

# *How Italian Fathers Construct Themselves as Partners in Family Cooking Duties*

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*Working Paper n. 9*  
2005

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The Italian research is part of a collaborative project headed by prof. Ochs at the Sloan Center on Everyday Lives of Families, based in UCLA. It is a comparative research project involving an Italian as well as a Swedish unit, and it is based on extensive ethnographic fieldwork in family households. The families are all composed by two parents and at least two siblings, one of which between 8 and 12 years of age; both parents work outdoors.

The general aim of the project is to understand how the family organizes to carry out manifold activities. The research implies observing (and videorecording) the family members at home during their working and weekend days, and interviewing the parents about the family history, habits and network of relationships, as well as for their views on the matters of health care and children's education.

Extensive observation is dedicated to the organization of the home space, creating house maps and getting a large number of photographs of the home space, objects and storage resources; the point of view of each of the family member as for significant places and objects is obtained by asking individual videorecorded home tours in which they show and explain the different part of the house from their own perspective.

Interviews and field observations are integrally transcribed; an "activity log" is also produced by both ethnographic fieldnotes and recordings, synthesizing the main activities carried out in the settings.

The main part analysis is performed on the transcripts; when relevant passages are identified, they are further examined by going back to the audio and/or video data.

## **Introduction**

In our reflections on Father's role in Italian working families, we found that fathers show a good participation's effort during the breakfast time in order to reach the aim of getting the family out of home in time for school and work. Observing carefully at the periods of time of weekdays evening dinners, and on Sunday evenings, we found that many fathers are rather active in preparing dinner, showing an attitude of reciprocity in the relationships with their wives. We take this concept from an anthropological and sociological reflection on the cooperation between parental couples; it is a generalized reciprocity in which there is not a direct or explicit exchange that has to satisfy both parties: it is a type of exchange that assumes that components will perhaps balance in longer times. For this reason the reciprocal relationships has a rather generic form: it is complimentary (CISF, 1990). This reciprocity can lead also to friendships' relationships within the modern couples.

In our case we find a kind of reciprocity in the attitude of fathers who position themselves as active partners in what is considered in Italy the typical wife's role (preparing meals), even when they work full time outside home in a paid work.

We decided to devote attention to the way in which Italian fathers act as partners and even as actors in family cooking duties, because from our previous study on Italian dinner conversations (see Ochs, Pontecorvo, Fasulo, 1996) we found that the mothers are dominant in Italian families, also because their role is decisive in planning, choosing and cooking meals: mothers know better children's tastes and in general children's lives, even though they were almost all mothers working also outside home.

Looking carefully to this new data corpus, we found that the Italian fathers we studied are collaborative in cooking duties and sometimes they look as being really expert of the field. *It is an evolution in father's role?* It could be nice since our present fathers are younger than previous ones. But we must also say that in previous research we had not collected data about the phase of dinner preparation. However we found that in our observed Italian families fathers present themselves often as expert partners or even as main actors in cooking or preparing dinner.

### **Family data: how fathers construct themselves**

In order to study how fathers construct themselves as partners and actors in the everyday life, we refer our comments to the interactions videotaped during the evenings.

The following excerpts are derived from the video data corpus of family interactions concerning cooking tasks in order to analyse how fathers discursively construct their roles as helpers or as protagonists in preparing dinners.

#### **Excerpt 1**

RIPE Family (Thursday evening - mother)

Participants: MOM, DAD, Riccardo (13 years old), Leo (10 years old)

1. MOM: (( <i>al padre</i> )) vuoi un "Pinot grigio" (( <i>un buon vino bianco</i> )), vuoi un altro (( <i>vino</i> )), vuoi un altro ancora (( <i>vino</i> )), quale preferisci?	(( <i>to dad</i> )) would you like a "Pinot grigio" (( <i>a good white wine</i> )), would you like another (( <i>wine</i> )), would you like another (( <i>wine</i> )), which do you prefer?
2. DAD: non ha suonato? (( <i>il forno</i> )) ma la luce non è accesa?	it doesn't ring (( <i>the oven</i> )) but the light isn't turn on?
3. MOM: o ne vuoi un altro? (( <i>vino</i> ))	or do you like another? (( <i>wine</i> ))
4. DAD: ah: c'è una prima	ah: there is a first

