things in order (turn 114 “*will you put...later*”). In the last part of the excerpt, the father is explaining the details of the activity to his daughter (turn 130): Elisa’s silence reveals her lack of interest in the activity, and, in the father’s view (turn 135), his insistence is a sign of the “relevance” of the activity. Anyway, Elisa no longer accepts the role assigned to her by the father, and she leaves the room. The father tries to invoke her solidarity (appeal to the necessity of Elisa’s participation in turn 135), but he fails in his attempt and the joint activity is interrupted. This is a common “scenario” that we can observe frequently in our participant families.

We also noted the possibility to observe simultaneously different activities managed by parents in separate spaces and with different family members: for example, when the mother is engaged in making “pizza” for lunch (as she usually does on Saturdays or Sundays), the daughters prefer to spend their time in the same space (the kitchen). This co-presence is an opportunity to create some premises of collaboration and apprenticeship.

Excerpt 4: “Apprenticeship in the kitchen”. Participants: Mom (Renata), Carla (7 years), Elisa (3 years)

- ((Elisa pours a little bit of water into pizza dough))
234. Carla: NO!
235. Mom: () NOT ALL OF IT!
236. Carla: >mom’s telling us when it’s enough!<
237. (1.0)
238. Elisa: now? ((meaning if it’s time to pour water into the dough))
239. Mom: ((nods and Elisa pours water)) go ahead.
240. Elisa: a bit of water?
241. Mom: well.

242. (2.0) ((*Elisa pours water*))
 243. Mom: enough!
244. Carla: this pizza is all watered.
245. Elisa: again?
246. Mom: yes.
 247. Mom: ENOUGH! ((*to Elisa who goes in pouring water*))
 (...)
 289. Carla: can you give me a piece?
 290. Mom: not yet! if you want to eat. (.) pizza tonight you have to wait.
 291. Elisa: mom? shall I pour (:the water)
 292. Mom: ()
 293. Elisa: mom? shall I pour (:the water)
 294. (2.0)
 295. Mom: gosh!
 296. Carla: mom? ()
 297. Elisa: mom=hall I put=but what shall I put?
298. Mom: WHEN I'M DONE! I'm not done with the dough yet. let me finish!
 299. Elisa: mom? but what can I add? mom?
300. Mom: >NOTHING< yet sweetie! later you'll help me with spreading the sauce over. ok?
301. Carla: me too
 302. Mom: °sure°

The context of multiparty participation during an activity is an opportunity to observe the strategies used by family members in order to organise a certain number of household works. The attempt of Carla to participate in the activity is not accepted by the mother, whose concern is to cook without child's interference. Also Elisa is easier to participate. We can observe the children's insistence to cooperate with the mother, who is forced to accept their help. Eventually, they find a way to work jointly. Through this last excerpt, we would demonstrate how girls are not competent in the kitchen just by being girls. It takes time and participation (apprenticeship). Elisa does not yet really qualify as nicely as her elder sister (Carla) does. On a speculative note, when Elisa chooses to work with her father rather than with her mother, it may also be because she knows that her sister will outperform her, being more competent in kitchen matters. In contrast, Elisa may have a chance on her own with her father. That is one can analyse apprenticeship patterns as linked to sibling participation patterns.

The described family interaction is worthy of notice. On Saturday morning, both parents are doing some household work: the mother is making "pizza" for lunch, while the father is repairing the chest in the children's bedroom. Both parents try to get their daughters' participation in domestic tasks. The mother is more successful, since every child loves "kneading pizza dough". On a somewhat speculative note, there is a primitive psychological motivation in this type of "anal" work. Despite a strong and possibly oedipal link between 3 year old Elisa and her father, his proposal appears less appealing and he does not manage to recruit Elisa into doing a rather boring mechanical work. This was demonstrated by the play on words in excerpt 1 (turns 73-75) between Elisa and her father. By turning a "hammer" (*ma*) into a "rolling pin" (*ttarello*) needed for making any type of pasta or pizza and used in the kitchen by her mother at exactly the same time, the girl reveals a kind of subconscious choice towards her mother's activity.

