FAMILY LIFE: ROLES, BONDS AND IMPACT

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THE ETHNOGRAPHIC OBSERVATION OF THE EVERYDAY LIFE IN ITALY: COLLABORATIVE INTERACTIONS AMONG WORKING COUPLES

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this chapter is to analyze how Italian working couples collaborate during everyday households. Previous studies on the division of labor have indicated that managing parenting responsibilities and household tasks often becomes an area of contention, partly due to a lack of a successful approach for managing this area of working families’ busy lives. Most studies investigating parents’ attitudes about the household work are exclusively based on questionnaires. In this chapter we aim to capture the parents’ representations and to observe ethnographically the activities at home of working couples. Adopting the positioning theory and the discursive approach as guiding analytical concepts, we propose an analysis of how women and men position themselves as active partners in different collaborative household activities, ascribing meanings to what they do with the other family members and with the researchers.

This chapter draws from interview and videotaped data of interactions of eight Italian working couples, in order to examine collaborative interactions during family routines. Our data provide an opportunity to understand how couples construct family positions in accomplishing daily household tasks: the qualitative analysis of parents’ individual semi-structured interviews and video recordings of everyday interactions at home indicates different dimensions of women’s and men’s responsibilities. The analysis of data follows the theoretical and methodological principles of Discourse and Conversation Analysis, in order to show the importance of household interactions as an opportunity for collaboration and participation within different family frameworks.
INTRODUCTION

Over the past decades, the complexity of how couples interact as they confront the everyday challenges involved in working family life called the attention of numerous studies in social sciences. In this chapter we will review problematic issues regarding the division of labor, examining how these issues relate to the ongoing negotiation of responsibilities and expectations between partners, and analyzing interactions in which couples effectively collaborate.

Past studies in social sciences have pointed out the representations of couples related to the division of household work. In particular, within social psychology (Becker, 1981) most of the inquiries have considered household work in relation to genre’s stereotypes and balancing time and family activities. Schmidt (2000) has underlined that there is wide variation in how working parents organize and manage everyday household tasks, and the manner in which they coordinate their actions around these tasks will affect the quality of the relationships and the emotional tenor at home. Partners’ consensual understanding of positions and duties in the house are expected to promote efficient and affectively neutral interaction between partners, for example, whereas partners’ inability to agree upon and enact a clear division of labor is expected to result in continual re-negotiation of responsibilities. In turn, this lack of agreement is expected to engender frequent disputes and feelings of frustration.

Psychologists interested in dyadic processes in close relationships have examined marital interactions for nearly three decades. Although this work has been conducted primarily in controlled laboratory settings (in which couples were instructed to discuss sources of disagreement in their relationships), evidence is increasingly clear that objective indices of poor communication (e.g., expressing disagreement, being defensive, offering poor solutions to problems) are not uniformly detrimental to relationships. Instead, it appears that poor communication is particularly consequential for relationships when expressions of positive emotions, such as humor, interest, affection, and support, are relatively rare (Pasch, Bradbury, 1998; Johnson, Cohan, Davila, Lawrence, Rogge, Karney, Sullivan, Bradbury, 2005). Through the study of how working couples represent themselves and act when they are confronted to the everyday challenges involved in managing household tasks, we hope to gain new insights into family interactions.

IMPLICATIONS OF HOUSEHOLD WORKS

Household works 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. Over recent years a number of dual-earner families have led to a new configuration of the domestic distribution among members in working families worldwide. For example, research conducted in the United States has examined how working families attempt to balance work demands with household and parenting responsibilities (Christensen, 1988; Hochschild, Machung, 1989; Schor, 1991; Galinsky, Bond, Friedman, 1996). In Europe, other studies have investigated the organization of household labor (Emigh, 2000; Des Rivieres-Pigeon, 2002), and the representation of the quality of time families devote to their everyday activities (Kremer-Sadlik, Fatigante, Fasulo, 2008).
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Understanding how working families manage the division of labor inside the home emerges also as key focus for scholars studying contemporary dual-income families (Klein, Izquierdo, Bradbury, Arcidiacono, 2005). There is wide variation in how working families organize everyday household tasks, and the manner in which they coordinate their actions around these tasks will affect the quality of their lives. Notions of fairness and exchange of goods and services are reflected in the structure and behavior of household members in some societies. Cheal (1988) characterizes a moral economic household as one in which cooperation and consensus are the reigning principles. In the political economy model, family members are driven by self-interest, which may result in conflict over resource and work distribution with decisions falling to those in positions of authority.

