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#### Vittoria Colla

# **Education in everyday family life**

Language, culture, and morality in homework interactions

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### Introduction

# Everyday life and the making of a shared world of meanings

How do we become who we are? How do we develop our unshakable certainties (together with our deepest insecurities)? What experiences contribute to forging our ways of thinking and behaving, our understanding of the world and ways of acting in it? There is now a generalized consensus on the crucial role that family plays in this process. Whether you ask the man in the street or an expert in fields as different as neurosciences, psychology, sociology, anthropology, and of course pedagogy, the answer will most probably be the same: the earliest experiences we have as children with members of our family are the bedrock of our social identities, ways of thinking, and moral horizons. In particular, it is the words we are told as children by our parents, siblings, and grandparents, those ordinary dialogues fading in our memories, that draw the thickest lines of our future development. The present book focuses precisely on such family conversations. It shows how the contingent and apparently banal interactions that sprinkle everyday family life are in fact morally-charged events, encoding culture-specific systems of values and relentlessly transmitting them to new generations as absolute certainties. In line with a phenomenological approach to education (Bertolini, 1958, 1988; Caronia, 2011, 2018) and particularly taking up Iori's call for a "phenomenological pedagogy of the family" (Iori, 1999), the present work places mundane family talk at the center of its reflections, illuminating the topics, values, and educational practices<sup>1</sup> that characterize the or-

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> A note on the use of the terms "education" and "practice" in this volume is needed. "Education" (and related terms like "educate" and "educational") is to be intended as a calque of the Italian term "educazione" (from the Latin "educee", that is "to bring out", "to raise"), which refers to the process whereby personal, social, emotional, and intellectual development is promoted. This term covers two semantic fields as it means both "instruction", that is formal/intentional education, and "socialization", that is informal/unintentional education (Caronia, 2011). This double meaning of the term "education" is particularly relevant for the

dinary experiences of contemporary families (Formenti, 2000, 2014; Gigli, 2007, 2016; Milani, 2009a, 2009b, 2018; Pati, 2014).

The present volume builds on a rich, interdisciplinary line of inquiry that has long provided evidence for conceiving of family talk as "a uniquely fertile arena for moral thinking and moral development" (Wainryb & Recchia, 2014, p. 5). As research on culture and morality in everyday life has illustrated, children are socialized into culture-specific ethical beliefs through various discursive activities taking place in the family context, like mealtimes, storytelling, cleaning practices, sports, and media-consumption activities (see among others, Ochs, Pontecorvo, & Fasulo, 1996; Blum-Kulka, 1997; Pontecorvo & Arcidiacono, 2007; Caronia, 2012; Caronia, Colla, & Galatolo, 2021; Kremer-Sadlik & Kim, 2007; Fasulo, Loyd, & Padiglione, 2007). It is precisely the ordinary, inherently linguistic, and interactive nature of family life that makes it deeply moral and, therefore, educational (Aronsson, 2006). What parents say or do not say, the ways the talk, the words they utter, their intonation, silences, and even gestures constantly presuppose, ratify, and convey moral assumptions and expectations, thus educating children into their unquestioned and unquestionable validity (Ochs & Schieffelin, 1983, 1984; Caronia, 2002, 2012, 2018). In continuity with this line of inquiry, and adopting the phenomenological sensitivity that characterizes pedagogical studies on everyday family life (Caronia, 2018, 2021; Colla, 2021a, 2021b, 2022a, 2022b), this work intends to shed light on the 'implicit educational density' (Tramma, 2009) of mundane family conversations. Directing an original, phenomenologically oriented gaze to ordinary family life, this work reveals how parent-child conversations are "morally saturated" events (Baxter, 2011), whereby children are exposed to taken-for-granted cultural worldviews, socialized into morally appropriate ways of thinking and behaving, and raised into 'moral subjects'.

To illustrate the pervasive – yet scarcely noticed – educational relevance of ordinary family conversations, this volume focuses on an activity that characterizes the routine of most families, one that has been attracting increasing attention and critiques, yet one that is sur-

present volume, which, in a nutshell, shows how socialization/informal education is done in and through an activity of instruction/formal education like homework.

