Motherhood, Poverty, and Education. The case of Naples

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Abstract: This article describes how the educational role of poor mothers, both in terms of socialization of their children and in supporting them in schooling, is socially constructed, understood and played in Southern European societies. In this context the social welfare is of familistic type and the childcare system is not sufficiently developed. The analysis is based on the findings of two research projects, carried out in Rione Sanità, a poor neighbourhood in the historic centre of Naples, in Southern Italy. Here, poverty affects a large part of the population, concentrated in some inner areas and in big peripheral suburbs. Within the 'Neapolitan survival model', mothers/women play a key role in all contexts. They carry a heavy burden of responsibilities, both inside and outside the family. In 2012 a first case study was carried out to investigate which are the welfare provisions from voluntary organizations responding to the educational needs of children and adolescents living in this neighbourhood. In 2016 a second research was conducted on families' poverty and social relations. Based on the selection of 15 life stories of poor mothers and on information from in-depth interviews to key informants, the article outlines frequent links among motherhood, poverty and education, thus highlighting three key phases of life: socialization backgrounds, transition to motherhood and the experience of mothering.

Keywords: schooling, motherhood, social inequity, mediterranean welfare system

Introduction

How is the educational role of mothers in poverty socially constructed, understood and played in Southern European societies? How does this relate to educational attitudes, practices and, ultimately, to poverty?

This article focuses on the educational challenge of socializing and supporting children's schooling when mothers are poor. Therefore, it is also possible to observe how mothers manage in contributing to reproduce and/or interrupt the cycle of poverty. The suggested perspective appears relevant for a better understanding of education within Southern European contexts for at least two reasons: i) in such contexts, the welfare regime is of familistic type, i.e. the family has a central role in providing care for children and balancing deficiencies in the public welfare system (Ferrera, 1996; Morlicchio, Pugliese & Spinelli, 2002); ii) the influence of family background on children's educational achievements is still a source of social inequity with a strong persistence among and within countries in South Europe (Barone & Ruggera, 2018; OECD, 2018).

The analysis is based on two theoretical frameworks.

The first concerns children's socialization and education and, particularly, parents' role. In educating their children, parents are influenced by their socialization background and by the religious, political, cultural and economic features of the context. According to Berger and Luckmann (1966), internalisation of reality, which takes place in primary socialization when the maternal role has great relevance, is always filtered twice: children not only internalise the world within the family social space as the only possible, but they also assign the same colours' as their parents. Currently, the term "early childhood development" is defined as the stage of life when the child's neurological and psychological development is particularly influenced by social and interpersonal stimuli from the surroundings, and especially from the family (Milani, 2018). On the other hand, school is the other fundamental socialization's agent. However, this also plays a selection, and it is not always neutral in such position. The conflict theory proposed by Althusser (1965) and Bourdieu (1970), the theory of deprivation (Halsey, Floud & Anderson, 1961) and that of deficit (Bernestein, 1971), state that children in lower social classes are pushed out from education due to certain school mechanisms. At the same time, in analyzing biographies of drop out students, some qualitative studies (Colombo, 2010) have emphasized that partnership between school and family can take to a better social integration of children and better school achievements. As a social process, socialization is also shaped by gender. Moreover, socialization to gender influences all aspects of people's every-day life and it is lifelong lasting as shown by the social cognitive theory of gender development (Bandura, 1986; Bussey & Bandura, 1999).

A second theoretical framework of this research concerns poverty, its multidimensional nature and its impact on individual and family biographies. Poverty has been widely analysed and considered as a material, cultural, relational and/or capability deprivation (Morlicchio, 2012; Negri & Saraceno, 2004; Sen, 1992; 2009; Nussbaum, 2011). It can be investigated in some of its specific forms and with reference to social perception of the phenomenon and to responses given by institutional systems (Paugam, 2005; Ranci & Pavolini, 2015). Some studies proved that poverty transmission exceeds wealth, and it is more likely to be inherited (Grundiza & Lopez Vilaplana, 2013; Rutter & Madge, 1978). However, the incidence of this phenomenon is different among European countries and is higher among younger generations. The intergenerational transmission of poverty is a phenomenon that often involves families in weak economic contexts such as in the South of Italy. Different factors contribute to this result and to the variability across contexts and generations, such as the ability of the education system to counterbalance initial inequalities, work opportunities and social mobility of the labour market, the opportunities for economic autonomy of young people etc. (Saraceno, 2015). Poor children are very likely to face economic difficulties once they have become adults (Corcoran, 2001). In statistical terms, in continental European countries and even more in Southern countries, over 70% of people experiencing poverty in childhood become poor adults (Perrons & Plomien, 2010). A materially deprived family background, often correlated to or overlapped with disadvantages in many dimensions (e.g. in the educational one), is therefore a favourable condition to the reproduction of poverty, as well as a very reliable predictor of a future condition of this kind.

The article presents the findings of two different research projects developed in *Rione Sanità*, a poor neighbourhood in the city of Naples.

The first, carried out in 2012 (Licursi & Marcello, 2012) was aimed at identifying and analysing voluntary organizations and their support on the field for families, especially with reference to tutoring and assisting children and teenagers in their school work. The second study, conducted in 2016 (Chiodo & Pascuzzi, 2018) focused on the poverty of families and their social relations.

