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Alby, Francesca; Fatigante, Marilena; Zucchermaglio, Cristina

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Francesca Alby, Marilena Fatigante & Cristina Zucchermaglio

"Somebody is thinking about it": Women as household managers in dual-earner families

„Jemand wird schon daran denken." – Frauen als Managerinnen des Haushalts in Doppelverdienerfamilien

Abstract:
In this work we focus, through a multi-method approach, on the managerial practices used by working mothers to deal with complex schedules and family needs in domestic life. We know, from previous studies, that dual earner families face substantial reorganizations of their domestic life, but there has been little research on how such reorganizations are accomplished within families.

Findings draw on different data sets (focus groups, self-report charts, naturally occurring interactions) and, overall, show the centrality of managerial practices in the everyday domestic life of this kind of families. Results also show that housework is an arena for practical reasoning and thinking, making visible, through a detailed analysis of the sequential unfolding of actions, the managerial practices used by mothers to exploit and interactively coordinate different and competing activities. Finally, we suggest that managerial practices may constitute a form of *care work* through which mothers guarantee family members' well-being.

Keywords: working mother, housework, interaction, family management, cognitive work

Zusammenfassung:
In dieser Arbeit nehmen wir mithilfe eines Multimethodenansatzes die Managementpraxis erwerbstätiger Mütter, die diese zur Bewältigung komplexer Zeitpläne und der Bedürfnisse der Familie anwenden, in den Blick. Aus vorausgegangenen Studien wissen wir, dass Doppelverdienerfamilien einer grundlegenden Umgestaltung des häuslichen Familienlebens gegenüberstehen, wobei bisher kaum darüber geforscht wurde, wie eine solche Reorganisation innerhalb der Familien erreicht wird.

Die Erkenntnisse beruhen auf verschiedenen Datensätzen (Fokusgruppen, Zeitverwendungstagebücher, Aufzeichnung von Alltagsgesprächen) und verweisen auf die zentrale Bedeutung dieser Managementpraktiken im häuslichen Alltagsleben dieser Familien. Die Ergebnisse zeigen zudem, dass die Hausarbeit eine Arena praktischer Überlegungen und Denkmuster ist. Mithilfe einer detaillierten Analyse der sequentiellen Handlungsabfolgen in der Hausarbeit werden die Managementpraktiken sichtbar, die die Mütter nutzen, um unterschiedliche und miteinander in Wettstreit stehende Aktivitäten für sich zu verwerten und zu koordinieren. Abschließend schlagen wir vor, dass diese Managementpraktiken eine Form von Care-Arbeit darstellt, durch die Mütter das Wohlergehen der Familienmitglieder sicherstellen.

Schlagwörter: erwerbstätige Mütter, Hausarbeit, Interaktion, Familienmanagement, kognitive Tätigkeit

Reconceptualizing housework

As women increasingly entered the labor market over the last decades, married and common-law couples with children had to re-arrange the amount of time allocated by each partner to paid and unpaid work.

Since the early Seventies, feminist analyses (Oakley 1974; Hochschild/Machung 1989) focused on housework as a relevant research domain in which they aimed to understand how gender inequalities are mantained and reproduced

Contesting the rigid distinction between paid and unpaid work, feminist studies have unearthed the complex and burdening quality of housework mainly carried by women.

The persistence and the width of gender inequality (Lee 2005) has been shown by the quantitative studies on the division of domestic work (see Bianchi et al. 2000, 2006; Coltrane 2000). In several Western countries (mostly in Europe and the USA), women carry the heaviest load of tasks related to household, disregarding their job status and time resources available to them. This is particularly true in the Italian context as shown by recent extensive surveys by Istat (Italian Statistical Office) in 2010[1] (on Italian dual earner couples' formation see also Lucchini/Saraceno/Schizzerotto 2007).

The employment rate among women in Italy is lower than 50% and lower than the European average (60%).

To make the situation in our country even more critical, there is a lack of policies aimed at reconciling work and family life, including part-time work and teleworking or parental leave (very little used) and public services to support families. Italy is dedicating to family policies only 1.3% of its GDP, nursery places cover only 6% of requests (see Naldini 2002). The analysis carried out by Istat (2008) found that only 42.8% of households are being "helped" in this placement activity: 33.3% of these resort to informal and families' networks, 23.9% to paid services and only 2.2% to public services.

This context contributes to the maintenance of traditional roles in couples and to a limited involvement of men in domestic and family work. Signs of change with respect to a greater male involvement and equality in the distribution of the family workload have been detected but they mostly remain at the level of beliefs and social expectations (Zanatta 2012).These surveys, conducted within the Time-Use framework (Gershuny 2000), were essential to illuminate trends and distribution of the domestic workload in different countries.[2]

Qualitative studies have expanded the definition of domestic and family work, focusing on the meanings assigned to it by family members. Among the most conceptually relevant results of these research activities we find: the reconceptualization of distinctions such as the one between work and leisure when applied to caregiving (e.g., can the activity "bringing the kids to the park" be labeled as work or leisure? cf. Van Every 1997) or the problematization of the clear-cut distinction usually made between paid work and housework in relation to the time and place in which they happen (e.g., where to locate a

1 In Italy, an extensive survey-based documentation of the division of domestic work between men and women in different historical periods and in different phases of the life course has been provided by three large surveys performed by Istat (Italian Statistical Office) in 1988, 2002, and 2008.

