



Parenting, Play and the Work-Family Interaction

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Abstract

This article explores the recreational time of parents with young children and the ways it can influence practices reconciling work and family. The aim is to examine the internal dynamics and the emotional side of family life vis-à-vis parents' time structures. Children's organised and spontaneous activities have received scant attention in work-family studies and this lack of conceptual development around the quality of time use is unfortunate, if we take the work-family interaction to be more than the sum of strategies aiming at balancing both domains.

In this analytical framework special attention is then placed on play and on the activities parents set up with children during their recreational time. We find that especially play and loosely structured recreational time becomes important for parents because this time strongly characterises their home experience and through it they construct emotional bonds with their children. In this research, the concepts of 'parent-initiated play' will be introduced and used to find that play and activities with children are linked to asymmetric gender practices of care and bonding. The dual nature of parents' time with children is considered crucial in understanding the construction of family life and the strains around the work-family interaction.

Keywords: *Work-Family Interaction, Play, Parenting, Children's Activities, Gender*

Introduction

1.1 This article explores the recreational time of parents with young children and the ways it can influence practices reconciling work and family. The aim is to examine the internal dynamics and the emotional side of family life vis-à-vis parents' time structures. In addressing these issues, the literature usually moves towards a strategy that takes children into account as if they were a simple parameter, in that they are either present or not, and the only concern related to them regards the practical management of children's time on the part of the parents (Shaw et al. 2003; Zvonkovic *et al.* 2006). Conversely, this article examines the parents' experience of life with children, because this is a key area for the understanding of family life (Gillies 2011) and because this experience is closely connected to the ways parents manage their home and work commitments (Ba' 2010; Hochschild 2003). In studies on the work-family interaction, life with children and the organised and spontaneous activities revolving around it, have received scant attention: parents' and children's leisure time in itself is an enormous area of studies, but the way parents use these recreational activities to construct their world is a less investigated sociological area (Griffiths 2011; Lareau and Weininger 2008; Shaw *et al.* 2003).

1.2 Within these studies, and parenting literature in general, children are often considered the source of forms of parental work: e.g. the time parents spend for caring and for organising their education. Rarely is the playful element involved in the relationship between parent and child considered in relation to wider social issues (Folbre 2001; Furstenberg and Kaplan 2004; Griffiths 2009; Hochschild 2003; Lareau and Weininger 2008). Play is an important part of children's life and it is considered a crucial element in the constitution of parenting (Richardson 2006; Rossi 2006) and in the formation of emotional bonding (Hays 1996). In some studies, parents' narratives around emotional resources are thus connected to the practical and cultural arrangements that they use in work and family commitments (Ba' 2010; Brannen 2005; Hochschild 1997). Consequently, this article will investigate the emotional side of parents' interaction with children, as well as its 'work-like' practices (Shaw *et al.* 2003) and thus, concepts around

play and organised activities will be mobilised to show how parents construct time-together with their children and to show how an emotional focus is created through these types of playful and recreational interactions.

1.3 Recreational activities and play is a complex area which contains crucial elements for the understanding of parenting and its relationship with the work-family interaction. In this study then we shall flag up the importance of a set of activities that especially mothers arrange with their children, which is here referred to as 'parent-initiated play', which denotes an intensive mode of interaction between parents and children. This type of parent-children interaction is a source of emotional meaning for family narratives, but also a source of strain in the management of work and family and thus issues of asymmetric gender practices of care and bonding will be addressed. The interweaving of narratives around emotional bonding and the labour of caring from mothers (more rarely, fathers) will be conceptualised as the 'dual nature' of parents' family time (Crompton 2006; Hays 1996; Shaw *et al.* 2003).

1.4 Therefore, this article aims at widening the conceptualisation around family life, taking into consideration the dual nature of parents' time with children. In doing so, the article will address the gap in research around the qualitative dimension of family time use and its relevance vis-à-vis work and family time structures. This study will show how arranging recreational time and play for children is connected to the gendered domestic division of care as well as to emotional bonding and emotional attachment to family time on the parts of parents. Methodologically, this duality also suggests that researchers should not simply assume that within the work-family interaction, an hour is simply an hour (Lareau and Weininger 2008) and that the qualitative use of time is vital to understand issues related to this interaction.