The two studies used a mixed-method approach, combining secondary data sources with a qualitative fieldwork. A detailed analysis of secondary data, concerning the main socio-demographic and economic characteristics, and the study of the social-urban literature on the city and its suburbs preceded the fieldwork. In both studies, in-depth interviews to key informants were collected, for a total of 27. Life stories of 15 mothers in poverty were also gathered. The biographical approach enables to grasp the diachronic dimension of life stories, to better understand the logic of individuals' actions, and its interlinks with social relations and the life context (Atkinson, 1998;

Zanfrini, 1999; Bichi, 2000). It also allows to highlight the relations between history and biography within society, and between "the personal troubles of milieu" and "the public issues of social structure" (Mills, 1970, p. 14).

The article is divided into 3 sections. Section 1 focuses on the centrality of parenting and offers a literature review on the educational role of mothers in poverty. Section 2 describes the research context and the features that make Rione Sanità a social periphery in the heart of the city. Section 3 presents the main findings of the empirical studies. It highlights the most frequent aspects in the mothers' poverty life stories and their attitudes and practices towards children's needs and education.

Mothering in poverty: what is in literature

Parenting changes over time and across cultural and social contexts. It can be analysed from different perspectives, focusing on any of such components of the family (children, adults, the parental couple, etc.), on gender regimes (Lewis, 2000; Esping-Andersen, 2009; Knijn & Saraceno, 2011), on generations (Naldini, Solera & Torrioni, 2012). The core of this research is also parental fragility, which is considered as the weakness of the so-called parental skills (Mazzoli & Spadoni, 2009) or as the difficulty to play the educational role alone (Mazzucchelli, 2011). Parenting is influenced not only by cultural models of gender (Magaraggia, 2015) internalised during socialization, but also by the economic, social and cultural resources of parents. Nowadays the precariousness of living conditions and the de-institutionalization of life (Benasayag & Schmit, 2003; Leccardi, 2017), has increased in the number of unconfident parents, experiencing a presentification of their life project and family perspectives (Gallino, 2006), and dealing with the re-elaboration of personal failure.

Coherently with the topic of this article, the study focuses on the role of mothers. Many theoretical and research contributions acknowledged that "motherhood, as an activity, is experienced differently by women, depending on their social location" and that "parenting skills are (...) socially constructed, and differentially distributed and rewarded" (Fitz Gibbon, 2010, pp. 50-51). In fact, mothering is a social practice, a dynamic process of social interactions and relationships, and as a social construction, it is also highly influenced by gender belief systems. In particular, it is the gender socialization to strongly influence the contents of the maternal role which is intertwined with the cultural characteristics of the local society and with the role expectations developing within it through inter and intra-generational communication (Rossi, 2019; Crespi, 2008).

The study by Welles-Nystrom, New and Richman (1994) and the one by Bornstein et al. (2005), involving mothers and children of different national

and cultural backgrounds, highlighted the important cultural differences in the ideal of *good mother* and in maternal care practice (maternage). Within literature, it is often observed the lower ability of working class or poor parents to intentionally improve their children's destiny, as their efforts are mainly addressed to respond to basic needs (including food and shelter, Lareau, 2003). Therefore, a poor mother could dedicate herself to the care and education of her children without, however, knowing how to adopt an effective strategy. Simons et al. (1991) showed that the psychological functioning model of mothers is influenced by their socio-economic status, and that mothers at the bottom of the socio-economic ladder adopt rigid and inconsistent educational practice. Mothers in poverty are also claimed to show a lower sensitivity in socio-emotional exchanges with their children (Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2001; Bornstein & Venuti, 2013).

However, motherhood should always be analysed taking into consideration the social, cultural and economic context, as well as the "set of social interactions arising within a gendered set of relationships and social institutions at a particular time and place" (Cowdery & Knudnos-Martin, 2005, p. 335). Especially in those contexts where child-rearing is primarily considered a woman's responsibility only and the childcare services are weak or only purchasable on the private market, the image of the woman who dedicates or sacrifices herself for her children defining her own identity as a mother, is recurring. These features lead to negative effects in terms of renounce to paid work, time that mothers devote to themselves and social networking (Horne & Breitkreuz, 2018). Mothers take on the greater workload in the management of daily activities, the organization of resources (grandmothers, baby sitters, etc.), the care of children (Magaraggia, 2015), even when both partners are present and/or when very young. Motherhood is not always the result of a transition to adult life, which may also occur at a different pace (Jones, 2002; Bynner et al., 2002) or following different paths (Roberts, 2011). In certain experiences, motherhood is a kind of plunge into adult life with an increase in responsibilities added to an already very precarious and fragmented living condition. It is the case of single mothers or of mothers with many children living in poor contexts, or of foreign mothers. In these situations, motherhood can itself be the effect of dynamics of impoverishment, such as the case of teenage mothers being daughters of teenage mothers (Manlove, 1997).

Nonetheless, even in poverty, some maternity styles, helped by targeted socio-educational and welfare interventions and the action of voluntary organizations, may offer chances to interrupt the cycle of poverty and to support a new maternal identity model, which is different from the culturally dominant one.

The context: Rione Sanità within Naples

Naples is *the epicentre of Southern poverty* for number of population and density (989,111; 8.310.23 inhabitants per Km²) and for its metropolitan aspect (Morlicchio & Morniroli, 2013). Levels of wealth are low with regard to different dimensions (Istat, 2015): from those related to socio-economic indicators (income, material conditions of life and employment), to those concerning health, schooling, quality of services, safety, environment.

Naples is the Italian metropolitan city with the lowest pro-capita family income (12,314 €), the highest incidence of people living in families, where no one works or receives a pension from work (17.3% and 40.2%), the highest rate of non-participation at work (42.9%), the smallest life expectancy at birth, both for male and female (77.6 and 82.4 years), the lowest number of people with the highest education level, the highest rate of NEET (24.4%).

