LUNDS UNIVERSITET

Mai Mamma

An exploratory qualitative case study of Apulian mothers' perception of childcare

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Abstract

In Italy, ideas surrounding family and motherhood seem to be unveiled as myths rather than values. Despite the historical prominence of these notions within the national political and social agenda, the country's support to families and predominantly female caregivers remains severely inadequate. This insufficiency not only hinders progress in female employment – already one of the lowest in Europe – but also reinforces traditional gender roles within households that are already hard to be eradicated from the socio-political fabric.

There is a scarcity of qualitative research on motherhood and childcare in Italy, with even fewer local studies focusing on specific regions, especially in the South. This research attempts to fill this gap, representing an exploratory qualitative study of mothers residing in Puglia with preschool-aged children (0-6). The interviewees' perceptions of the care they undertake for their children is the primary focus of investigation.

The study employs a theoretical apparatus that draws from Silvia Federici and other Marxist-feminists' concept of social reproductive labor, to be then streamlined by Kathleen Lynch's theorization of love labor given the intimate nature of the care relations investigated. These theoretical underpinnings help identify four key themes linked to the interviewees' perspectives on childcare: lack of State support, intensive attitudes toward childcare, affective reasons for assuming childcare responsibilities, and use of formal vs. informal care support. These elements interact with the interviewees' perceptions of childcare, shaping their choices and experiences with it.

Keywords: care work, social reproduction, love labor, mothering, Puglia
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To nonna and Joan Didion

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The writing process of this dissertation took place during one of the hardest periods of my life. However, I am here writing the acknowledgments section, which I assume indicates that I made it through. Since this project is about care, I think it is right to mention all of the people that took care of me during the past six months.

I could not have written this dissertation without your support, Andrea. Since I know you, you have been a teacher, a supervisor, an editor and a friend. This project could not exist as it is without your help and I consider myself incredibly lucky for having had you by my side. Thank you for having the patience to deal with the most annoying person you know.

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Thank you *mamma*, although I have realized that complete understanding between us might not always be there, your unconditional care is the main reason I am still standing on my feet. I will be eternally grateful for the effort you invested in me, it is through your sacrifices that I have been able to access all that life offers and more. Your willingness to let me experience what you could not is a powerful testament of your love.

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An illustration that my dear friend Andrea dedicated to this work after one of our never-ending phone calls

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1. Introduction

How foolish to think you can tell your children about yourself before they're at least fifty.
To ask to be seen by them as a person and not as a function
(The Lost Daughter, Elena Ferrante, 2006)

On the second day of the *Stati Generali della Natalità*[1], held in Rome in May 2023, a discussion on the country's decreasing birth rate featured the participation of far-right Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and Pope Francis. While Bergoglio emphasized that "the theme of natality is central for everyone, especially for the future of Italy", Meloni provocatively stated "we live in an era where talking about birth rate, motherhood, and family is increasingly difficult; it seems like a revolutionary act", reaffirming her commitment to prioritize families as a top national interest (TG24, 2023a).

The government's persistent focus on natality and its references to preserving the Italian heritage – as highlighted by the Ministry of Agriculture Francesco Lollobrigida, who stated that "there is an Italian ethnicity to protect" (TG24, 2023b) – indicate that the discourse on family in Italy remains entrenched in myths. A recent incident exemplifying this is the suspension of all birth certificate registrations for children of same-sex couples in the municipality of Milan (Agence-France Presse, 2023). This occurrence underscores the lingering homophobia prevalent in thinking that homo-affective couples cannot take care of children as well as mothers and fathers do. Nevertheless, heteronormative families alike, and particularly women within them, still face their own difficulties.

The low birthrate in Italy can be primarily attributed to an unsustainable context for families. Outdated gender norms and a lack of support in achieving a work-life balance leave women shouldering the majority of the physical and mental burden of unpaid care work (Mencarini and Vignoli, 2018). Alessia

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[1] *an event organized to: reflect on a theme capable of uniting the entire country's system; try to make concrete proposals to reverse the demographic trend; imagine a new narrative of birth rates* (SGdN, 2023)

Minello (2022) underscores this issue in her book *Non è un Paese per madri* (No mother's land), emphasizing that it arises from a combination of cultural and systemic factors.

In the Italian context, women continue to be confined within the cultural myth of motherhood. Minello (2022) highlights that 51% of Italians still believe that a woman's most crucial role is to care for the household. This explains Italy having one of the lowest female employment rates in Europe as well as and one of the highest rates of unequal distribution of care responsibilities.

Due to their family status, mothers consistently encounter challenges in the labor market, considered as a "system inefficiency to be contained or eliminated" (Vianello, 2022). Furthermore, the persistent salary gap and precarious work conditions contribute to the perception of female work as *expendable* compared to the male counterparts within the household economy.

Throughout Italy's social and political history, in fact, unpaid care work has been conventionally attributed much without thinking to women (Federici, 2012). This often has led women to struggle in balancing work and family care or even opting to leave their careers and devote themselves only to the house. Although progress has been made, the gendered division and unpaid nature of care labor within Italian households persists (Da Rold, 2022). Issue that is further incentivized by Italy's conservative welfare system (León and Migliavacca, 2013), which heavily relies on informal care from and within family members, again mainly leveraging on women (Zamberletti *et al.*, 2018).

For years now, the unequal distribution of care work in the family and the consequent discriminatory consideration of it have been the subject of research by political, feminist and adjacent scholarship. However, the debate and the struggles of many women, including in Italy, indicate that there is still a long way to go and that the discussion must remain heated.

1.1 Context, aims and research questions

The purpose of this thesis is to propose an exploratory qualitative study on the current state of childcare in Puglia, a region in Southern Italy, with a primary focus on mothers with preschool-age children (0 to 6 years), considering the challenges posed by the unequal distribution of preschool facilities and the difficulties in accessing childcare services that fulfill the established criteria.

Silvia Federici (Bhattacharya, 2017; Federici, 2012) and Kathleen Lynch's (Cantillon and Lynch, 2017; Lynch, 2007) works serve as the theoretical foundations for this research. "Wages for Housework" (2012 [1974]), Federici's seminal work, presents a radical view of care work as unpaid *social reproductive labor*, which will become the basis of Marxist feminist thought on care. She opposes care motivated solely by love (Ashton and Federici, 2022), arguing that it perpetuates systemic issues of care inequality and requires economic compensation for the physical and mental toll it takes on women. Lynch's take on care, on the other hand, introduces the concept of *love labour* emphasizing the affective dimension of care. Lynch focuses, in fact, on those emotional bonds and engagement that make caring relationship non-commodifiable, despite the unequal distribution and lack of recognition they might present.

In the context of these theoretical debates, by means of interrelating the two perspectives overcoming their limits and streamlining their focus, my intention is to analyze the perceptions of mothers in Puglia regarding childcare, particularly looking at how these perceptions intersect with both national and regional support systems, as well as formal and informal external support.

As anticipated, I will achieve this by investigating the Apulian context. Italy's geographical fragmentation has led to a distinct regional development, not only in terms of institutional competences and political aspects but also culturally and socially. Puglia, as a region in the *Mezzogiorno[2]*, represents an interesting case study due to its association with the historically considered least developed

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[2] Southern Italy

and more traditional side of the country. While most research on motherhood and care labor in Italy has been quantitative, with some recent qualitative investigations in the Center-North area (Bertolini *et al.,* 2015; Ahola, 2007), there is a dearth of research with a specific Apulian focus. Furthermore, specific studies on the Southern part of the country have predominantly covered the broader Mezzogiorno area rather than exclusively concentrating on the region of Puglia, being one of the most populated and culturally active regions in the area (ISTAT[3], 2023).

Through a qualitative case study, I will mobilize the aforementioned theories on *social reproductive work* and *love labor,* combining theoretical analysis with a qualitative case study of mothers. Therefore, the goal of the research is multifold: firstly, it aims to map and investigate how the role of the State in their experiences with childcare, along with their interactions with formal and informal external support systems are positioned with respect to young Apulian mothers' perceptions. Secondly, it delves into the factors influencing the attitudes, motivations and interviewees' decisions to take up childcare responsibilities, including the presence of external support networks and past experiences. Finally, the research explores the interplay between these two aspects – support and perceptions – within the context of childcare experiences.

To this end, the exploration of the Apulian region aims at answering the question: *How do Apulian mothers perceive the care work they do towards their children?*

Quest that will be guided by a series of subquestions: **SQ1)** *How do Apulian mothers evaluate national and regional work-life balancing policies and care support and does it shape their perception of childcare?* **SQ2)** *What is the attitude towards childcare in Puglia?* **SQ3)** *What motivates Apulian mothers to take up childcare responsibilities?* And lastly **SQ4)** *Who contributes alongside Apulian mothers to carry out childcare activities?*

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[3] The Istituto nazionale di statistica (Italian National Institute of Statistics) is the primary source of official statistics in Italy

1.2 Outline of the thesis

In the following chapter, an exploration of legislative sources and demographics will shed light on the Italian and regional context concerning key policies pertaining to childcare, highlighting the complex and unfair child care system's division and distribution across the country. The subsequent section reviews – although scarce – the literature on childcare responsibilities in Italian households, focusing on distribution and influencing factors, and insisting on their shortcomings.

Next, the third chapter presents the theoretical framework. Here is a reconstruction of the main theories on care work, love labor and social reproductive work. After a brief introduction, these are systematized in a dialogue which aims to focus – looking at macro and micro aspects of childcare – the discussion on the caring relationship between mother and children. This theoretical combination's goal is to overcome the partial consideration they present on some themes, in order to form a sound analytical basis for the research.

The fourth chapter outlines the methodology. The chapter describes the context of Puglia, the data collection and analysis methods utilized in the study. It introduces the interviewed mothers, explains the criteria used for their selection, and addresses the ethical considerations taken into account.

Following is the analysis. Focusing on the interviewees' narratives, it explores their perceptions of care and the underlying motivations behind their engagement in childcare responsibilities. The chapter will also examine how these perceptions interact with the support provided by the State and the region, as well as external care support.

In the concluding chapter, I will offer a summary of the entire project, along with its limitations and further research ideas.

2. Background

2.1 Childcare within the Italian welfare system

Throughout most of the twentieth century Italy's political agenda was characterized by an absence of any explicit family policy. As Bundalevska (2017) recognised, this majorly had to deal with the cultural influence of the Catholic Church. Parenting was perceived as a god-given natural duty, and as a political consequence, childcare needs were considered to be part of the private sphere in which the state was not to interfere. Childcare was thus relegated to the family, both nuclear and extended and the upbringing of children was strictly considered a parents' responsibility, in which mothers were the main caregivers (Costa and Sabatinelli, 2011; Hohnerlein, 2009).

For this reason, Andreotti and Sabatinelli (2004) indicated that the Italian welfare system follows a South European model, as the overall degree of development of the welfare services is scarce and basic national measures are lacking. Only exacerbated, as Naldini (2002) argues, by the extreme local fragmentation of social assistance programmes, which are almost non-existent in many local urban centers, as a consequence of the uneven distribution of wealth that characterizes the Italian North/South divide .

Because of this, the institutional deficiency of Italian welfare has always been traditionally compensated by the strong role of the family (Del Boca *et al*., 2005; Andreotti and Sabatinelli, 2004) in which the family itself provides welfare to its members, in both terms of material support and care. As a matter of fact, Italy has a long history of reliance on intrafamily care and informal arrangements – for instance, following what Knijn and Saraceno eviscerated, in particular on mothers and grandmothers (2010). Saraceno (1994) calls these practices *unsupported familism*, allegedly legitimated by society due to the importance given to intergenerational solidarity beyond welfare state responsibilities.

Thus, this Italian model plays a dual role – partly as a cause and partly as a consequence – in shaping the conditions of social inequality both within and beyond the household. It contributes to the familistic reproduction of an already radicated gendered division of labor, in which women within the household are expected to be involved in all care and social reproduction activities (León and Migliavacca, 2013). Outside the household, Italian women's professional experience has also been negatively influenced. The burden of care obstacles their presence in the workplace, which explains the prevalence of the traditional *male breadwinner model* where women stay out of the job market to uptake unpaid reproductive labor in the household (Andreotti and Sabatinelli, 2004).

Following the general trend, in Italy alike, women's participation in the labor market increased from the Sixties and Seventies. Still, the problems with poor infrastructures of child support and gendered division of labor have never really been overcome (Del Boca *et al.*, 2005). As Balbo (1978) and Bertolini *et al.* (2015) argue, this the lack of development of family and care services align with the evolution of female employment, contributing to what feminist literature has defined as women's *double shift,* which describes women's double burden of care activities inside the household and outside in their paid day job.

2.2 Maternal vs paternal leave

The Italian legal framework for maternity leave is based on Article 37 of the Constitution, which encourages gender equality in the workplace and the need to support working women in their family responsibilities. Historically, working mothers were entitled to two periods of leave: a compulsory five-month leave paid at 80% of lost wages, and an optional nine-month leave until the child's first birthday, paid at 30% of lost wages only for the first six months. While the optional leave was restricted to all dependent employees, maternity leave was progressively extended to the self-employed, professionals, and all those holding some kind of atypical work contract. Meanwhile, solely from 1977, fathers had

the opportunity to take the optional leave, but only if the mother waived her entitlement and met the eligibility criteria (De Matteis *et al.*, 2023).

After 2000, reforms aimed at promoting gender equality by aligning fathers' responsibilities and rights with those of mothers' (ibid). Under the current system, working fathers are individually entitled to a portion of parental leave, totaling ten months for the couple; in case of three months of leave taken, he is entitled to an additional month. Both parents can take up to six months each, and the leave is compensated at 30% of lost wages if taken before the child's birth.