The extensive research done by Hochschild (1997) concludes that dual-earner American families find themselves in a “time bind”, whereby working adults have increased the time they spend at work and consequently have little time left for leisure, play, and relaxation. Other studies have found that this extends to additional dimensions of everyday life, with working adults claiming lack of time for exercise (Bertman, 1998), preparing meals (DeVault, 1990), cleaning the home, and seeking family health care (Siahpush, 2000). Other research based mainly on questionnaire data, especially in the Italian context (Bertacchi, Lebbolo, 2000), sheds light on children’s perspectives of the degree of father’s participation in household work and increasing instances of women dropping out of the workforce after the birth of their first child in order to manage the household. 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).

We are convinced that the study of household interactions provides an opportunity for examining the structure of apprenticeship activities at home, and to understand how, through collaborative stances, members accommodate, challenge, and socialize one another’s perspectives on household obligations.

**FAMILY WORK AND RESPONSIBILITY**

Goodnow (1989) has noted 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). 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. Whilst 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). Goodnow and Delaney (1989) have suggested the relevance of self-care tasks that focus on what is “own”, and family-care tasks that involve the effect of the work on the others. White and Brinkerhoff (1981) have provided five reasons of adults’ household activities: developmental (the work can contribute to the development of the responsibility);
mutual obligations; extrinsic (parents need help); task learning (children need to develop skills); residual (for example children learn to ask for pocket money). All these reasons are linked to the importance of work activities for a general responsibility in the family context and they can contribute to orient family members in positioning themselves within the framework of the household work.

**WHY TO EXAMINE THE HOUSEHOLD INTERACTIONS?**

Researchers that are increasingly turning their attention to household activities examine how working families manage work demands and time pressure when they negotiate home life and life away at work (Klein, Izquierdo, Bradbury, 2004). In working families women are generally the primary caretakers of children, and gender is used to determine roles in most workplaces. 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, or a process of constructing solidarity and cohesiveness within the family.

Psychological studies have yielded quantitatively rigorous descriptions of marital interaction (Bradbury, 1998; Bradbury, Karen, 1993), yet most of these works have been conducted in artificial laboratory settings or, in rare instances, have studied re-enactments of partners’ interactions (Burman, Margoin, John, 1993). These works have focused on couples’ discussions of marital problems in general, rather than the negotiation of household responsibilities in real time. Anthropological studies have demonstrated the power of qualitative methods and naturalistic observation: however, direct observations of middle-class, dual-career couples as they follow their everyday activities are rare.

This chapter will contribute to the new and growing ethnographic investigation of managing household labor in the everyday lives of working families. We hope to gain new insights into family interactions: we approach this chapter 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 family lives. In this sense, we present a research study that highlights a possible way to understand positions and responsibilities in everyday household activities. Through the study of family representations and interactions, we will explore 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. Parent-children interactions will show how family members discursively construct their positions and responsibilities about household work.

Examining displays of collaboration and instances in which individual interests conflict in couples’ ongoing negotiations is critical to understanding how these models operate in family life. The approach we propose in this chapter provides access to these shifting contexts and permits direct analysis of a wide range of micro-level behaviors and interactional sequences. These include how the two partners manage household demands and engage with one another to collaborate. Our current study also draws from recent works in linguistic anthropology, which show that such features of interaction, such as affect and nonverbal cues, eye gaze, gesture, and body posture and positioning, all reveal participant attitudes toward the
ongoing talk (Goodwin, 1990; Kendon, 1990). The structure and the sequential organization of interactions also display how speakers are orienting to and understanding one another (Goffman 1981; Tannen 1993; Ochs, Taylor 1995; Schegloff, 1995; Goodwin, Goodwin, 2000). Discourse analytic techniques can demonstrate the types of interactional work couples engage in at home, the challenges and difficulties of running a household, and the interactional consequences when expectations are either met or disregarded. The study of requests, challenges, and acts of accommodation and collaboration can reveal how men and women frame their participation and position themselves within the family.

The positioning theory is a useful approach to illustrate the flexible and situated discursive moves of working couples within the family context. The concept of positioning has been created as a metaphor to grasp how interactants are located within conversations: “positioning is the discursive process whereby selves are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced storylines” (Davies, Harré, 1990, p. 48). As positions are relational, positioning theory focuses on understanding how psychological phenomena are produced in a discourse. The act of positioning refers to the assignment of functions to speakers in the discursive construction of a conversation: it is not a sign of fixed individual states of mind, but it is situated in discursive practices. Positioning is a dynamic alternative to the more static concept of role, and it can be understood as a way in which people dynamically produce and explain their own and others’ everyday action. People could differ in their capacity to position themselves and others, in their intention to position and be positioned, and in their power to achieve positioning acts (Harré, van Langenhove, 1998).

A RESEARCH PROJECT ON THE EVERYDAY LIVES OF WORKING FAMILIES: METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

The study presented in this chapter is part of an international collaborative project 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 “Sapienza” University of Rome and at the University of Linköping). The project is based on an extensive ethnographic fieldwork in the domestic life of families. 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 chapter 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 positions assumed by the participant members of the families we observed.

