

# *In and Out: Father's Positioning in the Family System*

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The Italian research is a part of a collaborative study headed by prof. Ochs at the Sloan Centre on Everyday Lives of Families, based in UCLA. It is a comparative research project based on extensive ethnographic fieldwork in family households and it involves Italian and Swedish units. The families are composed of two working parents and at least two siblings, one of which is between 8 and 12 years old.

The general aim of the project is to understand how families organize their life in order to carry on various activities. The research is based on observing and videotaping families at home during the week and at weekends, and interviewing the parents about their family history, habits, relationships, health care matters and children's education.

An extensive observation of the home space organization was conducted through house mapping and photographing; each family member's perspective of what is considered as an important place or object in the house was videotaped and analyzed.

The interviews and field observations were integrally transcribed; an "activity log" was produced by ethnographic field notes and videotaping which synthesized the main activities carried out in the settings. The analysis of the main part was performed on the transcripts through the identification of the significant passages and the further examination of the relevant audio and/or video data.

## **Introduction: the focus on the father**

One of the main themes in psychology is the transformation of the father's role throughout the last years (Badolato, 1993): there is a shift from a traditional father (defined as a *provider*), who assures the economical well being of his family and educates children when they get older, to a *collaborative* father, whose role is motivated by the wife's necessity of an equal division of labor in a family. This transformation is supplemented by another role of an *emerging* father who is conscious of having equal capacities with women of bringing up and looking after children and who therefore alternates these responsibilities with his wife. The social image of the new fatherhood is a long on-going process (Ficeto, 2000; Scabini, 1999), as there are no common norms or signs to follow; in order to encourage such new and different behaviour it is necessary to consider the contradictory image of the father given by society, which sometimes idealizes this role and sometimes stresses its inadequacy. Men's role as a parent therefore is at risk of being always represented ambivalently.

It is hence very important to directly observe the everyday family routine of the Italian fathers in order to understand their role in its numerous manifestations. The following analysis is essentially interpretative and is based on the data gathered during spontaneous and natural interactions at home. This study supports the idea that men have manifold and complex ways of representing themselves within the family, which vary according to the contexts, moments, places of interactions and people involved in them. The study on the father's positioning in a family should also consider his own perspective of the everyday life and the boundaries between parental, filial, and conjugal subsystems. The focus on the father's role should come from the inside of family relationships, through a close observation of various settings of "being" in a family unit.

This study is purely explorative and implies no *categorization* of the eventual models and behaviours of the Italian fathers. The aim of the project is to gather the necessary information to understand how fathers adopt various roles and consequently assume

various positionings during family interactions. Maintaining as much as possible the adherence between the videotaped data and the ethnographic notes, we would like to examine what the participants themselves define as important.

### **Studies on fatherhood: psychological and sociological view**

During the last decades, the father's role in family life has attracted considerable attention of developmental psychologists and social scientists: the social and cultural changes prompted a re-definition of the father's image.

Recent psychological research on the father's role in Italy has emphasized the shift from the perception of a detached and absent father, an embodiment of power and family authority, whose role is limited to providing economic well being, towards the concept, starting from the '70s, of a "new father" (Drei, Carugati, 2003).

The new father gains an active role within the family and becomes involved in the development of children's personality and relational capacities previously seen as a feminine sphere alone. The '80s and '90s triggered many empirical researches on the aspects of "revaluation" of the paternal figure and above all its importance for the psychological development of children. Psychological research took a special course in order to shed light on the fatherhood from various points of view: quantitative and qualitative measures of the "new fatherhood" (Meyer-Kramer, 1980), correlation between personality variables, father's behaviour and child's psychological development and analysis of the father-child interactions.

The amount of time fathers spend with their children has drawn a great interest but failed to be effective in clarifying the complexity of a father-child relationship. Since the '70s, the time measurements have only shown a wide changeability, so that already in the 80's their poor reliability was confirmed: time measurements unrelated to the content and the quality of interactions appear to be ineffective.

