



# The Social Construction of Fatherhood Online: A Pedagogical Analysis on Contemporary Paternal Narratives

## La Costruzione Sociale della Paternità Online: Un'Analisi Pedagogica delle Narrazioni Paterne Contemporanee

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## ABSTRACT

The adoption of digital media within the domestic environment has led to an increasing contribution to scholarship in the field of pedagogy, family, and media studies concerned with the use of digital technology by contemporary parents, as both a tool for self-expression and informal learning, and as a milieu where to question or reinforce narratives about what it means to be a parent. In this paper we focus on the analysis of three different Italian paternal platforms: a website from a dad and professional family mediator, a blog by a father from a heterosexual family, the social media account of two gay fathers. Building on findings from a discourse analysis, we seek to understand the pedagogical and informal learning potential of these different digital milieus and their contents, here intended as cultural objects, with respect to how and in what terms they contribute to the social and discursive construction of fatherhood.

La diffusione dei media digitali all'interno dell'ambiente domestico ha portato a un crescente contributo di studi nel campo della pedagogia della famiglia e dei media studies sull'uso della tecnologia digitale da parte dei genitori contemporanei, sia come strumento di auto-espressione e di apprendimento informale, sia come ambiente in cui mettere in discussione o rinforzare le narrazioni culturali su cosa significhi essere un genitore. In questo articolo ci concentriamo sull'analisi di tre diverse piattaforme paterne italiane: un sito web di un papà e mediatore familiare professionista, un blog di un padre proveniente da una famiglia eterosessuale, l'account sui social media di due padri gay. L'obiettivo del contributo è quello di comprendere il potenziale pedagogico e di apprendimento informale di questi diversi ambienti digitali e dei loro contenuti, qui intesi come oggetti culturali, rispetto a come e in che termini essi concorrano alla costruzione sociale e discorsiva della paternità.

### KEYWORDS

Informal learning, Fatherhood, Digital media, Gender roles, Family  
Apprendimento informale, Paternità, Media digitali, Ruoli di genere, Famiglia

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## 1. Introduction

The increasingly more pervasive adoption of digital media within the domestic environment has led to an ever-increasing contribution to scholarship in the field of pedagogy, family, and media studies concerned with contemporary parents' use of digital technology, as both a tool for self-expression and informal learning, and as a milieu in which to construct, deconstruct, and revise new and old narratives about what it means to be a parent (Cino, 2020; Cino & Dalledonne Vandini, 2020; Demozzi, Gigli, Cino, 2020; Pedersen & Smithson, 2018). Many the studies concerned with this area of inquiry, though, have primarily focused on mothers and motherhood. This is not surprising, since mothers are regular users of digital technology in relation to their parenting, represent a relevant demographic of parenting forums and social networking sites users (Lupton et al., 2016), and, most of all, have historically been considered the *primary* caregivers for their children, thus accountable for "learning" and "performing" their social role correctly, even with the use of digital technology (Cino & Formenti, 2021).

Notwithstanding a smaller, yet epistemically relevant, portion of the scientific production on "digital parenting" has started to focus as well on fathers and how fatherhood can be learned and performed online. Examples of this trend are studies on fathers' use of digital platforms such as forums, Facebook pages, and blogs to narrate their experiences and seek support, the analysis of fathering websites, as well as the representation of fatherhood through visually oriented platforms such as Instagram – showing how fatherhood is displayed, understood, made sense of, thus socially and discursively constructed through digital media (Jorge et al., 2022; Scheibling, 2020).

In an era where the paternal role is subjected to a plethora of changes in industrialized and technologically advanced societies, and where the internet and digital media in general become tools to foster, hinder or make sense of these changes, at the very least, this scholarship appears to be pedagogically relevant. This is the case not only to better understand a relatively understudied phenomenon (i.e., the social and discursive construction of fatherhood online), but also to enhance our broader understanding of how digital platforms can contribute to the social (de)construction of both consolidated and emerging paternal narratives. Also, how these narratives potentially reframe what it means to be a father in the contemporary society, reinforce or challenge stereotypical family scripts, ideologies, and long-standing patriarchal and heteronormative accounts associated with the paternal role.