The three centers have similar goals and criteria for the selection of participants. The Italian Center on Everyday Lives of Families has 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

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1 We are grateful to the A. P. Sloan Foundation (New York, USA) for supporting this research and to our Swedish and American colleagues for discussing data and methodological approaches with us. We are also grateful to the working families who participated in this study for opening their homes to us.
years of age. Families were recruited through flyers in schools, and on occasion through teachers who were personally acquainted with 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 have received the instructions concerning the timing and procedures of the study in their own houses.

In order to achieve the research goals, we have taken an approach that integrates perspectives from cultural and linguistic anthropology, psychology, applied linguistics, and education (Arcidiacono, Pontecorvo, 2004). We have employed a range of data collection methodologies, including 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 researchers were engaged in four days of video taping and tracking of family members inside their homes. Interviews and field observations were then transcribed integrally (cf. figure 1); 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; Arcidiacono, Pontecorvo, 2010a). 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 has employed discourse analytic methods to closely examine participant interaction following the prescriptions of Conversation Analysis (Sacks, Schegloff, Jefferson, 1974) and Discourse Analysis (Edwards, Potter, Middleton, 1992; Antaki, 1994). The main part of the analysis we present in this chapter was carried out on the transcripts, where relevant passages were identified, they were further examined by going back to the original audio and/or video data, in order to be discussed analytically by the research group as a whole.

In this chapter we aim to study how working couples represent, construct, reproduce, and socialize perspectives on family positions and participation in the domestic work through their mutual negotiation. We aim to analyze how family members discursively construct their positions in relation to the notion of responsibility, according to the “participant categories” perspective suggested by Sacks (1992) and elaborated by Edwards and Stokoe (2004). We look at the categories that participants use as resources for their discursive participation in the everyday family interactions at home.

| falling intonation | <> | quicker speech |
| rising intonation  | ABC | high tone (capital) |
| exclaiming intonation | = | contiguous utterances |
| continuing intonation | o o | quiet speech |
| abrupt cut-off | [ | simultaneous or overlapping speech |
| prolonging of sounds | (2.0) | pause (2 seconds) |
| stressed syllable | () | non-transcribing segment of talk |

((() ) segments added by the transcriber in order to clarify some elements of the situation

Figure 1. transcription symbols (cf. Jefferson, 1985).
The specific goal of the chapter is to study, through the analysis of interviews and video-recorded interactions, the modalities by which couples organize their collaborative household work. In particular, we intend to answer the following research questions:

- What kind of representations do working couples offer about division of domestic labor?
- Which relationships are there between the declared representations of working couples and the organization and management of household work during the everyday lives?

**HOUSEHOLD ACTIVITIES IN FAMILY: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS**

The analysis we present in this section is exclusively qualitative: we will examine some excerpts derived from interviews and video-recorded interactions of Italian families concerning household tasks. In the analysis we consider different levels of the household work management and in particular we try to understand the following aspects: how family members engage themselves in a large range of ways during the everyday activities at home? Which positions and responsibilities they show in participating in household work? Which interactions involve both parents?

In this chapter we use conventionally the terms “father” and “mother” to indicate the adult members of the families. Even if we recognize the fact that adults play different roles such as father/mother as parents, and husband/wife as a couple, we do not discuss here the distinctions about different possible cultural and social roles that participants can play during their everyday activities and interactions. Specifically, we are interested in how they discursively position themselves during household activities and collaborative interactions at home.

**Representations of Household Work: The Interviews’ Data**

Some of the most significant challenges that working parents face when managing households involve negotiating responsibilities. In everyday lives this negotiation can become complicated by the lack of a satisfying model that takes into account the needs and expectations of each partner. Our interview data allow us to consider the ideas of each couples’ routine, their resources and attitudes toward their activities. Partners’ ideologies and the way in which actual everyday interaction unfolds can affect many critical experiences of family life: through the individual interviews we will discover the expectations of family members and the representations of their everyday lives at home. The excerpts we will examine have been selected following as criteria to remain sensitive to the participants’ position (Pontecorvo, 1996): we have chosen to frame each excerpt in its context of production, avoiding the use of pre-established categories. In fact, from an ethno-methodological point of view, analysis has to recognize what interactants do, as well as what they refrain from doing, to realize a given course of action (Maynard, Clayman, 2003). Thus, every effort is made to avoid general or ideal-typical characterizations of procedures in favor
of attending to specific instances as they unfold within, are shaped by, and in turn organize concrete circumstances.

In this section, we will present two excerpts in which parents offer their points of view on household work; in one case the representation of children’s participation in those activities is included. In the other, the father clarifies the role of the external help to the family.