Other methodological studies have examined the father's involvement through diaries and interviews. Even though numerous researches focus on the relationship between fathers and new-born children, pre-school age has not always been ignored; the

father's image that emerges from such research is that of a father in the 50s: fathers assume secondary roles and appear involved only at the moments when the need arises (Lewis, 1997).

These findings were revealed in different cultures: a survey on parent couples in Germany showed that there was a growing tendency of withdrawing from the interactions with a child aged between 2 and 5 years (Gauda, 1983); Australian data indicated that only in 2% of families fathers and mothers share child's care equally and 60% of fathers declare to never have looked after their children without mother's presence (Russell, 1983).

A remarkable part of psychological studies is concerned with the correlation between the father's role and a sexual development of a child: there was a strong separation of sexual roles in the 50s and child's socialization towards acquiring masculinity/femininity was a father's task. These conclusions were mainly substantiated by 2 research directions: 1) the studies on the absence of a father figure, which showed that premature deprivations caused difficulties in acquiring a sexual role and a sexual behaviour; 2) the research in the 70s and 80s on fathers' postpartum preferential interactions with males compared to females as determinants of the sexual role acquisition. Other studies highlighted the relation between the paternal role and child's cognitive, social, emotional and moral development as well as child's self-esteem.

The differences between father-child and mother-child interactions and their cultural dimensions proved to be fundamental for child's development. The findings revealed that mothers are more committed to looking after children while fathers participate more actively in games. Despite the fact that the majority of the studies emphasized that fathers still spent much less time playing with their children than mothers, the liveliness of such games made this activity especially salient (Lamb, Frodi, Hwang, Frodi, 1983).

The sociological studies refer to the Parsonian model (Maggioni, 2000), according to which the father's role is an intermediary between family and social system: the

father's responsibilities are the social development and moral education of the children that will later integrate them into their society. The most recent studies formulated theories concerning the concept of the new fatherhood: the idea of an affective equality leads to a stabilization of identical expectations from both parents. The new paternity aims at developing in men an "emotional" intelligence, traditionally considered as an exclusively feminine trait (Gottman, Declaire, 1999).

### **Representation of the father's positioning: intra-family and extra-family levels**

In the social field, especially psychology and sociology, the fatherhood has been mainly related to authority: this model only partly represented the practices that define family in its everyday life. The recent research on the fatherhood shifted towards the examination of the father's figure as a highly involved (at least mentally) in looking after and taking care of children and family.

The assessment of the three levels of fatherhood has determined the representations of the father's positioning in a family:

- 1) determinants of parental involvement: According to Pleck's studies (1997), the determinants of parental involvement involve individual level, family level, extra family level and cultural level;
- 2) degrees of parental involvement (Lamb, Pleck, Charnov, Levine, 1987): the amount of time fathers spend with their children and the nature of the activities they share (with a distinction between "engagement", father-child interactions concerning food, sleep, play, homework; "availability", as the time during which the father is not directly interacting but is available; "responsibility", as having mental charge of care);
- 3) consequences or effects of parental involvement: the effects of the father's presence found in the aspects traditionally perceived as depending on the mother's level of education. Many studies hold that the father's involvement is linked to several components of child socialization.

Some studies emphasised an increasing paternal involvement in the lives of their children, especially between the 80's and 90's (Pleck, 1997); yet such degree of involvement appears to be increasing also because the time working mothers spend with their children decreased at the same time (Lamb, 1997).

However, the observation of parental styles and behaviours in itself is not sufficient, as the reciprocity of the family relationships should also be taken into account. The real meaning of a study on the father's positioning can only be understood when the family is considered as a system of interdependent relationships. Traditionally, the research on social interactions used observational methods, but according to Russel and Radojevic (1992) fathers and mothers react differently to different methods of data collection. Fathers seem to be more inclined to carry out role performances for the observers and manifest less affection towards their children in family settings; this finding should prevent possible and hastened interpretations of how fathers (and all family members in general) appear when observed.