Against this background, in this paper we focus on the analysis of three different Italian paternal platforms: the expert website *Professione Papà*, by a father graduated in Education and professional family mediator offering "expert" advice on fathering, the blog *Babbo felice* recounting the journey of a father from a heterosexual family, and the Facebook/Instagram account *Papà per Scelta*, testifying the experience of two Italian gay dads navigating a cultural and legal environment that do not fully recognize the heterogeneity of contemporary families (Contini, 2010).

Building on findings from a discourse analysis (Phillips & Hardy, 2002) of a purposive sample (Palys, 2008) of 30 posts from these three paternal platforms, we seek to understand the informal learning potential of these different digital milieus and their contents, here intended as cultural objects (Griswold, 2012), with respect to how and in what terms they contribute to the social and discursive construction of fatherhood. The anglophone literature differentiate between "fatherhood" and "fathering", whereas the former describes the cultural and symbolic facets of what it means to be a father, and in general a broader discourse encompassing systems of beliefs, pedagogical attitudes, and axiology, while the latter focuses more on the practical sides of taking care of one's child (Crespi, 2018). While in this paper we will refer to fatherhood, in terms of social and cultural discourses on being a father, we do so by recognizing that fatherhood and fathering are in fact strictly inter-related in a circular relationship, whereas beliefs and ideologies on being a father inform behaviors and parental attitudes and actions, and such attitudes and actions may confirm or question the underpinning discourses on the matter, towards the consolidation or evolution of family scripts (Byng-Hall, 1988; Formenti, 2012).

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 Fatherhood and the ongoing evolution of a social and pedagogical role

In approaching our topic of inquiry, we feel compelled to consider certain epistemological peculiarities that come with studying the evolution of fatherhood as an epistemic object, well described by Bellassai (2001) when he claims that, in the history of humanity, men have been, at the same time, both omnipresent and invisible. Omnipresent because of the social, economic, and political power men have long had (and to several extents continue having); invisible for men,

«speaking on behalf of mankind and attributing to themselves the scepter of power by natural right, have concealed their own partiality, their own specificity as males, precluding themselves from understanding gender dynamics and thus becoming, in a sense, invisible to themselves» (Bellassai, 2001, p.17, authors' translation).

The author contends that despite wanting to rely on a patriarchal cosmogony discourse for long, men have historically been confronted with both the cultural and historical relativity of gender identity (i.e., what it means to be a man and how this system of meaning changes throughout times), and the reciprocal and relational nature of male and female identities, undermining a static idea of masculinity and gender.

The dynamic nature of gender roles has been of particular interest in the field of both men's and family studies in the past years, with scholars starting to pay more attention to the social construction of an idea of fatherhood which, to some extent, is trying to move

beyond or at least deconstruct the patriarchal or heteronormative premises it has been based on for so long (Ruspini, 2012), also making the partiality of manhood and fatherhood more visible, particularly through digital media – as we shall see.

