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## Quaderni di Teoria Sociale

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STEFANO BA'

## Social links and precarious work – the dignity of families in insecure jobs as a concept to understand their experiences

### *Introduction*

This article presents a theoretical review of the literature around a specific social case of the issue of precarious work: the case of parents who are in insecure jobs and their experience of “precarity”. There is a growing number of studies in this area, available in Italian and English language, which signals the shift of researchers from the assumption that precarity is affecting mainly young people, to the realisation that now there is a whole generation of adults that are becoming parents through precarity (the recent European Sociological Association Conference hosted a whole panel of studies dedicated to “precarious families” [ESA 2019, 161]). However, specific studies on precarious families are still limited in number, and this sociological reflection on the argument has the aim to provide a theoretical clarification on the issue in order to stimulate further empirical studies on how parental responsibilities merge with the reality of precarious work.

The theoretical lens through which the various observations and studies on families and insecure jobs are filtered is drawn from critical paradigms: namely the critical, Adorno-inspired, sociology of Holloway [2010] and Bonefeld [2014], but also the “*Epistemologia della condizione precaria*” [Giannini 2016]. The latter is obviously crucial for this discussion, as it sets the general conditions through

which people need to negotiate normal daily life vis-à-vis harsher regimes of employment.

But why parents in precarious employment? A part from the obvious fact that parents in precarious work have to stand more pressure than people in the same work conditions, but without dependent children, this case represents a privileged site for exploring the struggles of mothers and fathers in their everyday lives, in conjunction with wider considerations about “the economy”. Often these are struggles to “get at the end of the month” as well as struggles to ensure decent standards of living for their precarious lives. Therefore, the focus of this article is not on youth studies, even less so about the transition to adulthood, but more specifically on working families.

The issue of precarious families could be framed in the area of work and family balance or work and family reconciliation [Edgell *et al.* 2012], because the focus could be positioned on the way these parents manage their commitments in family life and in insecure jobs. However, this article follows critical considerations around the work-family balance [Ba' 2016], for the reason that we cannot completely separate the “private” from the “public sphere”, as well as paid work from unpaid, care work [Becker-Schmidt 1999; Heberle 2006; MacCannell 1999]. Here we follow Giannini's approach, which considers human activity in its entirety and through that examines the social conditions of precarious subjects [Giannini 2016].

As mentioned above, the number of studies on precarity and parenting is still limited, so there is a need to formulate theoretical frameworks before empirical research is further pursued. The novelty of this article is about a first systematisation of studies on precarious families from the literature available in Italian and English. The approach suggested tries to re-evaluate the concept of the commodity form of labour, and to centralise it in order to make sense of the literature in this field. As the approach proposed in this article does not want to be deductive, we do not think that it is simply possible to deduce the social links of people from the commodity form of labour. For that reason, this article proposes further attention to the daily struggles of parents. With these struggles, we propose the overarching idea of dignity to help explaining their experience of precarious work.

This article is divided in three parts: the first one, on job insecurity and the commodity form, wants to evaluate theoretically the main issues around precarity and family life: thus, the commodity form of labour is individuated as a crucial mechanism that facilitates the *precarisation* not only of work life, but of social life in general. However, the first section examines the issue of agency of parents, in order to offer a nuanced representation of the social conditions of precarity. The second section discusses the precarious lives of families with children, and their struggles: a number of concrete issues are examined and at the end of the section there is a review of the abstract concepts that the specialised literature provides in order to make sense of precarious families' experiences. Struggling through precarity is examined as daily personal experience as well as a more general concept for the social conditions of these families. The third section takes the considerations about daily struggle to a further stage and the concept of "dignity" is then introduced in order to make sense of the normality of precarious work, as well as the resistance to this normality. Dignity is an empirical finding presented in few qualitative studies, so we assess its importance in order to make sense of the experience of people with caring responsibilities who are also in precarious forms of employment.