2 Activities include washing dishes, washing clothes and ironing, cleaning the house, preparing and clearing the table, cooking, purchasing, and shopping (cf. Istat 2010).

phone call from the office to the babysitter; cf. Darrah, 2007; Frissen, 2000). These and other results have fostered an interpretation of the category of housework that shows how it includes intangible features such as emotion work (DeVault, 1999), morality (Ochs, Kremer Sadlik, 2007), inter-household and intra-household relationships and responsibilities (Doucet 2001) and, particularly interesting to the aim of this article, management practices (Darrah 2007). Darrah (2007) actually argues, that management practices are so widespread and ubiquitous "that management per se becomes the content of daily life" (Darrah 2007: 268).

Examples of these often tacit management practices adopted by women are: manipulation of time use, especially in household schedules, routinization of daily tasks, synchronization of household and workplace events as well as preparation for contingency needs (Hessing 1994). Hessing (1994) also underlines the relevance of administrative purposes in women activities (such as supervision and planning assessment) besides instrumental tasks (laundry and cooking). More recent studies acknowledge planning and coordination as a household job that burdens women more than men and that often remains invisible (Lee 2005: 241).

Such insights will be developed further in this article through a multimethod, qualitative research that aims to preserve the complexity of the phenomenon. This methodological triangulation (Denzin 1978) also strengthens our interpretations and the validity of our findings.

In particular, we will analyze domestic work from three complementary and mutually enriching sets of data, asking different kinds of research questions:

1) Focus groups allow us to analyze how working mothers talk about their everyday family life and activities. Which are the most demanding tasks from their perspective? Do the categories employed by surveys represent well the work that they do at home?
2) Self-reported charts of working mothers' daily activities allow us to analyze time management strategies. How do mothers routinely allocate their activities of domestic work? In what ways are such tasks accomplished within the constraints of a daily schedule? Does this routine allocation of daily activities reveal certain management strategies of domestic work?
3) Naturally occurring family interactions video-recorded at home allow us to analyze the actual management practices of working mothers and their moment-by-moment unfolding. How is such managerial activity accomplished to deal with concurrent flows of actions and temporal constraints?

The article will address these issues focusing on the point of view of working mothers, thus suggesting one of the possible narratives of domestic life. This selection sheds light on activities and meanings considered relevant by women, obscuring others that may emerge listening to the stories of men. The literature has in fact shown how men and women differ in their reporting of the allocation of the domestic tasks (cf. Kamo 2000; Geist 2010).

Methodology

Data corpus

The paper analyzes data from two studies.

The first study involved 15 working mothers[3] belonging to dual-earner families, and was conducted using focus group interviews led or simply prompted by a researcher, concerning matters related to the organization of everyday family life (cf. Zucchermaglio/ Alby 2014). We realized five focus groups, each consisting of three participants.[4] The focus groups were video-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The participants live in Rome, Italy. Both members of the couples work full-time[5] outside the home and have at least one child under the age of 10. They range in age from 37 to 50 years and they have from one to three children (the age range of the children is from 2 to 13). The families can be considered as middle class in terms of income and education. Their job status can be generally defined as professional, such as doctor, lawyer, secretary, professor, and accountant. Participants were asked to report how their everyday routines were changed after the birth of their first child. To solicit a mother's participation, we provided a list of topics which included domestic chores (house cleaning, grocery shopping, management of maids or caregivers, small repairs), childcare (preparing meals, putting children to bed, dressing them, child transportation, homework, and healthcare), social relations (extended family, children's friends), financial management, and amusement (play, TV, vacations, relaxation, sport).

The second study (drawn upon the ICELF database – Italian Center on Everyday Lives of Families[6]; cf. Pontecorvo 2006; Giorgi/Pontecorvo, 2009) is an ethnographic study involving eight Italian working families, all living in Rome.[7] This was part of a larger international project on family life in Italy, Sweden and the United States, whose overall aim was to identify what strategies dual-earner families used to adjust to work and family demands in their everyday life (Ochs, Kremer-Sadlik 2007; 2013). For the aim of this paper, we analyzed data from self-reported charts of each mother's daily family activities and video recordings of family interaction at home. Self-reported charts consisted of blank sheets divided into seven weekdays and each day into three parts (morning, afternoon, and evening). Mothers were asked to fill out the children's and their own daily activities for a typical week. Video recordings were taken twice a day, during, respectively, two weekdays and during part of the weekend. Video-recorded interactions were entirely

3 Interviewees were selected by means of informal contacts among the group of mothers whose children attended the same kindergarten of one of the researchers.

4 Focus groups were preferred to individual interviews because of their potential for exploring how meanings are negotiated and co-constructed by participants through analysis of their interactions. As Wilkinson (1998) argues, focus groups ensure, more than one-to-one interviews, that priority is given to the respondents' frameworks for understanding the world, diminishing the researcher's power at the data collection stage.

5 In Italy, working hours for full time jobs range from 35 to 40 hours a week.

6 See: http://icelf.weebly.com/.

7 Parents who volunteered to participate responded to ads and flyers distributed in schools.

transcribed using Gail Jefferson's conventions (Sacks/Schegloff/Jefferson 1974). The age of working in the ICELF study ranged for mothers from 34 to 47 years and for fathers from 39 to 55 years. Each family had two children (10 girls and 6 boys) with at least one child between the ages of 8 and 10, and their status (based on information about education, job and income) was middle class for 7 out of 8 families.