The role of the father has historically undergone profound changes. Phenomena such as the industrialization, the emancipation of women, the emergence of new family morphologies have all contributed to these changes – showing the capacity of families to evolve (Dato & Loiodice, 2022). In the 19th century, the rise of middle-class, the industrialization, and the social construction of childhood can be understood as catalysts for changes in family structures, meanings, and scripts. In this context, within the family fathers started to play a role more focused on financial support, while mothers on caregiving (Crivellari, 2022; Shorter, 1975). During the 20th century, Parsons and Bales' (1955) theorization of functionalist family roles well described this state of affairs, framing the mother as covering an expressive and emotional role, and the father as a breadwinner and patriarch. With the socio-cultural revolutions taking place between the 60's and the 70's, however, such a differentiation started to become less rigid (Quilici, 2018). During the 80's some men started to distance themselves from such a view of fatherhood (Bellassai, 2000), paving the way towards the social construction of new paternal narratives that are still in the making, challenging the traditional symbolic orders. When looking at Italy, this change has progressed more slowly than other socio-cultural realities. This is due to cultural reasons and social imaginaries associating children's care with women (Murgia & Poggio, 2011), with fathers playing an authoritarian patriarchal role for long in the family (Miniati, 2017) reinforcing a discourse based on rigid gender roles and traditional parenting and childrearing practices. Despite in the past decades men and women's life courses started having more points of convergence, the gender inequalities are still far from being overcome (Naldini & Torrioni, 2015). As Cannito (2016) makes the case for, while the so-called "new" fathers tend to define themselves as more involved and present, masculinity in Italy is still characterized by a rigid separation between the public/professional and private sphere, although fathers' identity is no longer only reliant on breadwinning but also on physical and relational intimacy with children. Still, Italian fathers tend to spend less time with children (even due to broader systemic reasons) and to play more of a "secondary" supportive role compared to mothers (Cannito, 2016), while balancing a more traditional role of breadwinners with a more contemporary tendency towards childcare and less neat gender differences (Bosoni, 2018).

Notwithstanding, many contemporary fathers have started to question the traditional discourses surrounding gender and masculinity, reclaiming the desire to be more involved in their children's lives, to distribute their caregiving responsibilities more equally with their partners, and to distance themselves from family scripts learned in their family of origins based on the figure of a distant and absent father (Demozzi et al., 2022; Naldini & Torrioni, 2015; Ruspini et al., 2011). Furthermore, the growing number of "un-

traditional" family morphologies, such as those with two homosexual fathers, further challenges old-fashioned accounts of fatherhood and help understand the changes that male identities are undergoing (Ruspini, 2012), with gay fathers reconfiguring the traditional cultural domains of maternal and paternal (Gigli, 2015; Sità et al., 2018). What these changes do, from a cultural and pedagogical perspective, is contributing to the construction of a new imaginary of fatherhood (Miniati, 2017). In the next paragraph we will explore how such a discursive shift may take place through fathers using digital media to construct emerging paternal narratives online and reinforce or question traditional ones.

## 2.2 Constructing paternal narratives through online representations

From a socio-constructionist point of view (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), the social construction of fatherhood can be understood as the process by which societal, historical, and cultural elements shape the discourses surrounding how fathers should perform their role (Goffman, 1956). In fact, there are considerable cultural and historical variations in the specific roles and moral expectations that come with being a father.

Research has demonstrated that a variety of elements, including societal norms, political, social, and cultural contexts, have an impact on how fatherhood is perceived and enacted in society (Lupton & Barclay, 1997). The role of the father may be more directly related to financial obligations, for instance, in communities where men are expected to be the primary breadwinners for their families; in turn, fathers may be more active in childcare and home duties in societies where gender roles are more fluid and flexible (Inhorn et al., 2015). An important element contributing to the social construction of fatherhood is how it is represented.

According to Cristini et al. (2014), the marginal positions fathers inhabited historically with respect to domains such as pregnancy, birth, and the like has been documented by the scarcity of iconographic portrayals of father compared to mothers. The authors follow Mead's theorization (1949) according to which women are deemed to be naturally inclined to be mothers, while men need to learn how to be fathers. Although, apart from a few exceptions, historically fatherhood has not been extensively represented in traditional iconography, throughout time media allowed for new narratives on the paternal to develop and be represented, working as cultural objects (Griswold, 2012) men, and society in general, can learn from. According to Griswold, a cultural object «may be defined as shared significance embodied in form. [...] In other words, it is a socially meaningful expression that is audible, visible, or tangible or that can be articulated» (Griswold, 2021, p. 12).