### *1. Job insecurity and the commodity form*

In this section the concept of precarity is defined and the conditions that set social relations around precarity are discussed. We find that recent trends towards the "precarisation" of employment relations are rooted in the generalisation of free market economic relations. Within these relations, labour is a commodity that needs to be exchanged in the market and despite of welfare protections for workers' rights and regulations of employment relations, this social and economic constitution of labour is emerging again, albeit in contradictory forms. Here we will explore these dynamics in order to set the discussion about the specific case of families in precarious work. At the end of the section, the discussion about the agency people in insecure jobs' is considered.

Following the recent issue on precarity in *Work Employment and Society* [2018], precarious work is framed as a social process, rather than an employment status which affects individuals [Alberti *et al.* 2018]. Thus, precarisation is not only linked to contractual employment insecurity, featuring casual and fixed-term contracts, on-demand work, bogus self-employment [Gallie *et al.* 2017] but also to a general form of social life which reproduces inequalities [Alberti *et al.* 2018]. Particularly useful is the framing of the precariat offered by Standing [2011, 9], where he stresses the temporal element of precarious work: the casualisation of labour then represents an important feature because not only de-stabilise the social temporality of people, but also erode their “work-based identity”.

From a recent historical background, there is evidence that the Great Recession [Clark, Heath 2015; Fumagalli 2011; Radice 2011; Berntsen 2016; Morini 2012; Tyler 2013], followed by austerity, produces material misery for people in the lowest social strata [TUC 2016; INPS 2017], but how is this issue linked to structural inequalities, rather than being an “eternal” issue about the less advantaged people in society? How we can link economic trends to social links and to the social organisation of society? And how can job insecurity affect the private life of families in a way that makes it not only an “economic issue”?

Job insecurity is a subjective experience immediately felt by workers and by parents to a greater degree from the moment they have the extra responsibility of raising children. Precarious employment is an economic as well social form that is to be linked not simply to the dynamics of capital as such, but to the way human practice is alienated in a specific social form of existence [Holloway 2012]. This form is based on exchange value, which is the basic mechanism that gives value to things: to goods as well as to labour-power (and thus to people). Human activities are measured through the mechanism of exchange, which is not limited to the market. Following Adorno [1990], “exchange value” is considered as one of the principal features of capitalism, and therefore we as human beings are conceptualised as subjects that are entrapped within a quantity-measuring mechanism [Benzer 2011; Tischler 2008]. A society based on the exchange form of social relations produces the “commodification of labour” [Bonefeld 2014]: work and human activities in general are quantified for profit in the free market. The commodification of labour, an experience immediately felt by the precariat

[Ba' 2018], represents the way in which human activities, in their most generic outward appearance, necessarily take the form of an exchange between the person doing the activity and the employer. Whatever the activity is, it is hollowed out by the exchange, and the person's way of expressing herself in the activity is equally measured through the exchange mechanism. There is nothing economic about this: rather the point of view expressed here represents the critique of political economy and reveals how capitalism distorts human activities into things [Bonefeld 2014]. Job insecurity and precarity are then the epiphenomena of the form that commodifies labour.

After the Great Recession, the trend in precarity has become increasingly general in many "advanced economies" [Giannini, Orientale-Caputo 2011; Murgia, Armano 2014; O'Hara 2015; TUC 2016]. Precarity as vulnerability and exploitability of labour is the historical tendency of capitalism, as Adorno [2005, 24] already observed after the Second World War, when "countless people are making, from the aftermath of liquidation of professions, their profession". Thus, in discussing the preconditions and the logic behind the phenomenon of precarious work and its relation to parenting, there is a need to focus on the form that social relations take around the commodification of labour. In that sense, the analysis of the preconditions of "precarious parents" and the social links that are produced around this phenomenon means steering away from psychological explanations and from the human capital and rational choice theory, which are based on individualistic, non-social models [e.g. Blossfeld *et al.* 2005, 17]. It is of course important to see the psychological damage to a person, who may be afraid or anxious about her employment perspectives. However, the form that precariousness takes in society means that people in precarious employment are transformed into pure labour-power that needs to be sold. To be more precise, for precarious parents all that count is the possibility of selling themselves. The commodification of labour-power then not only sets the conditions of existence for the labourer, but also the social form of her life. In this article, the feminine pronoun is used when discussing the worker because it is clear that women are the main emergent group within the labour force that live and operate in precarious conditions [Stier, Yaish 2014; Standing 2011]. Both as labourers in an increasingly insecure, flexible economy, and as the operators of care labour inside