Data analysis

1) Focus groups. Researchers repeatedly read the transcripts. They did not start the analysis by making use of predefined categories, but by actually identifying those sequences in the mothers' discourses in which they talked about their domestic work management practices. In these sequences, the analysts identified the language and discursive constructions that the mothers used to account for their activity and role in the housework (including both household labor and childcare). Themes and repertoires (Potter/Wetherell 1987) that turned out to be the most recurrent were selected and discussed in depth.

2) Self-reported charts. We examined eight mothers' charts. Researchers analyzed the distribution and scheduling of activities marked by the participants in relation to daily and weekly time.

3) Video-recorded interactions. Within the ICELF corpus we selected one episode in which a family returns home at the end of the day. The Mari family, which we will analyze here, represents well a frequently observed pattern of interaction in which the mother displays a high level of managerial responsibility for the sequential and temporal unfolding of many and concurrent domestic activities. A full sequence developing across the first three minutes after the family has returned home is analyzed in detail, on a turn-by-turn basis, according to the principles of Conversation Analysis (Sacks/Schegloff/Jefferson 1974)

Results

Working mothers as managers of family life

All the working mothers referred, in talking about their experience and their role in the organization of household and family labor, to activities such as monitoring, scheduling, planning and orchestrating activities. They reported to be in charge of such activities to "organize" their family life and they described them in different ways.

"Being a manager". Some working mothers explicitly labelled as 'managerial' the kind of work they do in organizing family life, as Sofia puts it.

Excerpt 1:

Sofia: "I turned into, after the children's birth, a real manager (…) we have an organization that is absolutely Teutonic".

Sofia accounts for the reorganization of her personal identity that has followed the birth of her two children by choosing the label of a "real manager". In so doing, she indexes a collection of characteristics routinely associated with the managerial identity, among which efficiency plays a central part. The metaphor she uses for describing the reorganization the whole family ("we have") underwent as "Teutonic" can also be interpreted within this category: common stereotypes about German are, in fact, that they are efficient and rigorous.

Efficiency, then, is the criterion that, according to her and other mothers' perspective, informs the practices adopted by the family to meet their daily commitments.

The very same choice of the term "manager" frames their household activities within an economic ideology. As Hochschild (1997) already pointed out, the borders between workplace and family realm are often blurred, allowing that economic vocabulary and practice cross into private life.

Other working mothers in the focus groups describe a particularly absorbing engagement that requires the maintenance of an *inventory* of the needs and activities of all family members. This can be seen in the case of Piera, shown in Excerpt 2, who describes herself as being involved in an ongoing monitoring of her three children's needs.

Excerpt 2:

Piera: "(…) the organization of the day is this one. I mean-I mean in the morning I prepare the meal for that one ((one of her three children)) who has to come back from school and when he comes back there's nobody ((at home)) I accompany the youngest one, I go to the office, after that I come back to pick her up, or if I have to stay longer ((in the office)), well maybe my son goes. If in the afternoon he has to go to sport I accompany him. That's the young one. The old one now is autonomous: so one just has to pick him up maybe in the evening if it's late, at that time though maybe my husband has come back so maybe he intervenes…".

Monitoring the details required from each family member's activity to meet external demands (such as entering the school or the sports lesson with full equipment), communicating with other household members about the timetables of these activities, and supervising the different schedules to see if they need to be changed are among other activities listed by mothers in the focus group, which can be interpreted as part of their managerial work in the economy of the family household.

Managing family life by means of all these activities is described as a demanding task, identified by a mother as "to carry the burden of the organization"; what is tiring is not so much its practical accomplishment but the cognitive work involved.

Thinking ahead and remembering. The cognitive effort of managing family life is the feature reported as mostly tiring (cf. Excerpt 3).

Excerpt 3:

Piera: "my most tiring task is, in my opinion, exactly this mental job ((literally 'head job'))…the physical work, you do it, you can do everything all in all".

Sara: "concerning the energy I spend for the organization, it is mentally very burdening, I mean, I feel it heavy on my shoulders".

Such work is also described as "a mental thing" (Lee 2005) or as "thinking about things". Remembering things to do is among the cognitive activities that working mothers consider as mostly challenging and unshared. They report carrying out the cognitive task of remembering (objects to bring, appointments to be made, schedules to follow, deadlines, etc.) for everyone in the family.

Commenting on something previously said by Elena, Sara, for instance, underlines that the effort does not reside in going to buy the milk but in remembering to do it (cf. Excerpt 4). She presents herself as the one who, willingly or not, holds the most responsibility in getting things accomplished; she does so by remarking that she often has to call her husband to remind him what to do with the kids, such as washing them.

Excerpt 4:

Sara: "(…) when you talked about the milk, right? I mean, that is what bothers me, it's not that much the effort of carrying the bags".

Elena: "it's the fact that you cannot forget it".

Sara: "right".

Elena: "it's the fact that if you don't think of that…".

Sara: "exactly, it's the fact that I cannot forget it, I mean I cannot forget the fact that in the evening the girl has to be washed. If I one day … it happens several days for me to come back at home at nine, I mean…(…) if I come back at home at eight and the girl has not been washed, it can be fine once that she is not cleaned, but for me … I cannot help but to think of it, right? I mean I have to call and tell him 'did you shower the girl? Did you give her a bath?"