Excerpt 1: RIPE family, audio recorded interview. Participants: mother, researcher

661. RES: the children do small works at home, to help? (1.0) sometimes?
662. MOM: yes:: mhm=yes: mhm: maybe more during the weekend, more than eh: during the weekdays, anyway yes, to set the table, to clear the table, and, (1.0) sometimes to tidy the clothes that I find regularly [piled up there
663. RES: [to tidy.
664. MOM: mhm=yes. that I find regularly piled up when they undress in the bath:room, yes. in general, what I’m asking them is not too much, yes to give some food to the dog, to clean the sand to the hamster, something like [that
665. RES: [Mhm:
666. MOM: here, but in general we a- ask them, if possible, to (. ) to manage their things,
667. RES: ah.
668. MOM: just to participate,

In this excerpt, the researcher asks the mother about the participation and the contribution of children in household works. Mom immediately confirms the helping role of the sons (turn 662, “yes mhm yes mhm”), even if she adds a sort of justification of her help’s request to the children (turn 664, “in general, what I’m asking them is not too much”). During the interview she positions herself as the person in charge of managing domestic activities: for example, she explicitly declares she asks children to set and to clear the table, and, sometimes, to tidy their clothes. Even if the question of the researcher concerns the contribution of the children, this mother is pointing out her position of woman continuously called to control the activities of the other family members. However, while the interventions of the researcher are minimal (turns 663 and 665), she underlines that her request is not too much demanding and concerns things that children can do easily (turn 664, “to give some food to the dog, to clean the sand to the hamster, something like that”). In her turn 666, she includes the father into the sequence, using the plural form: she is positioning herself as a co-responsible for the request to children’s help (“in general we ask them”), to invite them to manage their things and to recognize the value of their engagement in household activities (turn 668, “just to participate”).

The importance of the collaboration during the division of labor is sometimes expressed as an activity that parents like, even if they have a domestic support. Excerpt 2 concerns a father that underlines the family’s choice to manage autonomously the weekend time to do some household tasks.
Excerpt 2: RIPE family, audio recorded interview. Participants: father, researcher

500. DAD: the person who is at home doesn’t take care of children (0.5) the person that we have at home,

501. RES: [she doesn’t take care

502. DAD: as domestic helper,

503. RES: yes, mhm=mhm.

504. DAD: she is in charge to prepare, just a little bit, the lunch, to do the daily shopping: to clean the house, to iron, to wash, I mean- the bulk of the households.

505. RES: yes. so she doesn’t take care of children.

506. DAD: the children, are autonomous, they do the homework alone, (0.5) mhm: then we are here on saturday and sunday< we do it willingly, because on saturday and sunday< the women isn’t present because we don’t want her.

507. RES: ah! [so,

508. DAD: [we don’t want,

509. RES: you take care of

510. DAD: yes.

511. RES: of everything.

512. DAD: we like to do shopping, we like (0.5) to provide to the things of- of the week, we love it:

During the interview, the researcher is asking about the domestic support that usually helps the family during the week. The father underlines that the help of this woman is limited to a series of activities (turn 504, “the bulk of the households”) that are not concerned with the care of the children. When the researcher points out explicitly about this last point (turn 505, “yes, so she doesn’t take care of children”), the father takes exclusively a position of parent: in turn 506, firstly he highlights that children are autonomous, and secondly, after a pause (“(0.5) mhm, then...”), he stresses that, during the weekend, they do not need the presence of the domestic support. Dad is also speaking on behalf of his partner (see the use of the plural), assuming at the same time both positions of mother and father (“we are here on saturday and sunday” and “we do it willingly”). Even in turn 508 (“we don’t want”), he underlines again the intention of the couple, and finally, following the intervention of the researcher about the main topic of the discourse (turns 509-511, “you take care of everything”), he claims that one reason for their choice is the positive and pleasant nature to manage certain activities (turn 512, “we like to do shopping, we like to provide to the things of the week, we love it”).

The collaboration in the division of labor is a relevant aspect that parents underline during the interviews: there is a strong representation of the importance to decide together, to choose what would be done, which responsibilities would be delegated to children or to
external people. The quality of the family's everyday life is thus part of this idea to be collaborative and to be able to organize the different activities and rules of family members.

On the basis of the representations working couples have offered about their division of domestic labor, we would like to analyze the relationships between the declared representations and the real organization and management of household work during everyday activities. For this reason, in the following part of this chapter, we intend to present some excerpts of video recorded interactions at home in order to understand how couples construct family positions in accomplishing daily household tasks.