the private sphere, women are at the centre of social pressure to work in paid jobs and to be “good” mothers [Pugh 2015].

Are then precarious parents the victims of an adverse economic system? Or are they able to forge their own lives, even in the face of “objective” difficulties? In other words, how can we think about parents’ agency, that is, their capability to act on their own accord and to decide about their future? The concept of the social form of exchange value allows the social content of life to appear and avoids severing the economic from the personal. The economy as a field of human practice is not separated from daily social practices, which are not turned insecure by the conditions of precarious employment (as for instance Bourdieu [1988, 86] would insist). It is rather that even the precariousness of family life comes from the form of commodity that labour subsumes in the exchange society, which parents must adopt in order to establish their social relations. Labour needs to be commodified through the exchange form and people’s social relations, those of parents included, are dependent on the very possibility of this commodification. Parents in precarious employment bear (in every sense of the word) precarity and they can control their destiny only *through* it. Through these critical lenses, the conditions of precarity are not just an accident that happens to parents, rather these are the preconditions that shape the social lives of parents through the commodification of labour.

So, parents in insecure jobs that have to go through the commodity form: it is through this objectification that this form is also resisted and the possibility of a more dignified life is prefigured [Giannini 2016], as we will see in section “Precarity, struggle and dignity”. This may be prefigured also in ambivalent ways: precarious employment is sold by market capitalism as a form of freedom of choice (in this case usually termed flexibility, or even “the gig economy”, as if work is like going to see your favourite band!) hence scholars find in such employment seemingly individualised paths for arranging personal and family life [e.g. Gregory *et al.* 2013]. However, are these choices real for parents in precarious employment? Do they simply make do, or is it part of a strategy deployed by parents (and workers more generally) to re-appropriate control over work and private life? If we take it that adaptation and resistance are not simply mutually exclusive concepts [Ba’, 2018], then it is important to see what kind of struggles

parents in insecure jobs go through in order to secure decent standards of life for themselves and their children. The next section is dedicated to the evaluation of the concrete difficulties of families in precarious work, their financial difficulties and their experience of precarity. Through the review of the literature dedicated to precarious families, the next section will outline an understanding of their daily struggles as social struggles, struggles that have a social meaning, as well as a personal one.

## *2. The precarious lives of families with dependent children and their struggles*

This section discusses the main findings of literature on precarious families. From delays in setting up a family, to the issue around the lack of resources of these parents, from economic hardship to intergenerational solidarity, to other key items of fragility, this section will try to make sense of the experiences of parents in precarious work. Moving from these concrete issues, we will then take in consideration more abstract concepts emerging from the literature. So, “bond capital”, “heroic commitment” of mothers in insecure jobs and “doing security” will be critically examined to check their connection with the daily struggles of parents and their experience of precarity.

In evaluating the above, considerations on the internal relations between the conditions of precarity and parenthood are deemed to be fundamental, if we are to provide more than a simple list of issues affecting this social group. Discussing the internal relations of precarity and family life means finding social links that are meaningful for parents’ experience of family and experience of work. So, rather than a list of items affecting families in insecure jobs, critical-sociological literature finds “mediating terms” (like the above mentioned “doing security”) that may explain the whole social experience of parents.