Sara's formulation 'I cannot forget it' underlines that the daughter's hygiene is an obligation that has a different moral relevance for her and for her husband (Fasulo/Loyd/ Padiglione 2007; Ochs/Kremer Sadlik 2007). Such hygiene needs to meet certain standards (a daily bath) that she sets and to which the husband attends on her requests. Again, even if the father gives the baby a bath, the mother is responsible for imagining and planning such an action and for its accomplishment. The distinction between task accomplishment and task responsibility (Gangong/Coleman, 1999; Leslie/Anderson/ Branson, 1991) allowed capturing that mothers often manage domestic labor and childcare without executing directly the tasks. In fact, they also carry responsibility for the household when other family members execute the tasks (Doucet 2001; Daly 2002). As in Sara's example, when fathers display responsibility for a specific task, mothers are often still responsible at a more general level for the larger project or the entire procedure (Gottzén/Good 2010).

Another mother, Rossana, reports that taking her son's bag on the way to the gym is an activity relying totally on her memory (cf. Excerpt 5). Such a task is so invisible to her son and husband that, if she was not there, they would go to the gym without it.

Excerpt 5:

Rossana: "on Friday, he ((the husband)) was the one who had to go with him ((the child))… it was an exceptional case… the child goes to karate…I prepared the-the bag, the backpack, everything…I put it in front of the door ready to go (…) they got to the gym and realized that they hadn't the bag! Because no-

body ever cares about it, right? of .. of carrying it… my son, it's mother who carries it ((for him)), the husband by now …".

These episodes show that there are cognitive activities (such as remembering) involved in family work management that heavily impact on working mothers' workload. These activities are usually neglected in survey studies, even if they have, from the mothers' perspective, an essential role in allowing the family organization to run in a smooth and efficient way.

Planning and orchestrating. Working mothers framed planning as another activity through which household management is accomplished. Women talk about preparatory work that concerns many areas of family life and that enables her to have other tasks accomplished later. Piera describes it as a work that mostly happens "in the backstage", and which, being invisible, gives the impression that 'things take care of themselves' (cf. Excerpt 6). In another section of her comments, Piera refers to this work as a 'mental work', considered as something that happens 'within the skull' and, therefore, not observable by others. Piera complains that, due to its invisibility, this work is not acknowledged as having a true work status by the family and by society.

Excerpt 6:

Piera: "…it seems that things take care of …one doesn't understand that there is a backstage work…if things go in a certain way, they don't take care of themselves, right? There is somebody who takes care of them, right? Somebody is thinking about it…and I believe this is not understood".

Another reason for the little visibility of such backstage and orchestrating work is that it can be separated from direct execution of activities. We see an example of such a distinction between activities of orchestration and accomplishment of practical tasks when Sofia chooses things to buy at the supermarket and makes the order through the website. It is the husband, though, who later collects the grocery (cf. Excerpt 7).

Excerpt 7:

Sofia: "(...) I get up and begin to prepare breakfast for everybody then I give a very fast glance at the shopping list and make the bookings ((on the web)), because he has the Coop ((supermarket)) right down from the office, so when he leaves he gets it and brings it ((=the grocery)) home ... But I have to remind him … sometimes he does it by himself…but you can't rely on it".

Also, in this case, even if the father accomplishes the grocery shopping, Sofia does preparatory work which consists of not only checking the food at home and then placing the order, but also of activities such as monitoring the alimentary needs and preferences of family members or imagining and projecting possible meals to prepare; activities that, at a more general level, require, among other things, a work of continuous evaluation of others' needs and an anticipation of possible courses of actions (hypothetical meal plans).

The planning behind this task accomplishment is cognitively complex (more than just picking up the groceries), progressively built over time through everyday interactions, and sustains the accomplishments of following more circumscribed tasks, such as occasional grocery shopping.

Overall, the analysis of the descriptions and accounts provided in the focus groups shows how the working mothers emphasize, rather than the practicalities conventionally associated with housework, the activity of management and orchestration of household labor and childcare. These practices are described as mostly cognitive, including planning, supervising, monitoring, and orchestrating. Furthermore, they are described as a burden on their shoulders in distinctive ways as compared with other family members and, notably, their spouses.

In the next section, we will triangulate (Denzin 1978) the analyses of the interviews with different sources of data, which provide a window into the management practices carried out by working mothers from a different, although comparable, set. We will examine how the working mothers participating in the ICELF ethnographic study mark their activities across the day and the week and we will select, from this ethnography, one case study to show how the management practices develop and can be followed on a turn-by-turn basis by analyzing in depth the family interaction recorded at home.

Task organization in mothers' self-reported charts

Self-reported charts completed by the working mothers in the ICELF ethnography, give a graphical representation of both the variety and the "density" of activities occurring within a certain space of time, and provide a window into how the eight working mothers scheduled their household activities according to time constraints.