However, as highlighted by Knijn and Saraceno, (2010) despite this progressive spirit in the aim of the reforms, the behavior regarding parental leave did not change significantly. Gragnoli and Perulli (2004) emphasized, in fact, how concerns about contract renewal discouraged many parents from taking extended paid leaves, or deciding to make use of parental leave altogether. As a matter of fact, according to Gavio and Lelleri (2005), concerns with job stability coupled with the low compensation rate impacted fathers' decisions as well to take extended leaves, resulting in a small proportion of them utilizing this benefit.

2.3 Childcare services in Italy (and lack thereof)

Besides the constitutional right to parental leave, in Italy, the debate on supplementary forms of early childcare only began in the late 1960s. Initially focusing on kindergartens for children aged three to six, the aim was to provide equal opportunities for children from diverse backgrounds, regardless of their parents' employment status (Moss, 2009; Saraceno, 2003).

Childcare services for children under three initially focused on low-income working mothers and were partly funded by employers. However, as a result of the advocacy efforts by the women's movement, a law passed in 1971 mandated state and municipal financing of childcare centers, leading to a redefinition of these services with an educational emphasis (Saraceno, 2003).

In more recent years, discussions on under-three childcare have been driven by the desire for work-life balance (Knijin and Saraceno, 2010). However, research shows that factors such as budget constraints, limited trade union interest, uncertainty about appropriate childcare options, and the availability of grandparental care (Brandolini, 2008) have resulted in lower demand for formal childcare services, despite high labor force participation rates among mothers of very young children (Saraceno, 2008).

As a result, care for children under three often becomes a form of social assistance, regulated based on locally determined hierarchies of need. Consequently, still a significant number of working mothers, based on personal and cultural factors, turn to either the private market or grandparents to fulfill their childcare requirements (Knijin and Saraceno, 2010).

At present, services for children up to 3 years old are managed by regional governments, while services for children between 3 and 6 years old are overseen by the national government.There are three types of services available for children up to 3 years old. The first is the *nido d'infanzia* (nursery school), established in 1971 under Law 1044. The second is the *servizio integrativo* (supplementary service), established in 1997 by Law 285, which caters to the majority of children and involves a trained adult taking care of 3 to 5 children. The third is the *sezione primavera* (spring class), created in 2006 through Law 296, which is a specialized class within preschool facilities for children aged 24 to 36 months (Bulgarelli, 2018).

In Italy, the coverage of preschool childcare services links to differences in women's employment rates (CND, 2009; ISTAT 2008) and waiting lists are longer where services are more abundant and of generally acknowledged good quality (CND, 2002). Even in regions with relatively high coverage, the number of children from working mothers exceeds the available slots (Knijn and Saraceno, 2010). Therefore, enrollment rates for childcare facilities vary significantly across regions, again, highlighting the unequal distribution of family care resources and discrepancy between the North and South of the Peninsula (Figari and Narazani, 2017; Andreotti and Sabatinelli, 2004).

Despite a recent increase in the availability of public childcare services, accessing them remains challenging. Not all families meet the eligibility criteria, and only 3 out of 4 eligible families, on average, are able to secure a place (Sorrenti *et al.*, 2015). Moreover, many families who are unable to access public services need to resort to either private care, which requires financial resources, or rely on care provided within the family, often falling on mothers. They grapple with the burden of balancing work commitments alongside caregiving responsibilities. As a result, not rare is the choice to leave jobs or depend on grandparents and other family members (Andreotti and Sabatinelli, 2005).

Currently, insufficient provisions of childcare services crucially contribute to social inequalities, not only limited to increasing gender disparities, but also causing hardship on families of different social class and ethnicity. For instance, middle-income households are excluded from free public services but rarely have sufficient resources to afford care services in the private market. Foreign families also encounter difficulties, as applying for public services could require intensive scrutiny of their residency permits and employment contracts.

These challenges are further compounded by significant regional disparities in the distribution of childcare services. The traditional North-South divide in Italy becomes more pronounced, particularly when combined with factors such as the distinction between large and medium-sized cities versus small towns and villages, which have fewer available services (Sorrenti *et al.*, 2015).

2.4 Mothering and childcare support in Puglia

In Italy, where some political competences are distributed to the regions, parts of public and private care services are governed by regional laws. Gabrielli and Dalla Zuanna (2010) showed how the absence of care is especially evident in the South, in which the lack of regional provisions favoring formal care services is compensated by higher percentage of familial and parental childcare.

For instance, according to a recent report by the Openpolis foundation, based on 2019 data released by ISTAT (2021), Italian nursery school spots have increased nationwide. However, the Southern regions remain stagnant compared to the Northern regions. In the North and Centre of the country, six regions have achieved the EU's quota of 33 nursery school places per 100 children under three years old. In contrast, the Mezzogiorno area falls below the national average of 26.9 places per 100 children, with Puglia having 18.9 places.

Due to the scarcity of childcare resources, particularly in the South, many women have been forced to decline job offers or halt their job search. The average female employment rate in Italy is 54.1%, and all regions in the Mezzogiorno area fall below this average, Puglia in particular has a rate of 37.1% for women aged 25 to 34 (Damiani, 2021). As much as the region has taken steps to encourage greater female participation in the labor market and these recent policies helped to somewhat decrease the region's lag in this regard, the overall outcomes remain rather limited (Stefani *et al.*, 2013).

Supporting this, Save the Children Italia conducted an important report called *Le equilibriste*, that is based on 2022 ISTAT data (Save the Children, 2023). The report evaluates the "mom-friendliness" (ANSA, 2023) of regions in Italy, and the assessment is determined by looking across seven dimensions: demography, employment, services, health, representation, violence, and subjective well-being. According to the latest edition of the report Puglia scores the 17th position out of the 20 regions, highlighting the poor state of Apulian mother support services, but generally with childcare in the Southern regions, which indeed all occupy the final positions in the chart (Save the Children, 2023).

2.5 Childcare in Southern Italy: a qualitative gap

Although there are statistical studies on motherhood and childcare that show that the situation in the South of Italy is lacking (Save the Children, 2023), very few in-depth studies discuss specifically what mothers' perceptions of the issue are.

The majority of research conducted on Italian mothers and their involvement in care labor relies heavily on quantitative data concerning work-life balance choices and the utilization of childcare services, rather than qualitative approaches. Moreover, there is a lack of literature focusing on specific regions of the country. The limited studies available predominantly concentrate on the Northern context (Bertolini *et al.*, 2015; Ahola, 2007), leaving a noticeable gap in understanding the care experience in the Southern regions which are usually grouped together under the *Mezzogiorno* umbrella due to assumed similarities.

On the Northern side, a pivotal qualitative study in childcare labor was conducted in 2015 by Bertolini *et al.* with their examination of the experiences of 21 young women residing in Turin, as they transitioned into motherhood. The study specifically focused on how their own and their partners' ideals of motherhood interacted with the demands of the labor market. Generally, as other quantitative studies confirm, there is a significant gender disparity in the distribution of domestic and care work within Italian households (Menniti *et al.*, 2015; Addabbo *et al.*, 2012; Bloemen *et al.*, 2010; Mancini and Pasqua, 2009). Aligned with Menniti *et al.* (2015), Bertolini *et al.* confirmed that in Turin as well women bear the major burden of housework and childcare, dedicating a disproportionately higher amount of time to these tasks compared to men. Concluding that mothers – by choice or by chance – adopted an *intensive style of mothering* (Hays, 1996), prioritizing the child's needs above their own.

Accordingly, if a *good mother* felt the pressure to reduce her involvement in work to stay at home with the newborn, conversely, *good fathers* reinforced their commitment to the workplace (Magda *et al.*, 2023; Treas and Tai, 2016; Naldini and Jurado, 2013). As a consequence the presence of children negatively affects a mother's ability to engage in paid work, while it increases the husband's working hours, especially when caring for young children who require significant attention from both parents (Addabbo *et al.*, 2012; Bloemen *et al.*, 2010; Mancini and Pasqua, 2009).

Thus, summing up, in the Italian context the presence of tensions derived from an intensive parenting culture is currently imposing gendered expectations

that may not align with the realistic possibilities provided by public support systems and workplace dynamics.

3.Theoretical framework

3.1 Introduction

The theoretical part of this thesis consists in an attempt to streamline the focus of the discussion on a specific kind of care relationship, that is the one of a mother and a child. To this end, two among the main frameworks that problematized, respectively, the general institutional aspects of care labor and in specific the work that is done towards children will be put in a dialogue.

First of all, I will introduce care labor (Folbre, 2005) as the grounding notion for the research, highlighting its gendered nature and unrecognized value. On that base, I will then present how care labour was framed on a macro-instututional and on a micro-relational level: namely, Federici's (2012) Marxist attempt to institutionalize and substantiate care labour as rightful obligation in spite of the then trending socio-cultural ideologies which attributed it to women; and Lynch's (2007) reintroduction of affection-based relationships as founding for the uptake of childcare responsibilities in parent-child relationships.

Confronting these frameworks to the data I will collect from my interviews will help understand the perception that my interviewees have of the work they do or they have done as caregivers towards their children. Starting from the Marxist feminist theoretical contribution of care labor to expand it with affection-based theories will allow for a much richer understanding of the socio-political and economical implications of the care labor that Apulian mothers do to their offspring. In fact, by means of combining and refocusing the theories in an organic way will allow to take into consideration both the perceptions, reasons and feelings behind motherhood and the political background of childcare within Italy's welfare system but also the expectations and extensions of care for Southern Italian mothers.

3.2 Perspectives of care labor

Across time, the significance of caregiving has been downplayed and overlooked, leading to its invisibility. In the past, the idea of care being perceived as laborious was absent, as it was commonly believed that women naturally possessed the inclination to emotionally care for and prioritize others (Bubeck, 2001; Tavris, 1993). Women, in fact, are typically held to higher family responsibility standards than men; alongside with facing stricter gender norms, where appropriate behavior for each gender are dictated in line with socially constructed notions of familial altruism and individual self-interest (Badgett and Folbre, 1999).

Given its gendered nature, these perspectives have been challenged by the feminist scholarship, which argued that, being integral to all aspects of social life, providing care for others is not a simple or inherent task. Instead, it requires significant physical and emotional effort and comes at a cost (O'Brien, 2008). For instance, parents dedicating time and energy to family-related responsibilities often have a notable decrease in lifetime earnings, as resources are spent to ensure the well-being of the person being cared for (Harkness *et al.*, 2023).

Nancy Folbre (2005) defines care work or *caring labor* as "work that involves connecting to other people, trying to help people meet their needs". The concept describes a type of work that requires personal attention, normally provided face-to-face, and often for people who cannot clearly express their own needs, such as children, the disabled and the elderly. Caring labor – as well involved with intercepting and responding to development needs that are not always straightforward – not only encompasses practical mansions but also entails an emotional attachment to the individual receiving care. As Abel and Nelson (1990) aptly put it, "caregiving is an activity encompassing both instrumental tasks and affective relations" including and resonating with what Hochschild (1983) defined as *emotional labor.*

Indeed, and despite being recognised that the need for emotional care is necessary and universal, still these above-mentioned disparities exist as

predominantly shaped by social and cultural factors (Love *et al.* 2023; O'Brien, 2008). Hays (1996) condensed these insights in the concept of *intense mothering*. According to this viewpoint, mothers are socially and culturally expected to be emotionally available to their children at all times, be constantly accessible, and fulfill these expectations regardless of the specific circumstances they find themselves in. Research indicates, in fact, that women feel obligated to engage in this type of caregiving due to a *moral imperative* rooted in customs and typical to their societal organization (Lynch, 2007; Bubeck, 2001). Notably, however, this intensiveness on the role of mothers does not imply that men do not care, but rather suggests that fathers are subject to different cultural and moral standards when it comes to caregiving.

3.3 Care as social reproductive labor: a Marxist -feminist definition

We must admit that capital has been very successful in hiding our work. It has created a true masterpiece at the expense of women. By denying housework a wage and transforming it into an act of love, capital has killed many birds with one stone.

(Wages Against Housework, Federici, 1974)

From this first outline what is striking is the tacit social, cultural and political agreement in asserving care and childcare labor to women without questioning. For this very reason, the nature of care labor has been a crucial subject within the critical Marxist feminist theoretical literature.

The framing of care labor as *social reproductive labor* was initially pointed out by Marx and Engels, who differentiated the *production* of goods and the *reproduction* of society and thus the labor power necessary for the maintenance of the economy (Bhattacharya, 2017; Duffy, 2007). This theoretical contribution became the base for Italian autonomist Marxists like Silvia Federici and Mariarosa dalla Costa to apply a feminist standpoint. The gendered nature of

the labor, once again, became fundamental for its understanding, given that women perform most reproductive work and most of it is unpaid (Smith and Winders, 2015).

Through their standpoint, Dalla Costa and Federici together with Selma James denounce how under capitalism housework is manipulated as a *female natural attribute*, a need or an aspiration, therefore something destined to be unwaged (Federici, 2012). Thus, reinforcing the assumption that housework is not work and preventing women from struggling against it. Their argument calls for the recognition of the other (forgotten) half of capitalist accumulation which is the reproductive sphere, which had been attributed until then to a sphere of love and affection. They affirm "we want to call work what is work so that eventually we might rediscover what is love and create our sexuality, which we have never known" (ibid: 20), asking for a wage for housework is the condition that allows the struggle against its unpaid nature and makes this type of work visible.

Accordingly, care labor is an integral part of the process by which society reproduces itself, and maintains the physical and mental health of its workforce (Bhattacharya, 2017; Federici, 2012). That is to say, caring is a necessary activity for the development and wellbeing of the members of our society within the current system; all those unpaid and mostly womanly endeavors carried out within the household and necessary to reproduce the wage labor force.

