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Negotiating Motherhood: Social Expectations, Institutional Challenges, and Shared Caregiving Practices

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Abstract

The present paper delves into some experiences of contemporary mothers to explore how structural constraints and individual agency are negotiated within the interplay of overlapping spheres of social expectations, institutional challenges, and shared caregiving practices. Building on narrative interviews with a sample of mothers from northern Italy, this study explores how maternal identity is socially and relationally constructed. Against the theoretical background of intensive mothering and parenting as a social construct, the analysis reveals tensions between the gender asymmetry of parental responsibility, individualistic and collective caregiving practices, and the redefinition of heterogeneous maternal subjectivities and expressions.

Keywords: motherhood, caregiving, gendered parenthood, social imaginaries, intensive parenting.

Abstract

Il presente contributo approfondisce alcune esperienze delle madri contemporanee per indagare come i vincoli strutturali e l'*agency* individuale vengano negoziati nell'intersezione tra aspettative sociali, sfide istituzionali e pratiche di cura condivisa. A partire da interviste narrative con un campione di madri dell'Italia settentrionale, lo studio analizza la costruzione sociale e relazionale dell'identità materna. Sullo sfondo teorico della maternità intensiva e della genitorialità intesa come costrutto sociale, l'analisi mette in luce le tensioni tra l'asimmetria di genere nelle responsabilità genitoriali, le pratiche di cura individuali e collettive, e la ridefinizione della legittimità di eterogenee soggettività e istanze materne.

Parole chiave: maternità, cura, genitorialità di genere, immaginari sociali, genitorialità intensiva.

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1. *Introduction*

In contemporary society, motherhood is entangled with broader social and cultural frameworks shaping expectations, responsibilities, and identities. Far from being an innate biological predisposition, motherhood takes form through processes of social and institutional mediation (Formenti, Cino, 2023; Milani, 2018). In this study, we examine how maternal identity is constructed through the entanglement of social positioning, cultural narratives, and interaction with both institutional and non-institutional actors. Building on findings from narrative interviews with seven mothers from Lombardy, we glimpse at some of the lived experiences and caregiving practices defining contemporary motherhood. Findings underline how mothers navigate competing expectations, balancing professional and caregiving roles while facing institutional barriers and normative societal demands.

The study also explores the role of informal support networks in mitigating the demands of intensive parenting, pointing to alternative, more collective caregiving models that challenge dominant paradigms of maternal care. Despite variations in women's life trajectories, we identified a recurring pattern: namely, the pervasive naturalization of the mother as the primary caregiver, and the social pressure this exerts on our interviewees.

2. *Contemporary perspectives on motherhood*

Parenthood has undergone significant transformations over the past century. Historically considered a natural and intuitive practice, it is today increasingly perceived as a structured, expert-driven endeavor (Lee *et al.*, 2014; Sità, 2017). A key element of contemporary parenthood is the rise of intensive parenting, particularly intensive mothering (Hays, 1996). This ideology positions mothers as the main subjects responsible for their children's physical, emotional, and cognitive well-being, and is characterized by time-consuming, emotionally compelling, and financially draining caregiving practices, reinforced by policy frameworks, institutional norms, and media discourses (Forbes, Lamar, Bornstein, 2021). The archetype of the "super mother", who merges professional success with extraordinary maternal dedication, generates unrealistic expectations contributing to feelings of inadequacy among women (Constantinou, Varela, Buckby, 2021). This paradigm also reinforces gende-

red divisions of labor, as fathers, despite being increasingly encouraged to be involved, are often framed as ancillary caregivers (Cino, Dalledonne Vandini, 2023).