1.5 In this article then, we will firstly consider approaches used in work-family studies to analyse time with children and its relation to parents' time structure, and propose the case for adopting sociological-critical concepts. This is followed by the methodological section, where we explain the choice of qualitative methods and illustrate the research process. The data analysis is divided into three sections. In the first two, an analytical distinction is made between parents' more and less organised activities with children: in the former, we show how parents' lives are often involved with children's more formal activities and the dual nature of these gendered arrangements. In the latter, we introduce the concept of parent-initiated play to suggest that children's free-time activities are experienced as enjoyable time for parents, constituting their private sphere in opposition to work, yet we also show that this time is characterised by 'work-like' practices. The last section of data analysis explores in more depth the dual nature of parents' time with children and how the constitution of an emotional culture of home interacts with the 'work sphere'. We then suggest that the domains of work and family, rather than being simply areas of tension, are constituted through twofold elements. Play and activities with children represent an area where the labour of parents augment as the family space gains in personal and emotional qualities.[FB1]

Activities with children, gender and the work-family interaction

2.1 Work-family studies have been often stifled by the limitation of its concepts around 'work' and 'family life' (MacInnes 2008). This article aims to widen the conceptual field of family life, taking into consideration parents' time with children; in doing so this article will follow recent suggestions for a 'new approach' to work and family interaction, based on the critique of studies founding their understandings uniquely on Role Theory (Hochschild 2003; Warhurst *et al.* 2008). The next sub-section will outline the implications of Role Theory for the work-family interaction and consider what we can learn from its critique. In the other sub-sections we will explore how alternative concepts can be used to make sense of children's recreational activities and parents' work-family time structure.[FB2]

2.2 a. Beyond Role Theory - In work and family studies, Role Theory considers family members in terms of their relationship to their position as workers. Because for Role Theory these members are workers and parents in a discrete, discontinued way, work and family conflict can then only be represented in terms of 'time' and 'energy' tradeoffs. Role Theory has then to assume a psychological distance between the different positions of members, in order to explain possible 'mechanical' (Gatrell 2005: 150) conflicts between the roles people have to adopt. The critiques to role theory are linked to different perspectives on intimate relationships (Jamieson 2011) and to a renewed attention for the concept of family and its 'ability to contain a broad, often conflicting array of hopes, investments and interests' (Gillies 2011: 10.2). These new approaches to family and intimate relationships clearly indicate the need to take into account parenting as a contradictory site, where intimacy, leisure and play are inextricably interwoven with the gendered division of labour and intensive forms of family time. Within this framework, the limitations of studies on work-family 'balance' based on Role Theory become more clear: the use of concepts revolving around 'time' and 'energy' as finite resources for either work or home, shows a clearly solipsistic basis and a theoretical bias toward the psychological or even the physiological, rather than a critical-sociological approach. A critical approach would then examine the internal dynamics and the emotional side of family life vis-à-vis parents' time structures, trying to explain how the playful and appealing side (for many of its members, at least) of family life can be linked to its most intensive sides. A critical-sociological approach would avoid reifying the set of expectations around work and family (Hochschild 2003; Rossi 2006; Sennett 1998) by taking into account family as a contradictory site, capable of producing enjoyable, meaningful time for its members as well as reproducing inequalities. Therefore, recreational activities and play will be associated with the complexity of parents' interaction with children and in this article, family life will entail both work-like elements and emotional elements at the same time. In this respect, we will talk about the 'dual nature' of parents' time with children (Crompton 2006; Hochschild 1997; Shaw *et al.* 2003).

2.3 b. Emotional Culture - The dual nature of time structures is studied in Hochschild's *Time Bind* (1997), where she defines the intersection of work time and family time as being framed by an 'emotional culture' (Hochschild 1997: xx). Emotional culture is 'a set of rituals and beliefs about feelings' which

induce emotional focus and even a sense of the 'sacred' favouring some social bonds over others (Hochschild 1996: 20). The main point in Hochschild's approach to emotions is that 'rituals and beliefs about feelings' are the form through which the content (emotions) is expressed. In this respect, emotions take the form of symbols that are widely recognised and form part of the way that family members manage and express themselves in daily life (Segalen 2002). From this, it follows that the 'emotion is in the social relationship' (Barbalet 2002: 4). Emotional culture is also not a gender neutral concept, in the sense that its formation actually orientates mothers and fathers towards different understandings about the symbolic relevance of work and home and therefore leads them towards a different order of priorities (Hochschild 2003). Studies in the work, family and leisure intersection suggest that, even in the case of the dual earner family, mothers take on the work of organising family leisure, whilst experiencing these activities as part of their domestic labour, differing from what could be their personal leisure time (Shaw *et al.* 2003). In contrast, fathers arrange their leisure to 'be with' their children, experiencing a kind of 'leisure-based' parenting which is different from their female partners' (Kay 1996, 2006). Indeed, feminist studies on the dual-earner family have focused on the resilience of women's domestic position as primary carers and homemakers, which also lead women to be the primary provider of leisure time for children (Shaw *et al.* 2003; Shaw 2008). Thus, the emotional culture created through parents' recreational activities with children offer a privileged point of entry in the dynamics of family life: both in the sense of gendered patterns in the child-parent relationship and of intimate parenting practices through play and leisure, hence the dual nature of family life. In the next sub-section we explore how researchers conceptualise this dual nature of intimate parenting practices.