As these mainly private activities will have their outcomes in the public sphere, socialist feminist thought strongly critiques considering these domains distinctively and not as part of the same phenomenon. It asserts that the exclusive nature of the private sphere as an institution, reflects a historical system that marginalizes women from public life, assigning them the primary responsibility of childcare (Ferguson, 1988). The definition of social reproductive labor thus challenges this dual system that separates the public sphere from the private sphere, which consequently separates the formal economy from the household, leading to the recognition of only the labor dispensed to produce commodities and not the one dispensed to produce people (Bhattacharya, 2017), this partly due to the fact that while the formal economy is the site for the production of goods and

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services, the people who produce the latter are produced in *kin-based* site outside the formal economy, that is the family (Luxton, 2006).

It is relevant to also point out the doubts to this point of view, starting from a number of Marxist feminists who disagreed with the theoretical understanding of Wages for Housework. A number of them in fact argued that the line between work and leisure was porous; recognizing the malleable nature of unpaid domestic labor resulted in the research of a new set of relations necessary for a better understanding of unpaid domestic labor (Bhattacharya, 2017).
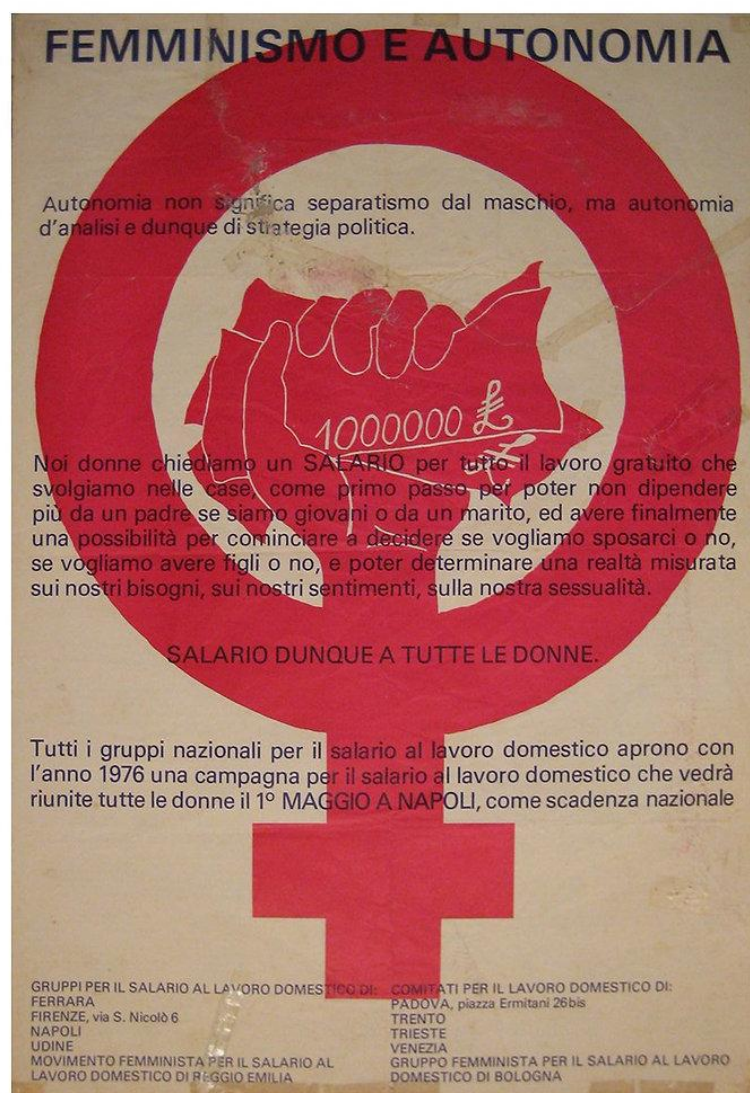
Figure 1. An Italian feminist manifesto from 1976 calling for wages for housework

3.4 A specific form of care: love labor

Caring involves both love and labour, and it is precisely this combination that underlines its conceptual complexity

(Finch and Groves, 1983)

In the effort to give substance to this hidden female work, Marxist feminist scholars denounced the framework of *love* (Ashton and Federici, 2022; Federici, 2012). According to the left-wing political theorists, motivating care labor on affection-based relationships obscures the exploitative nature of this unpaid work. As Federici herself writes "by denying housework a wage and transforming it into an act of love, capital has killed many birds with one stone" (Federici, 2012: 17).

Nevertheless, influenced by feminist movements and evolving societal contexts, several scholars have played a crucial role in differentiating various aspects of care (O'Brien, 2008; Bubeck, 2001; Tronto, 1993). Kathleen Lynch (2017; 2007) begun to revisit precisely those long-forgotten affective-based notions and further dissect and broaden the understanding of care and the various relationships within care labour. In this new framework, *love labor* becomes a central concept and affection becomes a motivating factor behind caring. To elaborate this concept, Lynch traces a structure of three circles of 'other-centered' relational care labour (Figure 2).

Tertiary Care Relations: Solidarity Work

Secondary Care relations: General care work

Primary Care Relations: Love Labor—nurturing involving mental and emotional work, physical work, commitment, time, trust, belongingness, presence, mutuality

Figure 2. Concentric Circles of Affective Care Relations. Adapted from Lynch 2007.

This research focuses on the first circle of the scheme as shown in Figure 2, that includes primary care relations – intimate relations characterized by strong attachment, inte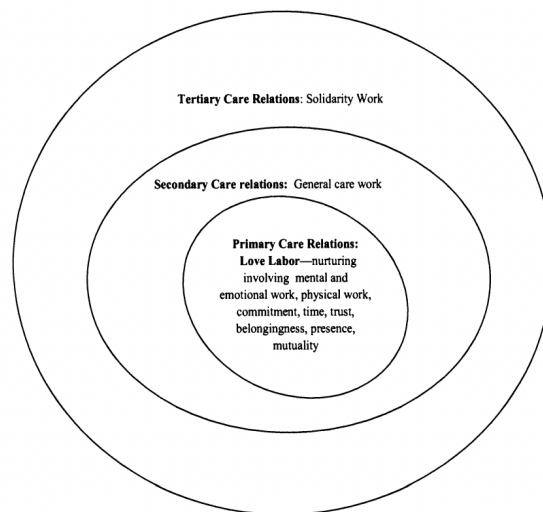rdependence, depth of engagement and intensity mainly confined to the familial and personal sphere (Lynch, 2007). On the other hand, secondary relationships involve instead nurturing emotional connections with neighbors, colleagues, and professions like teaching and nursing and other paid caring roles. Last, tertiary affective relationships are characterized by acts of solidarity, where individuals bear responsibilities through established obligations or engage in informal, political, cultural, or economic solidarity work to confront and address injustices.

Positive primary care relationships can foster a profound sense of *belongingness* and *trust*, while neglectful, exploitative, or abusive relationships can result in feelings of *isolation*, *distrust*, and *pain* (Cantillon and Lynch, 2017). The prototypical primary care relationship is one between a parent and a child, as a matter of fact the requirement of love labor is most visible in childcare relations in which there is a relation of obligation stemming from a relation of deep dependency (ibid).

Within primary relationships, love labour conforms as an *emotionally engaged* work that involves a number of emotionally laden responsibilities (Cantillon and Lynch, 2017). These refer to a person in mind and involve planning, listening, attending, and making a commitment to the relationship itself. Lynch (2007) discerns these actions into *physical* work, *mental* work and *emotional* work. Practically, physical work involves tasks like cooking one's favorite meal, changing up a diaper or even offering support with tasks. Mental work includes keeping one's presence in mental planning, anticipating and/or prioritizing one's needs and interests. Emotional work involves listening, affirming, supporting and challenging someone, as well as identifying with someone and supporting them emotionally at times of distress (ibid). Fundamentally, these responsibilities are affectively-driven, with the principal goal of the survival, development and wellbeing of the other.

Primary relationships stand apart from other forms of care, in fact, due to their intimate nature and *inalienable* characteristics – as love being founding of the act of caring itself –, which significantly impact the quality of the relationship (Lynch, 2007). As a matter of facts, they involve a *moral imperative* to care, characterized by a higher level of attentiveness and responsiveness grounded in the very activities of *looking out for* and *looking after* (Lynch, 2007; Tronto, 1993).

Although child-care workers, nurses, and teachers are certainly also responsible for providing care to those under their duty, the primary objective of these relationships is not to cultivate an intimate, mutually supportive bond driven by love. The teacher's aim is education, the nurse's objective is to restore individuals to good health, and the child-care worker's goal is to safeguard and promote children's development and well-being. These objectives are achieved through the act of caring, and while it is possible for affection to develop towards the person receiving care, love itself is not the primary purpose of the relationship (Cantillon and Lynch, 2017). While the intensity of love laboring may depend on the context and on cultural and legal norms, it does involve a kind of commitment that is not present to the same degree within secondary care relations (ibid). Additionally, the concept of love labor can vary in quality depending on the emotional resources available to sustain it.

Although there may not be a specific term to describe it or communicate to those who possess significant caregiving abilities the extent of their resources, the notion of *nurturing capital* (Lynch, 2009; 2007) helps to explain that individuals who have received a considerable amount of care throughout their lives possess a wealth of caregiving capabilities. Love, care, and acts of solidarity generate outcomes and various forms of nurturing capital that are accessible to us on personal, social, and political levels. The amount of nurturing capital one has available has an impact not only on their ability to form intimate connections with others but also on their overall well-being and their ability to contribute effectively in other areas of life (Lynch, 2009). Nurturing capital includes not only emotional care and support but also practical tasks, time, knowledge, and other

resources that contribute to the overall nurturing and well-being of individuals. The performance of nurturing tasks is generally driven by feelings of concern for others, but the act of carrying out the task itself may become routinized and require minimal emotional engagement at times (Lynch, 2009).

3.5 Framing a theoretical apparatus

As mentioned previously, this theoretical framework attempts to engage in a dialogue between Marxist feminist theory on *social reproductive labor* and the concept of *love labor,* which initially appears distinct from the former. The reason for this is that although both interact due to their common field of interest, the premises from which they start are equally important to meet the objective of this thesis in researching the perceptions of Apulian mothers with regard to childcare.

In the context of this thesis, the theory of Federici and feminist Marxists has been chosen as it provides conceptual tools to investigate the broader state and institutional macro-context concerning care. However, since the thesis angle revolves around a specific type of care, namely the micro-affectionate relationship between a mother and a child, the framework of love labor has enabled the exploration of the unique nature of this relationship. In essence, one theory complemented the other, streamlining the focus, resulting in a comprehensive conceptual apparatus for the analysis.

The founding conviction of the thesis and starting point in the analysis is that, as argued by Marxist-feminists, care work is complex work that requires an expenditure of time and resources on the part of caregivers (Folbre, 2005). As detailed by Lynch (2007), the complexity of childcare will be operationalized and analysed here in terms of *physical*, *mental* and *emotional* work, the three main components that constitute it.

This caring labour, as clearly explained by both Federici (2012) and Lynch (2017; 2007), will be considered for its *gendered* in nature, thus, as predominantly performed by women, for social, cultural and political reasons, as detailed above.

This explains the choice to include only mothers in the study, as they are the main subjects of this discrimination and are subject to both internal and external pressures that lead them, in many cases independently of their will, to take on the obligations of childcare. Many scholars, including Lynch (2007), attribute this discrepancy to the fact that women are put under much more moral pressure than men (O'Brien, 2008; Folbre, 2005; Reay, 2005; Daly, 2001; Bubeck, 2001). Leading oftentimes in developing an *intense model of mothering* that forces many women to neglect and sacrifice themselves for the sake of the infant (Hays, 1996). Mothering attitudes will be inquired as well during the interview process.

What love labor scholars fail to address with the due attention, or only marginally go over (see Lynch, 2017) is the political and institutional support (or lack thereof) on that matter. Thus, borrowing from Federici (2012), here, issues regarding *state support* and the work-life balance *negotiation* will be topics of inquiry. For instance, it will be investigated the struggle that many mothers suffer from the inequitable position they found themselves in: they need to work paid jobs to sustain their lives under the current systems, yet they are *unremunerated* and left alone by the state despite being the primary caregivers to tomorrow's workforce and society itself. Consequently, as Marxist and feminist scholarship pointed out, here to the apparatus of institutional support for childcare has been given important weight; as it was revealed early on, both in theory and in the words of the interviewees, that greatly influences the *choice* of mothers to take up care work.

In this respect, however, the distinction presented by Federici lacks nuance. Her consideration predominantly focuses on the broader context and practical acts of care in their quantifiable and therefore commodifiable components, intent on the social reproduction of capitalist labor force. Hence, the introduction of love labor in this work to investigate the *inalienable* and *non-commodifiable* components of care between mothers and children, such as *emotional* ties in the inherent *interdependent* nature of primary care relationships (Cantillon and Lynch, 2017; Lynch, 2007). If social reproduction theorists once removed love as detrimental for the social acceptance of the double shift struggles

many women are subjects to, Lynch (2007) states with the case of childcare in specific "mutuality, commitment, and feelings for others (and the human effort that accompanies expressing these) cannot be provided for hire as they are voluntary in nature" (ibid: 565). Additionally, as Lynch continues, past experiences with loving labour have been considered as influencing the perceptions of care, thus the *nurturing capital* Apulian mothers possess will be questioned.

Thus, in conclusion, by engaging with both theories for their respective macro and micro focus on care, the comprehension of childcare labor experiences of the interviewed mothers will be enhanced. By integrating this approach, in fact, the multiple nuanced political, social and cultural aspects of care within my research will be explored, composing an overview of Apulian mothers' perceptions of childcare labor.