Poverty is more concentrated in some areas of the city, such as the suburbs in the northern and eastern periphery of the city and some districts in the historic city centre (Amaturo, 2004; Sgritta, 2010). Alongside persistent and deep-rooted poverty, made up of large families with children poor for generations, new poverty has developed in recent years. However, informal networks of support systems seem to persist, and this somehow makes it possible to balance the lack of integration on the labour market, according to a peculiar *Neapolitan surviving model*, where women/mothers play a key role (Gambardella & Morlicchio, 2005).

Within the Neapolitan urban space, the Rione Sanità (see figure 1 for some statistics) does not have a geographical peripheral position, as it falls into the historical city centre. Walking through it, the historical city centre looks like a jigsaw puzzle, whose pieces, though very close to one another, appear rather separate and distant. Rione Sanità is developed in a depression: it is an urban reality in itself, which is not necessary to go through it to move from one part of the city to another.

> As soon as you enter the Sanità, you are surprised by the mosaic of stalls, the colourful shops, the noise of the streets and the streets full of historical and artistic memories, the clamour of children and the cries of women and men; the clothes hanging on the small thresholds or glued to the grey and damp walls of the basements or suspended between earth and sky from one window to another. You are in the throng of the crowd, in a plurality of voices, of colours, between the whirl of scooters, the clutter of the cars, the trash cans always redundant. The district looks different at different times and you immediately notice other things: young people and adults who act as a post for the drug dealing, invivable basements of a few square metres, wet and suffocating with rent of 300 euros, illiterate boys (Sacchetti, 2012, p. 32).

Figure 1. Rione Sanità Statistics

Inhabitants	16,738
Young age is prevailing	17.6% of population is under 15 (Naples 15.7%; Italy 14%) The Ageing index is 81.7% (Naples 114.4%; Italy 148.8%)
Low education	11.6% no qualification (Naples 9.5%; Italy 8.8%) 24.3% Primary education (Naples 20.2%; Italy 20.1%) about 40% Lower secondary education (middle school) (Naples 30.9%; Italy 29.8%)
Employment	33.9% unemployed (Naples 27.8%; Italy 11.4%) 41.5% Female unemployment (Naples 33%; Italy 13.6%)

Source: Istat (2011)

This isolation was caused by some political choices and transformations of the local economy. The district is characterized by an increasingly weakening of the main forms of social regulation, the inaction of formal institutions and the presence of criminal organizations dedicated to drug trafficking and other illegal activities. Within the community, there different territorial and human microcosms coexist, and they do not always interact; more often they cohabit without bumping into each other or doing it as less as possible. Internal fragmentation has increased if compared to the past, mainly due to new settlement choices: for example, a part of professionals or university students wishing to live in central areas with low housing costs have started to populate the outer areas of the district. Other areas have become a location for migrant housing settlements. In general, the innermost areas maintain a homogeneous and generally poor social profile.

The interviewees

In order to explore the different dimensions of poverty within Rione Sanità and to gather the views of those involved in the delivery of socio-educational support (aid) to local population, Interviews were collected from key informants: 3 policy lead officers, 1 social services manager, 4 third-sector organization managers, 7 religious people, 2 university professors, 1 school teacher and 5 volunteers of tertiary-sector organisations (hereinafter Ki and sequential number). The experience of motherhood in poverty was deepened through the collection of life stories. In accordance with the biographical approach (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002), life stories have been used to gather mothers' narratives of their experience of motherhood/mothering within their social environment, thus to get an understanding of their life choices. A look at the socio-demographic and professional characteristics of the mothers interviewed shows that, at the time of the interview most of them were under 40, and almost all of them had a secondary school level of education.. With regard to employment, some were housewives while others were engaged in extra-domestic work

activities, mainly as cleaning ladies or textile workers or sometimes both, exclusively with irregular work positions. There were 5 single mothers (single, separated, widowed) with a number of children aged from 1 to 4. Only one of them had attained an upper secondary education level. In the case of parental couples, 7 out of 10 were married, the number of children varied between 2 and 5, and, in some circumstances, there were other relatives in the family (one or both parents of the interviewee or their partner's, their single siblings, sometimes separated or divorced). Even in situations where the parental couple formally existed, fathers were not always present (because in prison or temporarily separated from wife/partner). As for the work, not all fathers had a job and, the ones employed, mainly worked with low qualification, a high degree of precariousness, often without regular job contract (see figure 2).

Figure 2. Demographic characteristics of the mothers interviewed

Interviewee's name (pseudonym)	Age	Education	Occupation	Marital status	No of children
Rita	31	Lower secondary	Unemployed	Separated	2
Giovanna	39	Lower secondary	Cleaner	Married	3
Maria	58	Primary	Retired	Married	4
Lucia	34	Lower secondary	Cleaner	Married	5
Teresa	24	Lower secondary	Unemployed	Married	2
Carmen	36	Upper secondary	Cleaner	Married	2
Antonia	46	Lower secondary	Housewife	Married	3
Sonia	31	Primary	Cleaner	Single	1
Valeria	42	Lower secondary	Housewife	Married	2
Antonella	37	Lower secondary	Housewife	Unmarried partner/in a stable relationship	2
Franca	50	Lower secondary	Cleaner	Widowed	2
Sandrine	33	Lower secondary	Cleaner	Unmarried partner/in a stable relationship	3
Consuelo	38	Primary	Cleaner	Single	3
Grazia	36	Lower secondary	Unemployed	Unmarried partner/in a stable relationship	3
Mara	42	Upper secondary	Cleaner	Separated	4

Source: Our dataset

Motherhood, poverty and education: findings

The biographical study disclosed some sequences of events and roles in the interviewees' life influencing the different ways of being mothers and of mothering in the Rione Sanità. These issues, which are also able to address children's development towards better educational achievements and to contribute to eradicate poverty or its reproduction, are the following: i) socialization background; ii) transition to motherhood; iii) experience of motherhood.

