

Production and Reception of Father's Construction of their Daughter's Sexuality on Twitter

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Biographical note

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Abstract, words: 190

Paper, words: 7654 (without references), 8348 (with references)

Abstract

Research has found humour and gender to be linked (Davis, 2006; Kotthoff 2006), specifically within languages/cultures (see Thielemann, 2011 for jokes in Russian). In this respect, women are often subject of jokes and, in some cases, this reproduces the gendered imbalance of suitable *roles* in private and public spaces. In this paper, I examine the message of two jokes told by Italian fathers policing their daughters' sexuality, as well as the interactions between myself and these fathers on Twitter. Using Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (Lazar, 2007; 2018), Social Media Critical Discourse Studies (KhosraviNik, 2018) and through adapting a framework designed to approach sexist jokes (Sunderland, 2007), I discuss: a) the 'who/what the text is about', and b) a desire to a traditional fatherhood emerging from the interactions in *it's just banter* and *the good and happy father*. Specifically, I discuss fatherhood as linked to an ontological desire (Kiesling, 2011) – the aspiration to certain gendered identities – in connection to an alleged transition from old to new fatherhood (Cannito 2019; Magaraggia, 2012) in Italy. This paper contributes to the literature on gender, sexuality and parental role negotiated through humour in digital contexts.

Keywords

Fatherhood, gender, parental roles, humour, sexuality

1. Introduction

Humour is context-sensitive and reproduces gender arrangements (Kotthoff, 2006; Thielemann, 2011). Italy has recently been at the centre of attention for the World Congress of Families, an event which took place in Verona (in March 2019). The congress focused on themes such as the centrality of Christian values, the sacredness of the family constituted by a father and a mother as well as objections to abortion and same-sex marriages.¹ Similar ideas, and more specifically that of the family being constituted by the union of a father and a mother, are often discussed in Italian politics from (far) right parties, such as *Lega* and *Fratelli d'Italia*. An example is the re-introduction of the kinship terms *madre* (mother) and *padre* (father) on applications for issuing documents, this replacing the gender-neutral and inclusive *genitore 1* (parent 1) and *genitore 2* (parent 2).²

It is in a society that constantly focuses on traditional values that jokes about daughters and their sexuality find room, **as suggested from the following examples**. For instance, in a TV programme on football (*B come Sabato*, B as Saturday³), the host and comedian Gabriele Corsi (GC) jokes with (and about) his 15-year-old daughter Margherita (M) who is in the studio:

Excerpt 1

GC: sotto i 18 anni se ti fai un tatuaggio, tu?... Muori

M: Si

GC: Fidanzata... tu? Muori

M: Si

GC: If you do a tattoo before you are 18, you? [You] die!

M: Yes

GC: [if you are] in a relationship with someone, you? [You] die!

M: Yes

The female co-guest and the audience in the studio joked about Corsi being a modern dad.

Another example is a post of a journalist and activist⁴ who works for an online newspaper, this dealing with violence against women and sexist insults towards women and advocating for women's right. He writes on his public Facebook page:

¹ <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/03/31/europe/verona-world-congress-of-families-intl/index.html> Accessed on 02/04/2019.

² https://www.agi.it/cronaca/documenti_identita_genitore-5269139/news/2019-04-04/. Accessed on 09/04/2019.

³ <https://www.raiplay.it/video/2018/12/B-come-Sabato-c630f5ca-0283-4fb9-2901eca1bdf6.html>. Accessed on 09/06/2019

⁴ I decided not to use his name because after searching for these posts on the search bar in Facebook, the link to them was not showing; the posts are, however, visible if one scrolls down to the dates mentioned above. His page is liked by 465,803 contacts Accessed 10/06/2019.

Facebook post 1

Mi spiacerebbe di cambiare scuola a [name of the daughter] ma stamani un bambino di classe le ha chiesto se andava di fidanzarsi e lei ha risposto di sì. Almeno mi avesse consultato. Non so se riuscite a cogliere a pieno la portata del problema.

I am sorry, but I have no choice, [name of the daughter, 4 y.o] will have to change school. This morning a little boy asked if she wanted to be with him and she said yes. If only she [or he?] had asked for my opinion on it. I am not sure you understand how huge this problem is.

12 October 2018, 3.600 likes

This post gathered the likes of 3,600 contacts. Some days after (on 16 October 2018), he returns to this topic, reproducing a conversation where he, ironically, asks his daughter if she is still in a relationship with the schoolmate. **These two background examples** show how some gendered traditional and culture-bound constructions are still in place and pervasive, regardless of some people's more inclusive and positive attitudes on gender and women's rights. These two episodes seem to portray humour about women/daughters as common in Italy, capturing the attention of and receiving the support from those who come across them.

The focus of this paper is on two jokes told by a pop singer, Nek, and a TV author, Marco Salvati on Twitter. These are examined from the perspective of the message – reconstructing a specific gender arrangement where daughters' sexuality is policed and controlled by fathers – and that of consumption and re-contextualisation of the message between those who told the jokes and myself.

