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Becoming a mother in neoliberal academia: Subjectivation and self-identity among early career researchers

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Abstract

This paper investigates how becoming a mother—and navigating such a complicated life transition—while pursuing an academic career impacts the way female researchers perceive themselves as acting subjects. By analyzing in-depth virtual interviews with Italian female early career researchers, this work explores the relationship between fertility decisions, motherhood hardships, self-identity, and career-related experiences in the interviewees' biographical trajectories. Despite their consideration of childbearing as a mental and practical obstacle to scientific production, many of the interviewees ascribe positive career outcomes to the arrival of their first child. The reflexivity set in motion by the interview process allows us to observe the collected interviews as double-layered narratives. The postponement of fertility choices and the presence of work-family conflict tend to be described as ordinary facets of a common career pattern, intrinsic to the female academic working experience. Meanwhile, the positive impacts of motherhood on self-identity and work-related skills are recounted on a more individual level, framed as a sort of paradox, a personal journey of self-discovery or—to some extent - a heroic performance.

KEYWORDS
academic motherhood, fertility decisions, Italian academia, narrative methods, self-identity

1 | INTRODUCTION

Choosing to become a mother while pursuing a career in science represents a core dilemma for female early career researchers (Murgia & Poggio, 2018). On the one hand, the job insecurity and mobility that characterize the early stages of an academic career tend to affect women's fertility choices (Russo & Minello, 2021; Vignoli et al., 2020). On the other hand, the neoliberal academic culture of labor tends to disrupt the boundaries between work and private life, demanding "all-consuming passion and commitment" from employees (Krilić et al., 2018, p. 147). In this regard, academia can be considered a "greedy institution" (Coser, 1974; Sullivan, 2014), since it asks for individuals' undivided time and devotion. Thus, the idea of investing time in and dedicating oneself to life spheres other than work, such as bearing children and taking care of them, is considered antithetical to obtaining a high-ranking position (Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2017).

Drawing on a qualitative study, this paper investigates how becoming a mother—and navigating such a complicated life transition—while pursuing an academic career impacts the way female researchers perceive themselves as acting subjects. By analyzing in-depth virtual interviews with Italian female early career researchers, this paper explores the relationship between fertility decisions, motherhood hardships, self-identity, and career-related experiences in the interviewees' biographical trajectories.

Many recent studies have investigated the post-pandemic implications of the double presence (Pereira, 2021; Remery et al., 2022), which refers to women's need to simultaneously respond to the demands of paid and unpaid work (Balbo, 1978). Furthermore, there is a rich literature analyzing work-life balance among academic employees (Bassett, 2005; Lind, 2008), a branch of which specifically focuses on how the family sphere can affect academic career development (Bozzon et al., 2017; Krilić et al., 2018). However, the novelty of this paper is twofold: first, it attempts to disentangle the intricate web of impacts academia has on the choice to become a mother, and second, it uses narrative methods to interpret how academic mothers forge their self-identity and self-understanding in relation to both motherhood and the pursuit of a scientific career.

2 | MOTHERHOOD AND SELF-IDENTITY

The premise of this article is that motherhood sets in motion a deep questioning of self-identity and self-perception in relation to the world. While the hegemonic gender scheme (Valian, 2005) suggests that women are naturally prone to nurturing and childbearing, becoming mothers, and embodying the maternal role (with the whole complex set of behaviors it encompasses), is "potentially disruptive to a sense of self" (Miller, 2005, p. 25). "Over time—states Miller—a new social self as mother has to be learned" (2005, p. 15).

Sociologists often discuss the self in terms of "the degree of active involvement individuals have in shaping their personal and cultural experience" (Elliott, 2020, p. 5), and imply that individuals possess a sense of self. Some theorists emphasize how the self should be considered a socially constructed product (Goffman, 1969), an internalization of structures of the external world that guide how a social actor thinks, feels, and acts (Bourdieu, 1977).

In an effort to avoid recursive debates on the "freeing of agency from structure" (Adkins, 2002, p. 3), I will echo Anthony Giddens (1991) in considering social actors as "partially knowing subjects" who can act on and sometimes against the "structure" that produces them. Thus, to refer to the structure that produces subjects, I will apply the Foucauldian concept of mechanisms of subjectivation: the embodiment of the normative horizon capable of permeating the bodies of individuals and influencing every aspect of their everyday lives (Foucault, 2005). Meanwhile, to analyze the way my interlocutors reflect upon and narrate personal changes in their self-perception and behavior along their biographical trajectories, I will use the concept of self-identity outlined in Giddens' definition:

> [self-identity] is not something that is just given, as the result of the continuities of the individual action-system, but something that has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individuals [...] self-identity is not a distinctive trait, or even a collection of traits, possessed by the individual. It is *the self as reflexivity understood by the person in terms of her or his biography*.
>
> (Giddens, 1991, p. 52-3)

As several commentators underlined, Giddens' concept of self-identity, with its focus on reflexivity as a continuous process of self-monitoring, puts excessive emphasis on the tacit knowledge and self-understanding of social agents (Elliott, 2020, p. 49). The analytical turn I suggest lies in the possibility of grasping the limitation of Giddens' theoretical approach and counterintuitively making it an effective tool for the interpretive work I propose. It is precisely the passage through the notion of subjectification elaborated by Foucault that enables this analytical move. The latter allows us to highlight how the construction of personal experiences and identity interweaves with social structure.