4.Methodology

4.1 Research design: case study

For the purpose of this research, I have chosen to conduct a qualitative analysis through a case study. Creswell and Poth (2018) consider case study an approach in which the researcher investigates in-depth a bounded system (i.e. a case) in which the field of research is defined within specific parameters.

Here, the investigated context is narrowed down to Puglia, a region in the south of Italy. As mentioned before, there is a lack of qualitative research on the region, despite having unique characteristics both in its system of childcare services (Luise, 2023) and in its social and cultural interpretations and expectations of motherhood (Leccardi, 2002). Thus, as the chosen data collection method was qualitative interviews, the recruitment of participants has been limited to Apulian – currently living in the region – mothers. Likewise, the focus of the secondary literature inquiry and empirical questions presented investigate the cultural and political context of the region.

4.2 Data collection

4.2.1 Sampling

The sampling of interviewees was based on specific criteria. In a nutshell, mothers of children aged 0 to 6, residing, dealing with social services, and carrying out the main caring activities in Puglia, since they became parents. While not all participants were originally from Puglia – for instance, one interviewee, Agata, was Sicilian and born in Germany – they were all residing in Puglia when they became parents.

All interviewees were mothers with at least one child between the ages of *0 and 6 years*. This is attributed to two reasons: firstly, it aligns with the notion supported by previous literature on childcare choices within (heterosexual) couples, emphasizing that the first years of a child's life, especially the first three years, are the most critical and debated period concerning care responsibilities (Bertolini *et al.*, 2015). The second reason is that this age range corresponds to the crucial preschool period, right before compulsory education (*scuola dell'obbligo*) which starts with elementary school. During this time, the decision to enroll children in preschool services relies on the parents, and it is not mandatory. Additionally, as discussed in the previous sections (see Section 2.3), there are multiple preschool services in Italy with significant differences in administration, quality, and distribution, and the services are especially challenging and high-threshold for parents with children aged 0 to 3 and 3 to 6 years.

Being familiar with the region of Puglia, where my hometown is located, facilitated the process of reaching out to participants for my research. The majority of participants were recruited using a snowball technique, which contributed to a relatively smooth sampling procedure. This approach was employed until *data saturation* was achieved, meaning that obtaining additional new information became challenging (Guest *et al.*, 2006).

I initiated the process by contacting one mother from my network of acquaintances, I provided her with an overview of the project and then I requested to conduct an interview. Afterwards, I asked for references and contact information of mothers she thought were suitable or interesting for this research. This approach resulted in obtaining multiple contacts for potential participants.

To ensure diversity within the sample, I asked non-sensitive questions during the recruitment process, such as the province of residency and details about the family and working situation (see Table 1). This information was considered when forming the final sample. With the exception of one interviewee living in the province of Lecce, the sample primarily consists of participants from the regional capital, Bari, where the majority of the population currently resides (ISTAT, 2022).

Interviewees	Age	Residency	Occupation	Number and age of children within the household	Marital status	(Near) presence of extended family members

Ava	38	Terlizzi	Private employee	• 2 children.
				  ○ 4 years
				  ○ 8 years old
					Married	Yes

Anna	38	Bari	Private employee	• 1 child. ○ 2 years old	Married	Yes

Agata	33	Ugento	Unemployed	• 3 children.
				  ○ 4 years
				  ○ 2 years
				  ○ 4 months old
					Married	Yes

Alice	38	Acquaviva delle Fonti	Private employee	• 1 child.
				  ○ 2 years
				  ○ 7 months old
					Partnered	No

Aurora	44	Putignano	Secondary school teacher	• 2 children.
				  ○ 10 years
				  ○ 4 years
					Married	Yes

Adele	45	Bitonto	Freelance psychotherapist	• 1 child. ○ 5 years old	Married	Yes

Table 1: Pseudonymized demographics of interviewed mothers

4.2.2 Semi-structured interviews

Given that the research aims to explore how interviewees perceive the care work they provide for their children, semi-structured interviews are a suitable option. This design offers a high degree of flexibility in data collection (Bryman, 2012), allowing participants to express their thoughts and experiences in their own words. This aspect is particularly important when investigating matters related to emotions, attitudes and self-perception (Seale, 2017).

To conduct the interviews, I developed an interview guide (see Appendix 2) as a reference to maintain focus throughout the process. The design of the interview questions stemmed from the intention to explore the inquiries raised by my theoretical apparatus. As a result, I formulated the questions in a manner that did not favor any specific theory but rather allowed the responses to naturally cover a broad range of perspectives, encompassing both macro and micro aspects of childcare work. The questions focused on experiences of childcare, both emotional and physical aspects, informal and formal care support, childcare

services, and the regional and national caregiving context. The semi-structured design of the interviews allowed me to ask a question and let the interviewees lead the conversation. In total, six interviews have been conducted remotely between June 18th and July 7th, 2023.

4.2.3 Interview process

Scheduling interviews with the participants posed challenges due to the demands of their childcare responsibilities. For instance, one mother mentioned that she could not be interviewed at certain times of the day because her children were sleeping or because she had plans to take them to the park.

During the interviews, interruptions were quite common, with the interviewees' children often crying, screaming, or making insistent requests. These interruptions sometimes led to shorter and more superficial answers from the interviewees, as my priority was to cover the majority of the interview guide. However, these interruptions accurately mirrored the context of our discussions on childcare, highlighting the constant presence of their children in their lives. The interviews lasted up until one hour and were conducted in Italian, which is both my native language and that of the interviewees. The interviews were recorded with the previous information and consent of the interviewees, which was obtained again orally before the start of each interview. Additionally, I took notes during the interviews, capturing specific aspects or quotes that I found significant for the research.

4.3 Data analysis

The analysis of the data has been conducted through thematic analysis. Therefore, after transcribing and translating the recordings of each interview, I started coding the transcripts of the interviews. The coding process was conducted utilizing NVivo software, employing a blend of inductive and deductive methods. As

Braun and Clarke (2012) state, thematic analysis is enhanced by incorporating a combination of both approaches. Purely inductive analysis is not practical, as pre-existing knowledge affects the process. Similarly, when coding for a theoretical construct, we must consider data relevance and significance for that construct.

I also followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps guide to thematic analysis. The process began with (1) familiarizing myself with the data through the interviews' transcription using Transkriptor, a voice recognition software. To address its impreciseness, I personally cross-checked the transcriptions with the original recordings and made the necessary corrections. Subsequently, I conducted a final review of the transcripts for accuracy. (2) Next, I employed NVivo to generate initial codes, aligning them with predefined concepts from my theoretical apparatus, such as *affection*, *gendered nature*, *negotiation between labor market participation and care*, and *work-life balance policies*. However, during the transcript review, new codes emerged organically from the data, including *pregnancy*, *the role of the father*, *discipline*, and *experiencing motherhood*. During the first coding round, I systematically applied both predefined and newly generated codes to the transcripts while remaining open to identifying additional codes that surfaced from the data. In the second data review, I began to develop categories; for instance, codes like *formal care* and *informal care* were grouped together under the category of *care extension*, while *mental work, emotional work*, and *physical work* were combined under *childcare activities*. (3) I also started reaching out for themes; to facilitate this process, I utilized mind-maps in a separate notebook, arranging codes into theme-piles. (4) Throughout this analysis, I conducted multiple reviews of the themes, constantly consulting my research questions. In the initial stage, I observed a significant overlap of themes, indicating their interconnectedness. While this was a positive aspect, it also posed a challenge in clearly distinguishing the individual themes. To address this, I began the writing process while frequently revisiting my research questions. (5) This approach allowed me to identify four overarching themes that aligned with my four research questions. Additionally, the writing process naturally led to the

identification of sub-themes within these main themes. The resulting themes provided a comprehensive exploration of the interviewees' experiences of childcare, encompassing a broad spectrum ranging from a macro level to a micro level and their interrelations. (6) Finally, I presented the themes and their sub themes in Section 5, the findings section.

4.4 Ethical considerations

When approaching the respondents for their participation in the research, I provided an overview of the project, outlining the themes that the interviews would cover. While childcare may not initially appear to be an overly sensitive topic, I figured that there was still a possibility that it could touch upon difficult experiences for the interviewees, as was the case with Agata's account (see Section 5.3.3). Once I obtained their consent, I took the necessary steps to ensure their comfort and privacy. I communicated through text (Appendix 1) during the selection process and reiterated verbally pre-interview that (1) their identity would be anonymized using pseudonyms, (2) they had the freedom to withdraw their consent from the interview at any point, (3) they were under no obligation to answer any questions they did not wish to respond to, and (4) they could halt the interview at any time (Seale, 2017). Furthermore, before commencing the interview, I also (5) sought their consent to record the session for transcription.

5. Findings and analysis

The following chapter delves into what has emerged from the insights collected during the interviews with six Apulian mothers. Within the analysis I recognized four themes that respond to the four sub-questions at the basis of my research. The first one (*SQ1*) concerns the interviewees perception and experience with state support, considered scarce and ineffective. The second one (*SQ2*) observes their attitude to childcare, as noted, that is aligned with an intensive model of mothering. The third one (*SQ3*) presents the reasoning behind their choice to uptake childcare responsibilities, mainly having to deal with the affective engagement they developed and their past experiences with care. Lastly the fourth one (*SQ4*) includes their relation and experience with childcare extension, delving into the presence of the father as a carer within the family, and mothers' decision to entrust their children to formal and informal care support.

As a general remark to be kept in mind, although the objective was to conduct an exploratory case study of Puglia, the interviewees mainly talked about the State's role in childcare support, never mentioning regional policies, and only rarely commented on territorial specificities. Thus, the findings will be presented accordingly.

The excerpts and quotes in the following sections are all my translations.

5.1 '*Italy is definitely not a country that helps to have children*'. State support

For a long time, the role of the Italian State in supporting unpaid care work responsibilities within the familial household has been absent or minimum. The Italian legislator, but in fact at a social level as well, mainly considers the two the traditional gendered categories of work: *reproductive work* – mostly or exclusively done by wives and mothers – that is unpaid and undervalued and

relegated to the private sphere therefore considered out of institutional competence (Costa and Sabatinelli, 2011; Hohnerlein, 2009), and *productive work* – which has been culturally associated with the male breadwinner model – remunerated with money.

For this reason, in Italy the issue of care remained invisible for the longest time behind values that associated women's caregiving responsibilities to their natural character and disposition (Federici, 2012), additionally encouraged by the political and cultural presence in the country of the Catholic Church (Alonso *et al.*, 2023).

In the present time things have changed, although compared to other European countries Italy still holds a very scarce governmental support for working mothers (and parents in general) and traditional notions of gendered division of work still persist (Bertolini *et al.,* 2015).

As mentioned, Italy's competences repartition follows a regional model which assigns to regions the responsibility to set up the necessary policy infrastructure on specific matters such as childcare as it is believed that the local scale and proximity knowledge might improve the efficacy of these provisions. Yet, the promise of success has not been met as interviewees preferred to refer to the private market or family members for practical reasons instead, as ensuring spots within the Apulian publicly-run childcare system is challenging and time-consuming. Still, rather than lamenting these issues on a regional level, all of the mothers agreed that the State is significantly neglectful in the support of mothers and families in general and wished it would prioritize the issue more. A significant issue that has surfaced is the lack of adequate policies to support working mothers (and fathers), coupled with State support that has restrictive eligibility criteria based on income and job contracts.

5.1.1 Work-life balancing policies

A common concern raised by all the working mothers interviewed was their perception regarding parental leave, considered scarce both for mothers and

fathers. All the mothers utilized the 5-month compulsory maternity leave (*congedo di maternità*)*,* which was paid at 80%. However, they lamented that this period was insufficient for a mother to fully adjust to caring for a newborn child personally.

"If they were to see the baby at three months, everyone would realize that they are not yet ready to be separated from the mother" (Ava)

Interestingly, the working situation of mothers employed in the public and private sector was a topic of conversation. It was mentioned how, in fact, to people involved in the public the possibilities to extend the paid parental leave are more favorable and up until a year; contrarily, to mothers working in the private sector and whose interest is to prevent early detachments from their children, there might be only the possibility to extend the paid leave for 3 additional months, but at an extremely low rate of 30% of the total income. Some mothers, like Ava and Anna, decided to take the extended leave despite recognizing that it was economically unsustainable due to the reduced pay, which eventually affected the family's financial stability in the long run.

In contrast to Bertolini *et al*.'s (2015) research on young Turinese parents' ideals of parental leave-taking, where (heterosexual) couples interviewed expressed that it felt natural for the mother to take the leave while the father continued working, the Apulian mothers interviewed displayed greater awareness and were more critical of the unfair difference between parental leaves. These Apulian mothers expressed a desire for a more extended *paternal* leave (*congedo di paternità*), which as of now only comprises 10 days of compulsory leave (INPS, 2022). As a matter of fact, according to them, increasing paternal leave would have several advantages, benefiting both the father-child relationship and the distribution of caregiving responsibilities within the couple. A father taking a paid leave would have more time to actively participate in childcare, thereby reducing the burden on the mother. Moreover, if the mother is employed, the father's involvement in caregiving would enable her to return to work and allocate

more time to her professional commitments, leading to a better work-life balance for both parents.