Overall, the ICELF mothers exploit time opportunities between activities. Their charts display what Darrah (2007) defines as *"chunking" of activities,* i.e. the practice of "breaking activities into constituent parts or modules" which, he conceives, is "an adaptation to the absence of longer periods of uninterrupted time" (2007:266). By exploiting interstitial times, mothers seem, then, to opt for a practice of condensing and "packaging" most activities in a narrow time, which as it has been described, is a tool to enhance efficiency (see references in Gillis 2001; Southerthon 2003). An example of such usage of interstitial times is the mother in the Giti family[8] (cf. Tab.1), who stretches the time after Wednesday dinner (she goes to bed earlier during the other days of the week) to do domestic chores (ironing), while watching TV at the same time. Moreover, she engages in activities (laundry, dinner preparation, washing dishes) that happen between main family events (such as dinner).

Table 1: Self-reported charts of Giti mother during the evening of a workday

	Mother
Wednesday evening	18.30-19.00: I play with B. (daughter)
	19.00-20.00: I make dinner
	20.00-21.00: dinner and washing dishes
	21.00-23.00: I iron with TV
	23.00-23.30: TV
	23.30: I go to bed

8 All names have been changed.

Another example is provided by the extract from the Ripe mother's chart (cf. Tab.2): when the family returns home, she orients to both house-care (tidying up/dinner preparation) and childcare (homework).

Table 2: Self-reported charts of Ripe mother during the evening of a Sunday

	Mother
Sunday evening	18.00: back home/I tidy up
	18.30: homework
	19.00: I prepare dinner
	19.40: we have dinner
	20.30: I plan our next week
	21.30: kids go to bed
	22.00: TV
	23.30: to bed

Data like these show how working mothers engage, within a very short time, in several activities related to both household chores and childcare. Other charts show how they are able to schedule childcare-related activities (such as returning home to have lunch with the kids, bringing the kids to the dentist or to sports) in-between their office hours (e.g., during lunch break). Given the task to which the working mothers responded (i.e., marking and allocating activities to time slots during the day), charts leave activities such as planning, monitoring, and remembering – which working mothers in the first study identified as central in their domestic workload – obscure. One exception is provided by Ripe mother's chart shown above, when she quotes "20.30: I plan our next week". The opportunity to shift rapidly from one activity to another (sometimes distant in place), or to address concurrently different household demands require, though, a great deal of management and orchestration, if we consider that it is done as part of the routine accomplishment of "doing family" (Aronsson 2006).

In order to provide a detailed analysis of how the concurrent management of different activities can be enacted, we chose to select one episode from the corpus of video-recorded family interactions, which finely captures a time when many tasks need to be concurrently accomplished; this is the family homecoming, described as a particularly stressful moment in the family agenda (cf. also Gottzén/Good 2010; Rönka et al. 2010). Managing the family organization as family members re-enter the domestic space together is pivotal in this case.

In what follows, we will focus on such a "critical" time, analyzing its interactional and practical unfolding.

Management practices in naturally occurring interactions

The availability of a corpus of video-recorded family interaction at home provided us with the unique opportunity to observe the fine details of how everyday family activities get done. Compared with what working mothers tell us about their daily schedule inside

and outside the home, ethnographic observation and video-recording can provide clues on how management activities are enacted in daily family life.

The following three-minute episode is taken from the video-recording taped at home in the Mari family on one Sunday evening. The Mari family is a middle-class family composed of four persons: mother, father, and two children (Livia, 13 years old, and Carlo, eight years old). Both mother and father are academic professors, and travel during the week because they teach in other cities. Part of the housework is outsourced to a housemaid for 35 hours during the week. The housemaid does not specifically take care of the children, although she may monitor them when she is home during the afternoon. Frequently, due to their – and their children's – engagement in outdoor sports (such as skiing or sailing), the Mari family leaves the city for the weekend and return home on Sunday evening. This was also the case on the Sunday during which researchers video-recorded the family interactions at home.

The episode starts at about 8 p.m. as the family has just returned home from the weekend trip (to the seaside). Also, the grandmother is occasionally present at home. Researchers filmed the family participants as they stepped into the house and started to arrange plans for the dinner and other activities.

Excerpt 8: Sunday evening – returning home

Excerpt 8a: ((in the kitchen))

Participants: father (Anton), mother (Gioia), Carlo (eight years old), Livia (13 years old)

((mother, father and Carlo enter the kitchen))

1 Father we'll eat something quickly and then we go to bed uh? [( )
2 Carlo [(okay),
3 (2.0) ((mother trashes a bag))
4 Father [( )
5 Mother: [Livia= Carlo= no
6 Carlo I go to bed
7 Mother Carlo don't: you don't ha[ve to go to bed
8 Carlo [I am I-
9 Mother dad has -
10 Father what do you do? what do you do ((probably to Carlo))
11 Mother come sweetheart. (.) you have to do a little [bit of homework
12 Father [you have to do homework and (wait)
13 Mother come with me. so that we do a bit of homework (1.0)
14 and while we prepare something to eat , (.) and. (1.0)
15 Carlo 'll cook!
16 Mother no you have to do a little bit of ho:mework< ((slightly smiling)) come with me
17 ((gently pushing Carlo toward the living room))
18 Carlo yes
19 Mother where is your bag
((Mother and Carlo walk together through the corridor))

Family homecomings have been documented as complex events jam-packed by several, often pressuring and competing needs (Arcidiacono 2007: Campos et al. 2009; Ochs et al. 2010). Parents and children may feel compelled to attend to different activities (according to their own agendas of priorities) and, then, convergence of interests and attention may

be difficult to achieve. The father's turn, here initiating the sequence, appears as an attempt to set an overall agenda for all the family members: namely, having something to eat and going to bed (line 1). He uses a general, impersonal form (*si mangia*, literally *"one should eat"*), thus imbuing his proposal with a prescriptive, normative tone. The proposal is immediately met and replied by Carlo (eight years old), who is within earshot of his father speaking and aligns with one part of the father's suggestion (he agrees to go to bed; lines 2, 6). At this point, his mother intervenes, hurriedly (lines 4-5) correcting the father's proposal (see line 10) and stopping the young child from going to bed (line 7). Instead, the mother tells Carlo (lines 11, 13) to do his homework.