In *Mothering the Self*, Stephanie Lawler (2000) advises us to consider how, over the course of our lives, we tend to "incorporate various forms of understanding of the self into an overall schema of self-understanding" (2000, p. 58). Taking into consideration and adapting Giddens' concept of self-identity as the reflexive quality of the self will allow me to analyze the way academic mothers forge their self-understanding by recollecting their thoughts, emotions, and activities concerning both their career trajectory and motherhood experience and ascribing meanings to such experiences.

3 | THE NEOLIBERAL ITALIAN ACADEMIC SYSTEM

3.1 | Recruitment procedures and career development

Despite efforts made in the last decade to smooth out the differences among national higher education systems across Europe (Murgia & Poggio, 2018), the academic labor market remains characterized by national features, in terms of recruitment procedures, selection devices, grade structures, workloads and salaries (Enders, 2001; Musselin, 2004). Considering the ways these characteristics vary across European countries, it is possible to observe three main career models: the tenure-track, survivor, and protective pyramid models (Musselin, 2005). The Italian academic labor market falls into the last category (Le Feuvre et al., 2018). Indeed, the 2010 reform (L. 240/2010) introduced nationally organized accreditation procedures, on the one hand prompting Ph.D. holders to identify with their disciplinary field rather than with the institution where they work, and on the other, rendering them dependent on full-time professors to apply for research funding.

The long and selective tenure-track process is characterized by three levels of early career development: the post-doctoral fellowship (which cannot exceed the prescribed 6 years duration), and two kinds of fixed-term research contracts, type A and type B, respectively, (called junior and senior research positions in this paper). The junior research position entails a 3-year contract renewable for a maximum of 2 more years. The senior research position corresponds to a 3-year contract that guarantees appointment to Associate Professor following a positive evaluation by the National Scientific Qualification Committee. The latter can be considered a sort of "habilitation" by the relevant disciplinary field, organized around a series of standardized criteria defined by the Ministry of Education, University and Research (MIUR). Obtaining the National Scientific Qualification is a prerequisite for the role of Associate or Full Professor.

The reformed Italian academic system intervenes in the self-regulation of universities to such an extent that they fall under the managerial principles of the New Public Management, which is tied to a neoliberal agenda (Ferlie et al., 2008; Picardi, 2020). This type of management creates a transformation in the role of research staff (Colarusso & Giancola, 2020): autonomy is reduced in the face of corporate logic, leading to an increase in fixed-

term positions and thus to the fragmentation of academic paths (Murgia & Poggio, 2018). Furthermore, as a selection device, the National Scientific Qualification Committee rewards scientific productivity more than any other academic mission, including teaching. Given the gendered organization of academic work (Benschop & Brouns, 2003), whereby women are more likely to be assigned teaching roles and/or support roles for colleagues and students (Kantola, 2008), this shift in evaluation has played an important role in amplifying gender asymmetries in academic career development. Indeed, after the 2010 Reform was enacted, the *Glass Door Index*—the ratio of women carrying out research activities with fixed-term positions to women with tenured positions—increased in Italy, confirming the thesis of a greater female academic precarity (Picardi, 2020).

3.2 | Women in contemporary Italian academic institutions

In member countries, women represent more than 40% of academic workers. However, they only hold around a quarter of the full professor positions (26.2%) (European Commission, 2021). The gender gap in Italian academia, not dissimilarly, sees women disappearing in the transition from temporary positions (44% of women) to permanent positions (38% of Associate Professors are female) and diminishing even further among the highest-ranking roles (24% of Full Professors are female) (Picardi, 2020). The latter value could be influenced by a cohort effect since full professors mainly belong to cohorts with historically low female representation (Minello & Russo, 2021). Nevertheless, scholars agree that female academics attain tenure more slowly than their male counterparts (Hewlett, 2002; Williams, 2005), even when they publish higher-quality work (Marini & Meschitti, 2018).

The fragmented career path of female researchers takes a toll on their family and fertility choices (Bozzon et al., 2017). Since the early stages of a researcher's career often overlap with peak reproductive years (Murgia & Poggio, 2018), female academics remain unmarried or childless more often than their male counterparts and women in general (Hewlett, 2002). Childbearing postponement and, consequently, late fertility choices might be considered the other side of the same coin since scholars have found that highly educated Italian working women are "structurally forced to maximize their career opportunities before becoming mothers" (Barbieri et al., 2015, p. 426) because both their employment and career chances decrease once they do (Scherer & Reyneri, 2008).