The analyzed data corpus revealed a variety of positionings in family subsystems: it is especially evident in the situations where a father was called upon a particular role but was inevitably "exposed" to his wife's look if the role was "conventionally" perceived as feminine. In some cases, fathers were relegated to the position of a "third son", subjected to the mother's control and continuous correction. If on one hand fathers tend towards the filial subsystem within a family, on the other hand they attempt to be placed outside the family context where their "private individuality" and uniqueness are recognized.

The examples that follow are derived from the transcriptions of the videotapes of the family dynamics in Italian families. The data are transcribed according to the methodology of the conversational analysis (Sacks, Schegloff, Jefferson, 1974) and are analyzed by all members of the research group. These excerpts are meant to sustain the idea that fathers can assume various positionings in a family depending upon the interactions they have with other family members. Some extracts are taken from the individual interviews conducted on the parents regarding family history, educational practices, social relationships, work and other aspects.



## Excerpt 1 “Let’s see by mom!”

GITI Family – Wednesday morning – father

Participants: father (Paolo); mother (Emma); Elena (8 years old); Alice (1,6 years old)

1. ((tempo 00:20: il padre sta vestendo Alice nella stanza da letto dei genitori))	((Time 00:20: dad is dressing Alice in the parents bedroom))
2. DAD: sapete (.) adesso Ali(ce) va all’asilo. fa una passeggiata con brum brum ((l’automobile)) di mamma. Va all’asilo. e chi c’è all’asilo?	You know (.) now Ali(ce) goes to the kindergarten. she goes for a walk by brum brum ((car)) of mom. she goes to the kindergarten. and who is in the kindergarten?
3. Alice: ( )	( )
4. DAD: Chi c’è? Davide? Davide poi?	Who is present? Davide? Davide and then?
5. Alice: Elena	Elena
6. DAD: Elena? Poi?	Elena? And then?
7. Alice: ( )	( )
8. DAD: Sara? Poi?	Sara? And then?
9. Alice: ( )	( )
10. DAD: Daniela. Poi? Poi chi c’è?	Daniela. And then? Then who is present?
11. Alice: ( )	( )
12. DAD: Liliana (1.0) Tommaso?	Liliana (1.0) Tommaso?
13. ((Alice si lamenta ma il padre continua a vestirla e gioca e canta con lei)) Time 03:22	((Alice is complaining but dad is dressing her and he’s playing and singing with the child)) Time 03:22
14. DAD: baby? ((alla madre)) io sto mettendo il vestito che è sul (letto)	baby? ((to MOM)) I’m putting the clothe that is on the (bed)
15. MOM: e si!	And yes!
16. DAD: no perché ci sono pure i pantaloni di Elena che però sono grandi	No because there are also the Elena’s trousers but they are large
17. MOM: ( )	( )
18. ((il padre continua a vestire Alice e la madre entra nella stanza))	((DAD is dressing Alice and MOM comes in the room))
19. DAD: come sei bella! ((ad Alice)) fatti vedere da mamma! Io vado a fare un controllo all’altra figlia ((uscendo dalla stanza))	you do look smart! ((to Alice)) let’s see by mom! I go to check the other daughter ((he’s leaving the room))

In this excerpt, the father is dressing the child, as a usual activity that he does every morning. During the interaction he controls very well the situation and he completes the duty also by playing and singing with Alice (line 13). At the end of the dressing's activity the mother is coming in the bedroom (to do something else) and the father express his satisfaction (line 19 "you do look smart!"), also addressing the child to the mom. In this "auto-celebration" of competence the father reveals his role of children's caretaker, and he leaves the room in order to check the other child (Elena), probably because she is also engaged in dressing herself.