Rather than being confined to the domestic sphere, motherhood unfolds through social interactions and institutional negotiations. A systemic lens (Formenti, Ed., 2012) provides a useful framework for understanding how maternal identity is constructed through patterns of interaction, recursive communication, and the dynamic interplay between individuals and their environment. Parenthood is not solely an individual or dyadic experience but emerges within a network of relationships shaped by feedback loops, adaptation, and contextual influences. Parental identity is further formed by institutional expectations and the extent to which parents perceive their caregiving practices as being socially validated or challenged. While educational institutions and policy frameworks regulate and legitimize maternal and paternal roles, in practice, mothers often assume most caregiving responsibilities (Brown, 2022).

Another feature of contemporary parenthood is the epistemology of parental determinism, which assumes that children's future success or failure is directly determined by parental choices (Fargion, 2023). This linear logic has led to an amplified focus on risk consciousness, where parents, especially mothers, are expected to continuously mitigate potential threats to their children's well-being (Lupton, 2012). Parental risk management is further complicated by institutional structures ratifying normative expectations about families. Schools, childcare centers, and healthcare providers may function as sites of parental surveillance, where caregiving practices are assessed and, at times, disciplined (Formenti, 2009). Mothers who fail to conform to dominant parenting ideologies often face judgment, marginalization, or institutional scrutiny, reinforcing the notion that "good parenting" is a narrowly defined, socially regulated practice (Formenti, Cino, 2023).

While dominant parenting ideologies emphasize individual parental responsibility, alternative frameworks highlight the potential of distributed caregiving models. The presence of extended kinship networks and informal support systems (e.g., grandparents, babysitters, close friends) challenges the individualistic and privatized nature of Western parenting norms, pointing towards more collectivistic pedagogical models (Lansford *et al.*, 2021). Thus, recognizing the relational and contextual nature of parenthood makes it possible to move beyond the constraints of intensive mothering and embrace less unequal and more community-oriented approaches to caregiving.

3. *The study in question*

Our study employs an inductive qualitative approach to capture some of the complexities of contemporary motherhood, building on a broad exploratory research question: *How do mothers make sense of their motherhood in everyday life?*

Focusing on meaning-making and lived experience, we conducted open-ended, narrative interviews with seven working mothers, prioritizing richness of data over sample size (Denzin, 1989), to explore how participants construct and articulate their caregiving roles within specific socio-cultural contexts. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, primarily via informal personal networks in the Milan area. Inclusion criteria required participants to be mothers with current or recent employment experience and available for in-depth narrative interviews. The inclusion of women with employment trajectories was intended to explore how caregiving practices intersect with professional responsibilities, a key site of tension in contemporary motherhood (Forbes, Lamar, Bornstein, 2021).

While no specific age range for the children was imposed, participants were selected to reflect a variety of caregiving arrangements linked to having at least one child in early or middle childhood, where institutional and informal care practices are particularly salient (Gigli, 2016). The sample includes mothers aged 30-45 years, all professionals residing in Milan and its surrounding areas, with one participant working abroad (Haiti, with prior experience in Sub-Saharan Africa). The sample also spans diverse family configurations, including married, separated, and co-habiting mothers (for a broader overview see *Figure 1*). Participants' informed consent was collected, and all identifiable information was anonymized.

Pseudonym	Year of Birth	Age	Residence	Employment Status	Marital Status	Number of Children	Children's age
Genevieve	1980	44	Milan	Freelancer	Separated	2	7, 14
Giulia	1994	30	Milan	Freelancer	Separated	1	5
Alice	1987	37	Milan	Freelancer	Married	1	2
Silvana	1989	35	Haiti	Employee	Almost Divorced	1	2
Olivia	1991	33	Province of Milan	Employee	Married	2	4, 7
Ninì	1994	30	Province of Milan	Freelancer	Cohabiting	1	7
Azzurra	1986	38	Milan	Freelancer	Married	1	5

Figure 1 – *Interviewees' data*

Interviews purposefully followed a minimal structure, posing two generative questions:

1) *What does being a mother mean to you?*
2) *Could you walk me through a typical day in your life?*