Finally, other factors discouraging female academics from having children before securing a stabilized position are related to the Italian welfare system, which does not offer long periods of paid parental leave, and has among the lowest family benefits in Western Europe (Barbieri et al., 2015), and does not guarantee a sufficient enrollment rate in childcare services for children under the age of 3 (OECD, 2017).

4 | EMPIRICAL MATERIALS AND METHODS

The data consists of 15 in-depth interviews with female early career researchers. In defining early career researchers, I draw from the literature that considers career stages "in relation to the academic hierarchy, rather than to the professional experience of researchers" (Bozzon et al., 2017, p. 339). The interviewees were selected by publishing an open call for participation on social media, targeting online communities with large numbers of followers working in Italian academia. I used Facebook as the main platform to connect with potentially interested interlocutors.

The interviews were conducted from November 2020—March 2021, fully recorded and transcribed, and subsequently encoded with the NVivo program. They lasted between 45 min and 2 h and took place on a conference platform (Webex or Skype). Since the research was carried out during the COVID-19 pandemic, the decision to meet my interviewees online was dictated by physical-distancing norms. Nonetheless, this allowed me to involve researchers from different geographic zones of the country, making it easier to protect the anonymity of the interviewees without sacrificing relevant information. To ensure the anonymity, I use fictional names and do not

mention information about specific fields of research or reference career stories that would make my interlocutors recognizable.

Three main theoretical criteria guided the sample construction: motherhood, academic workers, and temporary employment position, the latter current or experienced not more than 5 years prior to the interview. By welcoming the participation of academic mothers who only recently secured a tenured position, I aimed to discuss the impact of being a mother on the process of acquiring tenure.

The mean age of the interviewees is approximately 41 years old, consistent with the mean age of academics holding permanent positions in Italian academia: almost 47 for assistant professors and 59 for full professors (Miur, 2019). With regard to their research fields, four of the interviewees work in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) disciplines and two in the Social Sciences and Humanities. At the time of the interviews, two of them were post-doctoral fellows, 5 Junior Researchers, 6 Senior Researchers, 1 Associate Professor, and one in a lectureship position. At the time of their first pregnancy, only three of the interviewees had secured permanent employment, while four obtained tenure after motherhood. Moreover, the most represented contract forms at the time of first pregnancy were also the most precarious ones, such as lectureships (which do not offer paid maternity-leave) and other precarious and lower-paid positions (8 out of 15). Finally, the mean age at the time of first pregnancy was 38; five of the interviewees gave birth after passing the age of 40.

During the interviews, I generally posed two open questions: "Would you like to tell me about your career trajectory?" and "Would you like to tell me about your reproductive trajectory to motherhood?". This type of open questioning stimulates self-narration, and thus reflexivity. The latter induces individuals to review their actions and feelings and, when stimulated to narrate, to organize their biographical experiences into a coherent description of life choices and events. Since "we are only selves insofar as we move in a certain space of questions" (Taylor, 1990, p. 34), narrative interviews are meant to stimulate the recursive and reflexive quality of the interlocutors' selves (Miller, 2005). During the analysis of the empirical material, I took into consideration the words the interviewees chose to narrate their career and life trajectories and the cause-effect relationship they described in their decision making processes, which allowed me to interpret the meanings they assign to their actions as they relate to their self-identities as both mothers and scientists.

Finally, in the coding process, I chose categories based on findings from the data material: academic career development; fertility decisions and reproductive health; work-life balance; gender stereotypes in academia; and self-identity after motherhood.

5 | FINDINGS

The following section will explore three topics concerning the relationship between motherhood and early career stages in academia that emerge from the interviews. The first concerns how the organization of academic work impacts fertility choices. The second is related to the legitimation of gender inequality, which produces work/family conflict. Finally, the third concerns how becoming a mother impacts academic workers' concepts of the self and self-identity.

5.1 | Postponing motherhood

Research results suggest that, in the effort to attain a tenured position, female early career academics in Italy are inclined to postpone motherhood.

One reason can be ascribed to the economic uncertainty that characterizes the early stages of an academic career. Scholars have found that job insecurity increases the opportunity cost of motherhood (Scherer & Reyneri, 2008), and that precarious forms of employment and associated feelings of economic uncertainty have an

impact on first-birth postponement among highly educated women (Vignoli et al., 2020). In the following excerpt, Virginia describes how her job insecurity and related economic uncertainty represented a challenging mental barrier to her family planning:

> I have to say that the crucial factor was not so much having kids, but worrying about having them and knowing that I'm in this precarious situation, this constant thinking about what happens if I lose my job, if I can't make a living, a whole series of anxieties, let's say, that accumulate. If you're alone, you're only responsible for yourself. Having children increases responsibility because you have to care for other people (Virginia, 43, Senior Researcher, mother of two).