Daily Interactions around Household Works: The Ethnographic Observation of Family Activities

The observation of everyday family interactions is a crucial point in the investigation of how couples manage household tasks. The qualitative analysis of family members' positioning during discursive exchanges can offer an idea of how participants continuously try to align or to be in asymmetrical relationships within different family frameworks (Goodwin, 2000; Arcidiacono, Pontecorvo, 2010b). For instance, there are cases in which the disagreement can be a sign of some difficulties and resistance to collaborate with the partner, or, on the contrary, the humor and the playful attitude can contribute to work in partnership (Roberts, 2000).

The following excerpt concerns a couple discussing a typically perceived feminine household activity: the question is why the mother is always the one to wash the dishes. The father positions himself in front of the researcher as a competent "dish washer", opening a sequence in which the mother is called to argue her point of view on the opportunity to leave to the partner the task.

Excerpt 3: CILO family, video recorded interaction (Wednesday evening). Participants: mother, father, researcher

1 DAD: so Nicoletta ((the mother)) doesn't want me to wash the dishes because I make too much foam-
2 MOM: no, it's not just the foam, you're bad at washing.
3 DAD: [no
4 MOM: it's different
5 DAD: it's not that I wash it poorly- no I finish all-
6 MOM: you make too much foam. you know what he does?
((addressing to the researcher)) he takes the towel and puts the washing-powder on it after he washes the dish.
7 DAD: no, I'll show what I do ((he walks toward the sink))
8 MOM: no (0.5) I'm nervous, I don't like it ((the father walks back)) it's better to wash the dishes with hot water. you know what he does?
9 DAD: the very hot water, it is already on when I wash.
10 MOM: and yes, sure you understand-
11 DAD: I use more water pressure, it's true.
The Ethnographic Observation of The Everyday Life in Italy:

12  MOM: he- the hot water is on and he washes a dish every half hour.
13  DAD: you know hot sterilizes more-
14  MOM: this is very hot, put your hands in, it is hot with the gloves. this is very hot.
15  DAD: can I show how I wash the dishes?
16  MOM: no:: no ( )
17  DAD: and it is not possible ((he’s leaving the kitchen))
18  MOM: anyway I’m nervous he has washed dishes only once in his life.

The sequence of the excerpt 3 offers an example of the possible distance between individual representations and real possibilities to act within some domestic frameworks. In particular, while the father expresses a desire to get involved in the activity of dishwashing, the mother takes on the role of the expert and negatively evaluates the father’s ability to wash the dishes in the manner she prefers. The mother initiates a humorous perspective and also responds to her husband’s amusing counterarguments with humor. While she points out that her husband poorly executes the dishwashing chore and lacks experience in this area, instead of creating tension, the couple’s interaction is quite playful.

In turn 1, the father is addressing the researcher and he is designating the mother as responsible for his inability to wash the dishes. Immediately, mom replies (turn 2, “no, it’s not just the foam, you’re bad at washing”) and offers a counterargument related to the presumed inappropriate explanation of the father rather than the prohibition to wash dishes. In turn 6, she changes her position and she uses the third person to designate the father in order to address her turn to the researcher. The claim “you know what he does?” is a rhetorical device that is employed to anticipate the interlocutor to undermine their claims when they are in adversative situations (Pomerantz, 1986). The audience of the sequence includes the researcher, even when the father tries to defend his position (turn 7, “no, I’ll show what I do”). The mother immediately stops the request of the partner (turn 8, “no, I’m nervous”), confirming the previous claim and using again the third person to designate the father (“you know what he does?”). The mother’s hyperbole (turn 12, “he washes a dish every half hour”) and her expressions of fear and extreme refusal of his attempts to show off his dish washing process, all contribute to the light, comical affect in this interaction. In fact, in turn 14 she is inviting the father to test the water (“put your hands in”), but then, when dad opens to the possibility to show his competence (turn 15, “can I show how I wash the dishes?”), she immediately does not consent him to draw near (turn 16, “no no”), and she ends the sequence using again the third person to claim that the father “has washed dishes only once in his life” (turn 18).

In the management of household activities, besides the expression of difficulties and tensions between the family members, there will be situations in which a positive atmosphere can be created in agreement with a certain degree of expertise in doing specific domestic tasks. The playful character of some collaborative modalities of participation is often established in the “here and now” of precise activities, involving not only the couple but also the other family members.
The following excerpt concerns the end of a dinner and in particular the moment in which the family has to plan the next activities, amongst the washing dishes. Family members present the situation as a "theatrical" condition and in this way the household task becomes almost irrelevant. The family finds equilibrium in sharing different activities: in particular, the mother will be engaged in washing dishes and the father, making a playful scene, will take the responsibility to take care for the children.