2.4 c. The ludic and work-like sides of free-time with children - Researchers have pointed to the understudied phenomenon of organised leisure (Lareau and Weinger 2008) and 'free' time with children (Craig 2006) as key areas for the understanding of work-family interaction and the gendered division of domestic care. These areas are recognised to be an important part of the familial landscape (Lareau and Weinger 2008: 420). Yet, 'there appears to be a gap in the research relating to children's free-time activities' (Griffiths 2011: 191) and how these activities relate to parenting and their mediation of work and family. The intensive involvement of (especially) mothers in the leisure time of children with its 'work-like' practices (Shaw *et al.* 2003: 27) is often connected to the ludic side of activities formed through "unstructured free-time" with children (Griffiths 2011: 191). Parents play an important role in children's free-time enjoyment; moreover parent-child interactions occurring within loosely structured activities 'co-construct' their free time together (Griffiths 2011: 200). This co-construction expresses the deep involvement in children's play and activities on the part of adults (especially mothers), showing how adults tend to preserve the home space as private, separate from work, with different symbolic features. This tendency shows that one dimension of family time is characterised by the intersection of the intensive involvement of parents and an emerging emotional culture featuring the co-construction of time together. This aspect will be then the focus of this research, especially because the distinctive characteristics of the various activities with children and the demands they entail are not well documented (Lareau and Weinger 2008: 422), nor their effect on parents' work-family time structure (Shaw 2008).

2.5 d. Children's recreational activities and parents' work-family time structure - So how does recreational time with children, and play in particular, contribute to the constitution of the emotional side of parents' family life? And how is this emotional bonding involved in the work-family interaction? Crompton (2006), in her study of employment and the family, while centralising the concept of the 'dual nature of care', considers the co-construction of time together mainly as a source of domestic labour, rather than engaging with broader ideas around parents' interaction with children. However, if only direct active care is considered, a significant underestimation of women's time spent in activities with children results (Craig 2006: 263). In fact, if the dual nature of family time is not examined in depth, then inconsistencies arise in research: for instance, White *et al.* conclude that time with children is playing a decreasing part in the experience of negative job-to-home spill-over (white 2003:190), whilst Crompton (2006) argues that the presence of children 'is an important factor that contributes to the significantly higher levels of work-life conflict' for mothers (2006: 81). Rather, in this article the strategy used to answer the research question - how do children's play and recreational activities affect parents' work-family time structure - is geared towards an investigation of the internal dynamics of work and family life. The research investigates how parents construct time together with their children, their experience of recreational activities and how it is positioned in their narratives of different domains of life (principally family and work). Through this approach, we aim to reconstruct narratives of conflicts and reconciliation around themes of play, family and work, so uncovering contradictions, frictions as well as narratives of 'balance' of the different domains of parents' life. Thus, using the concept and the evidence around the dual nature of parents' time with children, this article will address questions around the work-family interaction and its gendered configuration, whilst showing family life in its complexity.

Methodology

3.1 The qualitative findings reported in this article are part of an ESRC-funded study conducted to explore the complex interaction of work and family life, focusing on the practices that parents perform in their life with children and in their life at work. In order to explore the meanings, the practices and the emotional aspects involved in the lives of working families, the research was based on a series of in-depth, semi-structured interviews (Lewis *et al.* 2006).

3.2 The sample consisted of married/cohabiting couples living in and around Manchester (UK), where both partners are employed (either full- or part-time) and there is at least one dependent child, age ranging from birth to 10 years. The majority of parents were in their thirties or forties and of British/ Irish white ethnic background, all in heterosexual relationships. The dual-earner couple was chosen as it represents a meaningful context of work-family tension, and also because the dual-earner household is now the dominant form among those of working age (Lewis *et al.* 2009). Thirty-two families were recruited for this research, although in four cases the interviews were arranged with only one member (the woman in

each case). A total of sixty people thus took part in the research (out of which twenty-eight were fathers) and most of the couples (twenty-eight) were interviewed jointly. Confidentiality was assured and all the names used in this article are pseudonymous. The face to face interviews were conducted mostly in participants' homes and each lasted between 1 and 1 and a half hours. The sample of research participants was chiefly composed of middle-class and professional people: there were teachers, nurses, social and welfare workers and included other professionals like GPs, consultants, professors and a few senior managers.