Socialization backgrounds

During mothers' life trajectories as well as today, there is a constant presence that addresses, accompanies, supports, reassures and influences choices and actions: i.e. birth families. Indeed, the birth family has an ambivalent nature able to change as life goes on and to adapt itself to the changes that birth families themselves contribute to produce. The influence is linked to socialization firstly.

In most life stories, a troubled family environment was typical during childhood and adolescence. This was due to the rhythms and forms of hard working, to the anxiety of losing work or to the burden of childrearing. Some interviewees had a very large birth family, reaching even 11 siblings. Single-parent families, where fathers were absent, were also frequent. The socialization of our interviewees, including the gender socialization, may be described as a "socialization to troubles". It resulted in an early adulthood transition due to the early assumption of responsibilities at a very young age, such as that of caring for the younger siblings and/or of having extra-domestic employment. Growing up in a materially deprived family environment, with disadvantages that tend to extend to other spheres of social life, the risk of becoming poor adults raises.

Most of all, the impact was on education: in almost all stories, interviewees left school very early, sometimes before achieving the middle school diploma, a level that some of them attained later, by attending *evening classes*.

At a certain age older daughters frequently left school to assist or replace their mother in the care of other family members. This need arose especially when the mother carried out intensive productive work and did not have time enough for home management and for other children's care, or when disease unabled her from the caring role. Lucia's story is emblematic: a 34-years-old mother who left school at the age of 11, but began to help her mother with care duties since she was 8. Her mother was a textile worker, one of the many women working at home in the Sanità neighbourhood, without going to the factory. Her salary, like that of other workers, depended

on her piecework production: the more she produced the more she earned. For this reason, while remaining at home, she had little time to devote to young children. It was Mid-Nineties, but socialization of daughters and their destiny still appeared strongly bent to the needs of social reproduction.

> I used to look after the little ones since I was a little girl, because mum worked. She still works today as a shoe-maker. She worked at home and I took care of my sisters. I was 8 years old and I was looking after my little sister and then when I was 12, the third daughter was born. It is two sisters… I have looked after. I left school and looked after them. I was 11 years old. I left middle school, but then I went back and I took the middle school diploma at 15. Three months after I got it, I got pregnant (Lucia).

The interviewees' education was also early interrupted to start working at their parents' request, who needed a contribution to family income or because the children did not want to weigh on the family economy. For the girls, this type of support was often added to the collaboration in domestic life.

Franca, who at the time of the interview was 50, started working part-time when she was still attending primary school.

> I started working when I was 10-11 years old, I went to a laundry, I left school and I went to this lady's laundry to work. I stretched until one o'clock, I had a part-time job. Then I finished primary school and I went in the morning and then at 12-13 I went to work to the shoe factory (…) I went to middle school, but in the evening (Franca).

Giovanna and Carmen's stories took place between the Eighties and Nineties. They interrupted their studies very early too, due to the economic needs of their birth families; however, both decided to return to school later.

> I attained the primary school diploma and I took the middle school one too because I wanted it and so I got it. But I never asked much from my mother because … I saw the sacrifices that she did (…). I saw the difficulty of my mother, but mum never, never made us understand. And I went to work like that, so that I could at least buy my things, a sweater, a pair of shoes (Giovanna).

> I left school early, up to the middle grade, I only started high school, then I got it back later, as an external, because I attended vocational training courses and an upper secondary level was required. I used to go to school, I went there but then I left because I needed to go to work, at sixteen I dropped out (Carmen).

Other reasons for the early school leaving were linked to disaffection towards the study associated with a poor mental map of the possible life trajectories (Ginatempo, 1994). At a certain point, within interviewees' life

horizon, education was no longer a fundamental goal to reach or a starting point towards a biographical project, taking into account several options. In the interviewees' imaginary there were very few possible trajectories which were mediated by the cultural and identity models offered by their social environment. Therefore, the transition to adult life was marked by the acquisition of the role of wife and mother, not necessarily in this order. Some interviewees left school at the start of a love story and/or because of a pregnancy.

> The typical situation includes the following aspects: poorly trained parents, precarious work conditions, becoming parents at a very young age. Children become parents very early, they do not specialize, do not go to school. What we try to do with the educational centres is to break the chain of this continuous transmission. It is like a genetic disease; it is incredible (Ki12).

Finally, there is another aspect of the socialization backgrounds emerging from many stories: the family solidarity that becomes the central resource for the survival of poor families. Many interviewees recalled how their mothers taught them the importance of family and the strength of this bond:

> I was born right here, we are seven children, my mother and my father, four girls and three boys. However, at the age of thirty-six my father passed away because of a bad disease and my mother was alone with seven children. But she has always had the strength and the stubbornness to go forward, always together, we are a real family, always together (Giovanna).

> We are very close, even with my brothers, with brothers-in-law, we are very close, if there is a difficulty … but also thanks to my mother who is old-fashioned and she does not want any misunderstandings between brothers and sisters. Then if it happens, she does everything to make up for the situation (Antonia).