Both traditional media, such as the art, literature, movies, tv shows, and modern digital media all contribute to the social construction of fatherhood, through cultural objects offering frameworks of reference showing what a father is supposed to be, testifying changes both in parenting styles, from an

authoritarian to a more empathetic one, and family morphologies, as in the case of gay fathers (Blackwell et al., 2016; Kelly & Tropp, 2016). From an educational perspective, media representations play an important role in the way we understand and make sense of our social reality (Fiske, 1994; Tramma, 2009), thus fostering the rise and consolidation of certain discourses around fatherhood as an epistemic object from which men can learn from. Assarsson and Aarsand (2011) emphasize how the media contribute to the representations of parenthood and set the standards on what it means to be a “good” parent. This is particularly relevant in the context of our work.

Research shows that fathers looking for parenting advice and information now frequently turn to the internet for informational and emotional support (Eriksson, H., & Salzman Erikson, 2013). Online parenting communities and forums, as well as dad blogs or parenting Facebook groups have gained popularity in recent years, giving men a place to interact with one another and seek guidance on a variety of parenthood-related issues (Scheibling, 2020).

As more fathers use the internet and social media to connect with other fathers, receive support, and learn about parenting, the trend of fathers seeking help online is on the rise (StGeorge & Fletcher, 2011). Clearly, variables such as the rising involvement of dads in childrearing, the growing understanding of the significance of fathers in child development, and the practicality and accessibility of internet resources, can contribute to this trend, which is not to be intended as concerning all fathers indistinctly.

Nonetheless, parenting platforms and social media have made fatherhood a more prominent and significant part of contemporary culture, portraying different domains of fathers’ involvement (Diniz & Sepùlveda, 2022). Fathers have used parenting websites, blogs, and social media platforms more frequently as they have grown in popularity to interact with other fathers and families as well as to share their experiences as fathers (Jensen et al., 2019); the image of fathers as being more involved in childcare and housework is one aspect characterizing fatherhood on social media (Scheibling, 2020). As fathers who use social media are likely to publish information about their involvement in childcare and household duties, these representations may potentially have an impact on societal norms and expectations for fathers.

The use of hashtags and other online activism techniques to support good representations of fathers and to question conventional gender norms is another relevant element to consider. For instance, men have shared their experiences and difficulties with fatherhood using hashtags to create a more complex and heterogeneous representation of fatherhood (Zestanakis, 2022).

In general, the representation of fatherhood on social media can address societal perceptions of fathers and their role in the family and society. Also, it can give fathers a place to network and discuss their parenting experiences and struggles. Nonetheless, it is crucial to understand that social media give a constrained and sometimes biased image of fatherhood (Diniz & Sepùlveda, 2022), with certain platforms, like Instagram, tending to portray idealized versions of fatherhood, and others, such as blogs, focusing more

on challenges fathers live, or parenting websites offering more “structured” indications on how fatherhood should be enacted, in line with trends already detected in parenting platforms for mothers (Cino, 2020).

Despite their differences, online spaces for fathers are pedagogically relevant for they are «embedded in a national, social and cultural context», and the representations conveyed in such spaces contribute «to people’s everyday lives and self-understanding» (Andreasson & Johansson, 2016, p. 485), showing their informal learning potential.

### 3. Method

Building on the literature mentioned above, this paper focuses on the social construction of fatherhood online. The aim is exploratory in nature, as it seeks to investigate examples of Italian paternal platforms by focusing on parenting websites, blogs, and social media accounts that, in portraying and conveying a certain representation of fatherhood, function as cultural objects with an informal learning potential (Griswold, 2012; Tramma, 2009).

To this end, we decided to focus our analytical effort on three Italian platforms managed by fathers and centered on fatherhood, sampled purposively to examine how discourses on fatherhood are socially constructed in three venues that differ with respect to their subjects of enunciation (i.e., who is communicating and from what perspective) (Benveniste, 1971; Cino, 2020). Following the principles of qualitative inquiry, our choice is not focused on representativeness, but on specificity, with no aim of generalizability of findings, but treating our data situationally and contextually (Creswell, 2014).