3.3 The interviews were semi-structured and the topics discussed with participants covered three broad areas: 1) family life and daily interaction with children, 2) work-life balance and 3) work characteristics. Questions around life with children were designed to elicit accounts around formal and more spontaneous activities with children. Interviewers were aware of the difficulties in getting the minutiae of daily life; the way parents 'normally' interact with their children. So in order to get accounts around free time with children, we asked questions like 'what do you do with your children in a typical day', but also had a series of prompts regarding formal activities, games, informal play time and little routines. This strategy, as well as our genuine interest in this topic, made it possible to have frank conversations with parents around the details of their play and recreational time with children. Moreover, during the interviews, accounts were solicited on topics that may have revealed the emotional or symbolic attachments to family life, such as: most valued time in a typical day, arrangements around mealtimes and arrangements for week-ends. Questions around work life were more structured. One matter that was not discussed with parents was the cost - in terms of money - of extra-curricular activities for their children; this was done because investigating costs, and their financial implications for parents, would have taken the focus of the investigation away from our research aims. However, from the data we gathered it is clear that, as stated in the paragraph above, the sample of research participants was chiefly composed of middle-class and professional people.

3.4 Interviewing couples together represented a strategy for including fathers' accounts in the picture (Aitken 2001; Devine 2004). It also gave participants the opportunity to refer to a shared understanding of matters arising from work and family life (Allan 1980; Bennett and McAivty 1985). This strategy had the weakness of possibly downplaying aspects of the gender division of labour in the household, as a couple will tend to present versions of their life together according to the 'family myth' of harmony (Hertz 1995); although recent research points out that it is becoming more common for couples to make 'no attempt to convey the image of a harmonious marriage' (Boeije 2004: 3).

3.5 Data analysis was based on Grounded Theory methodology (Strauss and Corbin 1994), and relied on the discovery of coding paradigms (and the extraction of quotes) to identify relationships among interviewees' stories and themes. Thus, when the accounts of the ways in which parents constructed their free time with children added no new information and when properties, dimensions, conditions or consequences formed coherent narratives around family life, play and work, and how these were experienced by parents, we considered that the sample had reached theoretical saturation (Strauss and Corbin 1998) and that no further accounts were needed.

Organised (or more structured) activities

4.1 Parents report spending a substantial amount of their 'free' time with their children. Participants' experiences of daily life with children make a rather long list, but one very important area came to the fore during the interviews, that consisted of recreational time in general and play in particular. This area of daily life is crucial in understanding not only family life, but also in examining conceptions of work and family as discrete domains of life (Brown and Warner-Smith 2005; Hochschild 2003; Lareau and Weininger 2008; Richardson 2006).

4.2 In this article, we make an analytical distinction between activities organised by parents for their children and loosely structured time with children. However, in participants' narratives these are not marked as separated. Thus, we are not making any claim on the 'ontological' status of different activities that parents set up with children as these are to be considered as a relatively homogeneous set of cultural practices that have different characteristics within themselves. On this basis, this classification in activities that are more and less structured is then to a degree arbitrary, and these activities, even the most 'spontaneous', should be thought of as in a continuum that goes from formal and organised activities to less-structured time that parents spend with children. Yet, it is still useful to consider these two areas in different analytical spaces because we can observe a set of different approaches to children's free time and the way parents get involved in it. This section will examine organised or more formal activities. Within this context, what are organised or structured activities? We came to a classification of these through participants' accounts, as it was clear that for parents, 'children's activities' are those arranged and performed through *ad hoc* organisations and/or in *ad hoc* places which also imply regular attendance over time. These typically consist of: swimming, football, basketball, ballet, horse riding, drama, art classes, music lessons etc. and these activities are usually arranged according to the child's gender. The following quote comes from Michelle, part-time Teacher of French in a secondary school and George, full-time senior advisory Teacher, parents of Laura and Benjamin both 7 years old.

George: They are very, very active kids, particularly Benjamin - physically he really needs to spend a lot of energy, (. . .) he is in a proper club now - and he's like training and playing the matches with little Man City Junior. . .

Michelle: We go swimming, roller skating. . . sometimes their little friends come around so they have tea and play together. . . out, take 'em in the park, you know. We are busy, believe me, but we like it this way! It gives us the chance to get more involved with them.

4.3 The practice of organising 'extra-curricular, enrichment activities' activities for children is known for being part of a middle-class strategy oriented to the reproduction of their cultural capital (Vincent and Ball 2006). Many participants showed signs of awareness of this middle-class practice when asked 'What type of activities do your children do?' However, the interview accounts showed that beside the intensive elements of parenting, there are themes suggesting the dual nature of caring for children. The same act of monitoring and organising for their children, in the account above, indicate a degree of active and ludic involvement from the side of parents. Certainly, the organisation of children's activities, especially extra-curricular, enrichment activities, requires time and dedication. The parents' role consists in setting them up, supervising their attendance and providing transport, all tasks that can be very time-consuming. This is how Kristin, a part-time Teacher, and her husband Ross, a Child's Advocate (parents of Ruth, 8 and Emma, 6) feel about it.

