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Precarity and family life in Italy and Great Britain. Job insecurity as commodification of labour

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Precarity and family life in Italy and Great Britain. Job insecurity as commodification of labour

Abstract

This study is based on a critical review of the academic literature around precarious work and family life from the British and Italian contexts. These two contexts were selected as they share similarities in the way parents in insecure jobs respond and recreate social life in the face of economic marginality, but they also share differences, especially gendered differences. While there is substantial research on job insecurity, its specific effects on people with caring responsibilities are less well documented, despite the fact that this part of society represents an important case to explore how ‘precarity’ may not be just an economic condition. Precarious work is understood here in terms of the exacerbation of the historical process of the commodification of labour, which is the social form associated with the ‘free-market economy’. This article proposes that the ‘commodity form’ of labour affects the life of parents, because insecurity means having to continuously look for jobs and remain ‘employable’. Commodification of labour has an important part to play in explaining the social relations of people doing paid work and care: this will constitute the central focus of this article, rather than focusing on ‘social structures’.

Key words: job insecurity, family, commodification, dignity

Introduction

Job insecurity (or ‘precarity’ as Standing [2011] calls it) is the terminological clarification of ‘flexibility’, a term that is positively associated with the free-market restructuring of employment, which stresses freedom of choice on the part of the employee. Through examining the literature on insecure jobs and parents whose life is affected by precarity, a critique of the ‘free economy’ will be used to interrogate the fundamental mechanisms of this free economy.

But why focus on parents in precarious employment? Parents in precarious work are exposed to the pressure of insecure work conditions, but are also responsible for dependent children. So, this group of workers represents a methodologically ideal site for exploring the struggles of mothers and fathers in their everyday lives. Often these are struggles to ensure decent standards of living (Schildrick et al, 2012) for them and their children. In this article, the investigation on the intersection between private life (family) and public life (work) includes explanations around issues that address the supposedly objective side (the mechanisms of the economy) as linked to the subjective side (parents as producers of life and workers), however precarious the latter may be. This framing follows a call for understanding ‘economic’ phenomena (like ‘precarity’) within wider social issues which include mothers’ domestic and care work (Meehan & Strauss, 2015)

The state of economic marginalisation of these parents cannot be understood simply as a by-product of the economic domination of capital; this reading would simply miss the daily struggles of parents in precarious work, struggles that are documented in the British and Italian contexts. In this article, ‘struggle’ is understood not in the sense of politically organised struggle, but as an everyday activity oriented to ensure decent standards of living for parents in insecure jobs and their children. In the Italian context, for instance, these struggles emerge in young couples’ search for a physical space they can call ‘home’

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3 (Giannini & Orientale-Caputo, 2011). In the British context, struggles are the arrangements
4 that young couples strive for in order to achieve ‘quality time’ during daily life (4in10, 2018).
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6 In these different contexts, parents struggle through precarious conditions first through
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8 physically generating their offspring and then for caring for their children, and these tasks are
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10 especially performed by mothers (because of traditionally understood family roles).
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15 This article interprets these struggles in the sense that these are not only struggles to
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17 adapt, but struggles that produce life and social relations. Through the concept of the
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19 commodification of labour, this study describes and explains parents’ struggles, while
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21 avoiding framing them through economic structures or hegemonic forces. This article makes
22
23 explicit and frames theoretically that ‘precarisation’ as a social phenomenon is causing
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25 hardship in these families, but their resilience and their daily struggle point to something that
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27 it is not simply adaptation to the status quo. Dignity is the name given to this resilience.
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31 The main argument is structured in the following way: the first section frames issues
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33 of families in insecure jobs and the social processes of precarisation, then it presents the main
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35 differences and the important similarities of this process as unfolding in the Italian and
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37 British contexts. The second section centralises the phenomenon of the commodification of
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39 labour as a form of social relation which binds paid work to care (and therefore to family
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41 life): this constitutes the central focus of this article, as the analysis of the literature uncovers
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43 social relations rather than ‘social structures’. The third section evaluates how research
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45 presented the details of precarious lives of families with young children in both contexts.
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47 Differences and similarities between the Italian and British contexts are discussed. Section
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49 four concludes that dignity is an aspect that, although registered in few studies, deserves
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51 further unpacking and interpretation: it strives to show that parents in insecure employment
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53 are not simply victims of adverse economic circumstances, but they have agency, in that they
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55 produce and reproduce social life.
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Approach of this study and comparative issues

Following recent studies, this article focusses on issues around the ‘precarisation’ of work (Alberti et al., 2018, p. 449) rather than on precarious work in itself, or issues strictly related to sociology of families. Precarisation as a process is about locating issues around work life and family life in a wider social landscape (Alberti et al., 2018; Author A, 2019; Fumagalli, 2011; Wilson & Yoachim, 2015). Meehan and Strauss (2015) indicate how the focus should be centred on the issues of the ‘precarious worlds’, that is: precarisation in work life is just one side of the systemic insecurity that various spheres of social life are experiencing at this precise historical moment.