Specifically, we selected the following three sites of data collection:

1. *Professione Papà*, (Profession Dad), a parenting website administered by a father with a degree in Education, who works as a family mediator with families and educational institutions, wrote a book about contemporary fatherhood, and writes posts on his website (which are the focus of our analysis) concerning different areas related to fatherhood and fathering. In this website the subject of enunciation is both a father and an expert.
2. *Babbo felice*, (Happy father), is a blog by a dad from a heterosexual family who wants to narrate his life as a father, the way he manages the work-life balance, and offer his stance on fatherhood issues. The subject of the enunciation is not a professional but someone who speaks from the insider’s perspective of a father.
3. *Papà per Scelta* (Dads by choice), which at a time has a blog, a Facebook page, and an Instagram page, is an online space by two gay fathers of two children born through surrogacy with the aim of showing and normalize their life as a gay family in a socio-political context, such as Italy, which still do not equate gay families to heterosexual ones. In our analysis we focused on posts shared both on their Facebook and Instagram page (by repost-

ing them in one of the two platforms). These pages are intentionally open to everyone, both men and women, and have the goal not only to show the daily life and challenges of this family, but also to celebrate all those parents who actively chose to be a parent. The subjects of the enunciation, the two authors, are insiders of their parenting experience.

These platforms were explored following tenets from digital ethnography (Pink et al., Eds., 2015) guided by a single, broad, research question:

*How do these platforms contribute to the social construction of a discourse around fatherhood?*

To answer our question, we selected a purposive sample of ten posts from each site, for a final sample of thirty posts that were analyzed following a discourse analytical framework (Phillips & Hardy, 2002). For this work, we decided to focus only on the original posts, to explore what kind of ideas and discourses surrounding fatherhood they promote. A discourse can be defined as an interpretive category apt to designate ways of representing, educating about, and understanding certain aspects of social life (Fairclough, 1992). As such, we deemed this approach appropriate and in line with our epistemic goal.

The analysis was carried out using NVivo to better manage the materials. Informed by a perspectivist epistemology (Cornish et al., 2013), we collaboratively and iteratively went through the data following an exploratory inductive approach, coding and discussing relevant passages of the posts with a focus on the use of language as a device to construct and frame fatherhood. We understand these posts as “cultural expressions and artefacts through which the understanding of fatherhood is constantly negotiated in relation to transformations in contemporary representations of fatherhood” (Andreasson & Johansson, 2016, p. 486).

The excerpts reported in the next section have been translated by the authors.

## 4. Findings

In this section we will discuss selected findings, which are organized in three sections, focusing, for space constraints, on one example of discursive construction of fatherhood for each platform. Our selection is by no means representative of the heterogeneity of contents published on these platforms but serves the purpose of focusing on singular significant occurrences of certain discourses. While these discourses are not to be intended as specific of just one platform and not another, this organization will help exemplify how different online arenas contribute to the social construction of fatherhood.

### 4.1 Defining gender roles and framing “good” and “bad” fatherhood on Professione Papà

As a website managed by a father with a degree in Education and who works as a family mediator, *Profes-*

*sione Papà* relies on an “expert” epistemic authority. In this regard, the posts we analyzed quite often use a vocabulary retrieved from family studies and education to give credibility to the subject of the enunciation and back the proposed claims. In our analysis, we identified this discursive strategy as a way of using “semi-expert” knowledge within a “deterministic” epistemological lens. In certain occurrences, the author quotes theories in the field of education and family studies, showing his familiarity with the topic. However, although the author refers to studies, no proper scientific reference is reported. Additionally, the use of the present simple shows an effort to communicate epistemic certainty (Caronia, 2014). The following two excerpts are an example of that:

Luckily, the first studies are coming in, showing that the attachment styles and emotional-relational development of children is no longer, as had once been shown, directly and exclusively descended from the attachment style and emotional-relational maturity of the mother, but is derived from the set of characteristics of both parents.

Mothers are also amid an identity crisis, because they carry on their shoulders the educational models of mothers and grandmothers (systemic theory holds that the models of at least two previous generations are present in each subject) but they are trying to be mothers in a completely different way.

