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Introduction to the special issue: Dual-career couples

Dual career couples are experiencing a renewed attention by researchers for at least three different reasons. Firstly, the increasing women's labour force participation throughout the family formation years, particularly among well educated women, opens the question whether something has changed both in gender arrangements within couples and in career patterns in the labour market and particularly in the impermeability of the "glass ceiling" that used to block women's upward mobility. Secondly, when both partners in a household invest in paid work the question arises concerning who is going to do all the unpaid work otherwise performed by women, for the household but also for kin and sometimes community. What is the quality of life of households, communities, societies in a world where all adults invest most of their energies in paid work? Thirdly, the divergent patterns of women's labour force participation, together with the prevalence of homogamous marriages, raise concerns on the risks of a possible strengthening of social inequalities.

As the interest for dual career couples remains fairly sustained and trespasses the boundaries of the sociology of the family within which has long remained confined, the "dual career couple" concept becomes however more elusive. *Strictu sensu*, dual career couples should refer only to couples in which both partners are involved in an upward mobile professional trajectory (Hiller and Dyehouse 1987, Levy et al. in this issue). Neither all dual earner couples nor all the well-educated ones are necessarily also dual career ones in this sense. Clement and Clement (2001) add an additional requirement for being defined a dual career couple *strictu sensu*: that of having children, that is of having caring responsibilities. According to their concept, therefore, dual career couples are defined by the fact that both partners are highly qualified, and follow their career path while not renouncing having children and a satisfying family life. On the basis of this narrow definition, the number of dual career couples might be quite small, and insufficient for a quantitative research approach. Furthermore, while research on dual career couples focuses mainly on the couple's dynamics and more or less asymmetrical interdependencies, the possibility that one or both the partner have a career does not depend only on negotiations and power relations within the couple, that is on its gender culture and arrangements. It depends also on the labour market and on the institutional framework within which couples develop their negotiations and take their decisions. The labour market and



institutional arrangements (i.e. the welfare state) embody both gender arrangements and gender cultures in the way they are organised (Pfau-Effinger 1998, Blossfeld and Hofmeister 2006). Therefore, they may or may not favour women's labour market participation and women's access to a professional upward career not only at the level of values or cultural models, but also in practical arrangements. Labour markets differ across countries also with regard to the kind of upward mobility they offer to men. For instance, the Italian and Swiss cases presented here clearly illustrate a situation of relative professional immobility.

For these reasons, research on dual career couples remains on shifting and uneasy grounds. As a matter of fact, most recent research on this issue – as the articles presented here testify – use a very broad definition of professional upward career, which in the case of women sometimes is even reduced to the ability to remain steadily in the labour market throughout the couple and family life course. Stability and continuity in labour market attachment, in fact, although prevalent among men, is only one of the possible employment trajectories for women (e.g. Maruani 2003). And dual career/dual earning is only one of the ways in which couples combine work and family roles even in societies where an increasing number of women participate in paid work while having family responsibilities. At the same time, the focus has progressively shifted from women's careers at the cross road of labour market and family demands to the “careers of couples” themselves (Blossfeld and Drobnič 2001), that is to the couple as a – more or less asymmetrical – inter-dependent unit, or as “linked lives”. In this perspective, research on dual career couples is greatly indebted to life course research both at the theoretical and methodological level.

Against this background of shifting definitions, research for a long time has focused on the one hand on mechanisms that favour, or hinder, the forming of dual career/dual stable earner couples, on the other hand on the different arrangements couples develop in dealing with each partner's career and the impact these have on the other partner.

The mechanisms that favour, or hinder, the forming of dual career couples have been probably the more continuous object of research in this field, spurring also a substantial development at the theory level (for a systematic presentation of the various theoretical approaches see Blossfeld and Drobnič 2001). Most of research and theories, however, do not actually address the issue of dual career couples, but rather the most basic one of the chances couples have of becoming dual earner ones through women's labour market participation. This is clearly the case for the group of explanations that focuses on the individual level and on mechanisms at play in the labour market. According to this kind of explanations – be it demand-side (e.g. Phelps 1972) or supply-side (e.g. Mincer and Ofek 1982) oriented – the forming of dual earner couples is mainly hindered by constraints on women's labour market participation and by gender specific labour market mechanisms. Cross-country and cross-social group differences, therefore, may be accounted for mainly by the operation of, and in, the labour market with regard to women's participation as well as by differences in women's human capital. This kind of explanation has been criticized for its limitations on two grounds. First, it considers the operating of the labour market as if it were independent from assumptions and practices concerning the family

as organized around specific gender arrangements. These, instead, are at work on both the supply and the demand side. Both men and women in couples, in fact, take their decisions concerning labour market participation on the basis of – gendered – assumptions and practices concerning their respective and reciprocal duties and opportunities with regard to the dual needs of income and care. Marriage/couples roles are gendered and, more or less asymmetrically, interdependent, not only during partnership, but to some degree even before a partnership develops. The missing attention for the interdependence of patterns of women's and men's labour supply within couples is the second kind of criticism addressed to an exclusively labour market based explanation of the mechanisms constraining or favouring dual earner couples. This interdependency, in fact, is implicitly expected by labour market demand: in its different expectations concerning women and men as potential workers and more generally in expectations concerning "proper" patterns of labour market and professional attachment. Consequently, it is also re-enforced by this very demand.