Hence, this article maintains a difference between precarisation as a process and issues around poverty. It is true that many studies on insecure jobs and family life individuate lack of financial means as one of the main problems for these parents; however, the focus on precarisation shifts the analysis from a seemingly eternal issue of poverty in ‘advanced economies’ to a specific focus on systemic change in the intertwined domains of social and employment relations.

Following these insights, the originality of this article is to present a core element of socio-economic transformation that is conceptually useful in framing precarious work and the lives of parents. This core element is that precarisation is a social process that goes on through the actions of ordinary people who struggle against the misery of the commodification of their labour and for a dignified life. If the dynamics of the contemporary economy can be considered as a gigantic mechanism that trades the labour-power of ordinary people with wages in order to make the ‘economy’ more profitable (Bonefeld, 2010), the subjects of this social action are nonetheless ordinary people, especially mothers from the working classes (Federici, 2012). The focus is then on how parents may shape their social

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3 circumstances, on their struggles ‘from below’ (Holloway, 2010). For the topic explored in
4 this article, parents are struggling *in* precarity, because this is their economic circumstance,
5 but they also struggle *against* it.
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10 Thus, given the above, it is now possible to frame the studies of the Italian and British
11 social contexts. Focussing on the specific issue of job insecurity and family life, the labour
12 market and welfare state policies of Britain and Italy feature the following points:
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17 1. The Italian state is a ‘familistic welfare state’, traditionally and in its contemporary
18 form as well (Ascoli & Pavolini, 2015). Thus, the main difference for the British and Italian
19 contexts are the gender differences in family life, in terms of who is steered by institutional
20 arrangements to perform housework and care work. For example, in Italy parental leave is *de*
21 *facto* unusable for fathers (Armano, Bove & Murgia, 2017). So, in the Italian context, the
22 combination of precarisation and family life represent a much more demanding burden for
23 women (Toffanin, 2011).
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33 2. Italian welfare is also ‘clientelist’ (Ascoli & Pavolini, 2015: 1), not providing
34 universal cover to citizens, lacking stable and tested principles of organization, apart from
35 that of protecting those who have already economic or institutional secured positions.
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37 Compared with that, the ‘activation’ policies of Britain (Serrano-Pascual, 2017), despite their
38 punitive characters, are more universal. Hence, in Italy the problem is not strictly speaking
39 the precarity connected with work, but rather the lack of support in between one occupation
40 and another and, more generally, of the concrete acquisition of full citizenship (Armano,
41 Bove & Murgia, 2017), whereas in Britain the universalistic approaches of activation policies
42 guarantee a certain level of rational expectation (Prosser, 2016). It is the difference between
43 engendering precarisation and managing it. Obviously, it must be said that in Britain, these
44 rational expectations and universalistic welfare and activation policies are predicated on the
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3 ‘civilised form of violence’ mobilised by the ‘strong state’ in its imposition of ‘abstract
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5 freedom’ for the dispossessed classes (Bonefeld, 2014).
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8 3. The British and Italian social contexts have gone through different processes of
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10 precarisation of labour: in Italy this was partially due to the implementation of the state’s
11
12 economic policies (Armano, Bove & Murgia, 2017), while in Britain atypical employment
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14 contracts have been developed through labour market and ‘economic’ internal mechanisms
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16 (Rubery et al., 2018). From these different trajectories, it follows that different sectors in the
17
18 two countries have gone through different forms of the precarisation of employment
19
20 relations. In Italy it is mainly the state sectors (Job Centres, for example) and the retail sector
21
22 that have gone through ‘forced liberalisation’ of employment contracts since the 2000s. In
23
24 particular, the retail sector was brutally ‘liberalised’ in a matter of a few years, to the point
25
26 that now supermarkets have the laxest legislation in Europe (Armano, Bove & Murgia, 2017).
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28 In both sectors women have been hit disproportionately. In contrast, in Britain, the sectors
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30 most affected by precarisation are construction, transport, accommodation and food, health
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32 and social work (TUC, 2016, p.31): in Britain the highly deregulated labour market has
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34 historically provided incentives ‘for a variety of atypical working relationships such as zero
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36 hours contracts, temporary agency working and bogus self-employment’ (NIESR, 2017,
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38 p.27).
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45 4. In both countries, the Great Recession (2008-10) has been a major leveller for
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47 socio-economic circumstances. The Great Recession has exacerbated the social trends that
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49 push disadvantaged groups into areas of economic marginalisation. The economic downturn
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51 made families more dependent on wage labour (INPS, 2017; TUC, 2016), while making it
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53 more difficult to rely on forms of welfare support, as the answer to recession has been
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55 austerity policies (and hence politics of mobilisation of the population dependant on the
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57 benefit system [O’Hara, 2015; Radice, 2011]). In Britain and Italy (as elsewhere) the Great
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3 Recession exacerbated ‘the contradictions between the extended reach of capital and its
4 protection by the state, and progressive forms of social reproduction’ (Meehan & Strauss
5 2015: 3). Italy is among the European countries with the highest levels of income inequality,
6 but Great Britain is slightly worse than Italy (Eurostat, 2018).
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12 5. In terms of statistical data, it is difficult to compare the development and magnitude
13 of precarious employment, especially because since after the Great Recession, official data
14 record an increase in employment in Britain, whereas in Italy there is a marked decrease in
15 official employment (NIESR, 2017, p.17), especially in the South. This is a huge official
16 difference, as the growth of unemployment in Italy clearly marks the contrast between the
17 two contexts. This difference may also be explained by the strong growth in temporary forms
18 of employment (taken as a proxy of precarity) in Britain between 2008 and 2015 (TUC,
19 2016), whereas in Italy this growth was less dramatic (INPS, 2017).
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31 In spite of the differences, it is also possible to trace basic similarities: the process
32 around the precarisation of labour produced what social policy literature calls ‘new needs’,
33 that is: weaker social subjects who do not find a precise union protection nor specific forms
34 of welfare support (Greer, 2016; Ranci & Migliavacca, 2015). In both social contexts,
35 atypical employment contracts are linked to the marginalisation of weaker social categories:
36 the new ‘social risks’ mainly concern families with children, young people entering the
37 labour market and women who must reconcile work and care responsibilities (Grimshaw et
38 al., 2015; Ranci & Migliavacca, 2015). The gender issue is central because these ‘new needs’
39 are linked to the historically increased female participation in the labour market, which tends
40 to make more visible, in both countries, a tendency towards the crisis of care (Toffanin, 2011;
41 Armano, Bove & Murgia, 2017): the care of the dependent elderly and care of pre-school-age
42 children. As stated in point 1, above, in Italy the ‘familistic welfare state’ complicates things
43 for women. The literature confirms that there is a convergence in Anglophone and
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3 Mediterranean countries in terms of privileging welfare reforms as a support to the ‘free
4 economy’, and thus to the de-institutionalisation and individualisation of labour relations
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6 (Prosser, 2016). In the next section, this aspect of work will be examined through the
7
8 commodification of labour and its effects on family life.
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12 The comparative approach of welfare regimes, explicated in terms of ‘activating’ the
13 population towards a specific mode of production, has an emphasis on ‘social regulation
14 methods’ (Serrano Pascual, 2007, p.276). However, the focus on these methods neglects
15 experience of the families involved in insecure jobs, in the name of a structural understanding
16 of ‘power’ and ‘hegemony’. In this article the social agency of fathers and mothers is
17 privileged over issues of political position and control: in the section ‘The precarious Lives of
18 Families with young Children’, the daily struggles in ‘getting by’ will be linked to wider
19 concerns about social and class struggles. The method of social regulation, and the issue of
20 hegemony, leaves intact the ‘precarisation of work’ as a commodification of work and human
21 life (Bonefeld, 2014). The next section is about framing more precisely precarious work as a
22 commodification of labour, how this commodification is linked to wider social processes and
23 how the struggle of parents through economic precarity is maintained through a (socially
24 relevant) dignity.
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45 **Job Insecurity and the commodification of labour**