Interviewer: Does it take a lot of time to arrange the activities of your children?

Kristin: I think **it takes up quite a lot of time**, it's a **commitment** isn't it?

Ross: I think, like a lot of children. . . they'll try things and. . . if they give up after a few weeks or so. . . Horse riding at the moment is a big . . . they're very keen on that and of course we then have to buy all the gear, so you do get into some expense, but **as long as they're enjoying it**, then we don't mind that. [*Emphasis added*]

4.4 This account shows that as well as time, organising activities for children requires 'commitment', which entails the careful observation of their children's progress, the monitoring of their involvement and supervising the overall attendance. It is a practical and organisational focus that needs to be maintained in time. This 'organisational intelligence' (Benn 1998; Gatrell 2005), together with the commitment to which Kristin refers, can be interpreted as a narrative that resonates with the elements of intensive parenting (Furedi 2007; Hays 1996), but also contains personal qualities of family time, by alluding to an 'emotional culture' that symbolically privileges the home sphere. Thus, parents' commitment and organisational focus refers to the 'symbolic marking' (Ba' 2010; Brannen 2005) of the family space, whilst being connected to gender norms: it is Kristin who talks about commitment and admits that the organisational aspects of these activities 'takes up a lot of time', whereas Ross evades the question and talks about his children in general.

4.5 These observations can be extended to many couples participating in the research: mothers do the bulk of the childcare work and the organisation of activities (this is consistent with other research on similar issues, e.g. Gatrell 2005; Shaw *et al.* 2003; Vincent and Ball 2006). Why do we have this gendered specialisation in children's activities and why do mothers talk more than fathers about 'commitment'? These accounts point to a set of expectations about mothers' behaviour which imply that their emotional culture should be centred on family time. The organisation of children's activities contributes to the constitution of intensive mothering and it is an essential factor shaping the work-family balance in the sense that 'free time' tends to be regimented in time and energy consuming practices. However, time and energy are not the only factors in the work and family interaction (Ba' 2010; Caproni 2004; Hochschild 2003; Rossi 2006) and in the accounts of participants, including mothers, there is ambivalence about it, as this area of life with children is also constituted as part of their emotional resources. This is Chloe, self-employed artist, married and mother of an 8 year old boy and a 5 year old girl:

Chloe: I take them swimming, yes, it's time consuming, but it's nice to see what they are doing, how they get along. . . how they are enjoying it, how they are improving their swimming skills. . . and sometimes it's an opportunity to have a little dinner together at the cafe, after the swim. . . it's not too expensive! It's nice!

4.6 Mothers tend to place a high value on the time they spend with and for their children, whilst talking about 'commitment' and 'time consuming' practices. The findings indicate how the dual nature of parents' free time with children is inscribed in the cultural fencing off of the family domain, and so in the separation between the work sphere and the family sphere. This type of division reproduces once again the modern split between gendered private and public spheres (Crompton 2006; Zaretsky 1976).

Loosely organised (or spontaneous) activities

5.1 Families organise extracurricular activities for their children, but also report of time left during the day to what can be termed 'spontaneous' interactions. For this research, spontaneous activity is a type of interaction centred on play, which is not planned and loosely based on family routine; it is often generated by the imagination of the child, but also the parent can take the initiative in arranging game-playing. This type of activity between parents and children has important effects on the way time is experienced by family members. In the following extract, one of the participants reflects on less-formal activities he does with his children: Sid is a full-time director of an artistic charity, married to Joanne and father of Julian (6 years) and Louise (15 months).

Interviewer: In a typical day, what do you do with your children? Sid: Now at the minute I spend more time with Julian and Joanne looks closely after Louise. . . Ehmm (*long pause*) Things that we do. . . we like to play on the computer. . . toy soldiers. . . it's on a basis: we **fancy** doing this, so let's do this. . . like last week he wanted to plant seeds, so we went to buy some seeds, we've put it in little pots and now it's growing!

Interviewer: Ok, is it that fairly regular?

Sid: Well, it may happen, it's kind of **spontaneous**, (. . .) [*emphasis added*]

5.2 These activities and playful moments with children are at times so unplanned and so undistinguished in the flux of daily activities, that participants find it difficult to recognise and describe them. These belong to the normal routine of daily life and do not stand out as would other, more structured activities, such as swimming or music lessons. Arian is a full-time accountant and routinely spends time playing with her daughters, two girls aged 3 and 1 years old. This is how her partner Horace, full-time head of a department in a large public organisation describes their daily interactions with children:

Interviewer: Amongst the various activities you do with your children, do you have any that is more tiring than other?