dichiarazione del nostro Primo Ministro ((leggendo il giornale))	declaration of our Prime Minister ((from the newspaper))
5. MOM: che fai? che mi stai facendo? qui sta suonando ((il forno))	what do you do? What are you doing to me? Here it is ringing ((the oven))
6. DAD: è appannato	it's cloudy
7. MOM: ehi, quanto mi paghi se bado ai tuoi occhiali?	ehi, how much do you pay me if I'll care for your glasses?
8. DAD: Io- io l'ho trovati	I- I found them
9. MOM: no, nel senso che me ne prendo cura li metto nella mia borsa, la mattina te li metto sul naso... ((la coppia lavora nella stessa postazione))	No, in a sense that I care for them I put them in my bag, in the morning I put them on your nose... ((the couple work in the same place))
10. DAD: MIA moglie, te ne sarò grato per l'eternità! ((come un attore))	MY wife, I'm grateful to you for eternity! ((as an actor in the drama))
11. MOM: okay, sono la sola che si interessa, tu continua a non usarli ((gli occhiali)) sarebbe più facile se tu avessi un laccetto al collo, ma comunque. Sai che le persone cinquantenni sono ancora più affascinanti con gli occhiali?	Okay, I'm the only one who is interested, you continue not to use them ((the glasses)) it would be easier if you had a lace for glasses on the neck, but anyway. Do you know that the charming 50 years old people with the glasses are even more charming?
12. DAD: sono già affascinante	I'm already charming
13. MOM: okay ((ironicamente)). Penso che sarebbe meglio se tu cominciassi a usare gli occhiali. Cosa? Il vassoio sarà caldo. Il frigo è vuoto (il frigo piange). Domani dobbiamo andare al negozio. Come l'altra volta, ti do la ((lista)). Abbiamo carne e pesce. Al supermercato puoi comprare frutta e verdura. Non è il massimo. ma non abbiamo tempo di andare al mercato. o possiamo andare al mercato sabato. Andremo sabato, non è il massimo. ma comunque. Okay?	okay ((ironic)). I think it's better that you start to use the glasses. What? The soup-plate will be hot. The fridge is empty (the fridge is crying). Tomorrow we have to go to the shop. Like the previous time, I give you a ((list)). We have already meat and fish. At the supermarket you can buy fruit and vegetables. It's not the best. but we don't have time to go to the market. Or we can go to the market on Saturday. We'll go on Saturday, it's not the best day. but anyway. Okay?

14. DAD: tra dieci minuti dobbiamo girarlo (( <i>riferendosi al pesce nel forno</i> ))	In ten minutes we have to turn it over (( <i>referring to the fish in the oven</i> ))
15. MOM: si.	Yes.
16. DAD: è possibile.	It's possible.
17. MOM: in questo modo lei va al supermercato e noi andiamo al mercato sabato	In this way she (( <i>the woman who is helping at home</i> )) goes to the supermarket and we go to the market on Saturday
18. DAD: hai messo il sale nel pesce?	Have you put salt on the fish?
19. MOM: si	Yes

In the Ripe family, the father is present in the kitchen and he works with the mother, while the children are elsewhere. He assigns himself the role of preparing the fish, seasoning it and controlling the cooking in the oven, although the mother asks in turn 5 (what are you doing *for me*) as if she is the chief cook. Perhaps not by chance, the mother opens up a mocking sequence about the fact that the husband does not admit his need for glasses, since he cannot see well the fish in the oven (see line 7). The mocking sequence is ironically ratified by the father (line 10), and they also talk about their plan to go together to the market, during this collaborative time in preparing dinner.

## Excerpt 2

RIPE Family - Thursday evening - mother  
 Participants: father (Marco); mother (Gaia); Leonardo (13 years old); Andrea (9 years old)

DAD: ha suonato? (( <i>il forno</i> ))	Was it ringing? (( <i>the oven</i> ))
MOM: no	No
DAD: vediamo se è pronto (( <i>il pesce che è in forno</i> ))	Let's see if it's ready. (( <i>the fish in the oven</i> ))
MOM: non è cotto?	It isn't?
DAD: ( )	( )
MOM: ma non è che si asciuga tropppo?	Won't it get too dry?
DAD: va bene così?	Is it ok?
MOM: <b>fammelo vedere, aspetta!</b>	<b>Let me check, wait!</b>