Starting from these accounts, this paper aims to investigate how daughters' sexuality is constructed by their fathers through unproblematised humour and, when challenged, what prototype of fatherhood is desired and defended in the interactions on the social network Twitter. Therefore, the research questions I address in this paper are:

1. *How do fathers construct their daughters' sexuality? (section 4).*
2. *How is desire to traditional fatherhood constructed and legitimised in the interactions on Twitter? (section 5).*

In this paper, I contextualise the literature on humour, desire and their intersection with gender and sexuality as well as parenthood (in Italy) through the principles of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (Lazar, 2007; 2018; FCDA henceforth). In the methodology, I outline the data and their relevance to Social Media Critical Discourse Studies (SM-CDS, KhosraviNik, 2018) and the analytical framework (adapted from Sunderland, 2007). I also reflect on ethical

accounts in using this dataset. The analysis that follows is split into two sections: a) examination of the contents of the jokes, that is sexist messages and imbalanced constructions where daughters are seen as disadvantaged (section 4); and b) investigation of legitimisation of fathers' attitudes towards the message and the desire to traditional fatherhood, emerging from *it's just a banter* and the *happy and good father* (section 5). In section 6, I conclude by offering a final overview of the problematization of conventional messages conveyed through humour and its connection with sexism, gender and gendered roles.

2. Gendered Desire, Parenthood and Humour

As outlined in the introduction, the jokes I refer to are told by fathers and they deal with conceptualising their daughters' sexuality. In reviewing studies on children and parents, it is unsurprising that mothers have been at the centre of scholarly work (Mackenzie, 2018; Miller, 2011), as they are generally seen as the primary (emotional) carers of children. While this is righteously problematized, literature has paid less attention to fathers. Sunderland (2004), in investigating UK magazines about parenthood, identified some discourses (i.e. set of ideas) which saw fathers 'lacking emphasis on responsibility', exercising their 'role part-time', performing a role as 'baby-entertainers', being 'mother's bumbling assistants' and 'line managers'. In interviewing first-time fathers, Miller (2011) found that fixed gender (and patriarchal) roles remain in their descriptions of parental duties. More recently, Mackenzie (2018), exploring the UK website *Mumsnet* (a website for parents), concludes that fathers are mostly absent from participating in this digital space while mothers seem to *exploit* it to negotiate and construct their parental role. It is for this reason, that this paper aims to address this gap by shedding light on fathers and fatherhood within a specific culture, Italy, and on an online platform, Twitter.

In relation to gendered roles, some of which seem more apt for women and some for men in specific cultures and societies, I believe that the notion of desire as postulated by Kiesling (2011) can provide an interesting platform for debate in relation to parental roles. Desire is, in Kiesling's view, *ontological* in that people might wish to 'have or emulate qualities of a particular identity' (2011, p. 213), including the maintenance of this 'want for something' (2011, p. 213). The *ontological* desire is discussed as linked to masculinities in Kiesling's work (2011) and is viewed in relation to the hegemony of these with respects to femininities, heterosexism (the foregrounding heteronormativity of masculinities) and solidarity between men (homosociality). Therefore, this ontological desire for men to aspire to a traditional view

of masculinity cannot be separated from the favourable position that they seem to occupy in society. This is not to say that there is not a desire for women to femininities, as Kiesling's theoretical underpinning seems to envisage this as well. It is for these reasons that his work seems to be relevant for this investigation, as the desire seems to be linked to performance and maintenance of socially and culturally bound 'old' fatherhood in Italy – more specifically, a control over women. The investigation of the data indeed sheds light on the conventionality of a *traditional prototype* of fatherhood (as well as a prototype of daughter-hood) in Italy. In relation to fatherhood in this country, Magaraggia (2012), after interviewing 40 fathers and mothers (of a European background), argues that there is a tension between a fear of losing traditional traits of masculinity and 'new' fatherhood, when constructing and enhancing the bond between father and child(ren). Cannito (2019, p. 2) argues that Italy 'is a very traditional country in terms of both welfare structure and practices of parenthood', suggesting that modifications of gender (and parental) roles and models are slower than in other European countries. In interviewing 35 fathers in the Northern region of Piemonte, she found that they legitimize old models and stereotypes about gendered parental roles (in opposition to 'new' fatherhood, as also found by Miller, 2011). Both scholars recognize that there is a tension between old and new models of fatherhood (Cannito also resorts to label some practices belonging to a *hybrid fatherhood*, 2009, p. 7). They agree that the relationship between masculinity and fatherhood in Italy is filtered through the idea of (desired) hegemonic masculinity, that is 'a specific masculinity in a given historical and society-wide social setting that legitimates the unequal gender relations between men and women, between masculinity and femininity and among masculinities' (Messerschmidt, 2019, p. 86).

In the examination below, the desired performance and the maintenance of a hierarchy between gendered roles, happen through humour. Davies agrees that humour is linked to social typifications, i.e. 'abstract schemas for social interaction which are recognized by members of the speech community and thus are available for characterization' (2006, p. 96) and Kotthoff (2006) suggests that humour is linked to 'hegemonic masculinities' and commonly accepted gendered structures. In addition, there seems to be general agreement that jokes about women are often about sex (Kotthoff, 2006; Legman 1968) and this seems to hold true for Italy in several capacities; for instance, sex is also central in describing, insulting and conceptualising women in both the private and the public sphere (e.g. see Formato, 2017, 2019 for sexist remarks used to attack female politicians). In relation to sexist jokes targeting women, Sunderland (2007) proposes 4 different ways to *face* and respond to them (however, not

necessarily through interactions) – i.e. critical rejection, engaging in resistant reading, critically enjoyment and feminist reclamation of the jokes. From Sunderland's perspective, opposing viewpoints between those initiating the jokes and those who *receive* them, form part of a (constructed) contradiction (joke vs re-reading), where the re-reading becomes an emancipatory effort in 'rendering dominant and traditional discourses unsustainable or at least unstable' (Sunderland 2007: 208).