46 The Great Recession of *circa* 2008-10 has been read in a number of ways, but a renewed
47 focus on the internal contradictions of the capitalist system has recently gained more
48 relevance (Harvey, 2011; Radice, 2011). The ruling elites responded to the recession with
49 ‘Austerity’ (O’Hara, 2015; Toffanin, 2011), which measures restricted public spending in
50 order to regulate the state’s finances and thus to stimulate private investment. However, one
51 direct consequence of this move is the squeezing of wages, the reduction of public
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3 employment and the attempt to mobilise part of the ‘inactive’ population into paid
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5 employment (Radice, 2011). According to a number of studies, recession and austerity
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7 accelerated the process of precarisation of labour, (Clark & Heath, 2015; Fumagalli, 2011;
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9 Grimshaw et al, 2015; Berntsen, 2016; Morini, 2012). Precarisation is becoming so
10
11 widespread that recent studies strongly argue for a more comprehensive concept of precarious
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13 employment, which may include ‘status insecurity’ as well as job tenure insecurity (Gallie *et*
14
15 *al.*, 2017).
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19 However, from a critical point of view, precarious employment is not just an
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21 economic form, but a social form that is to be linked to the way human practice is alienated in
22
23 a specific form of existence (Holloway, 2012). This form is based on the exchange-value,
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25 which is the basic mechanism that gives value to things: to goods as well as to labour-power
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27 (and thus to people). Human activities are measured through the mechanism of exchange,
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29 which is not limited to the market. Following Adorno (1990), ‘exchange-value’ is considered
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31 as one of the principal features of capitalism, and therefore we, as human beings, are
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33 conceptualised as subjects that are entrapped within a quantity-measuring mechanism
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35 (Bonefeld, 2010; Holloway, 2010). A society based on the exchange form of social relations
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37 produces the ‘commodification of labour’ (Bonefeld, 2014): work and human activities in
38
39 general are quantified for profit in the ‘free market’. The commodification of labour, an
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41 experience immediately felt by the precariat (Castel, 2003; Standing, 2011), represents the
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43 way in which human activities, in their most generic outward appearance, necessarily take the
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45 form of an exchange between the person doing the activity and capital. Whatever the activity
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47 is, it is hollowed out by the exchange, and the person’s way of expressing herself in the
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49 activity is equally measured through the exchange mechanism. There is nothing
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51 ‘economistic’ about this: rather the point of view expressed here represents the critique of
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53 how capitalism distorts human activities into relations between economic things (Bonefeld,
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3 2014). Job insecurity and ‘precarity’ are then the epiphenomena of the form that commodifies
4 labour.
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8 Precarity as vulnerability and exploitability of labour is the historical tendency of
9 capitalism, as Adorno (2005, p. 24) already observed after the Second World War, when
10 ‘countless people [were] making, from the aftermath of liquidation of professions, their
11 profession’. Thus, given the preconditions and the logic behind the phenomenon of
12 precarious labour and its relation to family life, there is a need to focus on the form that social
13 relations take around the commodification of labour. From points 3 and 4 above, it is
14 plausible to say that for precarious parents all that counts is the possibility of selling their
15 labour-power. The commodification of labour-power then not only sets the conditions of
16 existence for the labourer, but also the social form of her life. The ‘precarious worlds’ are
17 mainly women’s worlds because of the double burden placed on the shoulders of mothers
18 (Meehan & Strauss 2015). Both as labourers in an increasingly insecure, flexible economy,
19 and as the operators of care labour inside the private sphere, women are at the centre of social
20 pressure to work in paid jobs and to be ‘good’ mothers (Armano, Bove & Murgia, 2017;
21 Schildrick et al, 2012).
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40 Are then ‘precarious parents’ victims of an adverse economic system? Or are they
41 able to forge their own lives, even if facing ‘objective’ difficulties? In other words, how can
42 we think about parents’ agency? The economy as a field of human practice is not separated
43 from daily social practices. Conditions of precarious employment do not simply make
44 insecure the social relations of parents, it is rather that the precariousness of family life itself
45 is inscribed in the commodity form of labour: parents’ productive activities, their labour
46 power, their capability to operate, produce and care need to be validated through the
47 commodity form, in other words, they need wages in order to function. The assumption is
48 that the organisation of work is not a social structure, but that work (whether waged or not) is
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3 an activity that parents do, but needs to be exchanged, as explained above. Parents in
4 precarious work reproduce social life as well as precarity, they are the agent. Parents in
5 precarious employment bear (in every sense of the word) ‘precarity’ and can only show that
6 they control their destiny *through* it. It is through this objectification that the commodity form
7 is also resisted and the possibility of a more dignified life is prefigured (Giannini, 2016;
8 Author A, 2019).