Sharing the experience: parent-children interactions

The household activities are also characterized by the fact that family members can share the experience during different interactions occurring at home. In our data we have observed how parents and children can share the experience in the household work activities. In the following sequence the child is asking to the father what he is doing; this request is an opportunity to tell something and to share the experience with the father and the researcher.

Excerpt 5: “Sharing the experience”. Participants: Dad (Paolo), Elena (7 years and 5 months), Res. (researcher)

48. Elena: dad what are you doing?

49. Dad: I am trying to fix this thing here (.) just that now with you sleeping here.

50. Elena: I'll tell you something ((to the researcher))

51. Res.: mhm=mhm.

53. Elena: once upon the time, up there, Leonardo's father ((a friend)) was doing=was doing- was re- renewing the room. and::: a piece of-of::= mhm: (.) floor from the top of this fell down and **so we are now trying to fix it**, because if it falls, I= as I sleep here, if it falls [I fall too.

54. Res.: [you fall too.

55. Elena: mhm= mhm.

This excerpt is an example of the child's virtual self-inclusion in the father's activity. By asking father about what he is doing (turn 48) to just specify the activity, Elena gets the possibility to explain the reason behind it (turn 53): there is an attempt of self-inclusion by commenting on that “*we are now trying to fix it*” (even though she is no central co-participant), in fact she neither-works, non contributes with advice on helpful questions o yet, she apparently does see herself as a co-participant (“*trying to fix it*”).

Making an effort: narrative across the past, the present and the future

We have observed that there are some situations in which participants try to explain the development of responsibility in household work: in the excerpt 6 we can find the father's attempt to underlie the importance of children socialization to household chores, by a personal narration concerning the generational differences.

Excerpt 6: “Making an effort”. Participants: Dad (father), Mom (Emma), Alice (1 year and 5 months), Res. (researcher)

365. Dad: we belong to that wonderful generation in between where, our fa:thers, still weren't doing thi:ngs in households,=

366. Res.: eh! exactly!=

367. Dad: and [surely our children won't do them=

368. Res.: [=true!]

369. Alice: ((she laughs in the background)) eh: eh. EH:: ((throwing herself down on the bed that dad is putting in order))

370. Dad: ((getting closer to Alice)) <and then, **thank goodness there's Alice who helps me with ma:king the bed!**>

371. Alice: ((she laughs and grasps a corner of the sheet to help dad)) help!

372. Dad: help. GOOD JOB! *((together they spread out the sheet and let it cover the bed))*

373. Alice: *((laughs))*

374. (20.0)

375. Alice: BRUA': *((she mumbles while throwing herself on the bed))*

376. Dad: no. don't climb up though.

377. *((10 seconds: Alice vocalizes while the father finishes making the bed))*

378. Mom: boo::! *((as in pickaboo)) ((an off-screen enthusiastic exclamation to Alice))*

379. Dad: here! *((talking in a falsetto voice and bringing a pacifier to Alice's mouth))* (.) and I won't give it to you! *((teasingly taking it away each time Alice attempts to get it))*

380. Alice: *((She takes the pacifier while staring at the camera))*

381. Mom: Ele:na, (.) is this the way to behave in front of a- mhm: a: (stra:ngers?) (.) come on, (.) go=a:way *((off-screen))*

382. (31.0) *((Dad continues making the bed while Alice is behind him vocalizing and mimicking his moves))*