It is for what has been highlighted above that I adopt Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (Lazar, 2007; 2018, FCDA henceforth) in order to shed light on how gender ideologies are entrenched in power asymmetries, becoming 'common sense' (Lazar, 2018, p.372). This work covers the six principles of this theoretical framework: 1. Investigation of gender as ideological; 2. Power as a central focus; 3. Evidence of reproduction and maintenance of discourses; 4. Critical reflexivity, this concerning the interactions as a way to generate dialogue by disrupting the centrality of the sexist hierarchy through 'a political critique for action' (2007, p. 144); 5. Socially inclusive analytical activism; and 6. Transnationalism, i.e. acknowledging that gender is problematic globally but in several ways depending on the community, country or context (Lazar, 2018, pp. 373-376).

3. Data, Ethics and Methods of investigation in digital spaces

Having outlined the literature that informs my study, I here extensively discuss methods of examination, starting from the data used, what ethical considerations were taken into account, how the investigation relates to SM-CDS (Social Media Critical Discourse Study, KhosraviNik 2018) as well as what analytical framework has been used (Sunderland 2007).

The dataset for this investigation consists of two jokes and telling tweets of those who told the jokes and those who intervened in the case of Salvati's joke. Nek's (real name: Filippo Neviani) joke was initially told on TV in January 2018. He is a pop singer who is said to have sold 8.000.000 records through his 20-year career which started in the 90s. I reproduced and commented on the joke on Twitter mentioning his handle @NekOfficial. This started the interaction with the singer. The second joke was told on Twitter by a TV author, Marco Salvati in September 2018. I came across this tweet as one of the accounts I follow had *liked* it. The interaction between Salvati and myself started after I replied to his tweet. In building the dataset, ethical considerations have been taken into account. There has been agreement that signing the terms and conditions of social network platforms, such as Twitter, allows

researchers to consider language used by public accounts as accessible (Hardaker and Macglashan, 2015; Weller 2014). Specifically, Twitter's terms and conditions read that:

By submitting, posting or displaying Content on or through the Services, you grant us a worldwide, non-exclusive, royalty-free license (with the right to sublicense) to use, copy, reproduce, process, adapt, modify, publish, transmit, display and distribute such Content in any and all media or distribution methods (now known or later developed). **This license authorizes us to make your Content available to the rest of the world and to let others do the same.**

<https://twitter.com/en/tos#intlTerms> (my emphasis)

However, this does not mean that researchers should not ask whether they can (or cannot) use data; they should continue to reflect on the rationale of their investigation as well as on the risks for reproducing such data. What emerges from this study, as well as from similar scholarly work (Spilioti, 2017; Mackenzie, 2017; Paolillo, 2015), is that reflexivity is key. I believe that it is important to consider the difference between the terms 'ethics' and 'ethical'; with ethics, one can intend the procedures that needs to be approved by the university before starting a project (e.g. an application for focus groups, consent form) and with ethical, practices and reflections which aim at safeguarding the people who are involved in a study. Reflections and practices here are mainly based on ethical, related to 'the concerns of non-participant exposure to harm from the conduct of research [as well as] the nature of exposure and/or harm in digital media' (Paolillo 2015, p. 48).

In light of this, I did not plan to transform what I see as every day activism into academic scholarship and this restricted my choices in terms of asking consent from the two fathers at the time of the interactions. Second, having commented on the *venue* (Twitter and TV), I critically evaluate the topic – the relationship between the father and their daughters as a prototypical one in the Italian culture – and the participant(s) – the pop singer Nek and the TV author Salvati. In relation to the former, Nek and Salvati were the ones to raise the subject in a humorous way, this indicating a certain easiness with what was discussed; in relation to the latter – the participants – both are public figures, with Nek having 586.000 followers (and an accredited account, those with the blue tick) and Salvati having 77.700 followers. Because of their role, I associate degrees of *publicness* to them (Spilioti, 2017, p. 193) as well as to the words that they decide to share. While they seemed surprised to be challenged in the much wider and public arena of Twitter, they had a chance to reply and to know that I conduct research on the topic (via my public bio as well as information directly given). **In this respect, the data produced in the interactions is to be considered elicited (rather than purely natural occurring) and because of this, the knowledge produced is co-constructed in the interaction through the exchange of tweets and the different points of view. My position as a researcher is**

not invisible and both sides – the fathers and myself – act “as individual human beings with their own personal histories and idiosyncrasies” (Fontana and Frey, 1994, p. 372).

While not a traditional interview in sociolinguistics terms, the data collected, and its analysis, points at the interactive and dynamic nature of the construction, as well as the negotiation, of knowledge (as in the work by Reissner-Roubicek, 2012); this provides a methodological alternative that could be “adequate to the pursuit of [...] social and political goals” (Wilkinson, 1998, p. 122) of this research, in light of the theoretical framework chosen, i.e. FCDA.