Aurora's perspective on paternal leave is filled with criticism as she denounces the enduring sexist nature of the Italian state. She considers the treatment of fathers in terms of leave as emblematic of the wider approach the Italian state takes towards families. Despite the passage of six years from her own experience, she highlights that her husband could use only one day of paid leave for the birth of their first child and a mere four days for the second child. She continues by saying,

> "It's a bit of a Catholic mentality. I think that in Italy, there is a lack of culture surrounding... the culture of fatherhood. We are still a very patriarchal country"

Aurora sheds light on the unequal expectations within a heterosexual couple when it comes to parenthood and care responsibilities. The lack of sufficient legal coverage for paternity leave reflects the traditional expectation that mothers should primarily take on the caregiving responsibilities during the first years of a child's life (Bertolini *et al.*, 2015; Torrioni and Naldini, 2015).

On Agata's account, her husband's employer discouraged him from taking paternity leave, claiming that 10 days of leave were excessive. Unfortunately, like many others, he chose to forgo the paid leave due to the fear of job loss as confirmed by Gavio and Lelleri (2005). The country's challenging work environment, with long hours and job insecurity, makes it difficult for fathers to take time off for caregiving. Moreover, there is often latent hostility in private sector workplaces towards the concept of a *dad at home* (Bertolini *et al.*, 2015: 57). These factors discourage fathers from taking time off and being more involved in their children's lives. Agata reveals that her husband, a cook, often works 12 to 13 hours a day, despite his contract stating only 6 hours. However, he refrains from speaking up out of concern for the risk of being fired.

5.1.2 Discrimination in the workplace

The identity of a working mother is challenging, particularly in the absence of sufficient support to alleviate the double burden she often faces. Moreover, the lack of adequate protection from the State adds to the difficulties. Among the interviewed mothers, all but one were working mothers, and even the one who was not, had experiences with jobs and job searching. Out of the working mothers, three of them (the remaining one being self-employed) described their current work environment as supportive in balancing work and family life. However, two of them shared negative past experiences in the labor market, highlighting the need for better support and policies for working mothers.

Ava, who works now part-time for a company with fair employer support, had a rather negative experience with her previous job. Having been hired before her marriage, things changed rapidly after. Ava recounts being fired right after getting married, with the employer anticipating her future absence due to both marriage and potential pregnancy commitments, including maternal paid leave. In response, Ava took legal action against her workplace and eventually won the case. However, the experience left her quite scarred:

> "I felt terrible about it. You know, I didn't even want to enter the store as I felt like being a mother was a fault. I felt guilty, and I didn't even want to go into the store anymore because I had filed a lawsuit, so I thought they might look at me with disapproval"

In her current job, Ava feels that her employer is much more supportive of her role as a working mother. One significant form of support she receives is the concession to have fixed shifts until her children reach 3 years of age. This means she could choose either the morning or afternoon shift and stick with it for the entire week, providing her with more stability in her work schedule.

Agata, who is currently a stay-at-home mother, tells about her struggle in finding a job after giving birth to her daughter Ambra. Even though ultimately she

decided to not work, she had a negative experience in searching, getting rejected multiple times because of her being a mother. She started looking for a job compelled by the family's financial need but her experience did not turn out well,

> "No one would hire me. They see me as a mother, and they say, '*Oh, but you have to take time off work*' and '*you have two children*'. I was told, '*Well, hiring someone like you with two children is a problem for me because if your child gets sick and you have to miss work, it becomes a problem for me*'. So, my children became a sort of limitation in the workplace. It's clear that they don't see it positively that I'm a mother. Especially if they find out that I have no one here, no family, they think, '*Well, she doesn't have anyone to help, so she'll definitely have to take time off work*'"

The lack of an accessible and reliable care extension proves to be a significant obstacle for Agata, as highlighted in Section 5.4.2.2. With no family in close proximity and a lack of trust in formal care services, she faces even greater challenges as a working mother, leading her to forgo seeking employment altogether. She shares her frustration with the Italian labor market, where high taxes deter companies from providing adequate support to working mothers in managing their caregiving responsibilities. Agata believes that if the State were to lower taxes for companies, they might have the means to create spaces where employees' children could be cared for while parents work. Furthermore, the low pay in certain sectors compounds the difficulties. Agata recalls her experience as a children's entertainer at summer camps, stating that even if a mother decides to work, the earnings often do not cover the expense of hiring a babysitter. She explains that when offered a job for 800 € per month, she would have to spend 500 € on a babysitter to care for her three children. However, 500 € is insufficient for a month since babysitters typically demand 1,000 € to care for three children for 8 hours daily.

As a freelance psychologist Adele has a different experience, as she can choose when to work according to her needs. For instance, she mentioned taking time off whenever her daughter would fall sick. Having her office at home allows

her to easily check on her child between clients. However, despite the flexibility her status provides, it also means she receives less support from the state.

5.1.3 Remuneration for care

Despite the availability of remuneration for care services, the response from my interviewees has been overwhelmingly negative. They all feel that the financial support provided by the state to working parents is highly inadequate. A common critique is the challenging eligibility requirements that hinder their access to bonuses funded by the state, such as assistance to partially cover nursery school fees or payments for babysitters.

Anna and Alice availed themselves of the *bonus nido*, a financial contribution of up to 1,000 euros designed to assist parents in covering fees for authorized public and private nursery schools (INPS, 2023a). Aurora, on the other hand, received support from regional funds to cover her child's nursery school expenses. Additionally, Alice also received the *assegno per il nucleo familiare* (ANF), an economic benefit provided to families belonging to specific categories of employed workers (INPS, 2023b). In her case, the ANF amounted to 350 euros, which she found to be insufficient to meet the financial needs of her family.

Agata utilized the *carta acquisti*, a payment card worth 40 euros per month, designed to assist individuals who are 65 years old or have children under the age of 3 and are facing financial hardships (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politche Sociali, 2023). With this card, she purchased essential items for her daughters such as diapers and clothes. Additionally, she also received the *assegno di maternità* (maternity allowance), a social security benefit whose amount is adjusted annually based on the variation of the ISTAT index of consumer prices (INPS, 2023c). In her case, she received 800 euros when she applied for it.

As a freelancer, Adele had access to less support compared to other working mothers. While she used the maternity allowance, she faced challenges in accessing certain benefits due to her self-employed status. However, her husband, who is a state employee, was able to request both the bonus nido and the *bonus*

babysitter for additional support. The bonus babysitter is a contribution introduced after COVID-19, available to parents with children under 14 years of age engaged in remote learning or in quarantine. It allows parents to request one or more bonuses to cover the cost of babysitting services or supplementary childcare services (INPS, 2021).

The overall experience of remuneration for care activities, as described by all of the mothers interviewed, is quite negative. They express dissatisfaction with the minimal, if not nonexistent, financial support provided by the State and wish for more substantial assistance, particularly for working mothers who face significant caregiving responsibilities.

5.2 Attitudes towards childcare

5.2.1 '*Taking care of your own child is like taking care of yourself'*. Intensive mothering

The persistent lack of State support, combined with a traditional perception of motherhood that reinforces gendered division of care responsibilities within heterosexual couples places the primary burden of care work on mothers. As a result, this situation significantly influences how mothers perceive and approach childcare. Throughout the analysis process, a regular pattern was identified in the way most of the interviewees perceived the childcare they had been doing towards their children. This pattern visibly fits within the notion of *intensive mothering* (Hays, 1996). This model focuses into three domains: (a) sacred children/sacred mothering, (b) the responsibility of individual mothers, and (c) intensive methods of childrearing (Walls *et al.*, 2014). The latter was especially recurring in the perceptions of the mothers interviewed.

When discussing childcare, the mothers seldom viewed it as labor. Instead, they described it as an activity done with *pleasure* that brought them *emotional fulfillment*. Witnessing their child's happiness and serenity during the early years,

knowing their care contributed to it, further reinforced this perception. This perspective also influenced their decision to seek additional caregiving support, particularly formal care. However, alongside this sentiment, all interviewees recognized the inherent burdens of care work, as Aurora says,

> "Maternity is tiring, there is no doubt, but the reward you get in doing certain things, in spending time with your child surely repays you for the effort, so much so that often you don't feel the effort"

This quote foreshadows a pattern observed during the interviews regarding the mothers' discussions of their childcare responsibilities. It became evident that descriptions of both physical and mental distress, as well as emotional fulfillment, were frequently juxtaposed. At times, these descriptions seemed almost contradictory.

In her theorization of love labouring, Lynch (2007) categorizes care labour into three types: physical, emotional, and mental work. Among these, mothers frequently mentioned engaging in *mental* work, which involves actively being present and considerate of the individuals they care for. This aspect of caregiving holds significant importance in the lives of the participants, as they strive to ensure the best quality of life for their children. Thoughtful planning, considering preferences, and catering to specific needs are the ways they achieve this (Lynch, 2007). For instance, Agata's experience exemplifies a description of it:

> "I also indulge in her choices, I'm not one of those overimposing mothers. However, I also evaluate her decisions, her wishes. I go about them with her before; but also simply in the morning "*Ambra, what do you want to wear today? Do you prefer shorts?*" and in any case I like that even though she is so little she is a determined girl, who knows what she wants. So I also take lunch into consideration, I always ask them the morning before, "*Ambra today for lunch, what would you like to eat?*" If it's feasible, I'll do it, if it's not feasible, I'll say '*Okay, let's do it another day*'"

another example is found within Adele's account:

"For example, now we have chosen the sport she wanted to do, she does karate, she does swimming. We always choose the laboratory activities she wants to do. Well, I never impose anything on her, I always tell her "*I saw this, do you like it?*" she first says "*what is it about?*" and thinks about it, so I say "*well, think about it*". After, I don't know, even one day she comes and says "*yes, this might interest me, can I still go?*" "*Ok, yes, then I'll call*"

In both scenarios depicted by these mothers, it becomes evident how much of their mental energy is dedicated to anticipating and prioritizing their daughters' needs and interests. In the first instance, the mother places her daughter's day ahead of her own, ensuring she remains present by preparing her clothes and catering to her preferred lunch choices, even if they may not be readily available. In the second instance, Adele actively demonstrates her *attentiveness* (Lynch, 2007) to her child's interests by suggesting and assisting her in exploring new sports and activities.

Nevertheless, the demanding nature of the work became apparent. As previously stated, the mothers frequently intertwined the pleasure of caring for their children with the accompanying challenges. The substantial commitment and time investment involved often resulted in a significant neglect of self-care, leading to frequent physical and mental distress. This observation highlights how these mothers navigate the intricate balance between the rewards and burdens of childcare responsibilities:

"We all act like super moms and like everything is beautiful, everything is perfect, but behind that there are lots of tears, lots of suffering, lots of crying, lots of nervous breakdowns and I'm not afraid to say it because sometimes I'm also tired, so tired. And I often say, my goodness, who made me do it because it's not easy not sleeping, not having time for yourself, not being able to even shampoo your hair, like you have to plan every moment of your day [...] There are sleepless nights, you can't go out, you're no longer free, like you can't think of yourself as free. [...] In the evening, I sit outside with my neighbor who is a friend of mine and I take time for myself, that full hour for a moment to disconnect from life because… because you have to, because if you don't really

disconnect it becomes an illness and it's not pleasant anymore, because you're tired, then you have many emotional breakdowns" (Agata)

In the quotes, Agata's disregard for self-care is evident, specifically alluding to the physical and emotional tolls associated with caring within a primary care relation (Lynch, 2007). She describes being physically exhausted, especially because of sleep deprivation, which is an aspect of care work that has been brought up by multiple interviewees. Informal caregiving diverges from traditional economic work activities, as it operates without the usual time constraints and is driven by distinct motivations (O'Riordan *et al.*, 2010). This reiterates the importance of the intense level of care emphasized by Lynch. Agata does not have time for the simplest self-care tasks like shampooing her hair. Mentally, she feels constantly burnt out and suffers from frequent emotional breakdowns. In line with Hays' conceptualization of intensive mothering, Agata, like multiple of the other mothers interviewed, deprioritizes her needs and makes herself readily available to meet her children's physical and emotional needs (Walls *et al.*, 2014). The results presented in this section validate the conclusions drawn from Lynch's research called *Care Conversations* (2007). Lynch's study reveals that the care responsibilities associated with young children and elderly parents with special needs are frequently perceived as demanding. It demonstrates that such responsibilities can be both enjoyable and burdensome at the same time.

5.3 Reasons for childcare commitments

5.3.1 Choice

When questioned about her perspective on childcare as a form of labor, Alice answered "*I had a child at the moment I felt ready to take care of somebody else*"; most of the interviewees shared a similar sentiment. As familiar with the burdens they will have to deal with once they become parents, they viewed becoming a

mother as a deliberate choice, made when they felt prepared to take on the responsibility of caring for someone else. This conscious decision led them to expect a significant commitment to caregiving.

> "In the end work is a paid activity that you do for a paycheck. A child, on the other hand, you supposedly make it when you feel like it and they are part of the family. It's like taking care of your mom when she's not well" (Alice)

Alice provides a concise response. She acknowledges that the care activities she performs are unpaid, but she justifies this by emphasizing the intimate nature of childcare, which involves caring for her family. From her point of view, this matter holds significance beyond financial remuneration (Lynch, 2007). This sentiment is shared by all of the other interviewees. They all declare that childcare is the product of a conscious decision they made when choosing to become mothers, so they were fairly okay with the challenging nature of the work (Agata) and with temporarily setting aside their job (Anna, Ava).

The concept of love labor aligns well with the experiences shared by the interviewees. Love labor refers to a form of care that goes beyond merely fulfilling a task or responsibility. It involves sustaining relationships based on deep connections and dependencies, often within families, with the intention of nurturing the well-being of the individuals receiving care (2007).

5.3.2 Emotional attachment

Marxist feminist scholars have expressed the concern about the interplay of capitalism and patriarchy, which leads to the devaluation of unpaid reproductive work typically performed by wives and mothers. This devaluation occurs by associating such work with assumed natural characteristics or affective values, which serves to undermine its worth and justify its lack of compensation (Ashton and Federici, 2022; Bhattacharya, 2017; Federici, 2012).