Theories and explanations addressing the issue of interdependency consider the couple and the household as the locus of decision making with regard to both family matters and individual labour market participation. They too are mostly concerned with the issue of women's labour market participation rather than with dual careering as such. Further, they seem more focused on explaining why women do not participate steadily in the labour market than why they make or not a career. Beyond these commonalities, however, they offer quite different, sometimes complementary and sometimes competing explanations. The human capital/new home economic approach (Becker 1981) underlines both the benefits and the reproductive power of role specialisation in so far as men and women have different "market value". According to this approach, specialisation reaches equilibrium when both spouses' resources are maximally utilised and husbands and wives make rational decisions to utilise their human capital to achieve what is best for the household unit. Altruism and the existence of a single utility function for the couple are two fundamental assumptions of this theory. The resource bargaining model (Blood and Wolfe 1960, Brines 1993, 1994, Coltrane 2000) and its variant, the marital dependency model (England and Farkas 1986, McRae 1986, Sørensen and McLanahan 1987), on the contrary stress the conflicts and power implicit in negotiations over who can or must do what, between partners who command resources of different financial and market value. According to this approach, wives with a high earning power should more likely be able to strike a better balance in the division of labour with their partner; therefore they should also be more able to invest in their profession. Contrary to this assumption, however, time use data indicate that husbands of working wives do perform more family work and childcare than husbands of full time homemakers; yet, they do not appear to do so to a degree that really substitutes for their wives' family work (see Eurostat 2004, Saraceno 2005). It appears more likely that women buy themselves out of part of family work, rather than rebalancing paid and unpaid work within the household between husbands and wives. In addition to the focus on negotiation, rather than altruism and single utility function, the marital dependency model suggests that in a context of increased marital instability it is more worthwhile for women to invest in their professional career. This, in turn, increases their negotiating power if and when they do partner. From a different perspective, the

same suggestion is made by Bielby and Bielby (1989). They, in fact, argue, that as the number of dual earner couples increases, more balanced gender identities will develop both for women and men. Once again, there is no real evidence that men substantially change their investment in family and work due to their wives' labour force participation. Certainly they do not seem to change their investment in work and in the breadwinning role. Recent European employment data, for instance, show that throughout Europe having a child under six years increases men's labour force participation, while it decreases that of women (see Plantega and Siegel 2004). With specific regard to dual career couples, Bielby and Bielby argue that in these couples both partners have a higher work orientation than "simple" dual earner ones, since within the former each partner has a well paid partner who might support him/her. Working for pay, therefore, is not the outcome of financial constriction; on the contrary, it is driven mainly by internal, identity-based, motivations (see also Clement and Clement 2001). This is particularly true for women, in so far as working for pay is less established in women's than in men's gender role identity. Somewhat paradoxically, this argument sounds very similar to the perception of women's work found in upper middle class couples in a number of qualitative research performed in the 1980s. Men, but also many women, tended to say that in their case women's work was a luxury, something done for self-realisation, which had nothing to do with, and might even intrude on, family needs (e.g. Weiss 1987, Ferree 1987).

Introducing a social class perspective on the gender division of labour further complicates the analysis, since class specific gender identities – or scripts – interact, sometimes in a cumulative, sometimes in a conflicting way with actual options in the labour market, with the quality of jobs available, as well as with the specific career patterns and requirements available to men and women located differently in the social structure (see e.g. Blossfeld and Drobnič 2001, Crompton 2006).

The theories and research presented so far address the issue of dual earner/dual career couples mainly from the point of view of women's participation to the labour market and investment in professional life. The issue of family work, particularly care work, appears in these theories in the form of a cost, or constrain, for women – which, of course it is, given the prevalent division of labour (see also Halleröd 2005). The focus, therefore, is on who in the couple has more negotiating power to shift this work to the other, or what kind of women, in which social position, are more able to shift part of this work to somebody else. Another group of studies on dual earner/dual career couples, however, focuses on family/care work as a dimension of individual and family life that is not sufficiently taken account of in discourses on dual earning as the standard pattern of household organisation, particularly, although not exclusively, when there are children (e.g. Moen (ed.) 2003, Pfau-Effinger 2004, Crompton 2006). They argue that the asymmetry between the emphasis on gender equality in public discourse and the practice of gender inequality in labour market participation owes certainly to gender arrangements and cultural models within the couple. But it is also the consequence of an approach that considers participation to paid work and investment in a professional career as the main, if not only, basis of social participation and self realisation and even the main citizenship duty. According to its critics, this approach fails to acknowledge that experiencing both demands and needs of care is a normal part of each individual's life