The goal was to encourage participants to narrate their experiences freely. Conducted in familiar settings to foster rapport, interviews ranged from 24 to 56 minutes (M = 37.14, SD = 9.92). Data analysis was conducted through an inductive and iterative thematic approach, grounded in a constructivist and interpretive epistemology (Denzin, 1989; Saldaña, 2021). The first cycle of analysis involved open, first-level coding, privileging emic categories (Markee, 2012) derived from participants' narratives. This stage aimed to preserve the specificity of individual experiences and identify preliminary units of meaning. In the second cycle, we engaged in pattern coding to cluster these initial codes into broader, second-level, analytical categories, capturing both shared concerns and contrasting positions across cases.

The entire analytical process was collaborative: while the second author produced the initial coding matrix, both authors engaged in analytic dialogues to refine the emerging structures, explore intersubjective dynamics, and interrogate how participants' accounts resonated with, or resisted, dominant cultural discourses on motherhood.

A third step involved a thematic synthesis, during which categories were re-examined and recontextualized to develop a set of transversal themes. These final themes were not only descriptive but interpretive, allowing us to articulate how caregiving roles were negotiated within broader social imaginaries, institutional norms, and situated moral expectations. Attention was paid to latent content, narrative tensions, and shifts in position-taking that revealed the complexities of maternal identity construction. *Figure 2*, here below, exemplifies this three-step analytical procedure, outlining the progression from some first-level codes to thematic synthesis, through the interplay between emic insights, collaborative interpretation, and the construction of transversal interpretive themes.

First-cycle coding	Second-cycle coding	Thematization
• Feelings of inadequacy • Female empowerment • Maintenance of one's identity • Maternal role • Primary caregiver • Responsibility • Social comparison • Social isolation	• Identity • Maternal role • Emotional burden of maternal responsibility • Social comparison in maternal role formation • Work-life balance as a site of tension	Motherhood as social construct: recognition, legitimization, and positioning
• Educator • Enrollment obstacles • Facilitator • Fatigue • Feeling inadequate • Mismatch with institutional norms • Parental discipline expectations • Parental time • Primary caregiver	• Institutional expectations on maternal responsibility • Negotiating parental identity through school interactions • Parental judgment and social comparison in institutional settings • Temporal misalignments between family life and educational structures	Social support and normative expectations in educational services
• Child's well-being • Cultural differences • Demanding routines • Invisible labor of coordination • Maternal detachment as protective • Multiple caregivers • Non-biological support figures • Personal time • Primary caregiver • Resilience	• Challenging normative maternal scripts • Decentering maternal centrality • Reconfiguring parental identity in collective contexts • Redistributing caregiving responsibilities and emotional relief • Relational transformation through shared caregiving • Time redistribution and maternal self-care	Support network, care strategies, and distributed caregiving

Figure 2 – *Three-step analysis*

4. *Findings and discussions*

We organized our findings across three thematic axes highlighting some of the ways participants negotiate contemporary motherhood:

the social construction of motherhood, the role of educational institutions in shaping parental expectations, and the importance of informal support networks in caregiving.

4.1 *Motherhood as a social construct: recognition, legitimization, and positioning*

Parenthood is not an instinctive attribute, nor is it merely an individual experience; rather, it is a dynamic process informed by interactions within broader social and symbolic structures. The acknowledgement of one's parental role goes beyond the private, domestic sphere, being continuously negotiated with family members, peers, institutional actors, and professional environments. This process is not neutral but structured by normative expectations defining what it means to be a "good parent", and which family configurations are socially legitimized.

Those mothers whose parental trajectories do not conform to conventional frameworks often find themselves redefining and redistributing roles and caregiving responsibilities. As one of our interviewees reported, separated mothers, or those in non-traditional family structures, must actively construct and claim their parental legitimacy within a system that privileges the two-parent nuclear family as a normative prototype:

> A child needs both a mom and a dad to balance the nurturing. […] Nurturing is something like care […]. […] Usually, there's this triangle between mom, dad, and child, where everything is balanced […]. But in my case, I kind of take on both the maternal and paternal roles with Luca. Thankfully, the grandparents help restore some balance, but for me, it's really difficult (*Giulia, 30*).