Excerpt 4: PICO family, video recorded interaction (Wednesday evening). Participants: mother, father, child 1 (Daniela, 12 years old), child 2 (Serena, 10 years old), researcher

340 DAD: okay mom what do we do?
341 CHILD 1: what does she do.
342 MOM: what awaits me:: oh my god::
343 DAD: the omelet dishes you are going to wash on your own, because later on-
344 MOM: practically all of them.
345 DAD: we saved only three plates- okay let’s help mom for a while
346 MOM: no=no
347 DAD: no? shall we go and play:: are you going to let us play mom?
348 MOM: yes
349 DAD: well-done:::
350 MOM: you do it every evening anyway, it is not that::
351 DAD: have you heard Tomas? ((the neighbors' dog is barking)) Tomas too said go go:: have you heard Tomas: go go, Tomas agrees (4.0) let’s go to the little room ((the father and the children leave the kitchen and go to the children's bedroom))

The family has just finished eating and the father asks what they have to do, and playfully and ironically aligns himself with the children to “face” the mother. The question in turn 340 ("okay mom what do we do?") places the mother in the role of the authority who determines what needs to be done and assigns tasks to the rest of the family. The father indicates that the post-dinner chores are a collective effort by using the pronoun “we”. This is also the sign that the position is built on two sides: the mother versus the others (father and children together). This ongoing alliance is confirmed by the intervention of Daniela (turn 341, “what does she do”) that calls her father’s perspective into question and reframes the situation, enforcing in some way the “mother matter” through the stress on the pronounal switch that implicates the mother as responsible for the impending tasks. The mother takes up a humorous stance to the dinner clean-up work in turn 342, and affirms her daughter’s viewpoint that she (the mother) is the one who must accomplish this task alone. In her utterance (“what awaits me oh my god”), the vowel elongation and intonational stress humorously and dramatically frame her task as monumental. The father repeats but downgrades his offer by suggesting that they can help the mother (turn 345, “okay let’s help mom for a while”). However, as mom refuses (turn 346, “no no”), he comically asks the mother’s consent to go and play (turn 347, “no? shall we
go and play, are you going to let us play mom?"), again attempting to place her in an authoritative role. In this way, he guarantees his position on the children’s side versus the mother. After mom replies (turn 348, “yes”), the father responds with a loud (turn 349, “well-done!”), and his strong display of positive affect is a show of appreciation to his wife. In turn 350 (“you do it every evening”), the mother also aligns with the structure of alliance within this specific framework, through a recontextualization (Ochs, 1990) of the situation: she points out ironically that the routine is that she is the one to clean up while he plays. Moreover, the father personifies the neighbors’ dog (turn 351, “Tomas too said go”, “Tomas agrees”), in order to reinforce his position as third son and to legitimize the choice to leave the kitchen with the children. In showing closeness to the children’s needs, the father joins the daughters not only in the sense that he enters into an alliance versus the mother, but also using some epistemic and affective stances (“mom”, “we can play?”). He sustains the mother’s position as person that knows better how to wash dishes and effectively as the person that allows both the daughters and the father to go to play together.

The two excerpts we have presented in this section are representative of how the management of some activities (such as washing dishes) can be accomplished by parents through humor and playful attitude in front of the other family members and of the researchers.

The set of different modalities showed by the participants doing household tasks is particularly relevant within a precise situation, such as the dinner preparation. As this activity is considered as culturally relevant in Italy, we would like to present, in the next part of the chapter, some examples of how parents collaborate during their interactions in the kitchen before the dinner.

Collaborative Interactions during Dinner Preparation

The observation of different situations related to the preparation of the dinner among participant families suggests a variety of interactional ways to display collaboration. In particular, we would like to stress three specific collaborative processes we consider relevant within the family everyday lives: the first situation concerns the case in which one partner is perceived as expert or authority in a particular task, or he/she positions himself/herself as an expert; the second possibility includes partners that are coordinating together, and that are verbally organizing the activity in concert; the third process involves partners when they are engaged in a silent collaboration, working in the same space without verbal exchanges.

Within our corpus of data we have observed the three situations during a specific moment of the everyday life, such as the dinner preparation. For this reason, we intend to present some excerpts that highlight some aspects related to the first and second collaborative processes we mentioned above. The third situation (the silent collaboration) is difficult to capture in a transcript since nothing is verbalized, rather, it is the silent coordination of tasks in which partners contribute to the household activity of dinner preparation, without needing to clarify information or monitor one another’s tasks. We hypothesize that these couples have worked this way for a while; both know their way around the kitchen, and feel at ease with their positions and responsibilities.

Concerning the collaborative interactions in which one partner plays the role of expert or authority, we have selected the situations in which the participants position themselves within
a specific framework. For example, the following excerpt concerns a couple that solve together a problem about the status of the fish, which is baking in the oven. This excerpt is representative of a collaborative situation in which partners take their positions during the dinner preparation.