383. Alice: why don't you XXX he:lp? *((plaintive voice))*

384. Dad: *((looks at Alice in silence))*
(...)

391. Alice: HERE! (.) HERE!

392. Dad: here! here! *((covering the left side of the bed))*

393. Alice: HERE YOU ARE!

394. Dad: HERE YOU ARE! *((covering the bottom))*

395. Alice: and HERE! AND HERE!

396. Dad: HERE. HERE. *((covering the right side with Alice's help))*

397. Alice: he:re we are! *((announcing that the work is finished))*

398. Dad: mhm=do:ne! *((taking pillows))*

399. (4.0) *((dad puts the pillows on the bed))*

In this excerpt, the discussion between the father and the researcher about the role change in domestic work distribution among family members is a preliminary invitation to a collaborative action and it is addressed to the younger child in an ironic way (turn 370 “*thank goodness there is Alice who help me*”). Alice accepts the proposed activity (to make her parents’ bed) and we observe the father-daughter collaboration, even though Alice’s help is quite marginal symbolic and playful constructed as a game. Moreover, she throws herself on the bed (turn 375), thereby ruining their joint mode of making order.

Concluding discussion

The interest for the household activities and the responsibility has been a guideline for this study. We have combined theoretical and methodological tools of different fields in order to examine everyday interaction in working families. Our data illustrates the interactional work that family members are required to do in order to run a household, however we know that this study is simply a descriptive presentation of a small number of situations. We recognize that additional research that explores these issues will further illuminate the variety of ways that family members manage daily tasks at home.

Anyway, we can try to recognize, in the excerpts presented here, a kind of *continuum* across the different levels that emerge by the analysis. In particular we can consider a passage from a first level (“doing things right”) to a second level (“knowing technical

terms, and vocabulary”), as relevant in the excerpts 1 and 3; we can observe also a passage (excerpts 5 and 6) from a modality of “sharing experience” to a same ground level (“making efforts”). In this continuum is evident that there is not a real collaboration between parents and children, but the *presence* of both is perceived like a form of participation. In this paper we have argued that families construct, reproduce, and socialize perspectives on family roles and participation in domestic work through mutual negotiations. This previous analysis cover three dimensions of children's roles and responsibilities in the household setting: firstly, the construction of family roles is possible through the activities that family members recognize as relevant and educational. Household chores will prepare children to their future lives and teach the value of work. The data we analysed show that younger family members may as well construct their roles by the lack of collaboration in particular situations, since the relevance of the situation is ratified by the meaning that participants assign to each activity (as in excerpt 1). Secondly, parents aim at producing responsibility in their children towards specific activities related to their own competence and skills (e.g. father's manual repairing, mother's cooking). Thirdly, the opportunities that parents offer to their children have a relevant possibility to produce a sense of a better role's identity in the family: the activities of one member should bring a change in the activities of other family members. Children tend to be highly engaged in such educational situations.

This analysis reveals that studying household work interactions provides opportunities for examining the structure of apprenticeship activities at home as well as the social organization of families. The different parental kind of action is in a certain way “speculative” towards children, but it is oriented to underline the relevance of mental tools in the collaborative activities observed.

As a provisional comment, it may be that young children find mother's household activities more appealing, as they are often more comprehensible and more adequate to children's skills. As in the excerpt 6, the father is more successful with the task of arranging the bed, which is a usual mother's task. However, having examined the families with female children only, a further examination of the families with male children should be conducted for a future better evaluation.

The importance of this research is based on the fact that studying family interactions in the home reveals aspects of parent-female children behaviour not typically observed in laboratory studies: more of the requests examined here involve how family members negotiate the demands of household work and raising a family, and they appear to be overlaid with assumptions about who is expected to take on a certain task, who has the right to evaluate the performance on a task, and who establishes the standards by which a task is to be performed.

For these reasons, we think that the exploratory study we conducted is a first step to analyse the importance of household activities in the everyday lives of families, even if there is a need of a more specific attention and a very large view concerning the cultural implications of these dimensions.

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Appendix 1: Transcription symbols

.	falling intonation
?	rising intonation
,	continuing intonation
-	abrupt cut-off
:	prolonging of sounds
—	stressed syllable
° °	quiet speech
> <	quicker speech
hh.	aspiration
.hh	inhalation
[simultaneous or overlapping speech
=	contiguous utterances
(.)	pause (2/10 second or less)
()	non-transcribing segment of talk
BOLD	highlights segments or special analytical interest