The recall of the child's homework introduces a further demand in the complex management and timing of the family agenda. Attending to homework is set as a child's priority over eating, and motivating him to do his homework also affects the parents' priorities (or, at least, the mother's). Childcare activities – here meant as monitoring and assisting the children in some of their duties – must run concurrently, then, with dinner preparation and eating. It should be noted that, whereas activities such as eating and sleeping, invoked by the father, are occasioned by the present moment and needs (i.e. the end of the day), the activity recalled by the mother is displaced in time; it is rooted in the past – referring to homework that was likely left unfinished over the weekend – and projects into the future – referring to homework that need to be accomplished for the day after. Remembering (what has been left to be done, what has to be done) is then key in managing and orchestrating the family activities when competing tasks (here, having dinner and doing homework) need to be done. The father cooperates (lines 10, 12), aligning with the mother in pushing the child's attention toward the new demand.

The mother's contribution is not only limited to reminding the child of what he has to do, but also includes her active participation in setting the conditions for her son to attend to his task and, later, helping him herself (something we do not cover here in the analysis). After being assured that the child complied with her advice (line 18), the mother prompts him to look for the tools and materials he needs, i.e., his schoolbag. The video camera now follows mother and child in the living room and, then, into the child's room:

Excerpt 8b: ((in the child's room))

22 Mother dear go and take your bag though. I think it's in your bedroom let's see a little,
((Carlo walks out the room into the corridor, toward the kitchen, Mother goes toward the child's bedroom))
23 Mother no=no I think it is here in the bedroom Carlo
24 (2.0)
25 Carlo no it's::: here I 'd say my [bag
26 Mother → ((from the bedroom) [CARLO it's HERE INDEED ((she takes the bag and carries it))
27 as I told you:,

The mother engages in a series of actions aimed at obtaining the child's availability and full engagement in the homework activity: she solicits the child to look for and find his bag, offering prompts on where it might be (lines 22, 23) and eventually finding the bag herself. Contrary to the child's expectation, his mother is the one who correctly remembers where the bag had been left. Thus, she demonstrates a full understanding of the

child's domain and actions, both those that have yet to be done and those that have been accomplished (such as putting the bag somewhere).

As the episode unfolds (see excerpt 8c, lines 45-50 below), we see the mother fully involved in Carlo's homework, e.g., helping him orient toward the task, monitoring his movements and tools, arranging for him the space and tools to work, preventing him from being distracted. In sum, she acts as "scaffolder" enabling the child's full engagement in such an acitivity.

At the opposite side of the house, in the kitchen, the father is busy arranging the food for the dinner. Grandmother and Livia are also there, bending over the sink where grandma is cleaning some fish they apparently brought from the seaside trip. When the mother enters the living room with Carlo's bag in her hand, the father summons her from the kitchen.

The availability of two video cameras that followed both parents allowed us to track the actions that each of them was concurrently doing: the father looks at the fridge once, he takes some food (mostly cheese) out and puts it on the table. Then, he orients to the fridge again, at which point he summons the mother.

Excerpt 8c: ((in the child's room))

33 Father Gio'?
34 Mother yes Anton ((bending on Carlo's bag)) I COME SO:on as I j[u:st
35 Anton [( )
36 Mother I set him to do his history homework ((she pulls Carlo's notebook out of the bag)) come ((to Carlo, she opens the notebook and places it on the desk))
37 (3.0) ((Carlo walks away from mother and he cannot be seen by the video camera))
(…)
45 Mother take it. ((moving the notebook toward Carlo))
46 Carlo shall I (si[t)?
47 Mother [do you need to go pee before?
48 Carlo yes
49 Mother so go pee come on, (1.5) run
50 Carlo (all right) ((exiting the room))

In responding to the father, the mother seems to *frame* the activity in which she is involved as something she actively promotes and monitors ('I set him to do his history homework'); in so doing, she holds herself publicly accountable for the child's actions. Also, she informs the father about the type of activity (the *history homework*, ibidem) which the child needs attending, working then as a family (loud)speaker, i.e., self-selecting as the voice by which family members are kept publicly informed about each other's actions.

While putting the father's summon on hold, the mother maintains her attention on the homework activity, orienting the child's attention toward the notebook, monitoring his physiccal arrangement[9] and checking whether the child needs to attend to other (physical) needs, that might possibly compete with the accomplishment of his homework.

The father summons the mother again 10 seconds later, as he completes his task with the towels and orients again to the fridge:

9 This implies that she is keeping track of the child's physiological rhythms and anticipates the consequences of potential gaps and time mismatches in them.