DAD: lo devi assaggiare?	you have to try?
MOM: no=no la consistenza la capisco è che è cotto però non è...insomma no <b>forse un po' di grill il pesce va comunque cotto dentro eh</b>	No=no I see the consistency,. It's ready but not...no, <b>maybe a little bit of grill, the fish should be cooked inside eh</b>
DAD: sì	Yes

Here is another example from the same family when the wife controls her husband's activities by checking him and interfering when she thinks it is necessary. Marco's activity belongs to the sphere of domestic knowledge considered as feminine. The very fact that he is cooking shows that his autonomy is accepted, yet the wife is actually present and is legitimized to control the process. Her comment ("let me check, wait!") is an explicit expression of supervision, even though she is engaged in a different activity. She is not only there to provide help if necessary, but to rule the process further ("**maybe a little bit of grill, the fish should be cooked inside eh**").

### Excerpt 3

PICO Family (Tuesday evening - father)

Participants: MOM, DAD, Daniela(12 years old), Serena (10 years old)

1. DAD: (( <i>la madre continua a cucinare e il padre ritorna in cucina</i> )) è quasi pronto eh:: altri cinque minuti e mangiamo c'avranno una fame:::	(( <i>the mother is cooking and dad is coming to the kitchen</i> )) it is almost ready eh:: only five minutes and we eat, they must be hungry::: (( <i>referring to the children</i> ))
2. MOM: ( ) si sta qui guarda::	( ) yes, it is here look::
3. DAD: metto il pane?	I have to prepare the bread?
4. MOM: il pane lo devo tagliare::	the bread, I have to cut it::
5. DAD: che c'hai tagliato l'aglio? (( <i>prende un coltello poggiato sul tavolo</i> ))	Have you cut the garlic? (( <i>he is taking a knife from the table</i> ))



6. MOM: no c'ho tagliato il (formaggio) come va coi compiti là tutto a posto?	not I cut the (cheese), and how is about homework there, it's alright? ((addressing to the children in the drawing room))
7. Serena: si	yes
8. DAD: lo straccio?	the cloth where is it?
9. MOM: quale?	which?
10. DAD: per asciugare	to dry things
11. MOM: eh io lo poggio nei posti più:: ((apparecchiano))	eh I can put it in the places:: ((in the sense: everywhere, in strange places))
12. DAD: l'altra dov'è? ((riferito ad una pentola))	where is the other? ((referring to a pot))
13. MOM: quale? l'altra (1) mh:: mi so sporcata	which one? The other ((referring to the pot)) mh:: I got dirty
14. DAD: fammi andare a vedere Daniela che è sempre un po' lentina a fare i compiti oh	I have to look often Daniela because she is slow ((referring to the daughter's homework))

In the Pico family both parents are preparing dinner in the kitchen. They are cooking in a kind of silent coordinated dance. The father assumes a double role: he is helping his wife (he washes the knife and slices the bread) and at the same time he monitors the youngest daughter while she is doing homework. It is rather rare that husbands have two roles at the same time. The collaboration between parents is present also in an another family, in which we can observe a traditional kitchen's activity during Saturday morning.

#### Excerpt 4

CALI Family – Saturday (father)

Participants: DAD; MOM; Carla (8 years old); Elisa (3 years old)

