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Beyond school-related learning: Parent-child homework talk as a morality building activity

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ABSTRACT

Family interactions constitute an arena for children's moral development: it is indeed through ordinary talk, and shared, task-oriented activities that children are socialized into moral orders and culturally informed ways of thinking and acting. Drawing on a video-based study on the everyday life of 19 middle-class families and adopting a discourse analytic approach, the paper sheds light on the socializing function of a domestic activity: homework. We illustrate that, when it unfolds as a family activity, the issues at stake go far beyond its school-oriented goals: homework provides 'ethical affordances' that make relevant moral talk whereby parents introduce children to some unquestioned principles such as homework must be done neatly and it is part of the child's duties. We contend that, by participating in morally loaded homework interactions, children are socialized not only into a school-aligned cultural list concerning what is right and what is wrong about homework, but moreover into a constitutive, taken-for-granted pillar of human sociality: the moral assessability of human conduct, i.e., its being subject to evaluations informed by the 'right vs. wrong' category. Implications for teacher training and parent education programs are discussed in the conclusion.

1. Introduction

Since Harvey Sacks' claim on the heuristic force of studying the details of human interaction to grasp "the ways humans do things and the kind of things they use to order their affairs" (Sacks, 1984, p. 24), documenting how overarching entities such as norms, principles, values, moral orders, as well as communities' ethos are "done or accomplished" (Emirbayer & Maynard, 2010, p. 246) as social facts orienting people's everyday life has become a legitimate research program. Within this framework and consistently with the generalized consensus on the role that ordinary communication plays in constituting these social facts, an interest developed in how language and social interaction work as the main means through which children are socialized into the unquestioned certainties that constitute the "hinges" of our Lifeworld (Wittgenstein, 1969). Indeed, and as the language socialization paradigm maintains (Duranti, Ochs, & Schieffelin, 2012; Ochs & Schieffelin, 2017; Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986), it is mainly through family language-mediated activities and interactions that children learn to think and act as morally competent subjects, develop culturally ratified unshakable certainties, partake the 'temporarily shared worlds of meaning' (Rommetveit, 1979) of the communities they belong to, and therefore become "speakers of culture" (Ochs, 2002).

As research on morality in everyday life has long and extensively illustrated, children are socialized into culture-specific ethical

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beliefs through various discursive activities taking place in the family context, like mealtimes (see among others, Ochs, Pontecorvo, & Fasulo, 1996; Blum-Kulka, 1997; Pontecorvo & Arcidiacono, 2007; Heller, 2014; Galatolo & Caronia, 2018; Caronia, Colla, & Galatolo, 2021; Bova, 2021), storytelling (Ochs, Taylor, Rudolf, & Smith, 1992), cleaning practices (Fasulo, Loyd, & Padiglione, 2007), sports (Kremer-Sadlik & Kim, 2007), walks (Keisanen, Rauniomaa, & Siitonen, 2017), and media-consumption activities (Caronia, 2012). What parents say or do not say, the ways they talk, the words they utter, their intonation, silences, and even gestures constantly presuppose, ratify, and convey moral assumptions and expectations, thus socializing children into their unquestioned and unquestionable validity (Ochs & Schieffelin, 1983, 1984). In continuity with such a line of inquiry, this work sheds light on the moral density of mundane family conversations, showing how they constitute “a uniquely fertile arena for moral thinking and moral development” (Wainryb & Recchia, 2014, p. 5). In particular, the paper focuses on a family activity that has been attracting increasing attention and critiques but is still little explored as a morality-building accomplishment: homework.