There are clear indications from the literature that in different national contexts elements of diversity are mixed with commonalities in the way parents in insecure jobs experience and operate within the free market economy [Ba’ 2018; Carreri 2015; Giannini 2012; Gregory *et al.* 2013; Hardgrove *et al.* 2015; Jansen 2011; Piccone-Stella 2007; Stier, Yaish 2014]. Setting up a family, as a

communal project, is never an individualised task, neither in terms of investment of money nor in shared understanding of emotions. It often happens in a context where previous generations pass resources (money, time, or mobilisation of networks of solidarity) to their successors and where forms of welfare state still operate, as in Italy [Giannini 2012] and Great Britain [O'Hara 2015]. Indeed, it seems quite clear now that lack of resources and the uncertainties of precarious employment are directly linked to delays in setting up a family for many young people [Blossfeld *et al.* 2005; Clark, Heath 2015; Hardgrove *et al.* 2015; Murgia, Armano 2014; Piccone-Stella 2007]: in particular, young women are simply too unsure about income and resources available to plan for births and babies. Here, resources mainly mean housing and the possibility to move out of the parental home: precarious, insecure employment means lack of resources to afford a place called home, and with it the symbolic space for new life [Giannini, Orientale-Caputo 2011]. If by resources we understand means of subsistence, the story of capitalism then does not appear to have changed [Holloway 2010; Bonefeld 2014], despite all the so-called progress: struggle over means of subsistence is still the objective reality of the less-privileged classes.

Research on family life during the Great Recession (and with it, the intensification of the *precarisation* of labour) confirms the difficulty for couples of forming or keeping family life together, in the face of economic hardship [Clark, Heath 2015; Couper 2014; Edgell *et al.* 2012; Pugh 2015]. However, this is only part of the story: researches also suggest that families respond to these events by huddling close, in such a way that intergenerational dependence is both stretched and strengthened at the same time [Giannini 2012; Pugh 2015]. This ambivalence is important: it is not about not having enough data or the right data to decide which one is “true”. If the important category here is “struggle” (as we will see later), then it makes sense that people in precarious living conditions may both argue against each other and get closer to each other, which is all about struggling to form and confirm the social links that are vital for their well-being. But what do they argue over? Or: why do they need to get closer to each other? Studies suggest a crude answer: money [Ba' 2018; Bertolini *et al.* 2007; Giannini 2012; Ipsos Mori 2013; TUC 2016].

These studies isolate a number of “key items of fragility” for families whose members are in insecure jobs, which can be mainly reconnected to the cost of living [e.g. Ipsos Mori 2013]. Families interviewed for the Ipsos Mori [ivi, 19] study reported having to go without food at times, either after periods of extra expenses (like Christmas) or because children were given priority for getting healthy meals. Getting into debt is then a common strategy for British families living through recession and so-called recovery. Childcare is said to prevent women returning to work, because for the moment it can be “pretty extortionate” [ivi, 12; TUC 2016], and thus it is important to point out the continuous intergenerational support that allows childcare arrangements within the familial group (usually grandparents), freeing up mothers for paid employment [Piccone-Stella, Salmieri 2007, 85]. Crucially for our analysis here, a number of studies report parents’ accounts of arranging or trying to arrange “quality time” together: precarious employment makes it difficult in the sense that there may be either unsocial hours, or long commutes to work, or lack of employment altogether and thereby lack of money and anxiety about the future [Giannini 2012; Ipsos Mori 2013; Bertolini *et al.* 2007].

When assessing the social links that are established around caring responsibilities and precarious work, the literature individuates “bonding capital” [Ipsos Mori 2013, 33], a term which actually does not help to understand what is going on in terms of constituting and re-constituting social relations outside the short circuit of capitalism: bonding capital reifies human relationships in the same way that we have seen the social form of exchange-value reifies the person as a component part of the labour-power. Bonding capital as such reveals an ideological attempt to frame social relations in line with the exchange principle. Rather, bonding and intergenerational solidarities are expressions of the daily struggles of parents to negate and go beyond an oppressive reality.