### Excerpt 2 "Where is my shirt, Gaia?"

RIPE Family - Thursday morning - father

Participants: father (Marco); mother (Gaia); Leonardo (13 years old); Andrea (9 years old)

DAD: <b>Gaia, ma io una volta non avevo una: una camicia grigia?</b> ve la siete venduta?	<b>Gaia, but have not I once had a grey shirt?</b> Did you sell it?
MOM: può darsi che sia bagnata.	It might be wet
DAD: oddio	Oh my god
MOM: <b>ti serve un'alternativa?</b>	<b>Do you need another one?</b>
DAD: mi serve una cosa da mettere sotto il vestito grigio	I need something to put under my grey suit
MOM: arrivo!	I'm coming
DAD: mi metto la camicia bianca ((davanti all'armadio delle camicie, mentre la madre arriva))	Do I wear a white shirt ( <i>in front of the wardrobe, while the mother is arriving</i> )
MOM: <b>come mai il vestito grigio oggi?</b>	<b>How come a grey suit today?</b>
DAD: così	It's so
MOM: <b>ti senti serio?</b>	Do you feel like being serious?
DAD: mi sento serio? ma perché devo essere serio?	Do I feel serious, why should I?
MOM: <b>beh scusa però la camicia grigia sul vestito grigio no!</b>	<b>Excuse me, but a grey shirt under a grey suit! No</b>
DAD: o bianca? ((la camicia))	<b>a white one?</b>
MOM: <b>sembra che vai a un funerale no! ti devi mettere una cosa, una cosa un po' più allegrotta scusa eh?</b>	<b>It seems like you are going to a funeral, does not it? You should put something.. more cheerful, sorry eh?</b>
(6.0)	
MOM: <b>al limite ti metti una camicia rosa</b>	<b>At least put a pink one</b>
DAD: <b>è quella coi gemelli?</b>	<b>the one with twins on it?</b>
MOM: <b>no!</b>	<b>No!</b>
DAD: no.	No.

MOM: oppure celeste pallido pallido se proprio vuoi stare sul serio	Or at least the light light blue one if it is so important to be serious
DAD: aspetta questa, [è quella viola((a MOM che sta mostrando una camicia))	Wait, and the violet one (showing the shirt to the wife)
MOM: [no questa non è celeste	No, this is not blue
DAD: questa è viola	It is violet
MOM: questa è viola. va bene anche viola volendo	It is violet, oh well, violet could do
DAD: e allora è meglio viola (2.0) che rosa	So it is better violet (2.0) than the pink one
MOM: eh insomma, no grigia! ((andando via))	Well, at least not grey! (leaving)
DAD: va bene va bene	Ok, ok
MOM: okay	Okay

In this extract Marco turns to his wife to find a shirt. Gaia comes straight on and uses the situation to gain control over her husband's choices. Under the excuse of the shirt, she asks various questions in order to monitor and understand her husband's mood. Gaia implies that the initial husband's choice is out of place and her comment on the inadequacy of the grey colour demonstrates that she is the one that makes decisions. She is pulling various shirts out of the wardrobe in order to direct Marco's choices towards what she considers as right. Marco can only choose from the alternatives offered by his wife and she is to have the last word.

### Excerpt 3 "How do you do the washing up?"

CILO Family - Wednesday evening - Father

Participants: father; mother; child 1; child 2

440 DAD: Insomma <b>Nicole::tta</b> <b>((MAM)) non vuole che io lavo i</b> <b>pia::tti, perché faccio la</b> <b>schiuma</b> [fino a su	So <b>Nicole::tta ((MOM)) doesn't</b> <b>want me to wash the dish::es,</b> <b>because I lather a lot</b>
441 MOM: [No tu non è che fai la schiu:: ma, <b>tu</b> <b>li lavi proprio male</b> [è diverso.	[No it's not that you lath::er a lot, it's that you <b>you don't wash up well</b> [it's different.
442 DAD: [non è che li la:: vo male	[It's not that I wa::sh up badly
443 MOM: [Fai troppa schiuma	[You lather it a lot
444 DAD: [No io consu:: mo tutto	[No I fini::sh all
445 MOM: Lui sai che fa? Prende la spugna, mette il sapo:: ne e poi lo sciacqua.	You know what he does? He takes the sponge, puts the so::ap liquid and then rinses it all.