Excerpt 5: RIPE family, video recorded interaction (Thursday evening). Participants: mother, father, child 1 (Leonardo, 13 years old), researcher

((the mother is in the kitchen and the father enters))

1. DAD: it was ringing? ((the oven))
2. MOM: no.
3. DAD: ((the oven rings))
   now we check to see if it’s cooked. (19.0)
   it’s not cooked
5. MOM: it isn’t cooked?
6. DAD: ( )
7. MOM: but it’s possible that it’ll be very dry?
8. DAD: so this is the right way.
9. MOM: I have to check, wait.
10. (6.0)
11. DAD: you have to test
12. MOM: no- no, I understand the consistency. it’s cooked but no maybe a little bit of ( )
    the fish will be cooked inside eh
13. DAD: yes.
14. CHILD 1: how much more time?
15. DAD: we are waiting a few minutes for the grill
16. CHILD 1: have you added salt in the middle?
17. DAD: yes, mom added the salt!
18. MOM: mom added it.
19. DAD: we have also added mushrooms
20. CHILD 1: on mine?
21. DAD: on yours, too

As the father opens the oven door to examine the fish in turn 4, he says “now we check to see if it’s cooked”, framing this event as collaborative by using the first person plural, and displaying that he understands what his next task is in this cooking activity. He concludes in a low voice but loud enough for the mother to hear, “it’s not cooked.” His wife then expresses her expectation that the fish should be done by now, with her negatively formulated question in turn 5 “it isn’t cooked?”, and suggests that if they continue to bake it, it might end up “very dry” (turn 7). Then, the father defers to the mother in turn 11 (“you have to test”), positioning her as the expert in gauging these matters. In turn 12, the mother examines the fish and concludes that the father was correct claiming that it needs a little more time to cook. In response to the son’s questions about the time of the dinner (turn 14, “how much more time?”), the father replies (turn 15, “we are waiting a few minutes for the grill”), employing the plural pronoun ‘we’, which includes the mother and indicates the collaborative aspect of this activity. During the sequence, parents align together when they have to answer to the son’s query about the salt (turn 16, “have you added salt in the middle?”). They both claim
that the mother has added it. Immediately, the father adds that they also have added mushrooms, probably to agree with the son’s preferences for food.

Even if the excerpt shows a situation of dinner preparation in which at the same time both parents are engaged, the father is in charge to cook the fish, but he is under the “control” of the mother, considered as the authority of this kind of activity. At the beginning of the sequence the father position himself on the same level of the mother (by using the plural form), contributing to define the relevance of the mother’s role within the activity at stake. The couple is able to collaborate together, even if each partner can maintain own competencies and roles.

There are other cases in which, trying to coordinate their efforts together, partners have to declare explicitly the need to collaborate. The following excerpt concerns a situation in which the mother is cooking, while the father is moving between the kitchen and the dinner room, where the children are doing their homework.

Excerpt 6: PICO family, video recorded interaction (Tuesday evening). Participants: mother, father, child 2 (Serena, 10 years old), researcher

103. MOM: ((she is cooking)) it is almost ready eh:: only five minutes and we eat, they are angry::: ((referring to the children))

104. DAD: ( ) ((he is coming to the kitchen))

105. MOM: yes, it is here look::

106. DAD: I have to put the bread? ((on the table))

107. MOM: the bread, I have to cut it:::

108. DAD: have you cut the garlic? ((he is taking a knife))

109. MOM: not I cut the (cheese) (1.0) how is about homework there, that’s right? ((referring to the children in the other room))

110. CHILD 2: yes

111. DAD: the duster?

112. MOM: which?

113. DAD: to wipe

114. MOM: eh I can put it in the places:: ((in a sense: strange places))

115. DAD: where is the other? ((referring to the pot))

116. MOM: which one? the other ((referring to the pot)) mhm::: I get dirty

117. DAD: I have to go and check Serena because she is always a little bit slow ((referring to the homework))

The excerpt concerns the collaboration between mother and father in doing different activities, and their continuous verbal coordination to do tasks. When the mother is declaring that the dinner is almost ready (turn 103, “it is almost ready eh only five minutes and we eat”), she is not only informing the family members about the state of the meal, but she pointing out the children (“they are angry”) as people that will mainly benefit of her activity. When the father comes to the kitchen, he immediately offers his help to the mother (turn 106, “I have to put the bread?”): it seems that his claim is relevant for the activity at stake because the mother repeats part of the claim, as if she is remembering something to be done (turn 107,
"the bread, I have to cut it"). Then, her attention turns back to the children (turn 109, "how is about the homework there, that’s right?") that are studying in another room. This declaration is a kind of solicitation to the father that, even if he is trying to help the mother in preparing the dinner, takes the position of the responsible to monitor the children’s activity and immediately goes to check Serena in the other room. This father’s double role is explicitly declared in turn 117 ("I have to go and check Serena"), and acted by his moving back and forth to the two activity settings.