From the first excerpt we can appreciate how the authors recognizes the importance of both parents, challenging the idea that the mother is the only relevant attachment figure of the family. When it comes to fatherhood, we found in the data that the author of this website discursively constructs two figures that, following the *intensive parenting* tenets (Shirani et al., 2012), we labeled as the “good” and the “bad” father. Whereas being a “good” father is paired with having healthy children, being a “bad” father leads to several problems. In the posts we analyzed, the language is appropriately used to delineate these figures.

The good father is constructed referring to a father who is “present”, complementary to the mother, and who will prepare children (here, generically, “boys”) for the external world:

The father [...]almost naturally has the task of presenting the «external» world to the child, explaining it to him, and allowing a gradual transition from a situation of dependence to a condition of autonomy. [...] The mother will be more protective and inclined to strengthen a dyadic relationship; the father will be more inclined to help the child develop autonomy. [...] The entrance of a father into the life of one's child [...] is pedagogically significant in his upbringing, for the father can disclose – with simple gestures of care – the secrets of the world in which he will live.

In this excerpt we can see how the (good) father is portrayed as someone naturally inclined to foster children's autonomy, while the mother is framed as someone who plays more of a protective role. The author

explicitly recognizes this difference between mothers and fathers which is perceived as good. In a sense, through these posts, two different gender roles are constructed with the aim of valorizing these differences – although this also means reinforcing certain stereotypes. The author further emphasizes that with «simple gestures of care» (i.e., something seemingly effortlessly) a father can play his important role. The benefits of having a present father are also portrayed as apparent for children, when the author claims that «children with a present father will not be afraid of new things (grandparents, nannies, kindergartens), will be sociable and self-confident (at school, at sports, with friends), will be calm, tolerant and open-minded men».

The definition of specific gender roles within the family is a core argument to express what a “good” father is: a present figure who embraces an affective role but without turning down his normative responsibility. Those who are unable to maintain this balance, in turn, can be framed as “bad” fathers. An example of that is the so-called “mammo” (also defined by the author as a “maternal father”):

The maternal father is a confused man, with no identity or role who, not knowing how to be a father, is reduced to copying and repeating the typical attitudes of an old-fashioned mother. [...] it is [...] good that today's fathers have developed new affective skills, however it often happens that this development is matched by a specular lack of ability to play a normative role typical of traditional fathers, and unfortunately children of these fathers are likely to experience a dangerous feeling of lack of rules (anomie) that can result in a real sense of abandonment. [...] This father, or rather this *mammo*, [...] dissolves fatherhood into motherhood and does his children a disservice.

In the excerpt above, the author harshly criticizes the controversial figure of the “mammo” as someone who not only does not know how to perform fatherhood “correctly”, but whose attitude may have serious repercussions on his children. Once again, the importance of distinguish the paternal and maternal role is remarked to avoid negative outcomes.

Overall, in this platform, gender stereotypes were partially questioned and partially reinforced, advancing structural and functional differences between mothers and fathers that are also described as “natural” and are viewed positively. Furthermore, in line with its name (“*Professione Papà*”), fatherhood is “professionalized”, through a somehow deterministic epistemology according to which enacting fatherhood in a certain way may foster or hinder certain outcomes. Also, fatherhood was considered in relation to traditional heterosexual families.

#### 4.2 Constructing the “complementary” and “ancillary” father on *Babbo felice*

The *Babbo felice* blog moves from a different epistemic authority: the author, in fact, is not an “expert”, but talks based on his parenting experience and gives

the opportunity to other fathers to use the platform to write posts.

In our sample, we found that if on one hand fathers are described as complementary to mothers, they are also constructed as “ancillary” figures. The following excerpt exemplifies the importance that it is recognized to the mother, who is seen as the most significant figure in the life of a child, while also reclaiming the father’s role. This is done, however, in a stereotypical way:

We all know that the mother is the most important figure in raising children [...]. Nature has endowed women with pregnancy, breastfeeding, and sensitivity. Mother is tender, affectionate, and loving. However, the father [...] should not be underestimated. [...] the father is the figure who gives strength and security and makes one's family feel protected. The father is a man who has matured responsibility and security. The father loves his child, perhaps differently than the mother, but with the same strength.