Giulia's words reveal the persistence of a binary parental model, where motherhood and fatherhood are conceptualized as complementary yet distinct roles. Even in cases of single parenting, caregiving remains structured around this twofold framework, where "missing" functions are compensated more than reconfigured. Giulia does not seem to question the socio-cultural script defining parental roles but rather navigates them positioning herself as taking on both the "maternal" and "paternal" role, while acknowledging the importance of extended kin in mitigating this asymmetry.

On the other hand, mothers embedded in cultural contexts operating outside the Western nuclear family paradigm frame parenthood in more collective and relational terms:

> Something I've really felt here in Haiti, even with people who aren't my biological family but have become family in a broader sense, is how they've taken care of my son as if he were their own […]. And working within communities, I see a different approach to caregiving – you can find this in other African contexts as well" (*Silvana, 35*).

Silvana's thoughts suggest an alternative model of parenthood, less centered on individualistic maternal responsibility and more inclined to communal caregiving. Her lived experience challenges the Western emphasis on parental primacy, articulating instead a distributed form of care where multiple actors contribute to childrearing. As such, the Western ideals of intensive mothering (Hays, 1996), positioning caregiving within a private, domestic domain and framing mothers as the primary accountable actors for their children's upbringing, are implicitly contested.

However, even when mothers can negotiate their caregiving roles within different socio-cultural milieus, the intersection of parenthood and professional identity remains a site of tension, especially for women navigating work environments where motherhood is perceived as a liability. As the same interviewee puts it:

> In the job interview I'm currently doing with my Italian organization, this happened to me: they asked how I manage things with my child, how I juggle work and being a mother, and so on […]. On one hand, you think, "Oh, how considerate of them", but on the other, you can't help but feel that it's actually a bias (*Silvana, 35*).

Silvana's experience exemplifies how the social positioning of motherhood is not only relational but also profoundly institutionalized. The seemingly innocent question about her maternal management reflects discourses framing motherhood as a potential obstacle to professional reliability. This approach aligns with wider cultural constructs that view the maternal role at odds with the demands of economic productivity. The implicit assumption is that a working mother should display remarkable organizational skills and firm commitment to counteract the idea that children's caregiving might compromise her performance.

This institutional framing comes with its own material consequences: the deep-rooted association between motherhood and decreased work

efficiency propagates structural discrimination, worsened by the lack of a flexible work culture that promotes work-family balance (Mazzucchelli, 2011). Thus, mothers are not just recognized or not in diverse social contexts but must also actively negotiate the legitimacy of the juxtaposition of their maternal and professional identities within environments that frame these roles as conflicting. Altogether, these narratives underscore how parenthood is far from being merely biologically tied but socially constructed and shaped by overlapping spheres of individual positionings, institutional logics, and cultural frames.

4.2 *Social support and normative expectations in educational services*

Institutional pedagogical environments, such as educational services, function as loci where personal parenting experiences are measured against implicit normative models (Bove, 2020). Some interviewees shared feelings of inadequacy or distance from the caregiving practices enacted by other mothers or expected in educational institutions. This highlights how motherhood is not only constructed through individual experiences, but also through external interactions that may expose them to judgment and/or validation. Within this background, schools and childcare services may be understood as sites where parenthood is institutionalized, ratifying processes of regulation, exclusion, and conditional recognition. As in the words of this mother:

> Then daycare started, and I felt lost again. I started wondering whether my way of being…I don't know, I just didn't feel 'enough' as a mom […] Other parents had all these little attentions toward their children that I didn't have, and I started questioning whether I was lacking something – whether I was right, or if the right way was what I was seeing (*Azzurra, 38*).