The excerpts presented in this chapter suggest to us the presence of different modalities of collaboration among the observed families. Participants choose their forms of cooperation and management of household tasks in relation to the specific situation in which they interact (for example, the dinner preparation), the value of the activity (such as doing something for the children’s benefit), their expectations and representations. In any case, the observation of household work interactions provides opportunities to understand how family members structure the organization of their activities at home and how they negotiate and reproduce the demands of their everyday lives.

CONCLUSION

Families are comprised of individuals who coordinate their behaviors in relation to one another, and in working families the challenge of coordinating behaviors to meet different family needs is especially great. A central premise of this chapter has been the attention to the extent to which family members negotiate and enact effective strategies for contending with the numerous tasks that daily life presents. More generally, another premise has concerned the fact that the observation of people during their everyday routines and activities in managing the home tasks can reveal important insights into the large organization and dynamics of all family members.

As our analysis illustrates the interactional work that working couples are required to do in order to run household tasks, we can highlight several findings stand out from this chapter. First, we have identified from the interviews’ excerpts that household work appears to be far more than the mere completion of tasks needed to keep the family running smoothly; household works also define individuals’ daily experiences and contributes to how individuals identify and position themselves in relation to the partner. From the interviews conducted among working couples we have found that participants express no overt complaints or communicate a sense of burden regarding household chores: they represent a wish of togetherness, and positive affect in the organization of their lives. Parents appear to be less overwhelmed by the sheer amount of children’s activities, which allows for more time to cook and be together.

Second, the excerpts concerning the video recorded interactions show that activities around everyday chores are indeed tinged with strong and often unacknowledged emotional reactions: in the families we have observed, the management of household tasks presents opportunities for humor and warmth. In some instances these were unilateral expressions of humor that appeared to keep interactions from becoming abrasive (as in the case of a father who was cooking dinner, using irony to deflect his wife’s persistent monitoring) and in other
cases we saw how positive expressions were shared by partners (and children) and thus served to perpetuate engagement and collaboration.

With the present excerpts we can not know whether these interactional sequences are stable features of the observed families. Nevertheless, it would seem that families are most successful in contending with the routine tasks of everyday life when family members are active contributors to these tasks rather than passive, entitled recipients of others' contributions; when family members acknowledge the contributions that others make; when some consensually arrangement has been established so that the allocation of tasks to people is not renegotiated anew each day; and when there is flexibility rather than rigidity in the arrangement, so that one family member can 'pick up slack' if another is unable to fulfill their usual responsibilities. These would seem to be the conditions most likely to promote collaborative engagement in families, and to promote the view that everyday chores are a vehicle for defining the structure of participation within different family frameworks.

Far from being stuck to stereotypes of how adults in the family ought to behave, Italian parents take on manifold positions within the family participation structure during household activities: in general, they tend to be communal in their approach to household management. The data provide important glimpses into the patterns of collaboration that can occur in families, and family members seem to actively construct the settings in which task management occurs.

A deeper understanding of the dynamics underlying harmonious management of daily tasks might help to identify other specific elements of interactions. The interpretation of these findings is limited by several considerations, such as the size of the samples studied here that does not permit any generalization. In this respect, our observations must be considered as suggestive of other analytic avenues that might be pursued rather than as definitive statements about the division of labor in families. Notwithstanding these and other limitations, the present chapter has highlighted the centrality of the household management in the lives of dual-income families, and it has contributed to identify some specific positions that parents employ as attempts to collaborate around different tasks.

In our view, it is also important to pay attention to previous studies on family interactions (Ochs, Pontecorvo, Fasulo, 1996; Pontecorvo, Arcidiacono, 2007) that have showed a dominant position of the mothers in the Italian culture, due to the idea that the feminine figure is perceived as decisive in some activities, such as planning, choosing and cooking meals. However, in looking carefully at our data, we have found that both fathers and mothers are collaborative even in cooking duties: it seems that there is a signal of parental complex and multi-faceted functions. These findings lend support to the intuition that in-depths research would lead to a better understanding of the parents' positioning within the family system as a whole.

In this chapter we have argued also that families represent, construct, reproduce, and socialize perspectives on family positions and participation in domestic work through mutual negotiations: the direct observation of different family interactions reveals aspects of parents' collaboration that are not typically observable in laboratory studies. For example, most of the requests examined in this chapter involve how couples negotiate the demands of household works and how they raise the 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. However, we think that there is a need for a more specific attention to the cultural implications of these
dimensions, in order to illuminate new possible directions of positioning within collaborative interactions, and to identify more global patterns of living as modern families.

REFERENCES