Transition to motherhood

In many life stories, interviewees met their partner when they were pre-adolescent or just teenagers. It was often a boy older than them, grown up in the same neighbourhood. The steps leading to the birth of the new family do not always follow the regularization of the union and the subsequent procreation as traditionally required by Southern European culture. In several cases the formation of new families did not follow the traditional linear path, and was rather characterized by the deferral of some stages (for example, marriage or housing autonomy) and by the anticipation of others (procreation). Trajectories were multiple and depended on a combination of factors such as cultural (models, values and norms), material (the availability

of a house, a job, an income) and relational kind (the existence of a family network supporting the new family). Motherhood preceded the marriage, which would then assume the social value of a reparative action especially when the birth family did not accept the new union. It happened, for example, to Carmen and Valeria:

> It's 15 years that I am married, I am almost 36 years old and I have a child of almost 15 years old and a child of 6. I was 19 years old, I did the fujitina (I have eloped), I was expecting the baby and I had to get married (Carmen).

> I then ran away with my husband … I got pregnant, my mother did not want [did not accept my partner], then we found a small house and we got here. Then slowly everything was settled, and we got married (Valeria).

Becoming a mother represents a strong element of identity, a source of recognition and rite of passage to an adult age that does not always correspond to the majority. In the Rione Sanità, teenage pregnancy is a common condition, a social model that tends to reproduce over generations.

> I got married at 15, now I'm 34. I got married when I was very young, I was 15 years old and him 24. We have been together for 19 years and we have 5 children, the first is almost 18 years old and has a child of 2 (Lucia).

Many girls see the formation of a new family as a chance of social emancipation, the opportunity to leave the birth family and their difficult childhood. In such cases, premature maternity allows to assume a role – that of wife and mother – that fulfils both personal and social expectations.

> The fact that they have children at a very young age, 18-20 years old and already at that age, it is easy to have more than two children and it seems that becoming mothers for these women is the only opportunity for social emancipation, is a way to find their own identity: "I am because I am a mother, otherwise I would not be". So really an identity element (Ki12).

> For girls, the dead-end road is that of marriage and early motherhood. They get engaged very young with guys who are often older than them, they get attracted to the fact that they have their own car, that they can take them to the restaurant and they think of escaping their fate in this way (Ki03).

The consequence of this premature entry into adulthood, without the economic conditions that guarantee the self-sufficiency of the new household, nor the possibility to adequately respond to the needs of its members, is frequently the perpetuation of situations of fragility that fall into poverty

at the occurrence of biographical events breaking the precarious equilibrium of the survival.

The experience of mothering

In addition to taking care of children and home, some mothers contribute to earn money by doing marginal and underpaid jobs or by helping partners in their work. They also manage family spending and budgeting, maintain relationships and make exchanges with the family social networks.

Key informants interviews confirmed that those mothers take on themselves a heavy load of commitments and responsibilities, both when they have a partner, but even more when he is absent.

> We are dealing with families in which women 'carry on the shack' in every sense. The female figure is overloaded with commitments, responsibilities, a whole series of things, they are often single women, with husbands in prison who have to pay the house rent, the education of their children in a difficult neighbourhood (Ki13).

The young Teresa was one of the mothers raising children without the father, who was in prison. Her mother's support allowed her to place a safe distance from her husband, thereby protecting herself and her children from a violent relationship.

> I got engaged to my husband when I was 16 years old. Three weeks later and he got arrested. After a year he came out; 7 months had passed and I got pregnant with my first child. (He was out)... my son was 8 months old he got arrested again. He came out when my son was 5 and a half years old. He was under house arrest then, we had ups and downs ... quarrels happened every day because he kept the habit of beating me, many arguments ... then just came out again and I got pregnant with my daughter, the second one. I had a pregnancy always between ups and downs because we always quarrelled, he was always violent even when I was pregnant with the baby. I gave birth, my daughter was 40 days old and he got arrested another time. He still had to spend other 4 years in jail... My children do not know their daddy since my daughter was only 40 days old and the oldest one lived with him at home for 8 months only, because then I moved to my mum's, since we were always fighting with him (Teresa).

The female alliance, played mainly through the support of family networks, took place not only in response to extraordinary needs, but also in ordinary time, especially in that phase of the life cycle when children were babies.

> Then one says: "Sanità is a woman"! Actually you see that it is precisely women who have the family burden ... trying to be creative and

raise these children. There are some families made of grandmother, mother and children, where sometimes you also have the feeling that the male model... you cannot see it or it is a male model that's so deviant that has no chance of redemption (Ki16).

In the life stories, motherhood was rarely an experience of complete solitude: when children were born, there was always a mother, a mother-in-law, a sister, a sister-in-law or a neighbour at least giving help in the care of the baby, in preparing meals, in the handling of household chores. Mothers in difficulty were those whose family burden could not be shared because the support network was thin or overloaded.

> I live with children, but most of the time I stay here (at my parents' house), I eat here, they (my parents) help me, and at a certain time I go back to my house, I wash them (children) and put them to bed. (...) My mother cooks for me, she washes for me, she does everything, she helps me when I have to pick the children up she makes everything ready for my return (Rita).

> My mother helped me very, very, very much because I had two of my children, one 11 months after the other, and my mother stayed all day long in my house and helped me every day, she would come down to my house and say: "How can you deal with kids?" And in fact she lived in symbiosis with my second child (Giovanna).

The analysis of mothers' life stories allowed not only to identify material and cultural conditions for mothering, but also to outline forms and contents of the mother-child relationship, on the emotional and educational level.