I refer to Nek and Salvati with their names but I anonymise the tweets that were written by other users (and whose profile are public); however, I do not include those tweets which are not available since the two episodes. By introducing other jokes on the same topic (in the introduction), I have demonstrated that the aims of this investigation lie solely in the discourses around *what* is being said (as described below) and the conventional categories/prototypes represented (fathers and daughters) rather than the role of Nek and Salvati as fathers.

In relation to the aims of the study – investigating what is said (RQ1) and constructions of desired fatherhood (RQ2) – one cannot disregard the affordances of the medium in which the message is shared and the interactions have occurred. In order to contextualise this, SM-CDS (KhosraviNik 2018) provides interesting accounts of how the medium, in my case Twitter, allows the researcher to encounter and interact with enactments of (asymmetrical) power. In addition to traditional critical discourse studies – this defined as ‘socially committed, problem-oriented, textually based’ (KhosraviNik 2018, p. 586) – the SM perspective allows users to ‘have access to see and respond to institutionally and user generated content/texts’ (KhosraviNik, 2018, p. 582). The focus on digital environment is key, as this is a space where discourses circulate and where engagement is permitted (differently from offline texts restricted by time and space). In guaranteeing degrees of flexibility – e.g. I here do not co-construct similar meanings as those offered by the fathers and instead, I attempt to disrupt their sexist messages – SM-CDS is useful in the examination of power hierarchies (between fathers and daughters, and to some extents men and women). More specifically, I wish to investigate the horizontal level – i.e. the specific communication affordances of the messages shared and the interactions – as well as the vertical level, through linking language used with(in) the socio-political context (KhosraviNik 2018; KhosraviNik and Esposito, 2018), in a fruitful ‘proactive dynamism between media and society’ (KhosraviNik 2018, p. 588).

While SM-CDS provides a theoretical background to initiate investigation of language in social media, I adapt Sunderland’s (2011) work on feminist readings of sexist jokes to frame my

analysis, facilitating the examination from the two perspectives: *what/who the text is about* (section 4) and *feminist re-readings* (to be seen in relation to anti-feminist ones, section 5); I advance that my re-readings are informed by ‘*knowing about feminism; [...] having experienced feminism; [...] adopt[ing] a feminist perspective not just a ‘sexism awareness’ perspective; [...] see[ing] feminism and beyond* (e.g. its causes, but also its spin-offs)’ (Sunderland, 2007, p. 220 emphasis in the original). I position myself in between critically rejecting these jokes and engaging in resistant reading.⁵ Both SM-CDS and this analytical framework are helpful in answering the two research questions (outlined in 1).

4. The Who/What the Texts are about

Since 2003, the state TV RAI (Radio Televisione Italiana) has hosted a show called *Che tempo che fa* (*What's the weather like*), first combining weather forecasts and interviews with guests and then moved to become a bi-weekly episode show with fixed guests and non-fixed ones such as politicians, actors, singers etc. After its success on Rai 3 – a minor channel with a smaller audience – the programme moved to Rai 1 – the main channel – in 2017 (reaching an average of 13-14% audience share⁶). From 2017 to 2018, the programme was split into two: its traditional form *Che tempo che fa*⁷ aired on Sundays and its spin-off *Che fuori tempo che fa*⁸ on Mondays. In *Che fuori tempo che fa* guests and fixed panellist are sitting around a table and comment the news or discuss aspects of the work of the invited guests (e.g. a new book, a new record, a new movie), and it is in one of these programmes that the episode narrated below happened.

In January 2018, the anchor-man Fabio Fazio hosted Nek⁹ and several other guests, among whom Olympic medallist Roland Fischnaller. Nek's joke forms part of a somewhat unlinked stream of stories: L'Aura (L in the excerpt below), a female singer, starts by recounting her difficult relationship with her mum and suggests that the similarity between them was the reason they crushed when she was younger. Fabio Fazio (FF) then hints at when teenagers build

⁵ Sunderland offers these positions in relation to a *personal dilemma* (a contradiction within oneself) rather than an argument one could have with those who have told the jokes or other people commenting on them.

⁶ It is currently broadcast by Rai 2, following criticisms concerning the cost of the programme by the right party Lega which was in power from 2018-2019.

⁷ <https://www.raipublic.it/programmi/chetempochefa/> Accessed on 10/06/2019.

⁸ The title of the programme is based on a pun of the word *tempo* (time and weather), and in the compound form *fuori tempo*, it refers to the expression ‘out of time’ because of the time it is aired, i.e. after the main programme of the evening – known as *prima serata* – traditionally from 9 to 11 pm.

⁹ <https://www.raipublic.it/video/2017/12/Che-tempo-che-fa-6739c402-8f00-4eb5-aece-b17c312748ff.html>.

Accessed on 10/02/2018

independence from their parents (e.g. going to school on one's own). At this point, the Olympic medallist¹⁰ (RF) and Nek (N) intervene (as well as other guests participating with paralinguistic feature, i.e. Fabio Volo (FV)):

Excerpt 2

RF: Nella loro età come ero io quando subito 18 anni la prima macchina poi con la canzone di Nek fuori dalla valle 'Quando costa il mondo'

FF: eh ma bravoo

Nek hints at a victory gesture

L: siamo tutti connessi. Fantastico

FV sitting next to Nek sings a song in the background and pokes him

N: Esatto

FF: invece tu Filippo con tua figlia ho saputo che non sei per nulla né geloso né apprensivo

N: No

Everybody laughs

È della vergine e lo sarà fino a 30 anni

The majority of the panellists laugh but there is a sound of disapproval from what seems a female voice.