Horace: To be honest with you, I am tired quite a lot of the time, so, I play with them based on what they want to do, rather than on what I want to do. . . I don't **initiate playing** with them. Arian is a lot better, she would play with their jigsaw puzzles and they like to do a lot of drawing, painting, sticking up with glue, and using stickers, that's the most common thing that they do, they sit at the kitchen table and do those things. [*Emphasis added*]

5.3 From this account it emerges that play-time is a demanding activity which requires time, imagination, empathy, patience and at times, appropriate skills; all qualities that participants are not always willing or able to apply. Parents' involvement in recreational time with their children is found to be common, especially amongst mothers, and rather intensive, so it can be interpreted as a mode of interaction orientated to establish deeper connections between parents and children during everyday life. This type of approach to less structured recreational time is here called 'parent-initiated play'. The sociological interest in this comes with the focus on parent-child interactions 'co-constructing' their free time together (Griffiths 2011: 200), where this co-construction shows how adults assign special meaning to their home life and in so doing, tend to culturally generate the home space as personal, separate from work.

5.4 In the above extract, the set of activities associated with 'parent-initiated play' shows that it is actually the mother who is closely involved in the play time of children, despite (in this case) being full-time. This is quite typical of the research sample: not only do mothers tend to spend more time with their children in playful activities, whereas fathers report being tired, but they are also more imaginative, more likely to 'initiate playing'. This point is crucial: parents' interaction around children's play implies practical work which fills with meaning the otherwise empty 'black box' (Hochschild 2003) of family time, and in these ways they construct an emotional culture of family intimacy. This emotional culture, which is inspired by the ideology of family, orientates mothers in choosing a close involvement with their children's leisure. Thus, notions of motherhood as primarily nurturing (Kay 2006) are in operation when mothers dedicate themselves to the development of play time with children. The resulting interweaving of emotional bonding and 'work-like' elements around leisure reflects this inextricable link of personal dedication to children's playful activities and the moral obligations ('the commitment') suggested by expectations around motherhood. Monica's account suggests similar observations. Monica is a full-time genetic Counsellor, married and mother of Tara (4 years) and Gina (6 months).

Interviewer: Many parents told me that they often arrange some free-time to play with their children

Monica: We do a lot of that, we spend a lot of time playing with her, diverting her from the TV. . . what I try to do is to take her to her room and go through some of the toys, to see if we can start some game together, and most of the time I manage to initiate game time - but obviously she won't be playing for the whole weekend you know. . . also what she wants it's other children to play with, and it is definitely tiring for me as well! So I go through a lot of effort to make friends with other parents so that we can have their children round. . .

Here it is clear that the activities around 'parent-initiated play' involve intrinsic strain and forms of domestic labour, because sustaining this spontaneous playful interaction for a long time can prove difficult. This difficulty indicates the dual nature of leisure time with children, which can be seen as an area of emotional resources that is also connected with the labour of care.

5.5 Play with children is often described by participants as a 'constant stream of little activities': it is constant because it requires the time and attention of at least one parent; it is composed of a stream of little activities, because participation in them can be partitioned - the parent can stop to have a cup of tea, for instance. However, the parent can very rarely stop to give attention, for instance, to her or his work emails: participants clearly stated that when at home with their children 'you'd turned off your work brain and you can't be bothered' [to switch it on again] (Monica, research participant). Therefore, play and interaction with children are features which 'mark' (Ba' 2010; Brannen 2005; Nippert-Eng 1996) this time as emotionally and culturally separated and pertaining to their home domain.

5.6 For this domain, participants construct a narrative of daily life with children as enjoyable and fulfilling, even if they associate these activities with 'hard work'. For instance, there are the accounts of Josh, full-time technical assistant (married, two children: Mildred 6 and Don 4 years old) and Diane, full-time specialised nurse (married, two daughters: Nadine 9 and Edwina 4), from two different couples:

Interviewer: And which activity do you enjoy more doing with your children?

Josh: I think that if they are happy, you are happy! So **if they are doing something they enjoy**, then as long as they are enjoying it you enjoy it as well.

Interviewer: Which activity you do with them is more gratifying?

Diane: Probably just **doing things with them**, because they like to join in and be involved. . . if I'm cooking one of them will do one thing and the other will do another thing, Edwina recently took an interest in cooking, so if I'm making tea she'll go 'can I do this'. . . **we** sort of do things together, simple things. . . I like to be with them! [*Emphasis added*]

5.7 So, while the mother is actually 'doing' something with the children, the father relies on the fact that 'they are doing something they enjoy', thus taking a less active approach. They also use different pronouns: the mother says 'we' and the father 'they', indicating a different degree of closeness with their children. This gender division is important, as it pertains to a context where ordinary life is filled by children's presence ('I like to be with them') and is characterised by emotional interaction ('if they are happy, you are happy'). Obviously, these two elements are orientated to establish emotional bonds between parents and children and to create a narrative of emotional haven within the domain of home and family life. Parent-initiated play becomes a tacit specialisation of mothers' activities because this important emotional element of the family domain is constructed along gendered expectations of nurturing dedication towards children.