As for the term "practice", even though it has been defined in many different ways (see among others, Bourdieu, 1990; Garfinkel, 1967; Heritage, 2021; Wenger, 1998), this volume adopts a broad definition, considering "practice" as a way of accomplishing a certain action. In this perspective, practices are to be viewed as always "situated in a historical and social context that gives structure and meaning to [them]" (Wenger, 1998, p. 47).

prisingly little explored in its ordinary, concrete, and interactive unfolding: homework. In the last decades, together with the affirmation of the notion of "parental involvement" (e.g., Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Hornby, 2011; Kremer-Sadlik & Fatigante, 2015; LaRocque, Kleiman, & Darling, 2011; McNeal, 1999), homework has become a constitutive component of family routines (Izquierdo et al., 2006)<sup>2</sup>, involving not only the child but also their parents. Since 'good parents' are nowadays expected to play an active role in children's school-related experiences and formal education, homework constitutes a key site where parental involvement is implemented on a daily basis (Forsberg, 2007a, 2009a; Colla, 2020, 2022a; Kremer-Sadlik & Fatigante, 2015; Lehner-Mear, 2021; Montalbetti & Lisimberti, 2020). Homework has thus turned from a solitary and silent activity of the child into a family accomplishment realized through the use of language and social interaction. Such an ontological transformation of homework and its "participation framework" (Goffman, 1974) has coincided with the transition of this topic from the background to the foreground of educational research (and political debates)<sup>3</sup>. A variety of studies have measured – and questioned – the effectiveness of this activity, others have identified the (mainly negative) consequences of homework on children and family wellbeing, others have given instructions to parents and teachers on how to deal with this 'burden' and solve the 'homework battle' (see among others, Bennet & Kalish, 2006; Cooper, 1989a, 1989b, 2006; Cooper, Robinson, & Patall, 2006; Costa et al., 2016; Kohn, 2006; Kralovec & Buell, 2000, 2001; Meirieu, 2004[2000]; Parodi, 2016, 2018; Patall, Cooper, & Robinson, 2008; Polito, 2013; Tonucci, 2003). However, despite such a rich and longstanding stream of research, little is still known about the ways in which homework unfolds as an ordinary family activity; the interactive practices that make up this activity are yet to be fully discovered and analyzed (but see, Bolognesi & Dalledonne Vandini, 2020; Pontecorvo, Liberati, & Monaco, 2013; Wingard, 2006a; Wingard & Forsberg, 2009). What is missing is a work that lingers on the 'small talks' that constitute the fabric of the homework activity, showing the moral density of this ordinary family accomplishment.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Research indicates that Italian parents spend a considerable amount of time (i.e., about seven hours per week) helping their kids with the assignments (Di Cristofaro, 2018; Kremer-Sadlik & Fatigante, 2015).

Jin 2018, the Italian Minister of Education publicly invited teachers to reduce the quantity of homework assigned for Christmas holidays.

This volume intends to fill this gap. Building on the results of a video-based, ethnographic research conducted in Italy in 2018-2019, the volume leads the reader to (re)discover the routinary family activity of homework, illuminating its deep - yet mainly unnoticed - moral and educational value. Adopting an analytical perspective that focuses on the interactive unfolding of ordinary parent-child dialogues during homework, this volume sheds light on the socializing function of this family activity. Even though parents typically acknowledge the value of homework as an activity devoted to 'formal education' and carry out intentional educational actions to promote children's subject-related learning (Cunha et al., 2015; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001), they appear to be little aware that homework also constitutes a morally dense socialization arena. Through the analysis of parent-child conversations, the present text illustrates that homework is far more than a learning-oriented activity characterized by intentional practices of instruction. In subtle vet pervasive ways, homework provides 'ethical affordances' (Keane, 2014, 2016)<sup>4</sup>, unique occasions for parents and children to make moral claims, i.e., produce actions and statements informed by the notion of 'good vs bad'. By zooming in on everyday family conversations during homework, this volume shows how this apparently banal and routinary activity affords practices of "informal education" (Tramma, 2009), promoting children's socialization into culture-specific ethical worldviews. In this perspective, studying parent-child homework talk amounts to exploring how moral horizons and cultural ideologies are pervasively assumed, relied on, displayed (or "talked into being", Heritage, 1984a, p. 290), and transmitted to children in the unfolding of mundane activities. In this sense, this volume provides evidence for the educational richness of ordinary family life. Despite their mundane nature – or rather by virtue of it –, everyday parent-child interactions like the ones occurring during homework play a constitutive role in recreating the moral world we live by and passing it on to new generations (Caronia, 2018). Providing empirical evidence of the educational value of everyday family talk, this