Excerpt 8d: ((in the bathroom// corridor))

((Mother is in the bathroom attending to the child))

71 Father (fa) Giò? *((to Mother))*
72 (9.0) *((Father opens the fridge and bends over it))*
((hearable conversation between Mother and Carlo from the bathroom))
73 Father Giò? *((he closes the fridge))*
74Mother yes, Anton
75 Father → *((standing close to the fridge, looking toward Mother's direction))*
didn't you say th[a:t
76 Carlo [ah::: *((talking from the bathroom))*
77 Father . you 'd co[ok a:: vegetable=something.
[*((he steps toward the kitchen's thresholds, looking toward the corridor))*
78 Mother the[re should be some toma[toes,
[*((Father makes few steps toward the corridor))*
79 Carlo [aaa:, ((as if whining))
80 Father [there's nothing here.
[*(he turns back and steps back to the kitchen))*
81 Carlo (whining)) o ( )
82 Mother *(exiting the bathroom))* I- I left Priscilla the money I told her to buy them. *((walking rapidly from the bathroom to the kitchen))*
83 (1.0) *((Mother enters the kitchen))*
84 (2.0) *((Father is looking into the fridge, Mother comes close to him and starts looking, too))*
85 Father I don't see them
(…)

The father has found out that, contrary to his expectations, there is nothing ready in the fridge. In reminding the mother what she had apparently said (*'didn't you say'*, line 75), he is holding her accountable for providing the food for dinner. The mother immediately responds, firstly noting what there is in the fridge that could be prepared for dinner and then, when the father denies, she explains that she told the housekeeper to buy some food.

The mother's account sheds light on how she cultivates a domestic responsibility that extends beyond the strictly domestic sphere (see Doucet 2001 on responsibility in the maintenance of the connections to the social network of help surrounding the family).

The mother is then addressed and treated as a point of reference and coordination at the crossroads of different activities as well as different interlocutors, as is visible in the fact that, although interacting with the father, she does not stop to be summoned by the child, from the bathroom.

Ultimately, we include the last lines of the episode, providing a window into how the problem, now presented to both the mother and father, is eventually solved.

Here, the mother looks at the fridge and describes to her husband what is in there.

Excerpt 8e: ((in the kitchen))

96 Mother there are ( ) ( ),
97 (1.0) tomatoes, (0.6) these are the little, and these are the big ones.
98 Father . she didn't cook anything then.
99 Mother she did not.
100 Father didn't she say that she would have cooked something.
101 didn't she like it?
102 Mother she did not. there are.

103	there's the ha:m, (0.4) there's th[is pa:sta,	
104 Father →		[( ) how can we cook now.
105 Carlo		[h hh h. ((mimicking something between a cry and a laugh))
106 Father →		[(do you want me) to cook pasta or not.
107 Carlo	[mom what do I have on my leg?	
108 Father →	as you like.	
109 Grandma	I start cooking a bit of fish (+ dim) meanwhile.	
110 Father	[( ) *((turning to Grandma))*	
111 Carlo	[mO:::mmy:::.	
112 Mother	there are::: a bit of cheese,	
113 Father →	I cook pasta then.	
114 Mother →	cook the pasta ok.	
115 Father →	I cook the pasta.	
116	(0.4) ((Mother walks toward the kitchen thresholds))	
117 Father	both of them or just one.	
118 Mother	do one.	

((Mother reaches Carlo in the bathroom))

Compared with the father's statement (line 80, excerpt 1d) that there was "nothing", the mother lists different kinds of food that may provide viable options – in the absence of the expected one – for making dinner. Here, it seems that the mother is more able to re-arrange configurations of objects, displaying what Goodwin (1994) labels as "professional vision", i.e. the ability to see things in a way that supports specific actions and purposes, a way that may be unachievable for those who are novice or peripheral within a specific domain. The mother's ability in "reading the fridge" and providing a list of items that may serve as viable options for making a dinner suggests a practical competence (cf. Scribner 1984) which the mother develops and that positions herself as the primary authority in interpreting the situation and choosing among possible courses of actions/solution.

This practice of management of food provision is clearly different from the activity of cooking, traditionally associated with domestic work. While the mother engages in a search for a solution, the father rhetorically sustains a complaint (sequence 98-104) against the housemaid, who failed to adhere to the directions of buying and cooking something for the family.

Although acknowledging the failure, the mother does not push further the complaint; on the contrary, she continues to list the food options available in the fridge, orienting toward the accomplishment of the practical aim of cooking dinner. After having expressed his doubt about the possibility of cooking at all (line 104), the father launches the hypothesis of cooking pasta (line 106), and he does so by asking the mother whether she wants him to do this (lines 106, 108). Thus, he still holds her as *principal* (Goffman 1959) of the decision, i.e., the one who can legitimately allow and decide a certain course of action. The mother does not respond and continues listing, until the father, a few lines later, gives his choice (line 113), and obtains ratification from his wife (line 114).

The father's initiative resulted, then, from a long exploration in which the mother has been fully involved, addressed as the knowledgeable participant and ultimate supervisor. This is also demonstrated by the final question uttered by the father in line 117.

To sum up, the excerpt shows a case in which the couple – at the beginning of the episode – seems to distribute equally the family tasks: on the one hand, the father, with the

grandmother, takes care of the cooking, and on the other hand, the mother takes care of the children. However, a detailed analysis of the sequential development of the activities shows that the mother is ultimately regarded as being also responsible for managing the domain of food provision and preparation.