1. DAD: lascia fare agli uomini. mh=pussa via!= ((avvicinandosi al tavolo	leave the men doing things. mh=go away!= ((the approaches the table to stretch the
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<i>per stendere l'impasto della pizza))</i>	<i>pizza's dough))</i>
2. MOM: mphf: (( <i>espirando ironicamente</i> )).	<i>mphf: ((breathing ironically))</i>
3. DAD: com'è? (( <i>alle bambine che mangiano l'impasto</i> )) (2.0) com'è?	<i>what are you doing? ((to the girls that eat the dough)) (2.0) what's that?</i>
4. Carla: buona.	<i>it's good.</i>
5. Elisa: buona.	<i>it's good.</i>
6. DAD: mi fate un po' di spazio per favore?	<i>may I have some room, please?</i>
7. Elisa: sì. c'è una sedia!	<i>yes. there is a chair!</i>
8. Flavio: fuori su! su! (( <i>a Elisa</i> ))	<i>go out! out! ((to Elisa))</i>
9. Carla: e va bene. (( <i>allontanandosi dal tavolo</i> ))	<i>That's alright. ((leaving the table))</i>
10. MOM: e:hm. ↓che ti posso fare? (( <i>a DAD che taglia l'impasto per la pizza</i> ))	<i>e:hm. ↓what can I do for you? ((to DAD who is cutting the pizza's dough))</i>
11. DAD: (puoi accendere) il forno.	<i>can you light on the oven</i>
12. MOM: sì quello lo so. che ti posso (forno).	<i>yes. I know it. that I can (oven).</i>
13. DAD: (( <i>annuisce</i> ))	<i>((She moves the head vertically))</i>
14. MOM: l'hai preso il mattarello?	<i>have you take the rolling pin?</i>
15. DAD: no. (( <i>MOM continua ad aprire la scatola dei pelati e DAD a stendere la pizza</i> ))	<i>no. ((MOM goes on in opening the tomato's tin and DAD goes on in stretching the dough))</i>
16. DAD: ma che °l'hai	<i>have you done the dough with</i>

fatta° col cemento stavolta?	cement this time?
17. MOM: MA CHE NE SO! meno=male=che, la stendi te. sai che non c'hai- si vede che non l'hai mai fatto.	WHAT I KNOW! it's=really=good that, you are stretching. you see that you are not- an expert it appears that you have never done it.
18. DAD: [NON] se stende proprio! manco se,	the dough DOESN'T stretch at all!
19. MOM: ma dai!	well go on!
20. Carla: che è duro papà? <i>((avvicinandosi a dad e sorridendo))</i>	daddy it is very hard? <i>((getting close to dad and smiling))</i>
21. DAD: è: abbastanza: dure:tta ( ).	it's: rather: ha:rd ( ).
22. (40.00) <i>((DAD continua nella sua attività e MOM è in soggiorno con Elisa))</i>	(40.00) <i>((DAD goes on in this activity and MOM is in the living with Elisa))</i>
23. DAD: voi facite <i>((imitando il dialetto napoletano))</i> le costruzioni mentre io faccio il pizzettaio eh! (10.0) °senti più di così,° più di così non s'allarga sta pizza. <i>((mostrando la pizza alla telecamera))</i>	you "facite" (like "do") <i>((imitating the dialect of Naples))</i> the play constructions, while I'm working as a pizzaman eh! (10.0) °listen more than this,° more than this I cannot stretch the pizza's dough <i>((he's showing the pizza to the video camera))</i>
24. Researcher: proprio la classica famiglia italiana che fa la pizza, al pomodoro, <i>((ridendo))</i>	here this is the classical Italian family doing pizza with tomato, <i>((laughing))</i>
25. DAD: sì ma mhm sì ma è buonissima! (.) abbiamo scoperto questa cosa, (1.0)	yes yes but is really very good! (.) we have discovered this thing, (1.0) that is

che è (1.0) un=mh paio d'anni (2.0) e proprio::	(1.0) a=mh couple of years ago (2.0)
26. MOM: in effetti la facciamo una volta alla settimana all'incirca.	in fact we are doing pizza about once a week.
27. DAD: ci siamo accordati molto: democraticamente,	we agree upon democratically,
28. MOM: per la pizza.	for the pizza.
29. DAD: per la pizza. ebbene sì. qualche volta ho fatto pure, ((fa il segno del compasso disegnando la circonferenza della teglia)) <il (to:ndo/tonno)> mh ho buttato quello: per farla perfettamente tonda.	for the pizza. well this time I have done even a perfect circle and I have eliminated some dough to have a perfectly round of pizza.
30. MOM: dai=dai la faccio: ((facendo il gesto di prendere la teglia))	go on I'm doing it: ((she makes the gesture to take the oven plate))
31. DAD: ah=mh l'allarghi te?	ah=mh are you going on the stretching it?
32. MOM: sì.	yes.
33. DAD: dovresti farne un po' di più Reni ((si riferisce all'impasto))	you should do a little more dough ((to MOM))
34. MOM: di pasta?=EH: guarda, era quasi mezzo chilo.	the dough? Look it was almost half kilo
35. DAD: eh. quanta sia sta:ta: ehm: non lo so, dovresti di farne un po' di più.	eh. how much it was I don't know but you should prepare more dough
36. MOM: eh. (1.0) comunque io la stendo di più Flavio,	eh (1.0) however I stretched more than you, ( )