FF: poi cambia segno

RF: at their age like me when as soon as I turned 18 with my first car, outside the valley with the song by Nek 'How much does the world cost' [hinting at romantic encounters]

FF: Well done

Nek hints at a victory gesture

L: we are all connected. Fantastic

FV sitting next to Nek sings a song in the background and pokes him

N: Exactly

FF: on the other side Filippo I seem to gather that you are not jealous nor apprehensive with your daughter

N: No

Everybody laughs

She is from the star sign virgo and she will stay so until she is 30

The majority of the panellists laugh but there is a sound of disapproval from what seems a female voice.

FF: she will then change star sign

The joke (underlined in the excerpt above) needs a detailed explanation for those who do not speak Italian: *vergine* (translated into 'virgo') refers both to the star sign and being a virgin. Nek uses *sarà* (will be), an epistemic future which conveys a firm conjecture (about a third

¹⁰ His Italian is heavily influenced by the dialect and accent of his birthplace, Val di Funes, located in the autonomous region of Sud Tirol or Alto Adige where people speak a German dialect, arguably as their first language (Caravello, Tasso, Pizzetti and Lucchetti, 2009).

party who is not present). He also chooses to channel the conversation towards his daughter's sexuality by responding to only one of the two inputs offered by the host – *geloso* (jealous) – disregarding *apprensivo* (apprehensive). The idea of jealousy becomes central in the justification (as also discussed in section 5); here *geloso* (jealous) is to be intended as '[f]iercely protective of one's rights or possessions' (OED 2019, <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/jealous>), and refers to daughters seen as objects own by the(ir) fathers. Moreover, the joke is also validated by the narrative that follows, in which Nek *complains* to be the only man in the house; he also suggests that the control is in the hand of his wife and the two daughters (one of whom is the recipient of the joke, Beatrice aged 7), hinting at his *lost* power as breadwinner, a traditional male role in Italy (Magaraggia 2012, Cannito 2019)

Similarly, the joke by Marco Salvati constructs the sexuality of his young daughter as something fathers should be commenting on and uses this to appeal his Twitter audience. His tweets – *liked* by more than five thousand people – reads:

Tweet 1

Oggi la mia piccola principessa compie 14 anni. Mancano solo 20 anni e potrà già uscire con un ragazzo

Today my little princess turns 14. In 20 years from now she will be able to go out with a guy.

In this tweet, we see the conventional discourse of the fairy tale – *la mia piccola principessa* (my little princess) – and what seems instructions for future heterosexual relationships – *mancano solo 20 anni* (in 20 years from now) and *un ragazzo* (a guy).

The two messages, investigated to address RQ 1 *How do fathers construct their daughters' sexuality?* have similarities and differences, based on what can be inferred and what is present: first, both fathers construct control over their daughter's sexuality (with Nek more explicitly mentioning intercourse through the pun *virgo/virgin*), in what seems an act of policing their sexual life; second, while it is clear from Salvati's tweet yet can only be inferred from Nek's message, these daughters are envisioned in heterosexual relationships (showing how patriarchy is linked to other systems of power, e.g. centrality of heterosexuality, Lazar, 2018); third, it is interesting to note that both fathers indicate the 30s as a suitable age to have a relationship (and, consequently, sexual intercourse) somewhat providing information about acceptable

adulthood¹¹. Both fathers rested on a successful inference-based utterance that was (almost) unproblematically received by the audience, reflecting the hegemonic and dominant ‘common sense’ discussed by Lazar (2018) Mackenzie (2018) and Sunderland (2007). The laughs in the TV studio – which, as shown below, are used as an excuse for positioning himself as a good father in the Nek’s episode – and the likes as well as the support from other people in Salvati’s episode are here considered as constructing ‘certain ways of seeing, representing, conceptualising and evaluating the world’ (Mackenzie 2018, p. 11). Moreover, the *granted permission* to the daughters (when they reach their 30s) could be seen as a handover from the fathers to the boyfriends/husbands rather than ‘a pass’ to individual freedom, constructing women’s continued reliance upon men.

5. The Interactions

The framework adapted from Sunderland (2007) as well as the theoretical background offered by Lazar in FCDA (2007, 2018) are helpful in: 1. systematizing my counter-reading of the jokes and the fathers’ desire to a traditional fatherhood; 2. Operationalising critical reflexivity and personal activism. This section addresses RQ 2, i.e. *How is desired to traditional fatherhood constructed and legitimised in the interactions on Twitter?*

In relation to the joke told by Nek on TV, I report it to the Twitter arena by mentioning the handle of his official account (@NekOfficial) and adding the following comment:

Tweet 2

@NekOfficial dice ‘Mia figlia è della Vergine e lo sarà fino a 30 anni’. Certo.

Insegniamo pure alle bambine che sono proprietà (della gelosia) dei padri (e chissà di chi altro, mariti, fidanzati, fratelli). Il resto degli ospiti se la ride.

@NekOfficial says «my daughter is a virgo/virgin and she will be so until she is 30».

Yes, let’s teach girls that they are the property of (the jealousy) of their fathers (and why not others: husbands, boyfriends, brothers). And everybody laughed.