Beatrice, who was pregnant when I interviewed her, explained that her and her husband's job insecurity—they were both Junior Researchers in the STEM field—were offset by the belief that STEM researchers are more likely to find jobs in non-academic employment sectors:

> My husband and I convinced ourselves that if there were no options inside the academic labor market, we wouldn't remain jobless anyway. Well, it wasn't that we stopped thinking that we would succeed [in academia]. But the turning point was that we understood that if it wasn't here, there would be another place somewhere because unemployment is rare [in their field]. Let's say that, from this point of view, academia hasn't encouraged me [to have a child] anyway (Beatrice, 36, Junior Researcher, pregnant with her first child).

Another reason can be found in the concern that bearing a child will affect scientific productivity, which is a core issue for all academics, especially for the early career researchers who are in the making of their scientific reputation:

> And then I thought [if I get pregnant] I won't publish, that's it, I'll publish less anyway, my productivity will be threatened, so I was quite worried about this. […] it's definitely a big concern (Nina, 41, Postdoctoral Fellow, pregnant with her first child)

Nina's fears are backed up by evidence showing that female academics with young children have experienced a substantial reduction in the time they have to dedicate to research, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic (European Commission, 2021). Nevertheless, these fears are also the product of introjected descriptive gender stereotypes (Williams, 2005), which, by reflecting the cultural expectation of motherhood, are based on the assumption that every academic bearing a child will conform to the stereotype.

Alongside the aforementioned concerns surrounding job insecurity and productivity, the majority of my interlocutors also reported having experienced existential conflicts related to the prescriptive images of both the ideal mother and the ideal scientist. Sveva interestingly refers to her academic experience as having a "disruptive impact on the processes of subjectivation", which she describes as the feeling of being "coextensive with [the job] you do" and "being your work":

> I believe that our work as has been redesigned by neoliberal academia has a disruptive impact on the processes of subjectivation. I think that in other employment sectors, it doesn't exist, that is, this feeling of being coextensive with what you do, to the point that I was saying, you're self-centered, it's you and your work, you are your work. For me losing my job, and, I mean, being left without the possibility of doing what I love, would have been such a personal drama that it would have annihilated in me any desire to have a project in which I dedicated myself to something else […] [before tenure] I

> didn't have the energy left to devote to building a family, not even to being a good partner (Sveva, 43, Senior Researcher, mother of one).

Alma recollects discovering her desire to be a mother during a period when she had almost lost all hope in securing a steady position in academia:

> Sometimes, I think that maybe if I had achieved tenure earlier, I wouldn't have had a child either [like her older colleagues]. Because I realize that, in my case, I felt like my creative energy was directed toward my work, so writing a book was just like bearing a child. And honestly, when I started to think that maybe I wanted a child, it was precisely at the hardest time of my career. When I felt I had one foot out the door. Of course, I was giving lectures, but I didn't see any possibility of getting a tenured position at either of the universities where I worked. So at one point, I said to myself that I couldn't wait any longer, in the sense that I had to decide whether I was interested in having a child, regardless of my employment condition. And so that was when I made my decision. I honestly don't know (what I would have done) if I had already had tenure, if I had already been occupied by a thousand things, a thousand projects and so… I don't know if I would have had the same impetus, the same desire (Alma, 43, Senior Researcher, mother of one).

As both Sveva and Alma highlight, before motherhood, they understood themselves as completely work-centered to the point that writing a book could be described as an experience as full of love and pain as bearing a child. They coincide in describing their pursuit of a science career as something that takes a toll on their self-identity: the line between being professionally committed and personally invested proves to be so thin (Gill, 2009; Murgia & Poggio, 2018) that forsaking the idea of having a family can be considered just one of the consequences of their ambivalent involvement. Thus, Sveva postponed her desire to have a child until she achieved tenure, confessing that in the early stages of her career, she felt completely overwhelmed by the fear of losing her job/main passion. Meanwhile, Alma decided to give birth to her first child precisely when she felt most hopeless about achieving tenure and consequently unchained from the prescriptive image of the ideal worker.

5.2 | Double presence hardships

The narrations of my interlocutors overlap in their descriptions of the experience of motherhood as challenging because of heavy workloads and the absence of a boundary between personal space and work-space. Alice describes the challenges she faced after the birth of her son, pointing out the sense of guilt she felt for not being "productive" during her mandatory maternity leave[1]:

> The dictated work rhythm is heavy. Last year, I gave birth, and the first few months were difficult… Nevertheless, I had to write my first-year fellowship report, and I had to publish something or submit something to a journal. Luckily, I had something ready thanks to previous research work. But I felt guilty for not having produced something during the five months of mandatory maternity leave. I mean, you slow down for more than five months, because you still have sleepless nights when the baby is nine months old… you wake up three or four times during the night, and this doesn't allow you to be fresh and lucid the next day and write serenely (Alice, 37, Postdoctoral Fellow, mother of one).