( )	
37. DAD: <u>io pure vorrei</u> stenderla di più ma eh: ohm: non se stende! (( <i>facendo più</i> <i>forza sul mattarello</i> )) (.) (te lo sto dicendo io)	<u>I would like</u> to stretch it more but eh: ohm: it doesn't stretch!
38. MOM: comunque, (.) mettici la farina sopra.	however put the flour on it
39. DAD: se ci metto la farina scivola e fiù (( <i>come</i> <i>se scomparisse</i> )) come fanno i pizzettai a farLE tonde?	if I put the flour it leaves and it disappears. How may the pizzaman to do rounded pizzas?
40. MOM: so' pizzettai!	they are pizzettai (( <i>the</i> <i>specialized workers</i> ))
41. DAD: è fisicamente, (0.5) <qua:si impossibile> farle tonde. (.) con un mattarello. ma come fai? la pizza napoletana come si fa? viene migliore a MOM ( )	it is physically almost impossible to make rounded pizza with a rolling pin. How can you do it? How it is the napolitan (( <i>from Naples</i> )) pizza done? MOM is better than I
42. MOM: eh?	eh?
43. DAD: (manca un po' di sale)	(there is enough salt)
44. MOM: macchè!	it is not true!

In the Cali family there is the habit (for Saturday lunch) of preparing pizza together. All the family is engaged: also the youngest daughter (who is 3 years old) put her hands in the pizza's dough. The father has an important role: he stretches the dough with the rolling pin, since a lot of strength is required. Although at the end it does not remind well the remaining procedure, he acts as much a needed help: a proper "pizzettaio" (the man

who produces the pizza is a professional cooker in the Italian pizza-restaurant).

We also found situations in which parents collaborate in managing different activities: the mother is helping the children in their homework and the father is the only responsible person for preparing dinner.

### Excerpt 5

MARI Family - Sunday (father)

Participants: MOM, DAD, GRAND MOTHER, Livia (12 years old), Carlo (7 years old)

23. DAD: Giò! (7.0)(( <i>apre il frigorifero e prende qualcosa, entra Livia nella cucina</i> )) Giò!	Giò! (7.0) (( <i>he opens the fridge and picks up something, and then Livia enters in the kitchen</i> )) Giò!
24. MOM: Si amor	Yes, love
25. DAD: Non hai detto che cucinavi un verdura una cosa	Have you said that you cooked a vegetable, something, haven't you?
26. MOM: ci dovrebbero essere dei pomodori	There must be tomatoes
27. DAD: non c'è niente	There is nothing ready
28. MOM: ma amor io ho lasciato i soldi a Priscilla per comprarli (3.0) questi sono i piccolini e questi sono i grandi (( <i>pomodori</i> ))	But honey I left the money to Priscilla (the baby sitter) to buy them (3.0) there are both little ones and large ones (( <i>tomatoes</i> ))
29. DAD: non ha cucinato niente	She hasn't cooked anything
30. MOM: non l'ha cucinato no	She hasn't cooked, has she?
31. DAD: ( )cucinare una cosa, no va bene	( ) cooking something, no it is alright
32. MOM: c'è il prosciutto c'è questa pasta	There is the ham, there is this pasta
33. DAD: no non la cuciniamo o cuciniamo la pasta o no? come vuoi?	No, do we cook the pasta or don't we?
34. GRAND MOM: Proviamo a cuocere un po' di pescetti intanto↑	Do what do you want? Let cook these small fishes in the meanwhile↑
35. MOM: ci sono::: un po' di formaggi	There are::: some chesees
36. DAD: ma sulla pasta	But with the pasta
37. MOM: fai la pasta dai	Do the pasta, go on
38. DAD: sulla pasta.	With the pasta. Both or only