446 DAD: No, <b>ti faccio vedè come faccio</b> io:: ((avvicinandosi a lei))	No, <b>I'll show what I do:</b> (approaching her)
447 MOM: <b>No (.)me fai innervosì,</b>	<b>No (.) You annoy me</b>
448 PAP: ((se ne va perplesso))	((he leaves in a perplex mood))
449 MOM: Non me pia:: ce, i piatti si fanno con l'acqua bolle:: nte tu invece sai che fai?	I don't li:ke it, washing up is about hot water, do you know what you do it?
450 DAD: L'acqua bolle::: nte, invece è sempre [aperta a me	ho:::t water, instead it is always
451 MOM: [e si ce::: rto capirai	[yes su:::re
452 DAD: Spreco troppa [corre:: nte, è vero.	I waste a lot [of energy, it's true.
453 MOM: [lui l'acqua corrente ((mimando l'acqua che cade)) ( ) calda ogni mezz'ora	[he- uses a lot of hot water (miming running water) that it is hot every half an hour
454 DAD: Guarda che calda sterilizza molto di più:::	You know hot ((water)) sterilizes better:::
455 MOM: Questa è bolle:: nte, mettici le mani, coi guanti me scotto, questa è bollente	This one is boil::ing, put your hands in, I'll burn myself with gloves, it is boiling
456 DAD: <b>Posso fa vedere come lavo io?</b>	<b>Can I show how I wash the dishes?</b>
457 MOM: <b>[No::: ( )</b> d'acqua	<b>[No::: ( )</b> the water
458 DAD: [E non posso ((e se ne va))	[I cannot ((leaves))
459 MOM: <b>Anzi no::: me fa venì un nervoso l'ha fatto una volta in vita sua::: o le cose le fai come dico io:::((continua a sentirsi in lontananza la voce di MAM) )</b>	<b>Actually no::: he annoys me, did it be once in a life time::: ((her the voice is heard from the distance)</b>

The observed interactions reveal a possibility of gaining control through talking (at times ironically) about the everyday activities to the researchers. Here the wife is concentrated on washing up in the presence of her husband and the research team. The initial husband's affirmation of being able yet not allowed by his wife to do it instead of her immediately triggers her negative judgement: she excludes him from this activity because he is incapable of doing it well. The husband is treated here as a "third child" where the wife decides how things should or should not be done. It therefore the role of the wife to decide what the division of labor would be in the family. Despite his attempts to protest, this exclusion (he will finally give up and

leave the kitchen) puts him into a subordinate position without a possibility of negotiation.

#### Excerpt 4: “Can we play, mom?”

PICO Family – Wednesday evening – father

Participants: DAD; MOM; Child 1 (Daniela); Child 2 (Serena)

340. DAD: vabbè mamma che facciamo?	Okay MOM what do we do?
341. Child 2: che fa::	What does SHE do::
342. MOM: che mi aspetta:: oddio::	What is waiting for me:: oh my god::
343. DAD: i piatti dove c'è stata la frittata te li lavi tu perché dopo -	You wash the dishes where the omelette there was, because later -
344. MOM: cioè praticamente tutti	Practically everything
345. DAD: ne abbiamo salvati tre	We saved three plates
346. DAD: vabbè dai aiutiamo mamma un attimo	okay let's help MOM
347. MOM: no=no	no=no
348. DAD: no? andiamo a giocare:: ci fai giocare mamma?	No? Let's go playing:: do you let us playing MOM?
349. MOM: sì	yes
350. DAD: brava::	well-done::
351. MOM: tanto lo fate tutte le sere non è che::	You do it every evening, anyway, it is not that::
352. DAD: hai sentito tomas? Ha detto vai vai:: ((tomas è il cane del vicino che abbaia)) hai sentito tomas: vai vai vai ha acconsentito (0,4) andiamo in cameretta ((padre e figlie escono dalla cucina))	Have you heard Tomas ((the neighbour's dog))? He said go go:: Have you heard Tomas: go go it agrees (4.0) let's go to your little room ((children's bedroom)) ((DAD and children leave the kitchen))