Childcare is still seen as a mother's task rather than a parent's task, especially in Mediterranean countries (Esping-Andersen, 2016). It is against this backdrop that Alice describes the burden of her "double presence" (Balbo, 1978) as mother and academic worker. Alma also recollects the difficulties she faced in adapting her academic duties

(teaching, researching, and writing) to her child's needs. Furthermore, she describes the lack of Italian role models in high-ranking academic positions who embraced their double role as child-bearer and scientist:

> Personally, I was used to a rhythm that was dictated by writing and research. When you have a little child, clearly, none of that exists anymore, in the sense that the rhythm is set by their needs, and so you have to adapt all your teaching and research commitments… and, your creative inspiration, your writing flow, is subjected to the child's needs. So this is a pretty difficult adaptation process. But in my case, it really helped me to see the situation in Northern European countries where it's totally normal to see female researchers who have two or three children. […] Because if I had to look at my female mentors, the tendency would have been to say, "ok, if I choose this job, it means that motherhood is somehow precluded".

As Alma notes, Italian female scientists are more likely to remain unmarried and childless than their male counterparts or women in general (Minello, 2022), to the point that a positive role model can be more easily found in Northern European countries, where the length of parental leave periods and the availability of daycare have enabled both women and men to maintain a healthy work-life balance (Thun, 2020).

In Roberta's opinion, the pandemic has increased the hardship of motherhood by limiting the possibility of receiving help from grandparents or employing a babysitter[2]:

> As for the rest, yes, I think that there's certainly an erroneous way of ours as women of thinking about it, to adhere to this idea of childbearing as a limitation. I can tell you, even now, I'm a bit scared to go back to work while caring for my baby. Especially with the pandemic, which certainly doesn't help, because my parents are far away and traveling isn't possible, and I can't get a babysitter anyway… But I'm terrified of how presenting myself at a digital conference or department meeting wearing my baby in a carrier, for example, might be perceived. I have the impression that my image might be damaged in some way, or that I might not be considered as fully active at work as I was before, even though I have a little girl (Roberta, 37, Junior researcher, mother of one).

Upon returning to work after maternity leave, even in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, academic mothers experienced gendered expectations (Pereira, 2021; Remery et al., 2022). The closure of childcare services[3] and the difficult access to informal care (such as grandparents' help) made the pandemic a potential accelerator of structural disadvantages for female researchers (Minello et al., 2020). Roberta describes the ambivalence that stems from feeling that, on the one hand, childbearing should not be represented as "a limitation" for contemporary working women and, on the other hand, that she might face informal social sanctions if she violates unspoken norms by presenting herself, for instance, with her baby in a carrier during an online meeting. Flaminia recalls the total availability her supervisors required of her during a particularly hectic period of the pandemic, when she faced the hardship of taking care of her toddlers without childcare services while taking on distance education for the first time in her career:

> It seems to me that academia is particularly cruel from this point of view, because when I meet with fellow mothers at the kindergarten, who do other jobs, they seem to project a little less of their personal fulfillment [onto their jobs]… I see academia as a particularly cruel place for the reconciliation of procreative life and professional life, and it's tiring. I have to put in an immense effort to keep track of everything and it's hard, really… with two toddlers it's really hard. […] During the pandemic, I was so busy, [it was] too much work, and it felt like they [her supervisors] had no mercy, I'm telling you. I saw my laid off female friends who were saying: "ok, I'm earning less but I'm enjoying my children". I didn't have any financial problems because I didn't lose my salary, but I also worked full-

> time, with a crazy timesheet. They asked me for super efficiency with distance education, which was a completely new thing. They gave me a thousand organizational duties, so, I was also working at the bureaucratic level of the department, and I was like "I have two small children, how am I supposed to…" I remember the words that resonated with me were "don't you have a little mercy?" (Flaminia, 41, Senior Researcher, mother of two)

Scholars have found that women tend to be more frequently involved in "academic housework" than their male colleagues (Benschop & Brouns, 2003; Valian, 1999) since student counseling and organizational duties are often regarded as "feminine tasks" (Williams, 2005). In this way, the gendered organization of academic work and the asymmetric division of parental tasks generate an accumulation of disadvantages (Valian, 1999) that make it harder for academic mothers to attain tenure and successively higher positions (Eslen-Ziya & Yildirim, 2021; Minello & Russo, 2020). In Roberta and Flaminia's words, academia is a greedy institution (Sullivan, 2014), where boundaries are easily overstepped and workloads do not mirror the typical 8-h workday.

And yet, as I will explore in the following paragraph, despite the associated difficulties, my interlocutors define their experience of becoming mothers as a turning point in the way they understand themselves as academic employees, describing their existential changes as positive work-wise, inasmuch as these changes have helped them to better assess and negotiate their rights and needs within neoliberal academia.