The excerpt above, while trying to reclaim the importance of fathers, continue to do so by embracing gender stereotypes and cultural belief systems that see women as naturally inclined to mothering, and fathers as men who «matured responsibility» (Mead,1949). The role of the father, however, is more clearly constructed as ancillary in the following excerpt, emphasizing how fathers can be of help in the perinatal period:

Being a dad during the first year of our child can be an exciting (and sometimes stressful) challenge. But although it's often moms who take care of the newborn, you too can help in many ways! Here's how and why:  
You are your partner's emotional support: you listen to her thoughts and concerns and offer encouragement. You are her emotional anchor during this challenging time.  
You offer practical help: by changing diapers, feeding your baby, and playing with him. This lightens your partner's load and helps you become a present and involved father.  
[...] You offer your partner some time to relax: motherhood can be tiring and stressful [...]. You can prepare a warm bath, massage her feet, or simply watch a movie together. By offering your partner some relaxation, you show her your love and concern for her well-being.

Here, fatherhood is strictly considered in relation to motherhood: implicitly, the father is constructed as ancillary since his main role during the perinatal period is basically to support the mother. While this is certainly important, it seems like this figure is playing a secondary role. Despite the intentions and the rhetoric of supporting one’s partner as a sign of good fatherhood, gender stereotypes are in fact reinforced in this platform. Involved fatherhood, while encouraged, is to some extent secondary to motherhood. The figure here constructed is thus reliant on common sense knowledge reinforcing a discourse that wants cotemporary fathers to be involved in their families’ lives but struggles to move beyond traditional

cultural beliefs on the primary caregiving role of mothers. Also, the posts seem to only concern heterosexual fathers and families.

#### 4.3 Enacting “good” fatherhood while promoting a politics of visibility and resistance on *Papà per Scelta*

The *Papà per Scelta* platforms offer a different narrative compared to the ones we saw in the previous paragraphs, since gay parenting, for its own nature, challenges heteronormative discourses on what is a family and what is fatherhood and motherhood. In the posts we analyzed we found a strong attitude towards the promotion of a politics of visibility (i.e., showing the normality of one’s family) and resistance (i.e., fighting discourses discriminating gay parents), while also performing “good” fatherhood in line with happy online depictions of parenthood (Diniz & Sepúlveda, 2022). Almost all the posts are aimed at expressing the love and gratitude these fathers feel towards their children, portraying gay fatherhood as a strongly desired experience. Previous research found that gay parents are mindful of being constantly observed and judged externally on how they perform their parental roles, and as such they may feel the need to show they are good enough parents (Sità et al., 2018). This may be the case, especially in the context of online platforms aimed at portraying the reality of a family with two dads who navigate a heteronormative socio-cultural context that do not do justice to different family morphologies.

While performing good fatherhood, *Papà per Scelta* also becomes an active platform to counteract narratives from mainstream media on socially sensitive topics, such as surrogacy, as in the next post:

Mainstream media narratives on surrogacy do not consider the relationship between parents and the surrogate mother. It is a narrative that almost always ends at the time of the pregnancy and too often tells only those cases where the path is tainted by exploitation, selfishness, commodification, and poverty. Two days ago, I posted in the stories some clips of the Christmas call with our belly-mommy and her family. So many of you thanked us, asking if we could encapsulate it in a video, to share and show to those who continue to demonize our family every day. It would be great if this video reached as many people as possible. I would like it to reach the screens of those who fight a crusade against us every day, without knowing the story behind it. A story made up of people who love each other, miss each other, and form a big extended family. A story of love, freedom, and awareness. Everything else is propaganda!.