9
10 Available data on the daily experiences of parents in insecure jobs which mention
11 dignified aspects of life is reported in Italian research (Author A, 2019; Giannini, 2016),
12 while British studies refer to resilience–resistance as particular form of agency (Berntsen,
13 2016; Schildrick et al., 2012). In these studies, researchers present evidence of parents’
14 narratives which refer to a type of agency-resistance (Berntsen, 2016, p. 475) against the
15 harsh conditions associated with insecure jobs and refer to principled refusal of ‘precarity’ as
16 a normal state of affairs (Author A, 2019; Giannini, 2016). In such an approach, friendship,
17 family, love and bonds re-emerge through intense struggles which are often associated with a
18 sense of dignity by people at the margins. In that sense, ‘dignity’ or ‘resilience–resistance’
19 should not be considered as belonging to a normative frame (Psychopedis, 1992), but rather it
20 should be considered as the result of the daily social practices of parents struggling through
21 precarious conditions. The next section outlines parents’ daily struggles through these
22 precarious conditions.

23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40 41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 **The precarious Lives of Families with Young Children and their Struggles**

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51 The previous section showed that the social lives of parents in insecure jobs are mediated by
52 precarity as a social form of commodification of labour. There are clear indications from the
53 Italian and British literature that, in these different contexts, elements of diversity are mixed
54 with commonalities in the ways parents in insecure jobs experience and operate within the
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3 ‘free market economy’ (4in10, 2018; Author A, 2019; Giannini, 2016; Hardgrove, McDowell
4 & Rootham, 2015; INPS, 2017; Ipsos Mori, 2013; Schildrick et al., 2012).