5.3 | Shifting priorities and other "superpowers" of academic mothers

Despite their consideration of childbearing as an obstacle to scientific production on a mental or practical level, many of my interlocutors ascribe a career-related positive impact to the transition from *nullipara* (with no child) to *primipara* (after the first child's arrival). Nevertheless, while the narrative processes related to the postponement of fertility choices and the work-family conflict tend to be described as a common career pattern, intrinsic to the female academic working experience, the positive impact of motherhood on self-identity and work-related skills is conceived more as a paradox, a personal journey of self-discovery or a heroic performance.

In recalling the year she acquired tenure, while juggling between work and taking care of her child, Alma says she felt like *Wonder Woman*:

> For instance, the year I got tenure, I was already a mother, and I felt like Wonder Woman. […] I got my 'habilitation' [National Scientific Qualification], taught two courses, did research, and took care of my toddler… of course, with the help of my mother and my mother-in-law. It was like a chess match with myself. But in the end, I did it all. And so, that year I felt like Wonder Woman [laughs].

Alma describes the tension between pursuing an academic career and childbearing by referring to her double role as a "chess match with herself", a powerful metaphor that represents how she perceives academic work to be loaded with inner conflicts and personal tensions. Meanwhile, Alice finds that motherhood improved her multitasking abilities:

> I believe that the condition of a new mother makes explicit the super-skills, I would say almost superpowers, that a woman can put in place in different areas of life […] I realize that I'm very good at multitasking… and, in my personal experience, this organizational skill has been improved by childbearing.

Alma and Alice resort to the superhero lexicon: Alma refers to herself as Wonder Woman and Alice describes childbearing as something that "makes explicit a woman's super-skills". In this kind of narration, striving to achieve

a high-ranking position in science while occupying a dual role (mother and academic worker) is figured as a daunting task, like a hero's venture.

Another kind of narration centers around the acquired ability to reset one's priorities, sharing with the heroic quest narration the theme of the character's journey to find themselves. This type of narration, however, reframes motherhood as a turning point. As a biographically disruptive event, indeed, motherhood requires women to make sense of the many changes that accompany this moment of transition. In other terms, in order to "get back to normal" or to a "pre-baby self", (academic) mothers need to develop and incorporate "an understanding of self-as-mother into their broader schema of self-understanding" (Miller, 2005, p. 15).

Among my interlocutors, Lidia and Anna perceive motherhood as having made them more skilled but also more self-conscious. Lidia feels that she has acquired the ability to put things into perspective, and perceives her work as having a smaller impact on her self-identity. Meanwhile, Anna feels that by improving her capacity to organize her priorities, she has become more productive despite working fewer hours:

> [motherhood] changed the way I organize my day because, obviously, I have more variables to fit in. I had to become a little more efficient. But in my opinion, more than anything else, it's an existential perspective, in the sense that it gives you a little perspective… a less weighty vision, less centered on the ego, less centered on the value of work itself. We're not saving lives, nobody dies. As for my self-identity… well, working remains a crucial dimension, but a) it's not the only one, and b) it's not the first, and c) we are perfectible, so you can also do something that's not your best, and make it better later (Lidia, 47, Lecturer, mother of one).

> I got better at my job! [laughs] I don't know why. It's hard, but I got better at organizing my priorities. I'm more focused. That is, absurdly, I work fewer hours than I did before; because I have children, and they're still little, but I produce much more. I mean, when I work, I am unstoppable. I don't know how it happened (Anna, 38, Junior Researcher, mother of two).

While Lidia describes shifting priorities and both Anna and Alma feel that motherhood unlocked their potential and taught them how to produce more in a shorter period of time, Flaminia feels that becoming a mother, contrary to her expectations, increased her chances of getting tenure by making her more self-confident:

> I have to say that at a certain point, I decided to shift into a different gear, and to fight to the end […] The thing is that this acceleration happened right after I had my first child, which I always thought would have been a stopping point, so to speak, so [I thought] I had to do everything before it. Instead, it was the opposite, in the sense that my first child gave me an energy and a determination that I had never known […] Paradoxically, my son also gave me more self-confidence, perhaps it was for him [her child] that I said to myself: I have to get there… I have put all of myself into it.

In this excerpt, Flaminia refers to the changes she ascribes to motherhood (being more self-confident, more assertive, and more invested in her career goals) as having a "paradoxically" positive impact on her career development, as if such a positive impact of motherhood was not only unforeseeable but also difficult to comprehend from the listener's perspective.

In the same way, Sveva describes motherhood as something that made her feel more "centered", as well as more self-conscious and assertive in negotiating her needs:

> I know I have a series of responsibilities that are also towards my child, who I take care of and who I will take care of forever … This gives me a sense of … a feeling of centeredness … I don't know how to say it differently. I think that, for the first time, I've started to connect with a whole series of aspects

> that I had overlooked in life, and that, if you will, make up the activity of living itself, trivially speaking. And so, this gives me a sense of fullness and satisfaction, and it's perhaps the first time in life I don't feel like chasing anything, even though, clearly every day in the work we do we have deadlines and so on. But, finally, work has taken a back seat to other things. Finally, those things are non-negotiable, and it feels right. So, in my opinion, motherhood has made me assertive, or more assertive, something that I've never been before.