5.8 These activities and parent-initiated play are essential for participants in order to construct narratives of life with children. The focus on recreational time can help to reconceptualise the work-family interaction: giving centrality to the dual nature of parents' time with children, we can understand family as an intensive space where 'work like' elements are put in place by parents to develop bonds with their children, which makes the family space emotionally relevant for its members. This duality has an impact on how work and family are culturally considered: when it is a matter of spending time with children the home domain is symbolically 'fenced off' (Brannen 2005; Rossi 2006; Thompson & Bunderson 2001). Given this configuration of family life, we then must ask if and how the organisation of children's activities constitutes an element that influences the work-family interaction.

Dual nature of time with children and work-family interaction

6.1 Narratives around play and recreational activities are formed through the constitution of emotional bonding which are interwoven with the intensive parenting approach to family life. This dual nature of time with children has twofold effects on parents' work-life 'balance'. Participants point at the hurried pace of work and family life and the problem of striking an acceptable balance between the two, but they also present vivid pictures of their work and home lives. From such pictures it is apparent that they are referring not only to well-known stories about the hardship of dealing with all the factors of the life of working parents, but also to the order of emotional issues around work and family life (Ba' 2010; Nippert-Eng 1996). This twofold phenomenon can be summarised by Tracy, full-time social worker, married and mother of Emily (7 years), who claimed to feel 'one-hundred per cent mother and one-hundred per cent worker'. This account reflects the fact that the dichotomies of the work sphere and home sphere are worth reconsidering. The assumptions based on Role Theory and their mechanistic underpinnings cannot adequately explain how individuals are caught in multilayered cultural dimensions (Caproni 2004; Hochschild 2003; MacInnes 2008). In the rest of the section, we will show how, when taking into consideration playful activities with children, the work-family interaction is articulated in two distinct but connected processes, which show the dialectic between the ludic and work-like elements of parent-initiated play.

6.2 In the first process, parents involved in arranging recreational time with children do achieve a certain degree of reconciliation of work and family life. Participants' accounts refer to pressing work schedules and to the difficulties of achieving the 'right balance' between work and family time, but they also tell about how they manage to find time for their children and the free time activities they manage to arrange with them. In participants' accounts, an orderly family life is also signalled by words such as 'rhythm' and 'little regime':

George (whom we met above): We let the children watch a bit of television and. . . it's bath time, then we read a bit of stories and. . . by 8 o'clock we want the light out. That's how it works the typical day, we try to have a **rhythm**, we feel it is important for the children to have a **rhythm** in the day so they know what happens and in the evening it's the same routine, it seems to work quite well. . . [*Emphasis added*]

6.3 Such accounts are quite explicit and reflect general patterns found among participants. What is the meaning of this daily rhythm and why do they want to create this order? The answers to these questions reflect the desire to create an area of comfort for both parents and children; in that routines are quite similar to rituals, punctuating the daily experience of participants and creating order (Douglas 1966). Alex is full-time director of a small software company, married and father of two boys (3 years and 6 months old). This is how he expresses it:

Interviewer: What would you say it's the nicest moment of your day?

Alex: It is certainly the evening, **coming home from work**, everybody is back here. . . and the **little regime that we've got**, and as much as it's **comforting** to them I suppose it's comforting to us as well, isn't it? [*Emphasis added*]

6.4 The 'rhythm' and the 'little regime' to which these participants refer encapsulate the property of ritualised family narratives: through these, participants construct an order of narratives about home and work. Parents may find it hard to strike a 'work-family balance' and many expressed their frustration with the difficult conditions they face in juggling these commitments, yet these very conditions also give them

the possibility of constituting areas of emotional culture, which give a structure to their daily life (Hochschild 2003; Rossi 2006).

6.5 In the second process of this articulation of work time, family time and time with children, these cosy narratives of comforting little regimes are linked to the practice of intensive parenting, but also to the work-time dimension of mothering. The gendered nature of bonding and the emotional investment of mothers in their paid work affect the narratives of family time as a haven separated from the work domain (Benn 1998; Gatrell 1995; McMahon 1995). Thus, if we have on one side the symbolic importance of a constituted emotional culture for home, we also have the symbolic relevance of the emotional culture of work, not only with its obligations, but also with its personal rewards. This is how Jane (senior program manager, cohabiting and mother of two boys, 4 years and 18 months old) expresses her frustration about the dual nature of time for work and home:

Jane: I don't have the luxury of coming in half an hour or an hour earlier or whatever, to stay in later, or take work home because there are quite rigid parameters around my time with children.

