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In this presentation I will focus in particular on the methodology of a research project I conducted from 2019 to 2021 with a Marie Curie fellowship. The project is called *STRESS-Mums* and utilized the approach of Institutional Ethnography.

Before starting the presentation, just a few words to introduce myself.

I completed my PhD in Sociology in 2012 at the University of Padua, in Italy. And now I am the PI of the project RE-Green, funded with a STARS-grant by the University of Padua.

I will divide my presentation into three parts:

- first, a short introduction to *STRESS-Mums* project;
- second, the objectives of my research;
- third, the approach and methods I used.

Let us begin from the introduction to the project.

In the European countries, literature suggests that single motherhood is considered an increasing social problem.

Studies on single mothers usually underline their conditions of social fragility. This project took a different perspective and focused on the strategies, negotiations and practices of resistance that these mothers enact toward the dominant definition of family and parenthood.

This study thus aimed to develop knowledge to improve or change existing policies to respond to the disjunctures that these mothers experience in their everyday life between their needs and the institutional discourses (that is what Dorothy Smith calls *ruling relations*)

The proposal stemmed from the findings of some in-depth interviews I carried out in 2014 with Italian single mothers.

The interviews showed how single mothers' trajectories and strategies were affected by an orthodox dominant definition of parenthood and how they tried to counter this definition.

These interviews helped in identifying and understanding the problematic of the research for the proposal I wrote.

Here I present briefly the state of the art of the literature about the topic of single mothers. It is to say that a few scholars have focused on the single mothers' actions in countering the dominant definition of parenthood.

None of the studies seems to have sociologically considered the crucial transition of the judicial evaluation for child custody, the everyday strategies and practices that expected/future single mothers use to claim and achieve social inclusion and legitimization during that transition.

The research aims

1) to investigate how future single mothers negotiate or do not negotiate the (orthodox) dominant definition of family and parenthood and the (heterodox) less legitimated definitions of being/doing family and parents.

2) to understand the social practices and everyday strategies that single mothers use to claim social inclusion during that specific transition to single parenthood.

3) to analyse the discourses of institutions and professionals (judges, lawyers, court-appointed mental health experts) with the aim to understand:

a) how professionals shape the future single mothers' discourses about their heterodox definitions of family and parenthood;

b) how professionals negotiate the (orthodox) dominant definition of family and parenthood with the (heterodox) definitions of being/doing family proposed by parents.

I selected Belgium, Italy, Spain and the UK as countries where to carry out the research for various factors:

- 1) increasing separation/divorce rate
- 2) different/similar cultural characteristics (e.g., religion)
- 3) different/similar welfare policies
- 4) similar legislation on separation/divorce and children custody
- 5) different/similar stigmatization of single motherhood

The aim was to offer a comparative transnational study to provide new perspectives on the ruling relations between institutions and single mothers.

The design of this research study is based on the Institutional Ethnography (IE).

As a method of research, IE investigates a defined section of the social world from the standpoint of the organization of the 'work' of individuals.

IE has a 'situated' nature and its aim is to discover 'how things work'.

IE explores (and does not theorize, unlike Grounded Theory) how institutional discourse frames the way in which individuals think and act within their everyday practices, according to ethnomethodological suggestions.

The notion of 'institution' does not refer to a type of organization, but rather to clusters of text-mediated relations organized around particular ruling functions, for instance education or health care. IE is an empirical investigation of the linkages among local settings of everyday life, organizations, and translocal (meso/macro) processes of administration and governance.

IE is a social scientific procedure for investigating discourse as social relations. As in Marx, social relations concern the coordination of activities on a large scale, in and across multiple sites (De Vault, McCoy 2006).

The choice of IE in this project is due to its ability to explicate tensions that are produced by the social organization of knowledge.

This explication describes critically how and why experiences of tension are organized in an invisible manner by conceptual practices of power that regulate what people know and do in the everyday life. The aim is to generate knowledge about invisible and taken-for-granted forms of governance that rule the everyday life.