In this excerpt, these fathers are using the opportunities afforded by new media to challenge opinions reported in traditional media, reaching a broader public, and voicing and defending one’s reality and right to be seen and treated for what they are: a family. The topic of surrogacy is socially controversial, but here it is treated to invite people to deconstruct sceptical views that see it as a form of exploitation. In turn, by

showing (through a video) a family life moment (although crafted to be posted online), these parents are offering counter-narratives that legitimate different family morphologies and invite users to approach gay parenting beyond pessimistic accounts. Compared to the previous platforms, more focused on exploring allegedly “new” ways to be a father, in this one the authors need to first and foremost reclaim the narrative on the legitimacy for them to have a family challenging homophobic discourses. The literature supports that gay parents, unlike heterosexual parents from traditional family configurations, are more likely to have to justify their very own existence (Bos, 2010). Such a platform, then, is more than a daily diary of these parents’ parenting experience, becoming a space to support the notion according to which there are many family configurations out there (Contini, 2010), who are not equally treated, nor represented, thus calling for these parents to “educate” other people through their social media, as already testified in offline contexts such as educational institutions (Sità et al., 2018).

## 5. Conclusions

Throughout time, both the meaning of being a father, and the actual practices enacted to perform one’s paternal role have undergone significant changes with respect to the discourse around fathers and their social and pedagogical role, the educational relationship between a father and their children, and the relationship between a father and his partner (Lamb, 2000).

In recent years, online platforms have become a significant source of information and socialization for individuals around the world, and the construction of fatherhood on these platforms is no exception. Our case study on the social construction of fatherhood on these three online platforms in Italy reveals that they are complex and multifaceted, serving as informal learning environments that contribute to the ongoing discourse around fatherhood. In a sense, if men have long been invisible to themselves since they precluded themselves from understanding their partiality and gender dynamics governing their social roles (Bellassai, 2001), one may argue that today, thanks to the internet, men can become more visible with respect to these areas, to both themselves and others. This is supported by past research showing how thanks to digital media men today can expand and diversify the realm of representations of fatherhood (Diniz & Sepúlveda, 2022; Zestanakis, 2022). Our findings partially support this notion, but also show that, probably for socio-cultural reasons, the posts we analyzed (especially from the first two platforms) may perpetuate and reinforce traditional gender roles and stereotypes. For example, the selected posts from *Professione Papà*, although recognizing the importance of both mothers and fathers, tended to attribute to the latter certain specific roles in a somehow narrow and normative view of fatherhood. The *Babbo felice* blog posts we examined further reinforced gender stereotypes and constructed an ancillary version of fathers, remarking that women are naturally devoted to children while men should be there mainly to offer their support. Both these platforms presented a limited and

heteronormative view of fatherhood that do not adequately address the diversity of experiences of contemporary families. *Papà per Scelta*, on the other hand, provided an opportunity to challenge stereotypical narratives and to explore alternative constructions of fatherhood that go beyond the traditional gender binary, even though it also shows the still topical need for gay parents to show the world they can be *good enough* parents.

Overall, our research highlights the need for ongoing critical engagement with the social construction of fatherhood on online platforms. Traditional gender roles and stereotypes, in fact, are not always challenged as one may expect. While it may look like nothing new is under the sun, these platforms testify a slow, yet existing, evolution in contemporary understanding of fatherhood by men. It is thus important to recognize the potential of online platforms as informal learning environments to contribute to the discourse on fatherhood, since they do provide an idea on how fatherhood is intended, understood, and socially constructed by fathers themselves. Online platforms can be a valuable resource for both fathers and the broader society, to question gender stereotypes and learn more about being a father today and different family morphologies. Keeping a critical lens to approach them, however, is pivotal to understand to what extent they promote equitable and diverse representations of fatherhood or are reinforcing existing stereotypes. Such an understanding can inspire reflexive educational activities with parents, both fathers and mothers, from both heterosexual and homosexual families, to interrogate their own understandings of fatherhood and parenthood in the contemporary society.

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