Mothers who feel desynchronized with the standards set by other families or institutional norms – whether in daycare, schools, or early childhood services – often experience a sense of judgment. This may lead them to scrutinize their own behaviors and beliefs, sometimes fostering implicit or explicit social comparison with other parents or, in other cases, self-doubt, stress, or a sense of inadequacy regarding educators' expectations:

> Andrea, for example, […] attended his first year of preschool at the public school in Meda. […] He was three years old, and every day the teachers would

wait for me at the door to tell me he did something wrong. And they expected me to scold him. […] But how can I scold a three-year-old at home after school? Sure, I can tell him 'That's not okay, you need to behave like this', but I can't really reprimand him if at home he behaves just fine. Because he didn't do those things at home (*Olivia, 33*).

In these words, the school is framed as a mechanism of parental normalization, expecting an alignment between institutional and family-based educational models, which however is not shared by Olivia. The implicit demand for parental discipline rests on a framework where the responsibility for regulating the child's behavior extends beyond school, and onto the mother. This logic envisions a continuity between school and family, assuming a transfer of educational responsibilities reinforcing educational alignment, which, however, may not sit well with some mothers' frameworks.

All the women in the sample, as working mothers, highlighted the need for external social support to better manage childcare, whether in the form of fathers' involvement, help from grandparents, babysitters, or educational services like daycare and before- or after-school programs. Nonetheless, logistical and organizational obstacles were reported concerning fair access to educational services. The unpredictability of enrollment conditions implicitly excludes those who cannot preemptively structure their family life around institutional timelines, as the following excerpt exemplifies:

To enroll them in daycare, depending on when they're born, you must sign them up before they're even born, but they can only start after a certain number of months. Basically, the stars must align perfectly for you to get a spot in daycare and be able to return to work. It's exhausting and burdensome, both physically and mentally. It's one of the most challenging aspects (*Azzurra, 38*).

At the same time, the rigidity of some educational institutions exposes the struggle to reconcile parenting and institutional schedules. This is not merely a logistical issue, reflecting a ladder of contingencies that fails to accommodate the situated challenges parents face:

This year I forgot to sign her up for after-school care. It's just a matter of ten minutes – her school ends at 4:20 and I stop working at 4:30. But for those ten minutes, I can't pick her up. Last year, after-school care saved me because even if I worked in the afternoon, I could still pick her up and take care of things more calmly (*Ninì, 30*).

The perceived lack of structural support and the challenge of balancing work and caregiving are not simply management concerns. Rather, they reflect a broader model where parenthood lies in privatized responsibility, with access to childcare services contingent on individual or family resources. This system implicitly disregards those who lack informal support networks or the financial means to secure alternative arrangements. Based on these experiences, the institutionalization of parenthood operates through a process of selection and adaptation, privileging those who can conform to a predefined structure, while risking to marginalizing those who cannot fully fit within its constraints.

4.3. *Support network, care strategies, and distributed caregiving*

Our interviewees emphasized how, beyond formal institutions, parenthood is also shaped by informal networks of support that redefine the scopes and meanings of caregiving. Actors like grandparents, babysitters, friends, and the community at large can all ease (or constrain) mothers' endeavors in managing parenting and building alternative models of caregiving. Participants shared experiences conceptualizing extended family as encompassing not only biological but also social ties, who can provide essential support, especially for single parents, and challenge the traditional nuclear family model:

> Having them (the grandparents) is a great help […]. Sometimes he even spends the whole day with Grandpa […]. They go out to eat, go on little trips, ride bikes. He's the one who taught him to ride a bike without training wheels. So, as a father figure, he has his grandfather, then there is his grandmother who spoils him endlessly, and me. This is our little family (*Giulia, 30*).

> Besides the four of us – my husband, me, and his two grandparents – we also have a babysitter who initially started coming on Saturday mornings because, of course, schools are closed on Saturdays. I [...] used to work Saturday mornings, and Matteo often worked weekends too, so I absolutely needed someone, especially since my mom wasn't available either […]. Even now that I no longer work weekends, we decided to keep her coming a couple of times a month. The kids are really attached to her, and they're happy when she's around (*Olivia, 33*).