The emotional bond

On the first level, the mother-child relationship was described with the feature of *carnality*, a word expressing a strong emotional bond through high body contact. We found the most extreme and dramatic example in the words of this interviewee:

> I tell you that the relationship with the children is carnal, (...) It's carnal! The Neapolitan word, no? Which is really a close relationship, of absolute love, which is not a shady thing, it is really a feeling of strong belonging, when one belongs to you. Although many children of the Sanità live on the scooter, in the street, those kids have a strong sense of belonging to the family. There is that sense of motherhood, especially, that is very deep, which is also a sense of cuddly motherhood, maternity of strong bond... also very emotional, made of hugs, of kisses to the son, which never lack (...). When Father Antonio celebrated the funeral of Genny Cesarano, this boy who was killed, he said one thing... he was in the burial chamber when they returned the body to the family and said: "One expected screams, shouts" – you know this scene a little Neapolitan – and he said, "You know, I did not see

this, I saw a lot of kisses", a scene that gives you the very idea of what motherhood is in that neighbourhood, that is, the kisses, that is, "the children are mine!". This is the carnality, this bond, even if then the children grow up out in the street – but because there is no room inside the house [laughs] – however, the emotional bond is what is not lacking, the affection is not lacking. I do not know how to explain it: it is precisely the most archaic bond of motherhood in which: "I do not have the tools, I have nothing, but we are one, we are united!" (Ki16).

Even within life stories we found the reference to the warmth of the emotional relationship with the children, an environment experienced in mothers' childhood and considered beneficial for the children's well-being in order to protect them from the threats of the neighbourhood:

I'm not afraid of the neighbourhood because we've had so much warmth from the family, that we were never wrong, then today I give my children all the warmth that my mother gave me. My children are growing with warmth, like me (Giovanna).

The emotional intensity between mothers and children does not automatically mean the ability to adequately perform all the parental functions, especially in the case of young couples.

My impression is that, apart from all those kisses, hugs, a multitude of affection gestures, the child, even the little ones from kindergarten, dominates the parents. So neither the figure of the father nor (that of) the mother in young couples is educational at all. (...) I see them, before going into our kindergarten there is a tobacconist: if the child starts to stomp his feet: "I want, I want, I want candy!", Then he gets to school with bunches of candies like that... And the parents give up, they go and get into debt to get the sweets (Ki11).

The educational relationship

On the educational level, it is possible to highlight some elements. In the first years of their children's life, the main reference for almost all mothers were women in their social circle: often their mother or their partner's, or sisters or sisters-in-law or friends. Their support consisted in caring for children but also in transmitting knowledge around the maternal functions. Therefore, socialization in the first years of life often remained confined in the space of the closest relations. On the one hand, this helped to relieve mothers, lightening their load in the phase in which raising children requires more attention and energy. On the other hand, however, the internalization of care in the family network resulted to be framed in a narrow setting, which seems to be closed towards channels and educational stimuli, generally different from the traditional ones.

> Even if a young woman and mother does not know how to be a mother, she has her mother, so she does not need to turn to the services to request this kind of help in terms of advice, prevention. This is to give you the idea of a very strong bond. And the tendency is to remain closed in the circle between them (Ki09).

The presence of extended family systems, sometimes created confusion in the distinction of the roles and the educational responsibilities. Grandmothers took on the role of mothers with their grandchildren, and this duplication of maternal identity was translated into common language through the distinction between 'mamma' (mum=grandmother) and 'mammina' (little mum=young mother).

Only two mothers interviewed reported the experience of attending an educational service for preschoolers. In both cases, the family network was poor, distant or overloaded with commitments and responsibilities.

Franca was the only one in the family to earn an income; her husband did odd jobs, was drug addicted and ended up in jail for a while. Franca's parents were dead, her sisters worked all day long like her and they also had their children to take care of. When her first daughter was born, Franca asked to work at home and a neighbour helped her with the baby. After 6 years, the second child was born. She went to the church's counselling centre and she was offered the opportunity to include her young son in a religious day care service. Her husband died after 3 years. Working with glues and solvents caused her a severe allergy to her hands thus forcing her to interrupt her work.

> Since he was 18 months old, my son went to the nursery where Sister Rosetta lived. It was a private nursery but she enabled me to send my son there, even with the diaper, in order to give me the possibility to work (…). I met Sister Rosetta and … let's say that I was relieved by this because I had help from the church, she helped me when she could… and, nothing, he (my son) was three and my husband died and, nothing, I went on this way. Now, when I find something, I do the cleaning, if someone calls me, I do the cleaning into a building, so, wherever it happens (Franca).

Valeria moved to Rione Sanità along with her husband, who was born in the area. She was a housewife. The distance from her birth family led her to open up more to the socialization opportunities provided by the context. Her home was not far from an educational centre in the district, so the centre became familiar to her:

> My son was a child, he was one years old, always with the after-school care, with Gina … she introduced us to people who looked after children, who were from one up to three years old, before they went to kindergarten. Some girls looked after children, some others made

us mothers do crochet, massages… they talked … Shall I tell you the truth? Beautiful! Then when the children went to school, after 3 years, it was not done any longer (Valeria).

The near-monopoly of the family network on socialization in the earliest childhood is interrupted in the transition from pre-school to school age. In this phase, the other great socialization agency comes into play: the school. The role played by other subjects of an eventual educating community can then become fundamental. The presence in the neighbourhood of the territorial education centres and of other services for children provided by voluntary organizations offers important opportunities, but does not reduce parental responsibilities; it rather makes parents' decisions critical. During their children's school age, families – and especially mothers – are called to take a position in relation to different aspects of their children's growth, such as: the convergence between family and non-family educational orientation, the support provided to the school experience (in both symbolic and material terms), the use of extra-scholastic time.

The degree of awareness in the choices can vary, and also motivations may be different. Starting from a re-elaboration of personal experience of low schooling, almost all mothers assigned a great value to children's school education. Keeping children at school, getting them to study meant putting them on a good path. For all, it was an investment in their children's future, since – they hope it – will be better than theirs. But it was also a way of protection, trying to keep them out of crime.