This last example demonstrates the paternal positioning within the filial subsystem. The Pico family have just finished eating and the father playfully and ironically sides with children to “face” the mother; on one hand the mother wants to do the washing up by herself, on the other hand the father is talking in the plural (lines 340 and 348) to show his belonging to the kids’ group. This positioning seems to be accepted by the mother as she responds to all of them by using the plural in turn 351 as an usual activity and saying “you do it every evening anyway”).

The following is taken from two fathers’ interviews, aimed at the understanding of their self-perceptions. These excerpts highlight a more individualized father figure,

orientated towards a continuous research of personal space and self-realization that goes beyond the family context.

### Excerpt 5 “I do other things too”

Cali Family – Father’s interview

DAD: ((sta parlando del proprio lavoro)) <b>ad ogni modo mi occupo anche di altre cose</b> quindi:: da libero professionista diciamo così è un po’ una libera professione a tutto tondo eh ho sempre le antenne abbastanza abbastanza alzate per poter guardarmi intorno (0,3) come credo sia dovere di ogni libero professionista (guardarsi)	(Talking about his job) <b>Anyway, I do other things too</b> So::let’s say as a self-employed person, it is a completely free profession and I am always very attentive to what is happening around me(0,3) as I think any self-employed person should be.
Researcher: altre cose::,	Do you do other things
DAD: <b>mi occupo un po’ per passione un po’ diciamo in maniera semiprofessionale di musica</b> eh:: con degli amici abbiamo uno studio di <b>registrazione</b> e mh:: un’altra attività non menì importante: a volte anche gratificante rispetto alla prima è invece un’attività che si occupa di marketing ed è un settore completamente diverso	<b>I do musics, partly because I have a passion for it and partly let’s say as a semi-professional: we have a recording activity with some friends::</b> Another important thing for me, which sometimes is even more satisfying than musics is marketing, a completely different area
Researcher: bè spazi molto:	you range over various fields of knowledge
DAD: bè insomma ho un po’ di interessi	Well, I have few interests

Flavio here describes himself regardless of his role as a parent (what, on the contrary, often happens in the analyzed interviews with the mothers) but through a wide range of his own interests. His positioning, compared to the previous examples, does not originate from the role of the father and with regard to the filial system, but from the external context of a unique individual with his own passions and hobbies. This position is more apparent in the interviews as this method of data collection leaves much space for self-expression.