In the case of Salvati’s tweet, I reply to his tweet about the wishes for his daughter’s birthday and being able to go out with a guy in 20-year time as follows:

Tweet 3

¹¹ In one of my recent trips to Italy, a father who was told to *watch out* her 2-year-old daughter (playing with a younger boy) constructed the same joke. He replied ‘I have a plan, to lock her in the house and let her out when she is 34’. While anecdotal, this confirms the conventionality of this type of message conveyed through humour.

Ma solo a me questo tweet seppure ironico fa tristezza?? Ma perché avete l'inclinazione a considerare le donne per la loro sessualità? Di un figlio maschio non lo direste (o peggio, lo incoraggereste ad uscire prima dei 14 anni). Dai su, il mondo non gira intorno agli uomini.

Am I the only one who finds this tweet, yet ironic, a bit sad? Why do you tend to consider women only in relation to their sexual choices? You would not say this about your son (actually, you would encourage to go out before he is 14). Come on, the world does not revolve around men.

In both tweets (2 and 3), I offer what Sunderland (2007, p. 222) defines critically rejecting the jokes and engaging in resistant readings by answering directly to those who have initiated them, restoring the centrality of the engagement allowed by Twitter as the medium (as in SM-CDS). However, depending on the joke, I focus on two different angles. In the response to Nek, first in order of time, I explain that his joke is problematic in relation to the notion of man's alleged property of women (and the passage from fathers to partners) while also acknowledging that the joke received the support of the audience through an audible laugh. In the response to Salvati, I introduce the imbalance between what seems to be permitted to daughters and what to sons and, hint at the centrality of sexuality when talking about women. These first responses serve as initiators of longer conversations with Nek in the first episode, and with Salvati and other users who intervene, in the second one. In the following sub-sections, I explain in detail how these fathers attempt to defend their position by: a) focusing on the form – the joke – as more important than the message, attempting to cast doubt on my counter and feminist readings and, b) constructing and legitimising fatherhood traits (and the desires to these) such as the good and the happy father.

5.1. It's just Banter

Unsurprisingly, the first attempt to re-establish their position sees the two authors acknowledging that it is only a joke. Nek's response to my tweet reads as follows:

Tweet 4

E che tutti si siano messi a ridere, me compreso, non ti ha fatto venire in mente che il tutto sapeva di battuta?! Mi sa di no. Buonaserata Federica.

And that everybody laughed, including me, did not suggest to you that this tasted like a joke? Maybe not. Have a good evening Federica.

His tweet returns to the comment I made on everybody laughing, constructing a sort of legitimisation of the message through the support of the audience and the other panellists (reconstructing an *ideological* 'common sense'). He also uses a simile – 'to taste *like* a joke' –

in a rhetoric question directed at me. The inferred conventionality of the joke as well as the understanding that this is ‘just a joke’ is recurrent in the conversation with Nek. In explaining that the shared social (stereo)typification provided by the joke is detrimental to women, Nek insists that:

Tweet 5

Non c'erano messaggi da lanciare o argomenti delicati su cui soffermarsi. Era un momento di cazzeggio. È una frase che dico spesso per giocare sul segno zodiacale. Fa ridere...

There were no messages to send or thorny topics under discussion. We were having fun.
It is a sentence that I often say to play with her zodiac sign. It's funny....

It is here relevant to note the reinforcement of the justification of ‘the joke’, prioritizing the form over the message, as well as relying on a shared *blame* assigned to other panellists through *era un momento di cazzeggio* (lit. It was a moment of fun/we were having fun). Similarly, in the case of the interaction sparked after Salvati’s tweet, some users intervening return to the form – the joke – rather than the sexist message. Salvati’s joke is referred to as a 1. *tweet simpatico* (funny tweet) 2. *una battuta* (a joke) 3. a joke that highlights that some have *perso il gusto di scherzare* (lit. lost the taste in having fun) 4. *una palese battuta* (clearly a joke), 5. *un padre che scherza sull'amore per la figlia* (a dad who jokes on how much he loves his daughter). The tweet written by the TV author also prompts another user to ask how is *possibile che ancora ci sia chi non comprende la simpatica ironia di un padre* (possible that there are still people who do not understand the funny irony of a father). Similarly, somebody wishes for *un po' d'ironia* (a little bit of irony) adding that, as a mother, she stands by the tweet. One of the consequences of my critical reading of the joke is that Nek, as well as other users intervening in the conversation with Salvati, hints at some people’s lost ability to laugh when the jokes target women. This possibly refers to the debate on a perceived unnecessary politically correctness, an argument which is often used when commenting on the disparity between language used by/about women and men (see also Formato, 2019).

The first reaction of Salvati is to exhibit my tweet as an example of misuse of social media, this being an interesting account in relation to the relevance of the medium (as explained in 3); he retweets my resistant re-reading of the joke with the following comment:

Tweet 6

Vi spiego i social

Let me explain you the social media

This gathers the support (through the like function) of, arguably, many users¹² and serves to legitimate his position. In doing so, Salvati is counting on his followers to agree with him and reject my resistant and contradictory re-reading, using the tools and affordances provided by the online platform (a relevant point to be made in relation to SM-CDS).