Similarly, Pugh [2015, 202] conceptualises “commitment heroism” when analysing the struggle for emotional, material and symbolic security of mothers in precarious employment. Commitment heroism refers to the fact that mothers, despite being in insecure employment with meagre salaries, and despite the fact that they are pressed to find time for themselves, for work and for their children, nevertheless sacrifice themselves and work hard to ensure care for their immediate

relatives. With this “immense” commitment, Pugh says that mothers are trying to erect a moral wall between the world of paid employment and the world of intimate relationships. This interpretation of mothers’ work who “struggle to care” amid rampant insecurity reveals a moralistic take on mothers’ (and fathers’) struggle and commitment. It seems that mainstream sociology finds it difficult to figure out something that escapes the logic of exchange, something that does not respond to the logic of equivalents. “Doing security” [Cooper 2014] means struggle, and only through this standpoint is it possible to capture how mothers (and fathers) constitute their daily life, in other words: how their agency may emerge. Precarious employment does not simply determine precarious living conditions for families. In precarity, capitalism does not enter in family life from the outside, but from the inside, where the mechanisms underpinning precarious employment (through the commodification of labour) becomes the social form of life for families.

In this section, we have seen the “key items of fragility” for families in insecure jobs. We have also evaluated the concepts that are used by scholars in making sense of these social conditions. Now we have to consider whether, despite lack of resources and general pressure from insecure employment, there is an agency, a spontaneous way of organising social and intimate relationships. The answer to this question is quite complex and the next section will try to answer it more in depth through the sociological concept of everyday struggles.

### *3. Precarity, struggle and dignity*

In the previous sections, we have seen how “doing security” and similar concepts can be understood as the struggle of parents through precarity. There is evidence that these struggles mean something more than the simple struggle for accessing basic needs: we have seen that intergenerational solidarity, bonding and commitment point at ways of arranging their social links. Admittedly, recurring to commodity form and other seemingly economic concepts may risk presenting this argument as economicist, however, this section will move from these crucial concerns of parents to consider their dignity and how the issue of dignity, as

reflected in a small number of studies, can help us to explain the experiences of precarious families.

“Dignity” represents a type of findings that research independently has reported as present among families that are affected by job insecurity: some qualitative studies (Ba’ 2018; Berntsen 2016; Giannini 2016; Schildrick *et al.* 2012) narrate specifically about this social and personal experiences of precarious parents, and how it comes to constitute a response to precarity, but also an active sign of re-arranging intimate bonds (Ba’ 2018; Berntsen 2016). So, the concept of “dignity” used here is not about a separate moral dimension of the individual life: this study uses the concept of dignity to signal a social dimension of families living in precarity, a social dimension that in principle refuses to consider the existing conditions as normal or tolerable. Following the critical approaches mentioned in the introduction, this concept has a “negative” valence [Holloway 2002, 159], it is more about “what is not” than “what it is”. Evaluating the existing literature, dignity is a concept that signals the resistance of parents in insecure work to social relations deemed to be unfair. In that sense, struggling towards dignity means prefiguring a social reality beyond precarity.

Let’s examine these considerations more closely, starting with a particular research from the USA context [Wilson, Yochim 2015], which links once again the actions of precarious mother to an economic reality, only to develop more subtle considerations around mothers’ (and fathers’) agency. We will then analyse how dignity may represent an important concept for evaluating how precarious families swing between adaptation and resistance to existing circumstances. One term used to investigate the circumstances of parents’ (and especially mothers’) when they are subject to job insecurity is “entrepreneurialism”. This term is used as a critique of neo-liberal ideology [ivi], rather than in the sense that people would happily mobilise themselves and their own resources, recurring to the market instead of the welfare state. However, the internalisation of the faith in the market produces social relations (and bonds inside the family) as well as adaptation [ivi]. The concept entrepreneurialism helps us in investigating the inner working of parents’ and mothers’ lives in precarious employment. Entrepreneurialism indicates how precarious conditions are often privatised and interiorised and how the attempt of getting out of them is re-defined through