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> The notion of ethical affordance proposed by Keane (2014, 2016) indicates those situations that trigger moral evaluations and reflexivity by the participants. Building on Gibson (1977), this notion describes morality in a non-deterministic way, stressing the mere potentiality of any aspect of people's experiences to prompt ethical reflexivity. The concept of ethical affordance also expands on Gibson's notion, including not just physical objects but "anything that people can experience, such as emotions, cognitive biases, bodily movements, ways of eating, linguistic forms, traditional teachings, or conventional practices" (Keane, 2014, p. 7).

volume aims at fostering parents' awareness, reflexivity, and "epistemic vigilance" (Caronia, 2020, p. 60; Fabbri, 2018) with respect to the moral relevance and 'socializing power' of their interactive conduct and discursive activities in ordinary life (Fabbri, 2008; Formenti, 2001; Caronia, 2011; Catarsi, 2006b; Milani, 2009a, 2009b).

#### Navigating the volume

The chapters in the first part of the volume are dedicated to delineating the perspectives and theoretical frameworks of this work. Chapter 1 outlines the main concepts of the phenomenological paradigm that are relevant for conceiving of ordinary life as a moral and educational arena. Albeit apparently distant from the topic of homework, phenomenological notions such as "intentionality" (Husserl, 1970[1936]), "common sense" (Schutz, 1979[1962/1966]), and "ethnomethods" (Garfinkel, 1967) are in fact fundamental to the present volume as they theoretically frame the conception of everyday life, education, and social interaction adopted here. In the phenomenological perspective, everyday interactions are viewed as the bedrock of the social world, the fundamental practical instruments whereby the world as we know it, with its moral and social orders, is constantly recreated, 'naturalized', and transmitted to new generations. Consistently with the phenomenological emphasis on the constitutive role of ordinary interactions in the making of the social world, chapter 2 provides an overview of the theories and approaches that have proposed conceiving of social interaction as a site for educating children into culture-specific ways of thinking, feeling, speaking, and behaving. Despite their different fields of study, the theories delineated in chapter 2 converge in stressing that communicative practices shape children's developmental paths and ways of being in the world. Theories like Vygotsky's socio-cultural approach (Vygotsky, 1962 [1934]; Wertsch, 1985), Ochs and Schieffelin's (1984) language socialization paradigm as well as the language and social interaction approach with its unique focus on the micro and sequential dimensions of family conversations (e.g., Goodwin & Cekaite, 2018) offer fundamental theoretical bases for the present volume as they advance a conception of parent-child interactions as culturally informed educational arenas where children's socialization and development are promoted and channeled in culturespecific directions. This chapter also provides a review of the extensive body of research that, in the last thirty years, has investigated ordinary

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interactions within the family as essential sites of socialization. Focusing on a variety of moments and interactional practices that characterize ordinary family life, studies in this stream of research illuminate how contingent, taken-for-granted, micro interactional practices in parent-child conversations encode overarching cultural assumptions and moral beliefs, thus educating children to the "small culture" (Holliday, 1999) of the family as well as the broader cultures of the larger communities the family belongs to (e.g., Ochs & Kremer-Sadlik, 2007, 2013a; Caronia, 2012; Caronia & Galatolo, 2018; Goodwin & Cekaite, 2018; Kremer-Sadlik, 2019; Kremer-Sadlik & Fatigante, 2015; Sterponi, 2003, 2009, 2014). Shifting the focus from family life to the relationship between family and school (Arcidiacono, 2013), chapter 3 approaches the vast literature on parental involvement in children's school education by offering an overview of the main theoretical frameworks, scientific studies, and Italian policies on this topic, with a particular focus on homework. These theoretical and normative frameworks are particularly relevant for understanding the cultural and moral backdrop against which mundane parent-child homework interactions like the ones illustrated in this volume occur.