course and that the standard model of participation to the labour market was, and still is, based on a male breadwinner/female carer household model. When this household pattern is no longer viable or accepted, and it is even discouraged, the total social organisation of labour (to use Glucksmann's, 1995, terminology) needs to be restructured. Workers and their families, in fact, can no longer rely on full time homemakers. Time to care should be accommodated for and acknowledged also for workers and breadwinners, male and females. In absence of this, since caring needs must be addressed, couples and families fall back on – more or less modernised – traditional gender scripts, unless they renounce altogether assuming caring responsibilities. In any case they are likely to suffer because of time pressures. In this perspective, both Moen (2003) and Crompton (2006) develop a typology of couples based on how paid work and unpaid care are allocated between partners but also between households and the welfare state. The two typologies, which develop from more to less traditional in gender arrangements, are quite similar, as it can be seen in the table below. The role of state vs. market provision of care is crucial for the “democratisation” of participation in paid work as well as for granting quality services to all children. Yet, in these two typologies it is clear that exclusive involvement in paid work and career with a full contracting out of care, if possible at all, is not perceived as the best possible and even most innovative pattern.

Gender relations

Traditional ----->		less traditional	
C.: male breadwinner/female carer M.: traditionalist	C.: male breadwinner/female part time earner and carer M.: neo-traditionalist	C.: dual earners/state carer M.: high commitment	C.: dual earner/dual carer M.: dual moderates
	M.: alternate commitments	C.: dual earner/marketised care	

Source: Moen 2003, Crompton 2006, author's own pairing off of categories

Interestingly, according to a study by Crompton (2006) based on ISSP data, these types of couples are quite differently distributed across countries. Nowhere do “high commitment” couples – where dual career couples might in principle be found – touch 20% of all couples. They are more present in Portugal, the UK and the US. The “dual moderates”, another group where dual career couples might be found, are more evenly widespread and constitute the relative majority in most of the countries analysed by Crompton, but not in the US and the UK. These differences are the outcome of the complex interplay between national gender cultures and arrangements, and particularly welfare state arrangements, and national labour markets.

A quite different concern informs recent research on “work-rich and work-poor” couples and the possible impact on social stratification of education-based differences in women's labour force participation. Better educated women, in fact, are

more likely to enter and remain in the labour market throughout the family formation phase. They are also more likely to marry equally well educated men with good positions in the labour market. Marriage homogamy, therefore, redoubling human capital and labour market resources, may strengthen social polarisation in a labour market where the less skilled have fewer chances than before, and where jobs are becoming more insecure. According, for instance, to Hyslop (2001), marital homogamy accounts for about 23% of the rise in U.S. household income inequality. On the basis of various data, Esping Andersen (2006, p. 6) argues that “with two notable exceptions (France and the Netherlands) the Gini of household market incomes has surged (a 20+ percent rise in the past two decades) in Germany, Sweden, the UK and the US; in others, less so (a 6-7% rise in Denmark and Italy). The U-turn is very much driven by the top pulling ahead of the rest”. This is a very interesting field of study, but it addresses only marginally, if at all, the issue of how dual career/dual earner couples deal with the dual demands of investing in paid work and care.

Another line of research, starting from the pioneering work of Rapoport and Rapoport (1971, 1973) has focused on the specific dynamics and tensions within dual career couples as they have to deal with decisions concerning work, career and family demands. These decisions involve issue of time allocation and time scarcity (e. g. Moen 2003), role conflicts (e.g. Skinner 1980), but also where to live and how to manage the mobility demands of a partner’s career without affecting that of the other partner. Particularly in the United States, the issue of how to deal with geographical, sometimes international, mobility has become a growing issue not only for the couples themselves, but also for the organizations they work with (e.g. Harvey 1996)

The articles presented here address in various ways all the issues described above. Levy, Bühlmann and Widmer address explicitly the question of the conditions that favour the formation and management of dual career couples *strictu senso*, carefully reconstructing the professional histories of both men and women in the couple. They conclude that dual career couples are an elitist phenomenon, due not only to the scarcity of career options in the labour market, but to the operating of what they call gendered master statuses. Lucchini, Saraceno and Schizzerotto’s study on Italian couples uses a broader definition of dual career, based on Erikson’s and Goldthorpe’s (1992) class stratification. In Italy not only careers are very flat even for men. The formation and persistence of dual earner couples is also difficult, in so far family obligations keep a large proportion of women out of the labour market. In this perspective, women’s education, rather than the couple’s characteristics, seems to make the main difference. The somewhat paradoxical result is that, due to marriage homogamy, dual career couples in Italy are the relative majority of dual earner couples. Rusconi and Solga analyse the difficulties German women with high skills find in forming dual career couples (in a broad sense) because they face constraints in entering a career path. They also address the issue of the role of enterprise policies and not only of the welfare state, and of the contrasting norms of anti-nepotism on the one hand, of supporting dual career couples on the other hand. Reichart, Chesley and Moen, within a comparative approach, enlarge the perspective from the mechanisms of dual career formation to the viability of dual careering, and even only dual earning, while having caring responsibilities.

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