Entrambi o uno	one ingredient
39. MOM: fanne uno forza! <i>((MOM esce dalla cucina e si dirige verso il salone))</i>	Do one, go on! <i>(( MOM come out from the kitchen and she moves to the living room))</i>
40. DAD: LivIA	LivIA
41. LIVIA: SI	YES
42. DAD: c'hai molta fame o no?	Are you hungry, aren't you?
43. CARLO: [IO non tanta]	[I am not hungry
44. DAD: [c'hai molta fame]	[you are hungry
45. CARLO: dopo aver [mangiato una pizza]	After having [eaten a pizza
46. MOM:: [tu hai mangiato certo] una [pizza]	[you have eaten a [pizza
47. DAD: [che?]	[what?
48. DAD: Vuoi farne una o due voglio sapere	Would you like that I do one or two, I would like to know it
49. MOM: una	One
50. LIVIA: una	One
51. DAD: faccio una	I do one
52. CARLO: a me dammi soltanto la frutta ed un piccolo primo	For me only the fruit and a small portion of pasta
53. MOM: un piccolo primo <i>((con tono ironico))</i> tu dopo il gelato hai preso un pezzo di pizza enorme	A small portion of pasta <i>((ironic))</i> after the ice cream you have eaten a big piece of pizza
54. (6.0)	(6.0)
55. DAD: <i>(siediti tu va a riposa=riposarti) ((rivolto a Livia che è entrata in cucina))</i>	<i>(seat down, you go to relax) ((to Livia; she has come in the kitchen))</i>
<i>((da 7.36 a 12.00, in silenzio, DAD accende il fuoco, si gira verso la tavola e poi verso la credenza, dalla quale prende qualcosa, poi apre l'acqua e sembra lavare qualcosa. Si dirige poi verso la credenza sopra il frigo dove prende una coppa e la porta al lavabo. Prende una busta sul tavolo e la mette in frigo. Dalla credenza sopra il frigorifero prende dei piatti di vetro che mette</i>	<i>((from minute 7.36 to 12.00 DAD does the following things silently: he lights up the gas, turns toward the table, then toward the cupboard from which he takes something, then he opens the water for washing. Then he takes the plates to prepare the table, he adds forks, knives and glasses. Then he puts on paper napkins on the table. He lights up the lamp and the air on the pot that is boiling))</i>

<p><i>sulla tavola. 10.5 prende le posate da un cassetto del tavolo e con un coltello apre una confezione davanti a lui. Dalla credenza a fianco a quella da cui ha preso i piatti, prende i bicchieri che mette a tavola. 11.00 mette dei tovaglioli di carta sulla tavola. Accende le luci e l'aspiratore della cappa posta sopra la pentola con l'acqua che è stata precedentemente messa sul fuoco))</i></p>	
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The Mari's dad assumes the responsibility of preparing the dinner and even the table, while the mother is following the children's homework and limits her role to few suggestions about the presence of the stuff to be cooked. All the father's activity is done in the kitchen where his mother-in-law is present, with a mainly silent and secondary role. The dinner preparation is intermingled with the children's homework activity. In this case the mother assumes the responsibility for them and the father assumes the role of the cooking person even at the presence of the mother in law: a kind of expert exercise!

The sequence begins at line 23 where the father opens the fridge and calls the wife, who is following the children in their duties. The father finds out the tomatoes that he is looking for and accepts the suggestion of the mother in law to cook the small fishes. The wife suggests that there are some cheeses: the father asks whether he has to use both or only one.

The last part of the videotaped sequence is mainly silent: the father prepares the table in the kitchen while still cooking and looks as being really expert of all the passages for the small preparation.

We have to add that although Italian fathers result from sociological studies (Barbagli, 1984) that they like to help the wives in cooking and not doing



other household, this father is so expert that he is more than an Italian: he is of Spanish origin!

## **Conclusions**

The different examples show that our fathers are available to participate to cooking activities with diverse degree of responsibility. The last one assumes the whole responsibility for the dinner even though he asks the wife for some suggestions and confirmations. He is any more a help or a partner: he seems to be the main responsible person. In the excerpts we can observe how fathers try to collaborate with their wives, in order to assume various degree of responsibility in cooking activities.

This previous analysis shows the effort (by Italian fathers) to construct themselves as partner in family cooking duties, often under monitoring of their wives.

The father's role is not only to assist the mother in preparing meals and/or in setting the table. They can also assume a whole responsibility of cooking, in agreement with the "mother's assent", because the dominant female role in the kitchen is culturally defined in the observed context.

We consider this study as a kind of preliminary observation into the kitchen's activities that involve both parents: we need further analytical observations to understand better moments of everyday life of Italian families, specially when there are cooking duties.

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