Moreover, the sequential analysis of the courses of actions performed by the mother and father within the same span of three minutes shows a different rhythm in the development of their action. The mother's actions, developing across three minutes, include her performing quite a range of activities in different domains (monitoring both children's homework, assisting Carlo in the bathroom, "reading" the fridge and participating in decisions about dinner preparation), moving across the apartment (in and out of four rooms), and interacting with all the other family members and actively orienting their behaviors too. In comparison, the father's action develops with a slower rhythm, focusing on one single domain (dinner preparation), and does not involve the concurrent execution of complex interactional work.

Being addressed as "the manager" of household domains implies that the mother must remember things, remind people what they ought to do, maintain connections with the outside resources, and constantly monitor a family agenda. Even when the father nominates himself as the main agent who fully delivers a choice he made, he asks for – and receives – ratification from the mother, who figures then as the ultimate mentor of the decision-making process. We believe that this excerpt provides an opportunity to detail the range of complex social and psychological activities, many of them concurrently pursued, that might account for what mothers – in the focus groups – labeled as the "cognitive load" of their management practice of domestic work.

In particular, the obligation to "never forget" that mothers in the focus groups claim as being invariably associated with their role (and reported as the most burdensome job), is displayed in the interaction as the mother's constant activity of monitoring the agenda of the whole family in the past, present, and future.

Concluding remarks

In this paper we described the relevance of managerial practices in working mothers' perceptions of housework, comprising both domestic chores and childcare. Management activities have been accounted for as central for the everyday organization of a dual-earner family life. Our study has attempted to detail the elements which these managerial practices are made of, and has offered an instance in which they could be observed in action. In line with the epistemological principles of qualitative research, our aim is not to generalize the results but to contribute to detailing the categories with which to look at the domestic and family work taking into account the perspective of family members (Medved 2004).

Our results can be discussed within three different main themes.

1) *Housework as an arena for practical reasoning and thinking*. Reframing the common sense idea of housework as a set of merely 'brainless' and simple tasks, we suggest reconceptualizing dual-earner families as the locus of complex practical reasoning and ac-

tion. Through a close analysis of discourses generated in focus groups with working mothers, and by means of a sequential analysis of naturally occurring practices in a busy home, we showed that there is cognitive work (planning, remembering, thinking ahead) that constitutes the most challenging and complex part of a mother's job. Besides the accomplishment of material tasks, this work needs to be taken into account when we talk of 'housework'. Practices implied by this cognitive work are not easily captured by the traditional categories used to conceive housework. On the contrary, they recall what has been described within ethnographic studies of workplaces and centers of coordination (Suchman 1997) as "practical thinking" (Scribner 1986).

In time-critical situations characterized by many, possibly concurrent, flows of activities, at home as in the workplace, managerial practices seem to play a relevant role in the coordination and the actual accomplishment of action.

2) *Management practices: from work to home or vice versa?* In the detailed analysis of a video-recorded family returning home, we showed an example of how mother's managerial work could be accomplished. We observed the mother handling several and concurrent domains of activities: she matches demands of competing schedules, remembers things to do for all in the family, anticipates and plans courses of actions, monitors family needs, facilitates the flow of information within the family. In so doing, she presents herself as always accessible to family members, while sustaining with competence the unfolding of the overall family work. In the analysis of the self-reported charts, we were able to show how mothers engage in "interstitial" actions placed between main family events; if consistent, this could be seen as a time-saving strategy that allows them to accomplish more within a limited span of time. This finding matches the results of studies on other mothers' strategies such as multitasking and intra-household and inter-household mobility (cf. Cekaite 2010; Good 2009). Other studies (Darrah 2007) noted how efficient use of time and energy or productivity seems to drive the management of activities in the workplace as much as at home. Our research participants were lawyers, secretaries, and accountants, and their jobs were arenas where they experience practices and ideologies that may instruct them to manage busy agendas. Managerial practices and expertise are likely to be applied and cross-transferred in both settings, from workplace into home and back. Further studies may involve also non-working mothers and part-time working mothers to investigate whether there is a direction in this path and whether household settings could be the places in which mothers develop expertise on managing and organizing that are then applied elsewhere.

3) *Managerial practices as care work*. Managing and orchestrating family life – sometimes remotely from the office – becomes an important form of family care in situations in which mothers dedicate most of their time, and their physical presence, to paid work outside the home (Schneider/Waite 2005).

Within the wider socio-cultural scenario, working mothers' managerial practices may also interpret and enact a form of care work that is not tied to physical accessibility (Hays 1996), but to remembering, planning, and coordinating family life. "Thinking family", keeping family needs in mind all the time, is, in this hypothesis, a possible way for mothers to take care and guarantee family members' well-being. Further developments of our study will consider the couple level, examining together fathers' and mothers' accounts

for the organization of domestic work and their participation in it. This will deepen our knowledge of both partners' involvement and perspective about the accomplishment and development of a family project.

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Addresses of the authors/Anschriften der Autorinnen:

Dr. Francesca Alby (Corresponding author/Korrespondenzautorin)
Dr. Marilena Fatigante
Prof. Dr. Cristina Zucchernaglio

Sapienza University of Rome
Department of Social and Developmental Psychology
Via dei Marsi 78
001185 Roma
Italy/Italien

E-Mail: francesca.alby@uniroma1.it
marilena.fatigante@uniroma1.it
cristina.zucchermaglio@uniroma1.it