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8 Setting up a family, as a communal project, is never an individualised task, neither in
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10 terms of investment of money nor in shared understanding of emotions. It often happens in a
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12 context where previous generations pass resources (money, time, or mobilisation of networks
13
14 of solidarity) to their successors and where forms of support are still backed by the welfare
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16 state, in Italy (Giannini 2016) and in Great Britain (4in10, 2018; Grimshaw et al., 2015).
17
18 However, it seems quite clear now that lack of resources and the uncertainties of precarious
19
20 employment are linked to delays in setting up a family for many young people (Hardgrove *et*
21
22 *al.*, 2015; Armano, Bove & Murgia, 2017): in particular, young women are simply too unsure
23
24 about income and resources available to plan for births and babies. This insecurity is more
25
26 marked in Italy, where the ‘total fertility rate’ is now at 1.29 (Istat, 2018), while in England
27
28 and Wales it is at 1.7 (ONS, 2018). Particularly for Italy, this lower fertility rate has been
29
30 read as a historical sign of women refusing to bow down to a ‘familistic’ system that assigns
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32 care work mainly to them (Federici, 2012). Indeed, in Italy, the average age of women at the
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34 birth of their first child is 31.2 (Istat, 2018), while in England and Wales it is 28.9 (ONS,
35
36 2018). However, in both contexts the struggle over basic means is still the reality of the less-
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38 privileged classes, and women are facing more directly the necessity of this struggle
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40 (Jendrissek, 2016; Morini, 2012; Schildrick et al., 2012).
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47 Research on family life during the Great Recession (and with it, the intensification of
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49 the precarisation of labour) confirms the difficulty for couples of forming or keeping family
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51 life together, in the face of ‘economic’ hardship (4in10, 2018; Author A, 2019; Clark &
52
53 Heath, 2015). Research also suggests that families respond to these events by huddling close,
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55 in such a way that intergenerational dependence is both stretched and strengthened at the
56
57 same time. This ambivalence is important and it is reported in few studies, on the Italian
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3 (Giannini & Orientale-Caputo, 2011) and the British context (4in10, 2018). More qualitative
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5 research is needed on this specific issue, however, if the important category here is ‘struggle’,
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7 then it makes sense that people in precarious living conditions may both argue against each
8
9 other and get closer to each other, which is all about forming and confirming social relations
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11 that are vital for their well-being and their survival. But what do they argue over and why do
12
13 they need to get closer to each other? Studies on the Italian and British context suggest a
14
15 common crude answer: money (INPS, 2017; Ipsos Mori, 2013; Kokoroskou, 2007; Armano,
16
17 Bove & Murgia, 2017; Toffanin, 2011; TUC, 2016; Schildrick et al., 2012).

21
22 British studies isolate a number of ‘key items of fragility’ for families whose
23
24 members are in insecure jobs, which can be mainly connected to the cost of living (4in10,
25
26 2018; Ipsos Mori, 2013; Schildrick et al, 2012). Families in precarious work living in Britain
27
28 commonly complain about the rising cost of living and the unaffordability of means of
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30 subsistence and indeed critical analysis of inflation shows that prices are going up faster for
31
32 the less advantaged (Clark & Heath, 2015). For instance, families interviewed for the Ipsos
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34 Mori study (2013, p.19) reported having to go without food at times, either after periods of
35
36 extra expenses (like Christmas) or because children were given priority in getting healthy
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38 meals. Getting into debt is then a common strategy for British families living through job
39
40 insecurity (4in10, 2018; Schildrick et al, 2012). Indeed, British people are amongst the most
41
42 privately indebted in the world and this is an important distinction when compared with the
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44 Italian social context (IMF, 2018).