Lidia states that, despite feeling like her work remains a crucial dimension of her self-identity, it comes second to being a parent. Sveva describes a renewed sense of self that has put her in connection with "life itself" for "the very first time", as well as a sense of fulfillment that translates into an improved ability to negotiate in the work sphere. As evidenced by the quoted excerpts, the newly acquired soft-skills my interviewees ascribe to motherhood, such as priority assessment, multitasking, and time management, have a positive impact on the work sphere.

6 | DISCUSSION

The presented analysis explores academic motherhood with a special focus on early career researchers, bringing to light how the pursuit of an academic career influences family planning and work-life balance. Furthermore, it focuses on the way my interlocutors describe the impact of motherhood on their self-identity, in order to understand how academic mothers make sense of, and ascribe meanings to, the biographical transition from *nullipara* to *primipara* in relation to their career development. As for the following, in the first paragraph, I present results that seem consistent with most of the existing literature on academic motherhood (Davies & Petersen, 2005; Hewlett, 2002; Murgia & Poggio, 2018; Williams, 2005). In the second paragraph, I offer novelty elements that have emerged from my empirical analysis.

6.1 | The structural ambivalence of academic work-life

Scholars have argued that female academic careers tend to be more fragmented than those of men, especially in their early stages (Probert, 2005). On the one hand, this is because women in academia tend to obtain tenured positions more slowly than men, even when they publish more and produce higher-ranking work (Hewlett, 2002). On the other hand, it is due to the intersection between the early career stages and other biographical trajectories, such as family planning (Williams, 2005). In Italy, where the welfare system does not promote gender equity by financially supporting families and providing adequate early childcare services (Saraceno & Leira, 2008), mothers struggle to participate in the labor market, and highly educated women tend to resort to late and latest-late fertility choices in an attempt to stabilize their career before motherhood (Billari, 2005).

Research results suggest that, amid the increasingly high level of competition within neoliberal academia, Italian early career researchers postpone their first pregnancy not only due to the economic uncertainty that characterizes the pursuit of a tenured position (Modena & Sabatini, 2012; Vignoli et al., 2020), but also because mothers-to-be seem to get trapped between two prescriptive images. As Williams (2005) argues, on the one hand, there is the ideal mother, an ideal that incorporates both the social expectation regarding the duties of motherhood and the social definition of gender roles in the distribution of parental care and household responsibilities. On the other hand, since conducting scientific research is often represented as some "sort of a calling" (Murgia & Poggio, 2018, p. 33), there is the ideal scientist, an individual completely devoted to being a successful researcher, who considers academic work a "labor of love" (Gill, 2009). My interviewees report that—before motherhood—their work-identity completely overlapped with their self-identity, to the extent that they described their passion for and personal commitment to the job in terms of being "self-centered" and feeling completely coextensive with their

research work. As Fleming (2012) argues, to understand how academia shapes early career researchers' subjectivity, we must grasp that dedication to science does not allow for any detachment between the scientist and their scientific production, thus generating structural ambivalence.

This structural ambivalence—nurtured by feelings of love for and devotion to the job ('writing a book was just like bearing a child', as one of my interviewees puts it), along with excessive workloads determined by requested productivity levels (Davies & Petersen, 2005)—has been described by some scholars as a "passion-trap" (Busso & Rivetti, 2014) that makes it particularly hard for academics to escape the logic of self-exploitation (Murgia & Poggio, 2018). For instance, some of my interlocutors describe how they accepted that their life rhythms would be dictated by their (precarious) employment workload, even when their caregiving duties were at their heaviest, such as during the COVID-19 pandemic and right after childbirth. Indeed, the mechanisms that guide the academic labor market—the segmentation of the pre-tenure track and the pressure to perform as successful researchers while investing time in "academic housework", such as tutoring and organizational chores—act as a mode of subjectivation (Armano & Murgia, 2013; Russo & Minello, 2021). In other words, such mechanisms might be considered a "system of disposition" (Foucault, 2005) that shapes subjects in ways that fit neoliberal academia, forcing those who embrace the dual role of mothers and scientists to play "a chess match with themselves", as one of my interlocutors described it.

6.2 | Making sense of (academic) motherhood

My interviewees describe academia as a "greedy institution" (Coser, 1974): an organization that, by overstepping the work-sphere boundaries, "cultivate(s) voluntary compliance as a means of encompassing their members" (Sullivan, 2014, p. 3), and coincide in describing themselves as having internalized the structural ambivalence of academic work. Nevertheless, most of my interlocutors, especially (but not only) the ones who fulfilled their career aspirations by obtaining a permanent position, describe the onset of motherhood as a crucial turning point for their self-identity.