To conclude, the reactions of critical resistant readings and the conversations construct both acceptability and conventionality of the messages through the form – the jokes. The two seem to conflate to construct the idea that ‘[s]ome discourses gain the status and the currency of truth at a particular time or in a particular context. Such discourses can become synonymous with popular conceptions of what is every day or normal’ (Mackenzie, 2018, p. 11) as also discussed by Sunderland (2007) and Lazar (2007, 2018).

5.2. Fatherhood: the good and the happy Father

In both episodes, the authors of the jokes as well as other people intervening (in the case of Salvati) are interested in constructing an accepted version of fatherhood, one to which they aspire to, or as introduced before, they desire (Kiesling, 2011). This version of fatherhood includes the fathers being good ones or being *normally* jealous (i.e. possessive) of their daughters. Nek constructs the idea of being a good father indirectly; twice in the conversation, he tweets about Beatrice – the daughter who is the subject of his joke – suggesting that *a 7 anni è una bambina serena e vive di certezze dolcezze e unione* (she is 7 years old and is an untroubled child who lives of certainty, sweetness and union). He mentions this when I provide an in-depth explanation about why I believe the joke is problematic, forming part of a legacy of old and damaging stereotypes:

Tweet 7

Ma infatti il problema è quello caro Filippo. Che ridiamo (o meglio ridono) ancora di questi retaggi antichi, stereotipati e discriminatori.

The problem is exactly the one you mention, dear Filippo. [That] we laugh (or rather they laugh) about this old, stereotyped and discriminatory legacy.

He mentions this again when I comment that no one, when prompted, apologises for sexist remarks

Tweet 8

¹² 119 likes and 12 retweets.

mai che nessuno chieda scusa!

No one who ever apologises!

When I ask what Beatrice thinks of this joke, he tweets that he has asked the question to his older daughter, as shown in Tweet 9:

Tweet 9

Ho chiesto all'altra mia figlia di 22 che è emancipata fiera motivata con già una laurea e si è fatta una risata grassa... come tanti altri. At Salot¹³.

I asked my other daughter who is 22, emancipated, proud, motivated and with a degree who has laughed out loud... as many others. See you.

In this, I read an intention of the speaker to conceptualise himself as a good father who has raised (and continues to do so) daughters in good faith and at the best of its capacity. Similarly, Salvati, and those intervening, describe the tweet as that of an *amorevole padre* (a caring father), *un padre palesemente innamorato di sua figlia* (a father clearly in love with his daughter), *è un padre che scherza sull'amore per la figlia* (a father who jokes on the love for his daughter), also dictated by an *amore paterno* (a fatherly love).

The construction of love between fathers and daughters constructed in the data, raises an interesting question about conceptualisations around (new) fatherhood (in Italy)¹⁴. For instance, Magaraggia (2012) describes the struggle for fathers to construct the bond with their children; this is to be seen in relation to roles seen as traditional feminine – the *natural* affectionate mother – and masculine – the breadwinner and the *good provider*. In her work, she suggests to re-frame of old fatherhood as it can ‘become an element of friction that blocks the flow of intimacy between them and their children’ (Magaraggia, 2012, p. 82). Starting from this, Nek, Salvati and those interacting attempt to construct an indirect (because exhibited online) emotional bond, a trait attributed to ‘new fatherhood’ and often underdeveloped in conceptualisations (and practices) of ‘old fatherhood’ (see also Cannito, 2019 on ‘intimate fatherhood’). However, the emotional connection with their daughters (who are not *present* when the jokes are told) re-builds a traditional power relation between fathers and daughters,

¹³ It is also interesting to note that Nek adds a greeting to many of the tweets he sent: the first closes with *buonaserata Federica* (Have a good evening Federica), and in the following tweets he uses *a presto* (See you soon) and, in the tweet 9, *at salot* (see you in his dialect variety, that of Emilia Romagna), in an attempt to close the conversation

¹⁴ In 2015, Nek published a book titled *Lettera a mia figlia sull'amore* (Letter to my daughter about love, Rizzoli 2015) where he, according to the publisher, *spiega l'amore in tutte le sue sfumature* (explains love in all its hues). The singer never mentions the book in the interaction.

more widely in relation to a sexist societal imaginary (two concerns of FCDA, Lazar 2007; 2018). In fact, the emotions which are foregrounded as those of the fathers rather than the emotions of the daughters.

Furthermore, Salvati and other users rely on an *accepted* jealousy of fathers as a way of legitimising (the desire to) fatherhood, as shown in the following tweets:

Tweet 10 - Marco Salvati

Qui c'è solo un papà felice e un po' geloso.

There is only a happy father who is a little bit jealous.

Tweet 11 - Anonymised user

Ma io - ripeto - sono anche d'accordo in generale, ma sotto il tweet simpatico di un padre 'geloso' della figlia che ama... boh, mi pare solo un intervento superfluo e antipatico, che nulla aggiunge a una giusta battaglia.

I repeat! Even though I agree in general terms, [commenting] on a funny tweet of a father who is jealous of a daughter he loves.... Ehm, it seems to me to be an unpleasant intervention that does not add anything to a fair battle.

Tweet 12 - Anonymised user

Che due maroni per una battuta di un classico papà orgoglioso e un po' geloso come da procollo, ma state bene?

How annoying! [It was] a joke of a traditional proud father and a little bit jealous as from etiquette, are you all sane?