> I hope that the children will always be on track, especially the oldest who is 15, he attends the catering school… something for him if he goes ahead and manages to graduate because the job is for him, something that could make him earn quite enough, I hope so much, it is something that we repeat every day, both me and his dad, we tell him that if he graduates, even if at the beginning we have to make some sacrifices to open a small trattoria, we help him, even if I have to go away (emigrate), even if I don't have money… I would make a debt to help him at the beginning, I would do anything, do all the things for children to ensure them a better future (Carmen).

> I just have the primary level; I did not like to study. In fact, for this reason… to my son I try to … must always go to school! Always! He must learn everything. I learnt here, on the street … I see these things happening today, you hear all these things in the neighbourhoods, then I do not want him to lead down a bad road. …where we live, the neighbourhood is beautiful, but we often hear many things. That is, these mothers who have lost their children when they were 16-17 years old. So I try to keep him on the right track. He must do the right thing, he must work and everything else. He must study (Sonia).

Some mothers seemed more aware of the value of education as a transmission of skills and competences for social life as well as a means of personal fulfilment and achievement of those goals, they never achieved in their personal biography. Children can get where mothers have never got.

> My children, the first attends the third year of vocational school and he likes it. He (the little child at home) is in fourth grade of primary school. No, no, they go to school …. No, no, they have to go to school! (…) I do not know how to speak Italian. But my mother told me: "Valeria, it's nice when you go to school, you can talk to a doctor". It happens the doctor says a word and you do not understand, and you say "maronna, chiss mò c'ha rett?" (What did he say?) And you go on the internet to look up the meaning of a word, it's ugly. And I say to my children: "it's nice when you go to school, you know other people, you know other things". It's different, you're better educated … it's nicer when you're educated. (…) No, no, they have to go to school, what if they don't? And what am I going to do with them? Let them be barmen? To do … They have to do everything I could not (Valeria).

In stories such as Franca's one, the presence of a help service that took care of the global needs of the family appeared decisive in guiding the educational choices made by the mother. The first daughter, for example, attended the classical high school in a well-off district of the city, joined English classes organized by the school in the afternoon, followed a cake design workshop and one of sewing; the second child, was part of the 'Sanitansamble orchestra' and did karate at Save the Children's Punto Luce. All activities were suggested and supported by the church, that also helped Franca through financial contributions.

The school experience requires to be associated not only with communication and collaboration between family and school, but also, for example, with helping children in their homework. None of the mothers was deemed capable of this specific task, recognizing their own limits of knowledge and skills. The increased number of educational agencies involved in the socialization process of school-aged children was observed in many of the stories collected. Parents were flanked by school teachers, educators and animators of the territorial educational centres and of the other socio-educational services present in the district:

> The girl goes to the after-school of Sister Lucia to do her homework and for me it is a great help. They also do other activities. The children also do their homework by themselves but then do many other things, they also play a bit and then call me to go to get them. The boy does not want to go to school at all, he has a problem and teachers do not force him, even with homework in the afternoon, because he cannot be very stressed, he stays with me, then also does karate activities to this close association of the Punto Luce. I keep him busy. (…) More-

over, they feel very close to their grandparents, who are always here. Sister Lucia also kept the boy for a while, but he did not manage to stay there long. He has a support at school, I must say that from this point of view they help him, there is always just a person dedicated to him. Because he cannot do it alone, he's always on the move, he's hyperactive, if he's wrong he gets angry, so you have to be a little more careful and fully dedicated to him (Rita).

Mothers have been helped by socio-educational services pushed by reasons, such as the difficulty of supporting children in school work, the desire to spend their free time with activities useful for their development, the will to protect them from dangers of a high-density criminal district.

In other cases, the educational awareness was lower or combined with more material reasons: the need for time to devote to work or to get children far from the domestic environment, which is also their work setting and, in some stories, also the possibility to provide children with a complete meal.

My son goes to school in Capodimonte, at first he was with the nuns at 'Ozanam', then I took him off and I brought him to 'Papa Giovanni' because at the Ozanam they are only opened until four o'clock and, instead, here he can stay longer. Then here, in the month of July, they can guarantee the day-boarding that I do not pay and he can also attend in July. (…) If I find a job, it is convenient (…) if I find something on Saturday or in July (Franca).

I have to congratulate with the Tenda (children's socio-educational centre), a great help. Think if my daughter was here at home, what would she do? We are working and she would get everything dirty, she would start touching everything, making confusion … but it's also for her (my daughter), she does the activities with the other children, the after-school activities, the activities, a great possibility (Carmen).

Then there was the will to offer children everything that mothers have missed: education, opportunities for recreation and growth that do not weigh on families' budget.

I do everything to make my son feel good. The father lives elsewhere and does not always come to visit him and I behave as mother and father. I bring him up alone. Everything … my son plays music, after school, he does everything … swimming pool. I bring him up… My son is everything to me. I do everything to make him feel good. Because he must be fine. Because I already had such a difficult childhood. I have my father and my mother separated, I already understand what bringing up a child without a father means since I grew up without a father too (Sonia).

We keep our children clean, honest and responsible, they do their homework, they do activities instead of keeping them at home and do

> not spend a Euro, we do not spend a Euro. The other night they went
> to the theatre, all things that if you want to do you just have to pay.
> Just last night we talked about this thing, I am ignorant, but for my
> children… they just have to go to school… For me this centre is as holy
> as the school (Antonia).