The second part of the volume is dedicated to giving an empirical illustration of the moral and educational density of homework interactions. After a brief description of the study this work is based on (chapter 4), the volume dives into the analyses of selected excerpts of video-recorded parent-child homework interactions. All the analytical chapters share the intent to illustrate how parent-child homework interactions constitute morally dense accomplishments that are built upon commonsense assumptions and crucially contribute to socializing children into culture-specific moral worldviews. Beyond this common aim, the chapters are organized according to four main analytical foci. Chapter 5 illustrates how children are socialized into the value of homework, which is interactively constructed as self-evident and unquestionable. By problematizing children's mistakes, sloppy writing, and bad posture, parents display their orientation to homework as an important activity, conveying to their children the imperative of meeting high, school-aligned standards. In a similar vein, chapter 6 shows how children are pervasively socialized into the taken-for-granted idea that homework falls into their duties. Parent-child dialogues presented in this chapter illustrate how children are socialized into doing homework autonomously, without complaining, and by taking responsibility for it despite the involvement of their parents. Chapters 7 and 8 share the focus on 'temporal socialization', i.e., the process whereby social

actors gradually acquire culture-specific understandings of time, its value, and appropriate ways of using it (Daly, 1996; Elias, 1992; Iori, 2002, 2006). In particular, chapter 7 shows how parents rely on the temporal organization of family routines as a resource to give importance to homework, presenting it as a priority in children's lives; chapter 8 demonstrates that homework is a privileged site for educating children into time management rules and planning abilities. By taking part in homework conversations with their parents, children are educated to a series of imperatives concerning when to do homework, what time slots must be dedicated to learning *vs* entertainment activities, how to manage time and plan routines appropriately. In a few words, and more radically, through mundane family dialogues like the ones occurring during homework, children are socialized into the culture-specific conception of time as a limited and precious commodity that must be made productive and never wasted.

In sum, as delineated in the last chapter, there is much more to homework than learning to read, write, and do math. This volume shows that the small talks underpinning homework are deeply informed by cultural ideologies about what it means to be a 'moral' person and how to act appropriately. Through such contingent exchanges, children are socialized not only into homework-related imperatives such as writing neatly and sitting properly, but also into more general conceptions of schooling, education, autonomy, virtue, and time management. In a few words, they learn how to be *moral beings*. In a unique and unprecedented way, this volume identifies and describes the micro, interactional practices whereby moral education is done in and through ordinary family interactions. Even more importantly, this volume highlights how such contingent, typically overlooked, ordinary practices encompass foundational moral worldviews and therefore play a constitutive role in socializing children into culture-specific systems of values. The final chapter is dedicated to discussing the implications of this work for parents' education (Milani, 2018), delineating the contribution that this volume can give to a "phenomenological pedagogy of the family" (Iori, 1999). By providing empirical evidence of the moral density of homework interactions, this volume makes relevant the deep and unavoidable entanglement between 'education' and 'instruction' (Massa, 1997; Pontecorvo, Liberati, & Monaco, 2013). Showing how practices of formal and informal learning co-exist and shape each other, the present text raises parents' awareness of the enormous educational work they carry out in the unfolding of homework and, more broadly, in everyday family life. Illustrating the inherently moral and educational character of ordinary family conversations, this work constitutes a valuable resource to foster parents' "epistemic vigilance" (Caronia, 2020, p. 60), i.e., their ability to acknowledge, critically evaluate, and choose the premises that orient their ways of thinking, behaving, speaking, and *educating*.



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