Here I show to you a figure that represents the standpoint of the mothers. The figure shows the different levels considered by Institutional Ethnography and the key role of the text analysis in understanding how institutions impact on the everyday life of single mothers.

According to the IE approach, interviews, document analysis and visual methods are tools with which to investigate the ruling relations that shape the informants' everyday lives.

Therefore, the study consists of the following actions:

1. Qualitative interviews with single mothers
2. Document analysis
3. Qualitative interviews (documents-based interviews) with single mothers
4. Qualitative interviews with professionals
5. Qualitative interviews with women's rights activists
6. Photovoice with single mothers and professionals (not together)
7. Ethnographic participant observation

It is worthy noting that sampling procedure used an 'intersectional' approach by considering gender, ethnicity and class.

These mothers had a legal petition lodged with the court for sole children custody at least three years before (and then accepted or rejected by the court). All mothers had at least one dependent child (0-12 years).

The interviews were open ended (partially non-standardized) because Institutional Ethnography is grounded in the ethnomethodological approach and the interview should be a conversation with the informant with the aim of investigating widespread and discursive process and social practices.

*Document analysis.* A small subset (2 for each country, hence 8 in total) of these mothers already interviewed were asked for providing legal documents of their lawsuit to the research fellow.

I carried out an analysis of these legal documents (legal instances, judgements, court-appointed experts evaluations) in the frame of Institutional Ethnography.

The aim was to prepare the subsequent interview with these eight mothers.

Qualitative interviews (documents-based interviews) – Single mothers.

Then, I conducted these eight interviews with the single mothers already interviewed (two for each country). This second discursive interview explored mothers' experiences framed in particular by the legal documents. This helped to understand the ruling relations between institutions, texts like law and other documents, and the mothers.

Furthermore, I carried out three individual interviews 'to the double' for each country with professionals (judges, lawyers, mental health court experts).

The interview 'to the double' is a method useful for understanding the concerns, which orient the conduct of the members and the normative and moral dimension of their practices.

The interviewee is asked to imagine the interviewer as his double and to give her all useful suggestions to be substituted in his job by the interviewer.

Then, I interviewed four women's rights activists, one for each country, with the aim to understand

- how family law rules the everyday life of single mothers
- how activists and mothers promote actions of resistance and dissent against these law and procedures;
- how activists consider the issue of gender neutrality about shared custod.

Furthermore, I organized a photovoice session with single mothers in each country. The aim was to discuss and analyze the social practices and everyday strategies that single mothers used to claim social inclusion during the specific transition to single parenthood.

Before the session, five mothers collected pictures on their 'work' of self-legitimation and during the meeting they discuss together the pictures.

In a second step of the photo-voice activity, the images collected in the first step were discussed with a small group of judicial system professionals.

I particularly appreciate the photovoice technique because it allows experimentation with a dialogic reflexivity (between citizens and stakeholders involved in the action).

Finally, I conducted a participant observation of training events concerning children custody which involved legal professionals (like attorneys) and court-appointed experts. The aim was to collect discourses, practices and reflections on gender issues during the transition of these mothers through the judicial system.

It is important to highlight that all these actions (interviews, photovoice, participant observation) allowed a process of data triangulation.

To conclude, the research results highlight that

- 1) "Future" single mothers try to resist and negotiate the dominant definitions of parenthood and family culturally shared in some countries;
- 2) They look for symbolic legitimacy of themselves and their family, as partially neglected by policies and law framework. Their aim is the reduction of the negative effects of these definitions on their future trajectories (e.g., poverty);

- 3) The gender 'equality' framework masks inequalities that these mothers try to counteract during the specific transition to single parenthood.
- 4) How do they try to counteract these inequalities? They use claimsmaking activities to ask for social inclusion during their transition from double parenthood to single parenthood.
- 5) The disjunctures between mothers' need and law on domestic violence are widely described by the interviews and mapped by the research. They give the opportunity to critically discuss the appropriatenes of the law on shared custody and the court procedures.