The model of sacrificial motherhood appeared prevalent among the mothers interviewed: all, except the younger ones, talked about the future only with reference to their children: they did not have any expectations for change if compared to their own. They declared that children came first and that, as happened for them during their growth, the sacrifice in the name of and in front of the children was a value to be transmitted, since it is also able to lead them on the right route. The model of mother who sacrifices her own life for her children poses obstacles to the overcoming of the current condition of poverty. For instance, mothers have not the time to look for a full-time job or to improve their own education or skills.

> In fact, I cannot find a permanent workplace because I cannot work in
> the afternoon and I … because my son wants me, I have to look after
> him. My mother is old and has her responsibilities, so I do everything.
> I take him, I accompany him, everything (Rita).

However, the sacrifice made today to allow children to grasp educational and relational opportunities, broad in nature and quality, opens up new horizons for young generations, which are not even imaginable for their parents. Although key informants said that not all parents were actively involved in seizing opportunities and implementing strategies for their children's development, the life stories showed that many mothers were aspiring to a better future for their children, by connecting them to supportive people and educational experiences.

Discussion and conclusions

The educational role of mothers and their parenting should always be analysed taking into account the general and complex conditions of the socio-economic and cultural context in which it develops, including the prevailing gender regime, as well as the specific family background. This consideration led us to explore the main socio-demographic features of Rione Sanità, in Naples, and the socio-cultural and institutional framework from the perspective of key informants. Looked from the inside, the neighbourhood appeared as a non-homogeneous reality, strongly differentiated. There was not only marginality, but also an extraordinary vitality.

In order to observe and understand socialization and education processes within poor urban environments in the South of Europe, this study suggested a specific perspective, starting from mothers' stories. It considers the role

of mothers as crucial in developing school attitudes, practices and commitments of their children, and in realizing opportunities to abandon poverty.

Although findings cannot be generalized, as qualitative in nature, some conclusive considerations can be drawn from the study. These concern three key dimensions in the relationship among motherhood, poverty and education.

Women have been socialized to motherhood since very young, by rearing their younger siblings. Two trends emerged in mothers' socialization backgrounds that tend to reinforce each other. On the one hand, a model of family – and gender – socialization in which girls are asked to assume early adult roles in the care of the younger and/or needy members of the birth family, reinforcing the cultural ideology and practice of mothering as women's natural activity (Arendell, 2000). On the other hand, the sacrifice of time dedicated to school education. The achievement of a secondary educational qualification or completion of compulsory schooling are goals that lose social relevance, under the pressure of girls' family needs and the difficulties in school experience (Bourdieu, 1970; Colombo, 2010). In Rione Sanità, as in other deprived neighbourhoods of Naples, it is possible to observe a mutual difficulty in the relationship between poor families and schools (Pascuzzi, 2018).

With regard to to the transition to motherhood, some elements allowed to indicate the early motherhood as a mechanism of reproduction of poverty. Motherhood was sometimes experienced as a choice to leave the birth family. The fallacy of this conviction often appeared when realizing that motherhood may put in a condition of further vulnerability and of dependence not only on the partner but also on the birth family. One common adaptation model was then to live together with several families, to attempt original economies of scale. As noted by Saraceno and Naldini (2013), the coexistence in the adult network of adult people, covering both the role of parents and, again, that of dependent members, is increasingly widespread. This leads to a lengthening of intergenerational links, which is usually considered as an effect of lengthening the average life span. In the Rione Sanità, probably, the reasons for these trigeneration families must be sought precisely in the anticipation of motherhood at a young age/adolescence and in the concomitant experience of material deprivation. In both conditions, the effects of this transformation of intergenerational links are different, especially in terms of mutual expectations, boundaries of relationships, mutual rights and duties. In such case, motherhood did not emancipate from the condition of daughter.

In the practice of mothering, the research has found the existence of two levels, the emotional and the educational one. The first is often described, both by mothers and by key informants, as overloaded, differently from oth-

er research (Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2001; Bornstein & Venuti, 2013) findings that described the parenting of poor mothers as detached, because more directed towards the satisfaction of the material needs of the children and little attentive to emotional and attachment needs. The educational level, however, was rather light and unstable. A consistent connection is not always established between the two. When children were young, it was common to share the load of care with the other women in the family (especially with grandmothers) and mothers did not feel the solitude of the role. In this family reorganization, which in some cases led to a widening of the boundaries of motherhood (with the mother becoming 'little mother' and her grandmother 'mother'), mothers cut out a space that was above all emotional. With the entry into the school of children, the weight of the educational role was felt more strongly and some mothers approached the educational support services existing in the neighbourhood. Simplifying the understanding emerging from the life stories, one could say that it is as if only with the exit of the children from the boundaries of the extended family that parental and educational responsibility emerged in the full sense. At this point, the reaction of the mothers seems to follow different directions. Many of them saw the school as the only possible channel of social and spatial mobility, and that is why they encourage their children's attendance in socio-educational services. Their experience led them to imagine a different future for their children, impacting on both gender socialization (Vespa, 2009) and school attainments.

The life stories have allowed us to see different reactions, responses and adaptations to poverty. Alongside the reproduction of poverty, especially in situations of greater deprivation and isolation, strategies to interrupt the cycle were captured. This was the case of mothers who sacrificed themselves so that their children could complete school, leave the neighbourhood, free themselves from a future of poverty. However, even when mothers showed their capacity to be resilient, they could not succeed without support. They also needed to find external resources, in schools, in local welfare and associations. Their experiences confirmed the need to promote nurturing environments, environments where it is possible to exercise a positive parenting function to ensure a positive early childhood development (Milani, 2018), knowing that it is not sufficient to directly affect the relationships between children and parents, but it is also important to intervene on the different actors and services with which children and parents establish relationships.

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