6.6 For working parents (and especially for mothers) having time to spare for extra hours at work is considered a luxury. Jane's resentment suggests that paid work is as appealing for her sense of self as the home domain (see also: Lewis 2003; Wajcman and Martin 2002) and this is very common not only in this sample, but also in a sample from international research on work and family interaction (Lewis et al. 2009). However, in this extract, and in others, time for children is considered a priority over other areas of life. Thus, Jane's resentment expresses the limits of the concepts of work-life balance: many complain about the hardship of combining two such important areas of life, and indeed wish they had more time on their hands. Yet it appears that it is not just a matter of trying to add or subtract x amount of time for work for an y amount of time for home. 'Work and family conflict' is constructed by parents as a form of order, or a possible order, because family time, as well as work time, can be an area of dialectical emotional culture with work-like elements, but also filled with meaning (through play and 'spontaneous' interaction in the family and personal reward at work).

6.7 The findings of this research therefore suggest that the spaces of work and family interaction, rather than being simply areas of tension, are constituted through twofold elements. Mothers place a high value on the time they spend with children, even though this very attention to the minute details of play and children's leisure lead them to experience family time as source of intensive labour of care. The dual nature of time with children does not mean that the positive and the negative side of parents' domestic labour and the rewards of home life just balance each other. It means rather that the order that mothers are able to construct and the work that they put into family life are associated with meaningful, more complex emotions and frictions than the ones suggested by the mechanistic assumptions of work-family studies based on role theory.

6.8 The concept of 'work-life balance' proposed by the specialised literature indicates individualised spaces where members of families try to adapt to given circumstances, even if on the surface this concept suggests spaces of manoeuvre for personal lifestyle. Any sense that the narratives around play, or parent-initiated play belong to shared public narratives of family life, or that they may belong to a public understanding of parenting is missing: the work-family articulation is privatised and the elements of parenting are made eminently 'private', almost hidden. It is not a paradox that what is missing from the general understanding of 'work-life balance' is the possibility of achieving spaces of autonomy in both family and work. The fact that participants indicate a dialectical identity between order and conflict shows at the same time the incompleteness of the work-life balance as a concept and its potentials (Hewlett et al. 2002) for claims around publicly shared narrative of work and family life.

Conclusions

7.1 This article has examined aspects of the internal dynamics of family life in order to answer the question about how parents' recreational time with children affects their work-family interaction. The findings presented a complex picture of how parents' life with children is constituted and arranged: play and activities with children represent an area of tension where the labour of parents and its intensification augment as the family space gains in personal and emotional qualities. Through recreational activities and play, participants construct an emotional culture for their family life. However, these emotional and cultural resources are connected to a gendered code that influences parents' interaction at home, as well as being part of the intimacy of family life (Hochschild 2003).

7.2 One of the findings of this research revolves around the set of activities called 'parent-initiated play'. Parent-initiated play is a type of interaction between the parent - very often the mother - and the child, whereby the parent takes the lead in stimulating play time with the child, whilst letting the child develop his/her imagination in using toys, developing games and imaginary stories. Mothers - and to a less degree fathers - are intensely involved in the participation and arrangements of play time; these interactions involve labour, dedication, time and energy, but are also an important source of meaning for family narratives. This set of activities around play is then a mode of interaction that has gone under the radar of sociological research, but which constitute an important element of the intensification of mothering (Hays 1996). In this regard we argue that this article uniquely addresses the impact of children's play on parents' work-family interaction using first hand qualitative data.

7.3 The gendered diversification around time with children and its arrangements is a crucial aspect of these findings. It is especially mothers who invest more time and commitment in arranging children's structured activities and it is them who devote more time and attention to their children's play time. Hence the dual nature of more structured and less formal activities: the intensification of time with children

facilitates the creation of an emotional culture in family life. Taking into account this dual nature of intimate family life, we have seen that the work-family 'conflict' comes to be experienced in the same way as the actual 'order' parents achieve in their daily life with children. That is, meanings of family and work are linked to the emotional and material attachments parents constitute within these domains of daily life and so order and conflict (of work and family) assume their meanings only through these cultural and emotional relations.

7.4 Finally, the analysis on work-family interaction that we carried out suggests that the reconciliation of these domains cannot be geared around individual strategies oriented to 'maximise' lifestyle choices, and rather points to how parenting and caring for children is always shaped by societal norms and cultural arrangements around gender, family and employment. The dual nature of parenting should be fully acknowledged in order to take into consideration what may be a real free choice around the time parents would like to spend for material needs (in work and family) and for more ludic pursuits (in work and family).

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