They describe motherhood as something that unlocked their potential and nurtured their soft-skills, thus improving their work abilities and, in some cases, advancing their careers. This could be partially interpreted as a phenomenon scholar call "family to work enrichment", which concerns both instrumental and affective dimensions (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). According to the work-family enrichment theory, social role accumulation might have a positive impact on both individuals' well-being and self-efficacy perception. Indeed, individuals who embrace multiple roles might compensate for failure in one realm by receiving gratification in another (Sieber, 1974). Nevertheless, this explanation fails to take into account other existential dimensions. Since a person's identity can be found more in their "capacity to keep a particular narrative going" (Giddens, 1991, p. 54) than in their behavior, the specific lexicon my interviewees chose to adopt in describing their changes must be considered.

Despite all the difficulties it brings, in terms of family organization and workload management, the arrival of a first child is described as a journey of self-discovery, the beginning of a process of regaining self-consciousness. The academic mothers I interviewed use terms borrowed from the superhero lexicon (wonder-woman, superpowers, super-skills) or from a bildungsroman (being less egocentric, feeling of centeredness, achieving fulfillment). Thus, they come to frame the resetting of life priorities, necessary to embrace the maternal role, as part of a larger process of reconciliation with their own needs and desires, representing a crucial shift in their form of self-understanding. In other words, to embrace and understand the "self-as-mother", they had to regain "a sense of a recognizable and practiced (pre-baby) self" (Miller, 2005, p. 15), which seems to bring with it not only a deeper understanding of the mechanisms of subjectivation they were/are subjected to in the day-to-day life of academic work, but also a newfound willingness to act against some of those mechanisms by negotiating better working conditions.

7 | CONCLUSION

As individuals, we reflexively forge our biography as a story about our personal growth: our actions, the processes we undergo to develop new skills, and our attitudes toward the world all make sense when we coherently narrate our lives (Giddens, 1991; Ortner, 2005). Thus, our sense of self-identity, which mirrors the narrative trajectory of our biography, is what helps us through periods of transition or crisis (Elliott, 2020; Miller, 2005).

In recollecting their biographical experience as academic mothers, the early career researchers I interviewed seem to adopt two different narrative levels. When they narrate their fertility choices and fears that childbearing might slow down, if not hamper, their academic career, and when they describe the hardships of pursuing a career in science while mothering their children, they seem to position themselves within a collective narrative about gender stereotyping (Williams, 2005). By collective narrative, I mean they consider these difficulties to be a common condition of a discernible group—female early career researchers. Thus, their recollection of biographical events seems to adhere to the scientific literature on neoliberal academia, to the extent that they use expressions resembling quotes from the literature ('processes of subjectivation', 'reconciliation between procreative life and professional life', 'erroneous way as women of seeing childbearing as a limitation' and so forth). The web of subordination that permeates every aspect of precarious academic employees' working lives, which some scholars have defined as 'invisible' (Murgia & Poggio, 2018, p. 33), seems, in the words of my interviewees, to be highly visible yet inescapable all the same.

Nevertheless, when describing the positive effects motherhood has had on their careers, my interviewees abandon the collective narrative level, opting instead to reinterpret and recollect their personal experiences in terms of individual stories. In their accounts, motherhood is responsible for having produced a 'paradoxical' change in the way they understand both their jobs and themselves: academic work loses part of its specific importance in defining them as human beings, not because they describe themselves as having become completely devoted to their maternal role, but because, in working through their inner battle regarding their double role, they discover a new sense of fortitude and 'centeredness'. They are not just scientists in the making; they are also Wonder Women, to quote one of my interviewees.

The novelty of this study lies in capturing academic mothers' double-layered narratives, which result from a process of reflexivity set in motion by the interview process, and in portraying them as a complex subject who 'partially internalizes and partially reflects upon' (Ortner, 2005, p. 45) and, in some cases, reacts against the mechanism of subjectivation set in place by the contemporary neoliberal academic labor market.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

There are no conflicts of interest with respect to authorship and/or publication of this article.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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ENDNOTES

[1] In Italy, mandatory maternity leave is a 5-month period of obligatory absence from work prescribed for employed working mothers, to guarantee post-natal recovery. This obligatory absence from work is not imposed on independent

workers or self-employed professionals. In Italian academia, post-doctoral fellowships, junior and senior research positions, and all tenured positions respect mandatory maternity leave and grant maternity leave allowance. Other fixed-term positions, such as lectureships, are considered independent work, so they do not entail paid parental leave (Minello, 2022).

[2] During the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, a series of containment measures (such as remote working, remote learning, curfews and other limitations on citizens' movement) were implemented by the Italian government in an attempt to halt the spread of the virus.

[3] In Italy, childcare services and kindergartens were closed from the end of February 2020 until the beginning of September 2020, when they reopened part-time. Daycares reopened full-time in September 2021. Differently from childcare services, all other schools and universities were completely closed for 1 month (March 2020), until distance learning was implemented.

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