The distribution of caregiving through multiple figures is not just a practical solution; it also shapes how children relate to the world, pro-

moting a broader network of emotional and relational ties. Here parenting is conceptualized as a shared practice, where the child is not exclusively "the mother's" but rather part of a wider *relational ecology*. This perspective contrasts with the individualistic trends of Western parenting cultures, where the mother is often the sole recognized caregiver and communal support is seen as secondary or optional. As some scholars have noted, the lack of public childcare services and social policies that fail to promote the redistribution of caregiving responsibilities may reinforce this dynamic (Moscarini, 2014).

But the absence of a collective caregiving model as part of a broader *zeitgeist*, beyond gendered scripts stems, according to some interviewees, from a cultural resistance to fully and practically embrace the notion of shared responsibility for child-rearing. This was particularly relevant when comparing different social and geographical contexts:

> The way people perceive caregiving in Italy compared to Haiti has been completely different for me – it's one of the reasons I still don't see living in Italy with my son as an option. […] Taking care of a child shouldn't be the mother's sole responsibility, but in practice, that's how it is. I see it with my brother—he just had a baby, and the person who takes care of her is almost entirely his partner. Yes, there are the grandparents, but still […]. Tim has so many caregivers – his babysitter, the cleaning lady, the guard, and even the dogs. It's a huge advantage that would be impossible in Italy, but it has helped Tim avoid that overly dependent attachment to me. It also allows me to do my job and take care of myself sometimes (*Silvana, 35*).

Silvana's words reflect a model of distributed caregiving, where the presence of multiple caregivers is seen as enriching rather than diminishing parental bonds, also preventing what she defines as forms of "overly dependent attachment". This stands in clear contrast to the ideology of intensive motherhood, promoting exclusive maternal attachment. Additionally, the comparison between culturally different systems highlights a tension between Western individualistic parenting styles, and more collective models of care that help mothers feel less isolated. In our interviewees' words, isolation, in the Italian context, is perceived as the result of cultural models and social structures that fail to recognize caregiving as a distributed responsibility.

Their experiences suggest that to address parental support it is necessary to go beyond individualistic frameworks, reconsidering how society distributes and acknowledges care responsibilities. A recurring topic we identified, in this sense, was that the current situation, where parents

have to rely on private arrangements to manage childcare, ends up with marginalizing those who lack informal networks of support or financial means to find alternative solutions. Thus, the institutionalization of motherhood operates through classist selection and individuals' adaptability, privileging those who can conform to certain standards and leaving behind those mothers who cannot.

Conclusions

In this article, we explored the constant negotiation of motherhood at the intersection of intersecting dynamics of social recognition, institutional expectations, and caregiving practices. Although intensive parenting functions as a dominant ideology in the background, mothers from our sample tend to navigate its pressures juggling structural constraints and broader expectations that shape their parental identities. While institutional contexts, from schools to the workplace, seem to contribute to the intensification of mothering, alternative models of care, like extended kinship networks and distributed caregiving may provide strategies to challenge individualistic parenting paradigms, although these experiences may still be a prerogative of a few.

The emphasis on the tensions between private and collective caregiving is a key contribution of this work, showing how rethinking Western childrearing approaches could help mitigate the burdens mothers face with respect to their parenting. However, while we did not aim at generalizability, the small size and geographical concentration of our sample invites future research that may expand our findings with families from diverse geographical, socioeconomic, and cultural backgrounds.

Yet, our findings do invite broader reflections on how the *taken-for-grantedness* of maternal caregiving is structured and legitimized. Questioning maternal-centric cultural models calls not only for policy interventions (such as equal parental leaves and accessible childcare), but also for a reframing of caregiving as a collective responsibility rather than solely a private one.

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