However, the affective dimension is an intrinsic aspect of primary care relationships. In the process of identifying affection, I turned to Lynch's definition of primary care relationships (Cantillon and Lynch, 2017; Lynch, 2007). She characterizes such relationships by highlighting their strong level of attachment, interdependence, depth of engagement, and intense connection, which are akin to the familial sphere. During the interviews, a significant observation was that all interviewees used emotional-related terms like '*love*' '*affection*' '*emotional attachment*' and '*heart*' to express their reasons for taking up childcare responsibilities. This emotional attachment emerged as a prominent factor motivating the young mothers to assume the responsibility of caring for their children, aligning with emotional fulfillment as discussed in Section 5.2.1.
One example of this can be seen in Adele talking about her daughter:

> "Because I love her, she is the most beautiful thing in my life [laughs] I always tell her '*you are the most beautiful gift life has given me*'. I mean it's not a duty"

The interviewees consistently viewed the emotional attachment between a mother and her child as unconditional, leading them to prioritize their child above all else (Hays, 1996). This maternal bond was perceived to surpass all other forms of care relationships, including the one with their partner (Agata) and even the one with themselves (Aurora).

Over half of the interviewees described their emotional commitment to childcare as *natural*, pointing to the experience of pregnancy as the starting point of the care relationship. Anna, for example, emphasized the connection formed during pregnancy, carrying her child for nine months, giving birth to him, and breastfeeding him. The relationship was often described as symbiotic,

> "They become your being. They are pieces of you, that is, you feel it, because you have them inside at the beginning" (Agata)

Ava's statement furtherly reinforces the level of interconnectedness (Lynch, 2007) inherent to the relationship: "*caring for your child is like caring for yourself, if not more so*".

Conversely, when discussing their children receiving care from others, several mothers asserted that the care they would provide to their children could not be compared to the care offered by a *stranger* because of the unparalleled lack of emotional involvement (Lynch, 2007). For example, Ava, chose to not hire a babysitter to help her in her caregiving role and to uptake the whole task herself:

> "In my opinion the presence of a mother while growing up... let's make an example, when a babysitter scolds a child it's such a... cold reproach, but instead when it's the mother who scolds the child it's a reproach but always full of love. So this also means a lot to me [...] because the babysitter certainly has to become attached to the child, because once you raise them, it is normal to become attached. But she will never be able to reach the love that a mother can harbor for her own children"

Her choice to forgo hiring a babysitter stems from her belief that the care provided by a babysitter would lack the genuine affectively-driven nature that her own care embodies.

The consequences of lack of love labor becomes evident in Adele's experience during the COVID-19 pandemic. While she had to be away from home for work, her husband was able to work from home. With the closure of her daughter's nursery school and the babysitter unable to come due to infection risks, it was a challenging time for her. She not only felt guilty for her absence but also noticed the mental and physical effects it had on her daughter due to the lack of care (Lynch, 2007),

> "During that time, the little girl started eating very little, and over the course of that year, she only gained 200 grams. When I realized [...] it wasn't a good moment, I stopped working in mid-June, and I took all of July, August, and half of September to be with her. And indeed, she recovered, started eating again, gained weight, and overall, she got back on track"

As a result of noticing the indicators of her daughter's lack of care, Adele decided to take a break from work for two and a half months to dedicate more time to caring for her. Ultimately, the decision had positive outcomes as her daughter started eating more, gained weight, and experienced an overall improvement in her well-being.

At this point, I would like to clarify two things. Firstly, it is crucial to emphasize that the framework of primary care relationships and love labor is not limited to any specific type of parenthood. The motivation for care, when rooted in emotional attachment, is not contingent on biological reproduction or pregnancy; rather, it represents a distinct and nuanced experience. There are diverse paths to parenthood that hold equal validity and necessitate significant care work (Bosisio and Ronfani, 2015; Saraceno, 2012; Danna, 1998).

Secondly, I would like to specify that the presence of a strong emotional bond characterizing this type of care does not exempt it from being considered a form of labor. As mentioned in Section 5.2.1, providing love labor demands significant physical, mental, and emotional resources, and entails costs for the caregiver that extend beyond financial aspects, affecting them on a physical and cognitive level (Lynch, 2007). Moreover, it is evident that love labor continues to be gendered, with the majority of this work still carried out by women, starting from tasks like breastfeeding. While the role of fathers has been acknowledged as critical support for the mothers interviewed, which will be discussed in Section 5.4.1, it remains apparent that the taxing nature of care work predominantly falls on women and this unequal burden has repercussions on their career choices and overall well-being.

As a matter of fact, in their investigation of the 'Italian models' of parenthood Torrioni and Naldini (2015) identified that the organization of childcare revolves around what is considered 'best' for the child. Particularly during the first year of life, this is often associated with the perceived 'irreplaceability' of maternal care. According to this ideal, childcare responsibilities are distributed in a manner that prioritizes maternal care as essential for the child's well-being. This notion is confirmed by some of the

mothers interviewed, who expressed the belief that, particularly during the first three years of a child's life, the primary caregiver should be the child's mother, surpassing anyone else within or outside the immediate family unit. Such as Agata and Ava:

"Because right now, at this age when they're so young, that's the age where they need a mom and I prefer to do that. Then when they grow up and no longer need me, and I am aware that this day will come, then I will dedicate to myself again" (Agata)

"So this thing she told me made me understand that the child, when he is young, must experience his mother, regardless of everything" (Ava)

As we will see, this aspect of care will also be crucial in these women's decision to negotiate work-life conjugation and within their care extension decisions (Section 5.4).

5.3.3 Nurturing capital

In several instances, the interviewees voluntarily shifted the focus of the conversation to their past experiences of care during childhood. When discussing their caregiving approach and the reasons behind it, many of the young women referred to their own experiences of care, particularly in relation to their mother-daughter relationship. Mentioning their fathers was rare, or in some cases, not mentioned at all. Lynch introduces the concept of *nurturing capital* (2007: 565; 2009: 411), which includes the emotional resources that contribute to sustaining care. Accordingly, the presence or absence of nurturing capital influences people's capacity not only to establish intimate relationships with others but also to thrive and make meaningful contributions in various aspects of life. In this context, such nurturing capital can be traced back to the care they received during their upbringing. Moreover, this definition has been valuable in recognizing the inherent emotional importance that the interviewed mothers attribute to their understanding of care, as they mainly referred to perspectives that

emphasize the quality of care, extending beyond a mere set of tasks (Lynch, 2007). However, interestingly, my research revealed the opposite pattern in the narratives of three mothers.

Two mothers mentioned experiencing a lack of care during their own childhood, which had a negative emotional impact on them. However, this experience motivated them to compensate for the past by increasing the amount of care and improving its quality for their own children. They were determined to create a nurturing and loving environment, drawing from their own experiences to ensure their kids received the attention they needed. The first one, Ava, reminisces this moment from her childhood that still makes her emotional:

> "I had this experience when I was little. My mother was a nurse, now retired, and she had to work full-time all day. So, in the morning, she would leave before I woke up, and my aunt would come to our house to prepare me and take me to school. She would return in the late afternoon. Since my mother also worked shifts, she often had afternoon or night shifts. Sometimes, she couldn't attend my school meetings because she was at the hospital, so my aunt would come instead. I suffered from this absence, and my mother once told me that during one of my school meetings, a classmate of mine asked, '*Who is this, another mother of yours?*' because my mother accompanied me to school. It deeply moves me when I tell this, as it also affected my mother. I hugged her tightly and told my classmate, '*No, this is my real mother*.' This story made me understand that a child, when young, needs to experience the presence of their mother, regardless of everything else"

She reflects on her childhood and remembers her mother's absence as a caregiver. Her mother's demanding schedule as a nurse resulted in delegating a significant portion of her caregiving responsibilities to her sister. She continues:

> "I must not make them feel my absence because I experienced it firsthand. Even my mother tells me, she always says, '*When you need it, take time off, take vacations, don't do like me, I never took time off, and then I took it away from you*.' And she's right"

Love labor is an emotionally engaged work, and its absence is often more noticeable than its presence. Neglectful primary care relationships can lead to a sense of isolation, distrust, and emotional pain (Lynch, 2007). In Ava's case, the

lack of emotional attachment from her mother's care caused her pain. As a result of her mother's decision to prioritize her profession over caregiving, Ava made a different choice, devoting more time and energy to the care of her children and allowing herself to be more absent at work to ensure her children's emotional well-being,

> "I also had the opportunity to give up full-time work because I made a choice and decided to ask for part-time hours specifically to dedicate more time to my children. You have to make choices: either you focus on your career, but doing so means taking time away from your family. Since I believe it's right, as far as I'm concerned, to dedicate more time to my family, especially because both my partner and I work, and we didn't really have an economic necessity to [both] work 8 hours, I decided to switch to part-time"

For Ava, the double shift (Balbo, 1978) of being a working mother proved to be unsustainable. She faced a choice between prioritizing her career or spending more time with her family. Ultimately, Ava consciously decided to transition from working full-time to part-time, driven by her desire to devote more time and attention to caring for her children. This decision was further influenced by the fact that her husband also holds a full-time job, reinforcing the traditional male breadwinner model within their family.

Agata, the second mother, opens up about her struggle with a lack of care from her own mother following the early death of her father. The emotional weight of this loss, coupled with the challenges of being a working-class widowed mother in Southern Italy during the 1990s, profoundly affected her mother. Unfortunately, her mother's severe depression led to significant neglect of Agata and her siblings. In one part of the interview, Agata shares her experience:

> "I grew up in a different style, you see. My mother used to yell all the time, and she often hit me when I misbehaved. However, I want to have a different approach with my children. I have structured myself in a way that I don't want them to experience what I went through. Unfortunately, at the age of 11, I witnessed my father's death, and my mother became depressed, which blurred my childhood. Instead of living and going on trips, we couldn't afford it. So, I never went on a school trip, never had a proper birthday

celebration with many children at home. I never celebrated. For me, I started living after becoming independent. That's when I started celebrating birthdays, having a cake. So, I always try to prevent my daughters from experiencing this, but without spoiling them, because I want to instill values in them, understanding that not everything is given and not everything comes easily"

Agata's approach to caring for her children is also influenced by her own experience of neglect in her relationship with her mother. Like Ava, who also experienced insufficient care and its negative effects, she chooses to compensate by increasing her attentiveness and commitment to the care of her own children. When discussing the childcare activities she engages in with her children, Agata emphasizes quality time care, such as reading a book together before bedtime — a type of emotionally valuable care that she missed out on during her own childhood:

"Like with my 5-year-old daughter, we just finished the first Harry Potter book yesterday because it's a book that I really love, and every evening, we read a couple of pages, and I explain and tell her about this magical world. We have these habits that I perhaps would have wanted to have when I was little, so I give them everything I desired as a way to maybe compensate for the emptiness I always had"

As a response to the care she received, Agata also intensifies the care she provides to her children. She describes bringing them along with her wherever she goes, partly because there is no one to replace her in the care activities and partly due to her strong commitment to being attentive and caring towards them,

"When I go to the hairdresser, I take them with me, all three of them together. I don't even take a moment of rest. For me, they are fundamental, so I don't see them as a burden. If I want to go out for an *aperitivo*, I take them with me. My daughters are not a limitation for me; they don't restrict me in any way. If I want to go out, I just put them in the car and take them with me. My friends are used to it by now; they know I never leave them behind."

Aurora, instead, stands apart from the previous two examples as she expresses criticism towards the intense nature of her mother's care. When asked if she considers being a caregiver as something that involves sacrifice, she responds:

"No, sacrifice, no, because I had a mother who sacrificed herself for me, and I found it to be something sincerely unnatural, which, among other things, generated a great sense of guilt in me"

While she acknowledges her mother's commitment during her childhood, she also disapproves of her mother for giving too much of herself in the caregiving role. Aurora finds it uncomfortable and does not view it as an attestation of love. As a result of this, she becomes more aware of her own role as a caregiver and strives to approach it differently,

"But she always said it, she always said that she sacrificed herself for me, my sister. I don't know, maybe it's true that she did it, but I don't like it that she did it. I mean, I would have wanted my mother to take care of herself too. I would have lived better. I wouldn't have felt this sense of guilt that she gave up everything else to make me and my sister feel good. That's why I always try to understand when I reach the limit and can fall into that mistake"

5.4 Extending care

5.4.1 The role of the father

Although my choice to interview exclusively mothers was due to the obvious presence of a wide literature that associates and problematizes the gendered nature of care labour (Folbre, 2005; Federici, 2012; Lynch, 2007), all of the interviewees brought up the *fundamental* (Adele) role of their husbands, fathers of their children, in the family's childcare responsibilities. The role of the father in the dynamics of care has been repeatedly highlighted due to its undeniable significance in distributing responsibilities within the household. However, as

rightfully perceived by the mothers, this role of the father is often inadequately recognized by the Italian state. Despite the progressive evolution of policies over time (Bertolini *et al.*, 2015), the existing system still maintains heavily gendered norms, adhering to a male breadwinner familial model (Bimbi, 2014). This gendered approach to policy making further impacts the division of caregiving responsibilities within families.