the free market ideal: “become your own entrepreneur!”. Mothering through precarity, or “becoming mamapreneurial” [ivi, 669] is then seen in an ambivalent way: mothers are active in exploring options and operating within their social environment, but the final outcome seems to be that they adapt to the precarious status quo. This uneven contrast of adaptation and resistance to precarious employment is important because it means nothing less than the creation of social life for a new generation and – at the same time – the reproduction of the fundamental conditions for personal life. Thus, whilst pointing at mothers’ affective labour as functional to “broader regimes of governance” [ivi, p. 673], the analysis also points at the creation of the conditions for adult personality that are developed within the family.

Following this critical framing of entrepreneurialism, we suggest that affective labour, the bonding that is formed through parents’ daily lives and struggles, is to be linked to dignity more than to psychological strategies. One of the main features from studies on families in precarious employment is exactly the tension between adaptation and resistance [Giannini 2012; Ba’ 2018]. The adaptation of parents to fragmentation, trying to get by and deal with the harsh realities of the labour market, is often linked to struggles against the conditions of precarity. In that sense, struggling through the conditions of precarious employment means also resisting their complete subordination to the needs of the market. The theme of dignity then is highlighted in various, ambivalent ways: dignity as an individualised way to resist events beyond personal control, and dignity as a way to make sense of the struggle that parents need to sustain through precarity. This point requires further development.

In few recent studies [ivi], the difficult adaptation to precarity is the result of the daily struggles of mothers, who have to ensure stability in the face of economic insecurity; it is the process of reconstituting everyday family life, yet the result is not simple adaptation. Given precarious forms of employment, the stability of family life is no longer a given (if it ever was) and its very existence relies on mothers’ deployment of domestic, emotional and care labour for their families [Wilson, Yochim 2015, 674; Hardgrove *et al.* 2015]. For mothers in precarious circumstances, safeguarding the conditions for developing independent individuals within their families means employing their own personality as

something “spendable”, as we will see later on. Bonding capital, understood in this sense, transforms human activity into something almost “tangible”, like for instance the parental care of the child which should serve for the formation of human capital [Bonefeld 2014]. These forms of objectification of mothers’ activities are resisted, struggled over and accomplished at the same time [Wilson, Yochim 2015]. Not only is daily life implicated in the struggle through precarious economic circumstances, but even personal life, from within the intimate sphere, can be seen as “symbolic currency” [Illouz 2008, 94], that is: something that can be spendable. This tendency, which follows the commodification of human labour, defines how the form of precarious employment permeates social relations as well as the sense of self, but this form is not without its tensions: this tension is revealed by dignity.

Dignity in precarious families is the sign of a contradiction: in Giannini [2012; 2016], the temporality of life is always in danger of collapsing into the temporality of (precarious) labour: hence the resistance to this danger on the part of couples and hence also their dignity in attempting to arrange personal lives outside the crude, short circuit of capital. Following Holloway [1998], dignity is a social class concept, not a mere, vague human rights concept, more or less formalised in national or international charts. This is especially relevant for the lives of families that are caught in social relations within the frame of precarious employment, as dignity is “the negation of humiliation, the struggle against subordination” [ivi, 182]. The concept of dignity can help us to see where there is struggle, where there is resistance to simple adaptation to conditions which clearly imply the transformation of oneself into a mere thing that can be exchanged in the labour market. For those in precarious employment, the market represents something more than a temporary passage. One of the most common experiences of parents in the precarious labour force is the humiliation of having to look for paid work-opportunities and of having to be continuously employable [Ba’ 2019]. Thus, this daily struggle against the subordination is linked to dignity [Giannini 2012, 220] and it represents the implicit negation of the objectification to market prices and to the constrictions of the commodity form. To put it in radical terms, “dignity” implies that there is a “wrong type

of reality” (*Lettera di un precario suicida*, 2017; see also Adorno [1990, 11] on dialectics as “the ontology of the wrong state of things”).