Tweet 13 - Anonymised user

Lei è una ricercatrice ed un'autrice, e vuol dirmi che non sa che la 'gelosia di un padre nei confronti delle figlie' è cosa assolutamente NATURALE? Ma davvero si può considerare quel twitt come sessista???

You are a researcher and an author, and you tell me that you do not know that the jealousy of a father for his daughters is a NATURAL thing? Can we really consider that tweet as sexist???

Jealousy, in these tweets, is conceptualised as unproblematic by Salvati as well as by the other users and functions as a positive appraisal of his character, further contributing to construct another trait of a traditional fatherhood. One cannot exclude that Salvati and these users use *gelosia/geloso* (jealousy/jealous) having a more generic denotation than the one suggested in

many (Italian) dictionaries, these showing that jealousy is an emotion between two men fighting between each other in order to control the woman as a mere object *in between*. This is thoroughly explained in Formato (2019) who found that *gelosia* is a keyword in a corpus of newspaper articles in the period 2013-2016, on the topic of *femminicidio*, i.e. a form of gender-based violence, where women are killed by someone they either know or they have been in a relation with (see also Abis and Orrù, 2016). Regardless, those intervening seem to convincingly believe that jealousy is natural and forming part of the ‘etiquette’ i.e. a traditional and accepted fatherhood and a desirable attributed of this parental role.

The imbalanced hierarchy between fathers and daughters as ideological identities (another concern of FCDA), constructs men as favoured and in control, while women are policed and subject to the formers’ decisions. My critical counter-reading (in contradiction with the most supported view, i.e. that of the fathers), while aiming at being emancipatory (wishing to generate a dialogue), was only limitedly welcomed by those who accessed the conversation. In fact, only one father tweeted that my reading offered a new perspective on the relationship between fathers and daughters.¹⁵

6. Discussion

This paper stems from two conversations I engaged on Twitter as an effort to bridge academic work done on sexism in Italy and Italian (Formato, 2016, 2017, 2019) and (disrupting) conventional discourses that form part of the cultural and societal baggage of this country. Specifically, the findings of this study contribute to showing an asymmetry in Italian culture between women and men where the gendered un-evenness is mainly due to historical, yet still accepted, roles attributed to women and men. The notion of *desire* (Kiesling, 2011) to perform and maintain traditional (hegemonic) masculinity and fatherhood in these jokes is apparent through a FCDA reading as this focuses on ‘relations of power that systematically privilege men as a social group and disadvantage, exclud[ing] and disempower[ing] women’ (2007). FCDA is also used ‘to advance a rich and nuanced understanding of the complex workings of power and ideology in discourse in sustaining (hierarchically) gendered social arrangements’(2007, p. 141), as presented in the interactions with those telling the jokes. While one can see this through a re-framing of fatherhood and the attempt to negotiate an indirect bond with daughters (‘new fatherhood’) in a digital space, old and stereotypical roles (in Italian culture) are here reproduced, i.e. the imbalance of power between men and women as

¹⁵ This user then deleted his account from Twitter, therefore I decided not to reproduce his tweets in this paper.

essentialist categories and, more specifically, the differential in power between daughters and fathers on the topic of (women's) sexuality (addressing RQ 1). The interactions that followed the jokes support this imbalance, constructing a disregard of the force of a normalised message – policing women and their sexual life – and focusing on the unproblematic form – the jokes. They also seem to construct desirable fatherhood practices or ways of raising (their) daughters, through happy and good father-ing (this addressing RQ 2). This seems to be in line with what Miller (2011) found, that is fathers continue to relate their role to patriarchal values. My contradictory re-readings are dismissed: when women are loud about the problematization of gender roles through language, this is seen as an isolated voice (see also Formato, 2019 discussing backlash for female politicians arguing for non-sexist language). The humour of the two fathers also generated spin off of sexism from other angles, as the one shown in the following tweet:

Tweet 14 - Anonymous User

È vero, fatele uscire, che ho due figli maschi che devono fare praticato.

True, let them [daughters] go out; I have two sons who needs practice.

This example demonstrate how problematic humour is when women are talked about and seen through the lens of the imbalanced power relation between men and women and, how these jokes carry a legacy of such.

This work also aims to propose methodological tools (re-reading and engaging with sexist jokes) for similar research. This study shows that the medium – the digital environment – needs to be considered as contextual, as these interactions are would have never occurred had the fathers not intervened on Twitter, this **favouring an elicited co-construction and negotiation of knowledge between the parts**. The balance between considerations about the ethics in linguistic research and the relevance of the topic in relation to the field of gender and sexuality meant that selected choices had to be made. I was not expecting to receive replies and therefore I did not balance what Mackenzie (2016, p. 5) refers to as informational norms, i.e. ‘identifiable patterns of expectation, achieved in social context about the normal and appropriate use of data’. In hindsight, knowing that the jokes investigated here could be material for exploring the discursive relation between fathers and daughters, I would take the time to *measure* my argument by, for instance, providing samples from my or from other scholars' research.

In order to conclude, this examination aimed at showing how circulation of traditional messages on gender and sexuality in digital spaces can be explored through emancipatory action and feminist critical re-readings.

Declarations of Interest

There are no interests to declare for this paper.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the two anonymous reviewers and the editor of the journal who have provided invaluable comments on a previous version of this paper.

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