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50 Childcare costs prevents women returning to work, simply because in both contexts it
51
52 is very expensive (INPS, 2017; Quinn, 2018; TUC, 2016), and thus it is important to indicate
53
54 the continuous intergenerational support that allows childcare arrangements within the
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56 familial group (usually grandparents), freeing up mothers for paid employment. Grandparents
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58 represent great help in managing childcare and the possibility of mothers returning to work:
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3 this is surely the case for Italy (Giannini, 2016), where historically families tend to live close
4 by and there is relatively less geographical mobility compared to Britain, whereas in Britain
5 mothers in work increasingly look to the grandparents of their children for support, to the
6 point that the ‘informal care provided by millions of grandparents is saving working families
7 thousands of pounds a year’ (TUC, 2013).
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15 Crucially for our analysis here, in both social contexts a number of studies report
16 parents’ accounts of arranging or trying to arrange ‘quality time’ together, although
17 precarious employment makes it difficult because in the British context there may be either
18 unsocial hours or long commutes to work which get in the way (4in10, 2018, p. 24; Ipsos
19 Mori, 2013), whereas in the Italian context it is often the lack of enough hours and thereby
20 lack of earnings and anxiety about the future that disrupt these arrangements (Giannini &
21 Orientale-Caputo, 2011). What exactly may constitute ‘quality family time’ is context-
22 dependent, this is where the different cultural climate of these two countries may diverge,
23 however there is a lack of research on how families in precarious work may arrange special
24 time together (e.g. what kind of meal time they have, when and where, what kind of games
25 they play with children, what kind of couple-time may be able to be arranged etc.).
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40 Interconnections of generations are linked to occupational precarity, but it is also
41 connected to the ideals of family life. When assessing intergenerational dependencies,
42 especially in terms of financial support, the literature can be quite moralistic regarding
43 assumptions about the ‘prolonged residence of children in the parental home due to deferred
44 transition to adulthood’ (Ranci & Migliavacca, 2015, p.25; Ipsos Mori, 2013). However,
45 when we filter the data from this moralistic frame, it seems clear that in Italy, as in Britain,
46 young parents rely on the support of their own parents, as well as siblings. This has been
47 called ‘bonding capital’ (Ipsos Mori, 2013, p.33), a term which actually does not help to
48 understand what is going on in terms of constituting and re-constituting social relations: it
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3 reifies human relationships in the same way the social form of exchange-value reifies the
4 person as a component part of the labour-power. Bonding and intergenerational solidarities
5 are better understood as the expressions of the daily struggles of parents, resisting an
6 oppressive reality. This is especially true of mothers, who despite being in insecure
7 employment with meagre salaries and despite the fact that they are pressed to find time for
8 themselves, tend to work hard to ensure care for their immediate relatives (4in10, 2018;
9 Author A, 2019).

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12 As for these daily struggles, in the British context research finds a ‘resilient and
13 lasting work commitment’ for their participants (Schildrick *et al.* 2012) and this commitment
14 can be taken as a sign of people struggling to support themselves and their dependents. In the
15 Italian context, there is less of a sign of this work ethic, and the dominant key word from
16 families in insecure jobs is ‘dignity’ (Author A, 2019; Giannini, 2016). In the British social
17 context, the very sense of self-worth and dignity motivates these participants in trying to stay
18 away from the benefit system (Schildrick *et al.*, 2012). In Italy the lack of comprehensive
19 benefit system (or even the functioning activation policies) motivate parents to struggle in
20 other ways: from cutting unnecessary expenses to resorting to the informal market, from
21 rediscovering and cultivating vegetable patches (*orti*) for self-consumption to reverting to the
22 ‘moral economy’ (localised economies based on reciprocal favours) (Morini, 2012; Armano,
23 Bove & Murgia, 2017).

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26 These daily activities are here interpreted as ‘struggles’, because through the
27 standpoint of struggle it is possible to capture how parents (but especially mothers) constitute
28 their daily life. Precarious employment does not simply pre-determine precarious living
29 conditions for families. In precarity, capitalism does not enter family life from the ‘outside’,
30 but from the inside, where the mechanisms underpinning precarious employment
31 (commodification of labour) become the social form of life of families. Nonetheless, there is
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3 agency held by parents in precarious work, a spontaneous way of organising social and
4 family relationships which emerges through the form of the ‘economy’ (as the value of the
5 economy is also constituted by their labour, even if precarious). The next section tries to
6 show how this agency emerges through their daily struggles.
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14 **Precarity, Struggle and Dignity**