Recent research conducted on young Italian couples transitioning to parenthood (Torrioni and Naldini, 2015; Bertolini *et al.*, 2015) revealed that while there may be a sense of symmetry and equality in childcare responsibilities within the couple before becoming parents, this dynamic often changes after the first child. Various obstacles arise, leading to the resurgence of traditional elements, primarily associated with the mother figure, taking on a more central role in caregiving. According to Bertolini, the construction of parenthood in Italy is currently marked by the coexistence of both traditional and innovative elements. Fatherhood and fathering practices are undergoing changes, although the process is gradual (Bertone *et al.*, 2015). There is a blending of new fathering models with traditional ones. On one hand, fathers aspire to establish strong bonds with their children and move away from traditional roles. However, on the other hand, they still have limited involvement in childcare (Bimbi 2006; Ruspini 2006).

Even though every woman interviewed acknowledged their husband's considerable assistance in both childcare responsibilities and housework, half of the young mothers admitted that the burden of childcare falls more heavily on them rather than their spouses. This situation is primarily attributed to the extensive working hours their husbands have to undertake. Even though some husbands distance themselves from the traditional male breadwinner role, their daily presence is still limited. On the distribution of care between Ava and her husband, she states:

> "I always hope to do it 50/50, which is not always possible because unfortunately he has an office job too and often leaves in the morning and comes back in the evening, so sometimes it's not really 50/50. Maybe a bit more on me but we always try to divide it equally"

Similarly, Aurora affirms that approximately 80% of the caregiving responsibilities undoubtedly rest on her, in contrast to her husband, who spends the majority of the day at work and returns home at 7 in the evening. Additionally, Agata shares a similar experience with her husband, whose working hours are even longer, and he is completely away for work during most of the winter season:

“Everyone tells me '*Oh you're alone!*' because my husband goes away during the winter too, so I don't even have his help. And even when he's here anyway, my husband works a lot, I mean he's home at 10:00 PM. [he spends time with his children] In the afternoon, an hour, an hour and a half. So let's say that he experiences his children very little”

Nevertheless, all three of them emphasize that their husbands contribute to caregiving responsibilities whenever they are available. Agata, for instance, specifies that even if her husband spends just one hour at home, he actively helps with housework activities, takes care of washing up their children, and drives them to their afternoon activities. Especially when she is sick, her husband has been an excellent replacement for care responsibilities, demonstrating his willingness to be involved and supportive in childcare duties.

The remaining mothers confidently affirmed that they successfully shared childcare responsibilities equally with their husbands. Anna, for instance, emphasizes that her husband's support comes naturally, and she does not even need to ask for it:

“There is no negotiation and, well, considering that Andrea is still little, in the first year and a half I breastfed him too so it was mainly, let's say, my commitment. Although his dad always contributed as much as he could, if not directly, in other matters. But anyway we both take care of Alberto at the moment, so it's 50/50”

Anna's account further confirms the model of '*irreplaceability*' of maternal care during the child's first year, as previously mentioned in Torrioni and Naldini's (2015). Nevertheless, Anna firmly asserts that within the household, the father

plays a crucial role, stating, "*without my husband, I definitely could not be who I am. Alberto also couldn't be the child he is if it weren't for him too*". She goes further by affirming that, in her view, the role of the father has generally changed compared to the past, drawing not only from her personal experience but also from observations of other families.

> "I believe that there is one thing that has changed, I would say drastically. It is the role of the man. Before, the man had the role of the father of the family who had to bring home the money, but I'm telling you about several years ago, and not very cooperative at home. Now I do not see a guy who doesn't help his partner, who doesn't take care of his child independently, who doesn't do anything around the house, and so, in my opinion, the moment this changes the household budget changes too, the quality of life in the home has changed. And so the woman can also afford to work all day, because then the two of them share all the effort of the house and the child, of the family"

Adele and Alice could not agree more based on their own experiences. When asked about the equality of their husband's presence in caring for their daughters, Adele responds:

> "Equally? Ah, but he's much more present than me, sometimes in the afternoon a lot. I must really say that Alessia does sport because he is there in the afternoons. She participates in her friends' birthdays because he's there to accompany her, to stay, to pick her up"

Adele explains that her job as a freelance psychologist is demanding, with a constantly changing schedule, especially during weekdays. Nonetheless, her husband readily helps her out whenever needed without any hesitation. Similarly, Alice considers herself 'lucky' to have such a supportive partner. She asserts that her husband is a significant presence in their child's life, perhaps even more so than her, as her job keeps her away from home until 6 in the afternoon, while her husband's workday ends at midday. This enables him to pick up their child from nursery school and spend more quality time with him.

5.4.2 Formal and informal care

Previous research has highlighted the unequal distribution of public childcare services in Italy, making them difficult to access for many due to stringent eligibility criteria. In contrast to other countries where the lack of a robust welfare state has led to the growth of market substitutes for family services (such as nannies, daycares, etc.), which come with higher costs, Italy has not experienced a significant market substitution.

Instead, the burden of care has remained within the family, supported by a strong ethic of mutual assistance that extends beyond the nuclear family, and a normative belief that parents are primarily responsible for their children. This has led Italian families to resist outsourcing services, relying instead on informal care from family members or friends (Bertolini *et al.*, 2015; Del Boca, 2005).

Among the mothers interviewed, four of them opted to enroll their children in private *asilo nido* (nursery school) before they turned 3 years old, while the others preferred to personally care for their children or receive assistance from their partners, family members, or friends. However, it is worth noting that all of them expressed no reservations about sending their children to *scuola materna* (kindergarten) after they turned 3 years old, that is the main childcare service that is publicly funded and regulated on a national level.

5.4.2.1 Nursery school

The externalization of care for preschool children in Italy has been traditionally marginal compared to the rest of the European context. There has been a recent increase in the demand for care services due to two main factors: the rising participation of women in the labor market and for pedagogical reasons. The demand however was revealed to be problematic in particular for children below 3 years of age, given the more fragmented distribution of childcare services for this age range (Andreotti and Sabatinelli, 2005). Two out of the six mothers interviewed decided to send their children to nursery school primarily because of

the necessity to return to work. Their motivation to get back to work was not driven by a desire for self-fulfillment, but rather out of a financial need. This situation can be seen as a consequence of the lack of support from the State in the form of appropriate childcare policies for working parents and financial assistance for caregivers within the household (Del Boca, 2005).

Aurora, who is a secondary school teacher and has two children, shared that for her firstborn, she chose to be his primary caregiver. Working in the public sector, she was able to take leaves from work and afford to stay home to personally care for him and "*fully enjoy the experience of motherhood*". However, for her second child, economic reasons compelled her to make a different choice. Due to financial constraints, she opted to send her child to nursery school, as she could not afford the same level of personal care she provided for her firstborn.

Alice, who works as an employee in a local company, sends her own child to nursery school from 7 in the morning until 3.30 in the afternoon. She states that she was compelled to send her child to nursery school after only 4 months after giving birth, which caused her a certain amount of emotional distress:

> "It is unnatural at four months both on the baby's side and then also on the mother's side to detach oneself from one's baby, to detach the baby from the mother to go to work"

In this case as well, her choice was motivated by the financial necessity to return to work. Despite her husband also having a fulltime job as an employee in a company, she affirms that "*[in Italy] unfortunately, today a family cannot live on one salary*".

Three mothers cited their interest in enhancing their children's discipline and social development as key reasons for sending their children to nursery school (Andreotti and Sabatinelli, 2005). They believe that the nursery school environment provides valuable opportunities for their children to learn important rules and develop social skills. For instance Anna says,

> "Discipline. The rules that outsiders can provide are, in my opinion, sometimes more effective than those that a parent can give. And also emulation, emulation with other

children, maybe a little bit older who already know how to do things, helps growth in my opinion"

In this case, Anna values the choice of the nursery school because of the educational value which is another form of care itself (Folbre, 2005). According to Anna, the school imparts "*some simple rules, like eating sitting at the table with a bib, trying not to get dirty*". Comparing the same disciplinary approach to mothers she acknowledges that "*we [mothers] do, we see, but sometimes we also let it slide*". She also highlights the social value of school, emphasizing that interacting with other children plays a crucial role in a small child's growth.

Adele expresses a similar sentiment, describing her confidence in the young female teacher who took care of her daughter at the *sezione primavera*. She noticed that the teacher taught her daughter some valuable rules. She says:

"I have noticed that Alessia has made great progress, especially in terms of language, respecting others, and following the rules. She is able to work at her desk alone, color, and write. In other words, she is very independent in these aspects"

Hence, the care provided by the nursery school appears to focus on instilling discipline and fostering social interactions among peers. On the same line Alice states something very similar to Adele,

"On the other hand, the nursery school teaches him many things. It has taught him to eat together with the other children, to share. In fact, if you go to my son and he is eating a snack that he likes very much and you say '*can I have a piece?*' he calmly gives it to you, just as when he meets the other children and hugs them"

Additionally, she mentions that the nursery school also aids her son in preparing for kindergarten by teaching him the alphabet and counting numbers in both Italian and English.

5.4.2.2 Familism

The two remaining mothers chose not to utilize childcare services until their children were eligible for kindergarten. Their decision was driven by a familistic approach to care extension, wherein they relied on informal care from family members when available, such as grandparents, or took on the primary responsibility of caring for their children themselves.

Ava, one of the mothers, found significant support from her parents who live nearby, and she expresses gratitude for not having to hire a babysitter. Her children's grandmother in particular plays an important role, Ava describes her as fully available to take care of her children whenever she has work or other responsibilities. She values her parents' support not only because of it as a trustworthy replacement, but also because of the occasion to nurture an emotional attachment between her children and their grandparents, which is why she made the decision not to send them to nursery school:

> "I also chose not to send my children to nursery school precisely so that they could stay with my parents, with their grandparents, until they were three years old. Many criticized me by saying *'children have to relate to their peers'*. But that was fine with me, I wanted the children to enjoy the presence and love of their grandparents"

As an only child, Ava's children are the sole nephews her mother has, making their relationship special. Her mother willingly takes care of them whenever needed, and she never refuses to help out. This strong family support has significantly eased her ability to balance work, personal commitments and childcare responsibilities. She also appreciates her mother's choice to rely on informal family care during her own childhood, opting for support from grandparents, uncles, or aunts rather than hiring a private babysitter.

Agata had a more intensive approach to childcare. Not having any family members close to her she did not have the availability to rely on informal care arrangements. Her mother-in-law, who is also professionally involved with childcare as both a preschool teacher and a babysitter, is the only form of care

support she has, however she lives in a different town than Agata and her husband and therefore can help only when visiting. As a result most of the childcare responsibilities weigh on Agata. When asked why she did not seek to reduce her caregiving responsibilities by using a local nursery school or hiring a babysitter, she responded that, as a stay-at-home mother, she did not feel the need to take time away from her daughters. She acknowledges that her children are currently in a stage of dependence, and as they grow up, she expects them to become less reliant on her and require less of her care,

> "I don't feel the need [to hire a babysitter], I manage in the end. I know that maybe I don't eat, that I don't really have time, and that sometimes I cry because I'm too tired, but I don't feel the need for it. I don't want to entrust my children to someone else other than myself or maybe their grandmother. I don't feel like trusting... I don't trust much at all, to be honest. At the beginning, I didn't even trust my mother-in-law, I didn't even let her drive the child in the car [laughs], so you can imagine my general level of trust in human beings"

Agata embraces the responsibility of caring for her three children, valuing the precious time spent with them, even though it can be physically and emotionally demanding. Despite the challenges, she views her decision as natural and not burdensome, firmly believing that children *need* to be nurtured by their mothers, on that account, she states *"they have a need for their mom, because for children, we are their... the mom is the world. Everything revolves around mom"*.

6. Conclusions

This thesis is a case study that examines the perceptions of six mothers living in Puglia regarding the unpaid care work they provide to their children. To address the main research question, several sub-questions were used to gather information about the connection between their perception of care and (1) the impact and consideration of the State support on their caregiving experiences, (2) the attitude that marked their model of mothering (3) their motives for engaging in childcare activities, and (4) their decisions to seek external care support.

As a consequence of having focused the investigation of care from the institutional context to individual mother-child relationships, I ultimately discovered a consistent interplay among different perceptions in the interviewees' consideration of care work and how they interact with one another. This interaction is the reason why these themes often overlap and recur throughout the discussions. In this chapter, I will firstly summarize and discuss the findings to then describe possible future unfoldings of this research.

The analysis initially looked at how the region Apulia as well as the government supports unpaid care in Italian households. Anna's statement, *Italy is certainly not a country that helps with having children* pretty much captures the issue. Although the interviewees consistently talked about the State's role in childcare support, they did not specifically mention regional policies. This could indicate two possible outcomes: 1) there might be a lack of regional or local policies to support families, or 2) the interviewees may not be aware of existing regional policies or contributions. In fact, most of the interviewees discussed the issues on a national level rather than a local level and they did not highlight any particular difference between the southern and northern parts of the country.

To understand why unpaid care activities in Italian households are not adequately recognized by the national government, the study used the Marxist feminist concept of *social reproductive labor*. The findings highlighted a significant dissatisfaction and lack of trust in the State due to the inadequacy of

work-life policies and insufficient financial remuneration for caregiving. As resulted in previous research, this lack of support from the government does not contribute to an equal distribution of caregiving responsibilities among Italian parents and, in turn, reinforces a traditionalist gendered division of labor within the household, in favor of a male breadwinner model. Furthermore, the situation is exacerbated by a lack of prevention or protection against workplace discrimination for mothers. The experiences of two interviewees, Agata and Ava, serve as evidence. Agata encountered multiple rejections when applying for jobs, while Ava was fired due to her intention to start a family. All of these factors forced the interviewees to make difficult choices between pursuing a career and motherhood or to struggle in finding a balance between the two.