To conclude, the main point here is that families and people in precarious employment do not simply fit into an existing social order, they struggle against it and in doing so they produce new social relations, which more often than not see them in disadvantaged positions. So, families in precarious employment struggle over ideals of family life [Cooper 2014], but these are not marginal dreams that are empty of meaning just because the material basis for realising them does not exist. For example, in such an approach, friendship, family, love and bonds re-emerge through intense struggles which are often associated with a sense of dignity. In the social sciences there is the tendency to criticise parents’ views of normal family life, as this normality often hides normative assumptions around the role of women that are often discriminatory. Nonetheless the negation of these ideals is often the task of the market economy, which demands “zero drag” from parents and their availability for the job [Hochschild 2013]. Dignity against the negation of these ideals is then linked with struggles that are essentially social. It is not possible for the social sciences to separate the economic (supposedly the realm of necessity) from the realm of intimate life (allegedly the realm of moral action): the critical role of social sciences should highlight how material needs and moral considerations have a common basis [Holloway 2010; Bonefeld 2014]. Precarious parents do not make explicit, positive reference to a fairer state of social existence, but through their claims to dignity they prefigure one.

### *Conclusion*

This article is about parents in precarious work. There is an emerging body of research that is dedicated to this specific issue and the task of this article is to review theoretically the premises and the implications of their substantive arguments. It is important to understand the pressure of families in insecure jobs as there is by now entire generations that entered parenthood in precarious social conditions.

In this article, we have argued that the phenomenon of job insecurity is linked to the commodification of labour, which generally affects all of those “free” to sell their labour-power. We have tried to explain that these formulations do not necessarily entails an economic view on the matter, however parents in precarious work are more directly affected by the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion of the market economy and in their daily life they are clearly aware that their labour-power is a commodity and that they need to act on this precondition. Thus, the approach of this article, reflecting research and qualitative studies, suggests the centralisation of the daily struggles that precarious parents need to sustain for getting by and for decent standard of life. The issue of struggle is not connected to a politically organised struggle, but this article shows that parents in precarious work respond to the lack of financial security in a number of different, original ways. We have discussed how precarious parents adapt to given circumstances, but this fact is not simple regression and that they are nonetheless able to produce and reproduce meaningful social links.

Finally, the concept of dignity is individuated as exemplifying the struggle against precarity and this concept is linked to considerations around social links, rather than around the psychological dimensions of parenthood. Dignity is linked to the daily struggles of families to secure a decent standard of living in the face of a crude economic system simply based on the exchange of their labour-power into money. In the field of precarity, recurring to the concept of dignity allows the linking of economic and financial concern with the agency of families on the margin.

Through this theoretical and substantial evaluation of the literature, it is possible then to outline an approach to precarious families that on one hand takes in consideration very general social and economic trends, like that one of the commodity form of labour, and on the other one rejects an economic interpretation of social life, as there is also an emphasis on parents daily life, on their struggle to get by and on their dignity as human beings. That last concept, which is also a finding of research, is not an essential feature of precarious parents, but it may take different forms and different expressions according to different social and historical circumstances. This would be the contribution to the literature of this article.

Yet, how can we go beyond precarity? Reading the literature through a critical lens, it would be easy to formulate positive ideals, which are substantiated by the accounts of these very families. For instance: “happy families live in well-kept homes, possess nice things, have fun together and never worry about money” [Wilson, Yochim 2015], however these authors themselves make it clear that these ideals are *clichés* and real aspirations at the same time, underpinning the longing for dignity. Thus, what is emerging from the analysis of this literature is dignity as concept to understand the experiences and the struggles of families living through precarity. The original contribution of this article is about centralising this concept, which is also a finding, and making it a key to reinterpret and frame the issue of precarity.

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