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16 The previous section has shown that in both contexts, struggling through precarity always
17 means something more than simply accessing basic needs; intergenerational solidarity,
18 bonding and commitment point to dignity, but not as a separate moral dimension: struggling
19 towards dignity means prefiguring a social reality beyond precarity. The focus on the daily
20 activities and the meaning of struggles of parents in insecure jobs aims to be the strong point
21 of this article, making explicit what in research is still assumed, rather than fully postulated.
22 Thus, this section explores what kind of evidence and observations there are in the literature
23 about struggling for a decent standard of living.
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35 One term used to investigate the circumstances of parents (and especially mothers)
36 when they are subject to job insecurity is ‘entrepreneurialism’. This term is used as a critique
37 of neoliberal ideology (Wilson & Yochim, 2015), rather than in the sense that people would
38 happily mobilise themselves and their own resources, resorting to the market instead of the
39 welfare state. Thus, this concept is not intended to be used as a positive representation of
40 employment trends amongst the ‘precariat’: ‘bogus self-employment’ increasingly tends to
41 take place in Britain (Grimshaw et al., 2015; TUC, 2016), whereas in Italy it is relatively
42 more recent (NIESR, 2017, p.46). Self-employment (bogus or not) and entrepreneurialism
43 represents the way British institutions promote the governance of job insecurity and
44 unemployment. As indicated in points 1 and 2 in the first section, the Italian state comes late
45 in the attempt to mobilise part of the workforce into self-employment, as it has to deal with
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3 high levels of youth unemployment, strongly localised at regional level (especially in the
4 South) (Armano, Bove & Murgia, 2017).
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8 The 'internalisation of the faith in the market' (Wilson & Yochim, 2015) is then a
9 very general phenomenon which affects not only Italy and Great Britain, but also other
10 nations in the Global North. Entrepreneurialism indicates how precarious conditions are often
11 privatised and interiorised and how the attempt at getting out of them is re-defined through
12 the free market ideal: 'become your own entrepreneur!'. Mothering through precarity, or
13 'becoming mamapreneurial' (Wilson & Yochim, 2015, p.669) is then seen in an ambivalent
14 way: mothers are active in exploring options and operating within their social environment,
15 but the final outcome seems to be that they adapt to the precarious status quo. This uneven
16 contrast of adaptation and resistance to precarious employment is important because it means
17 nothing less than the creation of social life for a new generation and – at the same time – the
18 reproduction of the fundamental conditions for personal life. Thus, while framing mothers'
19 affective labour as functional to 'broader regimes of governance' (Wilson & Yochim, 2015,
20 p.673), the analysis also points to the creation of the conditions for adult personality that are
21 developed within families. In the Italian context as well this tension between adaptation and
22 resistance to job insecurity has been detected by qualitative studies (Author A, 2019;
23 Giannini, 2016).
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45 Following this critique of the neoliberal framing of the issue, the bonding that is
46 formed through parents' daily lives and struggles is to be linked to dignity as described in the
47 sections above. In the Italian and British contexts, the adaptation of parents to fragmentation,
48 trying to 'get by' and deal with the harsh realities of the labour market, is often linked to
49 struggles against the conditions of precarity (Schildrick et al., 2012; Armano, Bove &
50 Murgia, 2017). In that sense, struggling through these conditions means also resisting
51 parents' complete subordination to the needs of the market. There is not enough research on
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3 this precise issue of parents' agency through insecure jobs, how they not only resist, but also
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5 actively re-constitute social life at the everyday level. However, studies suggest that the
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7 difficult adaptation to social and economic insecurity is the result of the daily struggles of
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9 mothers (4in10, 2018; Author A, 2019), who have to ensure stability and the reconstitution of
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11 everyday family life, yet the result is not simple adaptation. Given precarious forms of
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13 employment, the stability of family life is no longer a 'given' (if it ever was) and its very
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15 existence relies on mothers' deployment of domestic, emotional and care labour (Wilson &
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17 Yochim, 2015, p. 674; Hardgrove *et al.*, 2015). 'Bonding capital', understood in this sense,
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19 transforms human activity into something measurable (Illouz, 2018). Not only is daily life
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21 implicated in the struggle through precarious economic circumstances, but even personal life
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23 can be distorted into a 'symbolic currency' (Illouz, 2008, p. 94), something that can be
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25 spendable. This tendency, which follows from the commodification of human labour, defines
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27 how everywhere the form of precarious employment permeates social relations as well as the
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29 sense of self, but this form is not without its tensions: this tension is revealed by dignity.
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35 Dignity in precarious families is the sign of a contradiction: the 'temporality of life' is
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37 always in danger of collapsing into the temporality of (precarious) labour (Author A, 2019;
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39 Giannini, 2016), yet resistance to this danger and the pride of being able to cope and 'get by'
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41 in precarious circumstances (Schildrick *et al.*, 2012, p.37) represent values that are not just
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43 moral values, but expressions of a social world that struggles to maintain meaningful social
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45 relations (Psychopedis, 1992). Hence, as outlined above, dignity is a social and class concept,
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47 not a mere human rights concept, more or less formalised in national or international charters
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49 (Holloway, 1998). The experience of precarious employment is often a conflicting
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51 experience, where precarious life is refused as 'normal' (Author A, 2019) and where dignity
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53 becomes the sign of 'the negation of humiliation, the struggle against subordination'
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55 (Holloway, 1998, p. 182). The concept of dignity can help us to see where there is resistance
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3 to simple adaptation to conditions which clearly imply the transformation of oneself into a
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5 mere thing that can be exchanged in the labour market. For those in precarious employment,
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7 the 'free market' represents something more than a temporary passage. One of the most
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9 common experiences of parents in the precarious labour force is the humiliation of having to
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11 look for paid work-opportunities and of having to be continuously employable (Castel, 2003;
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13 Standing, 2011; Schildrick et al., 2012). Thus, this daily struggle against subordination is
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15 linked to dignity (Giannini, 2016) and it represents the implicit negation of the objectification
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17 to market prices. In other words, dignity implies that there is a 'wrong type of reality'
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22 (Adorno, 1990).