### Excerpt 6 “This is what I am”

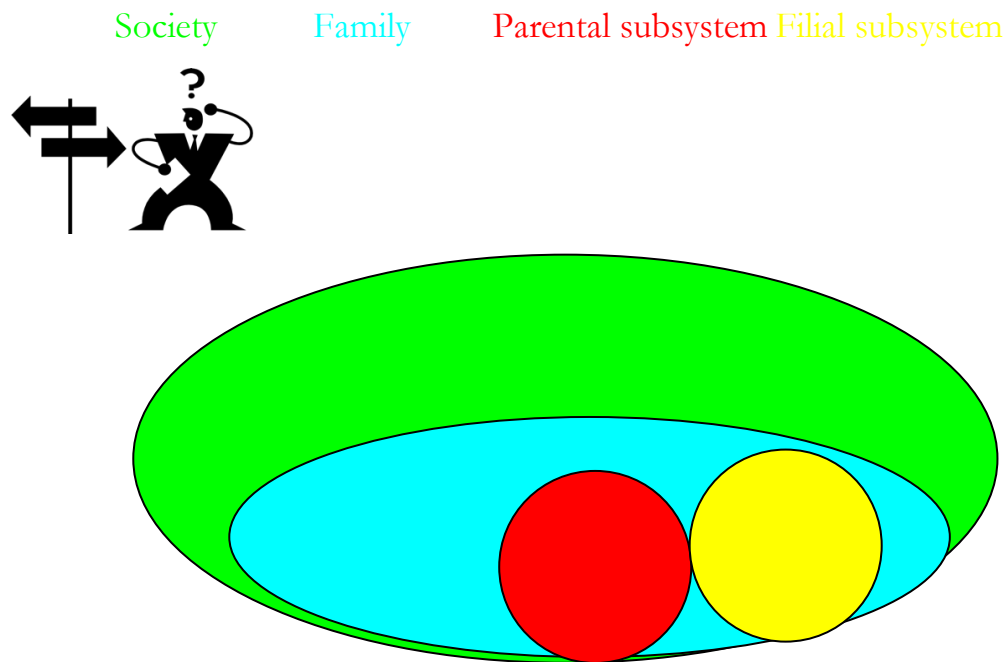
DAD: <b>faccio accumulazione di libri</b>	<b>I cumulate books</b>
Researcher: quindi avete tanti libri che non basta	So you have many books and the room it's never enough
DAD: sì no continuo a accumulare libri che non non so più dove metterli	Yes, well, I keep cumulating them so I don't know where to put them any longer
Researcher: non basta lo spazio mi faceva vedere che c'è anche una divisione::	You showed me an additional place: there is also a division
DAD: sì=sì ci son le cose sue che poi io ho diviso un po' per temi	Yes=yes here there are her things, I then divided them according to subjects
Researcher: ah anche per temi	Oh subjects
DAD: sì così c'ho insomma::	yes, so I have
Researcher: sono tantissimi questi libri	There are lots of books
DAD: la parte umoristica questo è il cinema il teatro questo è politica e saggistica e storia questi sono i gialli	These are funny books, this is about movies, here is politics, history and these are thrillers
Researcher: che ordine	What an order
DAD: no però poi in realtà sono un po' (misti) lì c'è lin la parte di linguistica lì c'è un'altra forma di saggistica tipo comunicazione sociologia	Well, they are actually somewhat mixed up, there is the linguistics part and here there are essay, like sociological communication
Researcher: bè poi insomma parecchi anche interessi rispetto a::	a wide range of interests then compared to
DAD: <b>bè sono io da questo punto di vista</b>	<b>Well, that's me, from this point of view</b>

Paolo is talking about his passion for books that ends up being a huge collection (an accumulation as he defines it) divided according to various themes and his sphere of interests. From his point of view, it is this passion rather than being a father/husband that defines him (**“that's what I am”**).

## Discussion and conclusion

This essentially exploratory study cannot imply any generalizations, our prime interest behind the registered and transcribed material was in the variety of paternal positionings. The emerging picture allows us to identify, both within and outside family contexts, various situations where fathers are either called upon or spontaneously adopt particular

roles (Jain A., Belsky J., Crnic K. 1996). The participating fathers “showed” two macro areas of positionings: a family dimension with its various internal movements and transitions between further subsystems, and an extra-family dimension, where fathers might “put aside” their family role and represent themselves as unique individuals. This idea is graphically illustrated below:



The first excerpts illustrate situations where husbands are under the control of their wives regarding the domestic activities culturally considered as feminine (such as washing dishes and cooking). However, this control can also be extended into the field of adult choices (such as getting dressed), putting the father in a subordinate position. The father therefore is assigned the role of being a “third child”, exposed to the possible control and correction of his wife. There is also a possibility that fathers playfully place themselves in a close position with the children, as in the example 4. It should be mentioned that if on one hand fathers tend towards filial subsystem within the family, on the other hand they attempt to place themselves in an extra family context, where their own individuality can be acknowledged through personal interests and hobbies.



The complex and many-sided image of the Italian fathers emerging from this study strengthens the idea that a deeper research effort on the father's figure will lead to a better understanding of the father's role and the family system as a whole.

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