The second theme focuses on the interviewees' attitude to childcare, which strongly aligns with Hays' (1996) cultural model of intensive motherhood. It was a commonly shared perspective among the mothers to prioritize their children's well-being over their own. Two aspects consistently emerged from the interviews: the significant mental and physical stress associated with caregiving and, at the same time, the sense of emotional fulfillment derived from contributing to their children's growth. However, paired with the lack of public support mentioned earlier, this situation easily leads mothers to make decisions such as reducing their focus on or giving up on their career prospects (Ava; Agata).

Consequently, the third theme emerged, focusing on the reasons behind the interviewees' willingness to take on childcare responsibilities. Lynch's concept of *love labor* has been essential in connecting the previous theme with this one by adding the emotional dimension to the equation of care. Indeed, all the interviewees saw caring for their children as a conscious decision they made when becoming mothers. Affection was consistently highlighted as a strong driving force behind their caregiving efforts, playing a crucial role in maintaining the care relationship with their children. Many of them drew upon their own past experiences of receiving care from their mothers as a source of motivation, influencing the way they care for their own children. For example, some provided more attentive and intense care due to having experienced inadequate care during

their own childhoods (Ava; Agata), while others approached caregiving with more consciousness because of an excessive devotion to care (Aurora).

The last theme focused on how the interviewees' perceptions influenced their choices regarding the extension of care, whether informal or formal. In terms of informal care, the role of the father in the couple was often seen as fundamental, with most mothers viewing their partners' contribution as equal and complementary. Although this indicates a potential departure from traditional gendered perceptions of care, many mothers expressed dissatisfaction with the limited nature of paternal leave. The lack of adequate paternal leave not only reinforces gender-based divisions of work but also hinders men from fully experiencing fatherhood.

Regarding formal care, most mothers questioned its use primarily during the first three years of their children's lives. However, after this period, they all agreed on enrolling their children in *scuola materna* (kindergarten). Some mothers mentioned relying on external assistance from an *asilo nido* (nursery school) due to the short and economically insufficient nature of parental leave, which forced them to return to work quickly (Aurora; Alice). Despite this constraint, there was a general consensus among the mothers about the positive educational and social value provided by nursery schools (Adele; Anna).

On the other hand, mothers like Agata and Ava, who chose to work part-time or stop working altogether, opted for informal care solutions. They either relied on family members (mostly their own mothers or mothers-in-law) or friends to take care of their children, or took on the full responsibility of childcare themselves. Their choice was mainly driven by their desire for their children to receive a more emotionally engaged care from themselves or a close family member rather than from a stranger. Additionally, their lack of trust in formal care services also influenced their decision.

In conclusion, the intense care work that Apulian mothers perform is motivated by affection, which nevertheless leads them to consume themselves for the sake of their children. At the political level, clearly, the effort is not considered

enough, both at the policy level and at the communication level. Introducing subsidized tax systems for companies to hire parents, extending parental leave with attention to fathers and by ensuring that there are no repercussions, and making contracts more flexible and fair for parents to support their children in the crucial early years of development, have emerged as critical priorities to respond to the overwhelming unequal distribution of care responsibilities in the household and lack of adequate support.

7.1 Further research and limitations

7.1.1 Scarcity of case study related information

The primary limitation encountered during the analysis process revolves around the scarcity of specific information regarding the context of the case study, namely Puglia. Despite directing questions towards the regional context during the interviews, the responses from the interviewees did not yield substantial insights. The discussions predominantly revolved around policies, financial remuneration, and childcare services from a national perspective, with interviewees emphasizing that the recognition of care work is more of a nationwide issue rather than exclusive to Puglia or the South in general. Contrary to the initial assumption, the interviewees did not significantly differentiate between the North and South of the country concerning care work, except for a single reference to Southern mothers being perceived as more clingy with their children (Ava) and a heightened possibility of being judged as a mother, particularly in small towns rather than larger cities (Aurora; Agata).

7.1.2 Representativity

This project is an exploratory study, representing an initial qualitative research effort concerning care work in the Puglia region. As stated earlier, the sample was

assembled through a snowballing approach, continuing until data saturation was reached. The goal was to examine how the experiences of mothers naturally intertwined within the regional context. As a result, the sample comprises employed white Italian mothers in heterosexual relationships who biologically gave birth to their children.

Given the profound impact of factors such as class, ethnicity, and migrant status on care work (Lynch, 2007), it is essential to acknowledge potential influences. Further research could potentially explore the experiences of migrant mothers, those residing in rural areas of the region, or queer couples in Apulia. Such investigations may unveil distinct conclusions and contribute additional dimensions to the discourse. Likewise, the inclusion of insights from mothers who have adopted or employed surrogacy, as well as single mothers – as previously studied in Ahola's research on lone mothers in Parma (2007) – could further enhance the overall understanding.

7.1.3 Social desirability bias

Another significant limitation of this research pertains to the potential presence of social desirability bias, where individuals may underreport socially undesirable attitudes and overreport more desirable ones (Latkin *et al*., 2017). This bias tends to be more pronounced when exploring personal or sensitive topics. According to Paulhus (1984), two components contribute to this bias: impression management, which involves purposefully presenting oneself to fit a situation or please an audience, and self-deception, which may occur unconsciously to maintain a positive self-concept. Regarding my research, even though I took measures to guarantee anonymity during the interviews, it is essential to acknowledge the possibility that the interviewees might have intentionally or unintentionally tried to present themselves in a favorable light and avoid being seen as *bad moms* (Ennis, 2014) while sharing their experiences with childcare. This potential bias is carefully considered when presenting the research findings.

7. Epilogue

The inspiration for this dissertation dawned upon me when I was struck by the profound extent of care I have received throughout my life, a sentiment I had previously taken for granted. This realization led me to contemplate the role of the caregivers in my personal experience, which, like many others, prominently featured women: my mother and my grandmother.

Beyond this personal introspection, I would argue that this thesis forms a continuation of the *fil rouge* initiated in my bachelor's dissertation. This earlier work explored the impact of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) on the American feminist movement. Despite lacking a comprehensive Marxist framework addressing care, gender, and race, Friedan's book poignantly highlighted the plight of American housewives in the 1950s.

The impetus for the development of this project has been observing my grandmother, to whom I dedicate this work. What resonated deeply was her inexhaustible drive to care for family members. Regardless of our pleas for her to prioritize herself, she persisted in her relentless planning, washing, cleaning, and cooking. Moments like when she would bring me a glass of freshly squeezed orange juice after lunch, considering my reluctance to consume post-meal fruit, prompted me to ponder whether her actions stemmed from an overwhelming love for us. This curiosity prompted me to delve into the emotional facet of care within this research. The concept of love labor certainly provided an apt framework, though the inherent complexity of this dimension defies complete apprehension.

My research journey illuminated the complicated nature of care. In the context of my exploratory study, I discovered the profound love my interviewees harbored for their children. I would say it is easy to romanticize the sacrificial devotion exhibited by mothers like those in my study; however, this commitment's intense nature necessitates scrutiny. I firmly contend that the myth of heteronormative motherhood continues to grip Italy, influencing women's choices regarding parenting, professional paths, and personal lives. Notably, even

privileged heterosexual couples often find themselves making sacrifices due to a culture resistant to progress and a support system that neglects mothers while morbidly fixating on birth rates, a prevailing system that ultimately does not care enough.

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9. Appendix

Appendix 1

Original (Italian) version:

Ciao [censurato]! Penso che [censurato] ti abbia informato su di me.

Sto cercando un campione di 6 madri pugliesi da intervistare, che abbiano uno o più figli in età compresa tra 0 e 6 anni. L'intervista avrà una durata massima di 45-60 minuti e verrà registrata per la trascrizione. Le domande esploreranno le percezioni delle intervistate riguardo alle cure che forniscono ai loro figli, le aspettative socio politiche in quanto madri italiane e meridionali, e come queste si intersecano con l'amore e l'affetto insiti nelle attività di cura.

Puoi stare tranquilla che la tua identità verrà anonimizzata utilizzando pseudonimi, hai la libertà di ritirare il tuo consenso all'intervista in qualsiasi momento, non sei obbligata a rispondere a domande alle quali non desideri rispondere e puoi decidere di interrompere l'intervista in qualsiasi momento.

Se sei interessata a essere intervistata e ad aiutarmi nel mio progetto, potresti descrivere brevemente la tua situazione familiare e lavorativa attuale? A presto!

Translated (English) version:

Hi [redacted]! I think [redacted] may have informed you about me.

I am looking for a sample of 6 mothers from Apulia to interview, who have one or more children aged 0 to 6 years. The interview will last for a maximum of 45 to 60 minutes and will be recorded for transcription. The questions will explore the interviewees' perceptions of the care they provide to their children, their sociopolitical expectations as Italian and Southern mothers, and how these intersect with the love and affection inherent in caregiving activities.

Rest assured that your identity would be anonymized using pseudonyms, you have the freedom to withdraw your consent from the interview at any point, you need under no obligation to answer any questions they did not wish to respond to, and you could decide to halt the interview at any time.

If you're interested in being interviewed and helping me with my project, could you briefly describe your current family and work situation? Talk to you soon!

Appendix 2

Original (Italian) version:

DOMANDE INTRODUTTIVE

1. Quanti anni hai?
2. Cosa fai per vivere?
3. Quanti figli hai al momento? Quanti anni hanno?
4. Hai un partner? Sei sposata? Cosa fa per vivere?
5. Hai parenti stretti che vivono con te o vicino a te? Sei in contatto con loro?

DOMANDE GENERALI SULLA CURA

1. Come descriveresti la tua esperienza come madre in Puglia?
2. Hai mai ricevuto sostegno per le tue attività di cura da un familiare o un amico stretto?
3. Cosa implica per te prendersi cura dei bambini?
4. Quante ore al giorno dedichi all'assistenza ai bambini?
5. Quali responsabilità percepisci come caregiver?
6. Come bilanci le tue responsabilità di cura con altri aspetti della tua vita, come il lavoro o obiettivi personali?
7. Come affronti la divisione delle responsabilità di cura tra te e il tuo partner, se applicabile?
8. Hai affrontato sfide o ostacoli nel prenderti cura del tuo bambino? In tal caso, come li hai superati?

DOMANDE SULLA NATURA SOCIALE E POLITICA DELLA CURA

1. Sei a conoscenza di servizi regionali per le madri residenti in Puglia in relazione alla cura dei loro figli?
2. Consideri l'assistenza ai bambini come lavoro? Se sì / no, puoi motivare la tua risposta?
3. Percepisci aspettative sociali riguardo al tuo ruolo sia di madre che di caregiver contemporaneamente? Se sì, come influenzano le tue pratiche di assistenza?
4. Quanto ritieni che lo Stato debba intervenire nell'organizzazione dell'assistenza all'interno della tua famiglia?
5. Quali sono le tue percezioni del ruolo dello Stato e delle istituzioni regionali nel supportare l'assistenza ai bambini e il lavoro di cura?
6. Hai cercato o ricevuto sostegno esterno, come servizi di assistenza all'infanzia, nelle tue responsabilità di cura?
7. Ad esempio, hai mai assunto una babysitter? Se sì / no, perché?
8. Senti che il tuo ruolo di caregiver sia riconosciuto e valorizzato dallo Stato? Perché sì o perché no?
9. In che modo il contesto culturale e sociale della Puglia influenza il tuo approccio all'assistenza?

DOMANDE SUL VALORE EMOTIVO DELLA CURA

1. Perché ti prendi cura del tuo bambino?
2. Pensi che l'assistenza ai bambini dovrebbe essere considerata una forma di cura diversa rispetto ad altre? (ad esempio, prendersi cura di una persona anziana, prendersi cura di un amico, prendersi cura di un gruppo di persone)
3. Quanto è personale per te l'assistenza ai bambini? Puoi elaborare il motivo?
4. Quando pensi che l'assistenza ai bambini venga fornita con amore? E quando avviene senza?

Translated (English) version

INTRODUCTORY QUESTIONS

1. How old are you?
2. What do you do for a living?
3. How many children do you have at the moment? How old are they?
4. Do you have a partner? Are you married? What do they do for a living?
5. Do you have any extended family living with you or close to you? Are you in contact?

GENERAL QUESTIONS ON CARE

1. How would you describe your experience as a mother in Puglia?
2. Have you ever received support for your care activities from a family member or a close friend?
3. What does childcare involve to you?
4. How many hours of childcare would you say you spend per day?
5. What do you perceive are your responsibilities as a caregiver?
6. How do you balance your caregiving responsibilities with other aspects of your life, such as work or personal goals?
7. How do you navigate the division of care responsibilities between yourself and your partner, if applicable?
8. Have you faced any challenges or obstacles in providing care for your child? If so, how have you overcome them?

QUESTIONS ON THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL NATURE OF CARE

1. Are you aware of regional services for mothers residing in Puglia related to the care of their children?
2. Do you see childcare as labor? If yes / no, can you motivate your answer?

3. Do you feel social expectations regarding your role as a mother and as a caregiver at the same time? If yes, how do they influence your caregiving practices?

4. How much do you feel like the State should intervene within childcare organization in one's household?

5. What are your perceptions of the role of the state and regional institutions in supporting childcare and care labor?

6. Have you sought or received any external support, such as childcare services, in your caregiving responsibilities?

7. For instance, have you ever hired a babysitter? If yes / not, why?

8. Do you feel that your caregiving role is recognized and valued by the State? Why or why not?

9. How does the cultural and social context of Puglia influence your approach to caregiving?

QUESTIONS ON THE EMOTIONAL VALUE OF CARE

1. Why do you take care of your child?

2. Do you think childcare should be considered a different form of care compared to others? (ex. Caring for an elderly person, caring for a friend, caring for a group of people)

3. How personal is childcare to you? Can you elaborate why?

4. When do you think childcare is done with love? What about when it is done without it?