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24 More precisely, families in precarious employment struggle over ideals of family life
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26 (Cooper, 2014), but these are not marginal dreams that are empty of meaning just because the
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28 material basis for realising them is simply not there. In the social sciences there is the
29
30 tendency to criticise parents' views of normal family life, as this normality often hides
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32 normative assumptions around the role of women that are often discriminatory. Nonetheless
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34 the negation of these ideals is often the task of the market economy, which demands 'zero
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36 drag' from parents and their unconditioned availability for 'the job', and this emerges quite
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38 clearly in the empirical studies in Great Britain (e.g. 4in10, 2018). Dignity against the
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40 negation of these ideals is linked to daily struggles that are essentially social. It is not possible
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42 for the social sciences to separate the economic (supposedly the realm of necessity) from the
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44 realm of intimate life (allegedly the realm of moral action): the critical role of social sciences
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46 should highlight how material needs and moral considerations have a common basis
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49 (Holloway, 2010). It is clear that in the literature available, 'precarious parents' themselves
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51 do not advance revolutionary social and economic claims, although contractual stabilisation
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53 is surely in their narratives (Grimshaw et al., 2015). However, it is possible to conclude that
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3 their claims to dignity represent a critique to a system based on the commodification of the
4 conditions of their personal and social life conditions.
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10 **Conclusion**

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12 This article has investigated the case of parents in precarious work in order to show that the
13 issues for this part of society are linked to the fundamental mechanisms of the ‘free market
14 economy’. Precarious work is framed within ‘precarisation’ (Alberti et al., 2018), a wider
15 social process which includes strictly economic dynamics, as well as the social relations of
16 people who struggle against these dynamics. As such, the social process of precarisation
17 involving parents in insecure jobs includes tendencies different from and wider than poverty.
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26 In this article, job insecurity is inextricably linked to the commodification of labour,
27 which generally affects all of those who are ‘free’ to sell their labour-power. People in
28 precarious work are more directly affected by the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion of
29 the free-market economy: in Britain as in Italy, the constant measurement of their
30 worth/value against the ‘free market’ represents their daily experience; they need to treat
31 themselves as labour-power, as a commodity that needs to be placed in the exchange
32 mechanism of the economy if they want to be able to support their families. Even within the
33 literature that does not follow a critically inspired sociology, studies individuate the issue of
34 struggle as central for the understanding of mothers’ and fathers’ social life.
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47 The main differences between the British and Italian contexts are: women’s (and
48 mothers’) position within precarisation. The Italian ‘familistic welfare state’ does not make it
49 easy for women to reconcile precarious work and motherhood, in the sense that traditional
50 expectations about care-work are reproduced through ‘activation’ policies. Since the Great
51 Recession, Italian official unemployment has risen higher than that in Great Britain and is
52 very much geographically localised, which makes general comparisons difficult, however
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3 these figures should explain the exponential growth of ‘bogus self-employment’ in Britain.
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5 The British and Italian social contexts have gone through different processes of precarisation
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7 of labour: in Italy this was partially due to the implementation of the state’s ‘activation’
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9 policies, while in Britain atypical employment contracts have been developed through labour
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11 market and ‘economic’ internal mechanisms. These different trajectories explain very
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13 precarious conditions in the Italian public and retail sector, and zero hours contracts,
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15 temporary agency working and bogus self-employment in Britain.
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19 What does this article add to existing literature? No other study frames how parents in
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21 insecure jobs go through hardship and yet produce social life and reproduce vital social
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23 relations. Through the concept of the commodification of labour, this study shows how
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25 parents go through precarisation, producing family life, while avoiding framing them through
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27 economic structures or hegemonic forces. Within this frame, struggle for dignity seems to be
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29 the evidence emerging from the few available qualitative studies.
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33 Furthermore, personal life is implicated in the commodification of parents’ social and
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35 intimate life, which explains precarious parents’ defence of their dignity. The concept of
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37 dignity is individuated in part of the literature as exemplifying the struggle against precarity
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39 and in our analysis this concept is linked to struggle against social subordination, rather than
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41 around the psychological dimensions of parenthood.
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45 Yet, how can we go beyond precarity in a way that would be socially just? In the
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47 literature available, the social justice element could be framed through the position of
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49 families with young children and their struggle to accomplish what they would consider
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51 decent standard of living. Reading this literature through a critical lens, social justice could be
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53 linked to parents’ awareness of conflicts and tensions within their socio-economic fields. It
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55 would be easy to formulate it through positive ideals, which are substantiated by research on
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57 these families. For instance: ‘happy families live in well-kept homes, possess nice things,
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3 have fun together and never worry about money' (Wilson & Yochim, 2015, p.675), however
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5 these authors themselves make it clear that these ideals are *clichés* and real aspirations at the
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7 same time, underpinning the longing for dignity. Thus, what is emerging from the analysis of
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9 this literature is a 'negative' concept of social justice which embodies the struggles of
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11 families living through precarity. More research is needed on parents in insecure jobs, but this
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13 article has tried to establish that social justice as dignity can be linked to an existing society
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15 based on precarious employment which necessarily negates their dignity. In that sense,
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17 dignity is a social class concept, rather than a generic principle. Dignity is linked to the daily
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19 struggles of families to secure a decent standard of living in the face of an economic form
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21 crudely based on the exchange of their lives into money.
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