In the last few decades, in keeping with the celebration of “parental involvement” (see among others, McNeal, 1999; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001, 2005; Hornby, 2011; LaRocque, Kleiman, & Darling, 2011), homework has become a constitutive component of family routines (Izquierdo et al., 2006), turning from a solitary and silent activity of the child into a family accomplishment. Such a transformation of homework and its “participation framework” (Goffman, 1974) has coincided with the moment this topic moved from the background to the foreground in socio-educational research and pedagogical debate. A variety of studies have measured – and questioned – the effectiveness of this activity (Cooper, 1989a, 1989b; Cooper, Robinson, & Patall, 2006; Costa, Cardoso, Lacerda, Lopes, & Gomes, 2016); others have identified the (mainly negative) consequences of homework on child and family wellbeing (Bennet & Kalish, 2006; Kohn, 2006; Kralovec & Buell, 2000, 2001), and still other studies have provided parents and teachers with instructions on how to deal with this ‘burden’ and solve the ‘homework battle’ (Cooper, 2006; Meirieu, 2000). Previous research has extensively described the interactive practices whereby homework unfolds as a family activity (Colla, 2023; Forsberg, 2007; Kremer-Sadlik & Fatigante, 2015; Wingard, 2006; Wingard & Forsberg, 2009) as well as the effects of parent-child homework interactions on children’s subject-related learning and school success (e.g., Van Voorhis, 2001; Battle-Bailey, 2004). However, less attention has been devoted to investigating homework as a *morally dense activity*, a vehicle of cultural knowledge and a means whereby children are socialized into becoming “speakers of cultures” (Ochs, 2002) far beyond the academic subject-matters (but see Colla, 2020, 2022). In a few words, literature largely fails to address the moral relevance of parent-child homework talk and the ways in which it contributes to socializing children into morally competent members of the communities where their sociocultural development mostly occurs, i.e., family and school.

The present paper contributes to this underexplored line of inquiry. Building on the results from previous video-based studies (Caronia & Colla, 2021; Colla, 2022) and adopting an analytical perspective that focuses on the interactive unfolding of ordinary parent-child interactions during homework, the paper sheds light on the *socializing function* of this family activity. Through the analysis of parent-child conversations, the paper illustrates that homework is far more than a learning-oriented activity characterized by intentional teaching practices. In subtle yet pervasive ways, homework provides “ethical affordances” (Keane, 2014; Kremer-Sadlik, 2019), i.e., occasions for parents and children to produce actions and statements informed by the categories of ‘good vs. bad’, ‘right vs. wrong’, ‘appropriate vs. inappropriate’. As the article contends, parent-child homework talk introduces children to a school-aligned, culture-specific list of rules and assumptions defining what is right and what is wrong about the specific activity at hand (e.g., homework must be done neatly, homework is part of the child’s duties). Yet, and more radically, homework interactions also socialize children into a taken-for-granted principle that lies at the very heart of human sociality: the moral assessability of human behavior, i.e., the belief that human conduct is inherently assessable as ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ (Keane, 2016).

The article is structured as follows. In the first sections we review the literature on morality in everyday life with a focus on family talk-in-interaction as a morality-building device. Then we make the case for homework as a trans-contextual activity that bridges families’ “small cultures” (Holliday, 1999) with the larger cultural models and moral expectations that are at the same time inscribed in, presupposed by, and implemented through school-related activities. After a brief description of the corpus and methodology of the study, we analyze a series of excerpts of video-recorded parent-child conversations during homework to show how children are socialized into morally appropriate ways of thinking and behaving in the unfolding of interaction and through apparently mere ‘learning talk’. In the concluding discussion, we argue that 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. 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, passing it on to new generations. Implications for teacher training and parent education programs are also discussed in the concluding remarks.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Children’s moral socialization in everyday family life: interactional resources

In line with the conception of morality as the presupposed horizon and the constantly (re)produced product of social interaction (Bergmann, 1998; Heritage & Lindström, 1998; Lambek, 2010; Linell & Rommetveit, 1998; Robles, 2015; Sidnell, 2010; Stivers, Mondada, & Steensig, 2011), studies on children’s socialization have focused on ordinary adult-child conversations as loci of (re) constitution and transmission of moral principles and meanings (Ochs & Kremer-Sadlik, 2007, 2013; Ochs & Schieffelin, 1983). Considering morality as “a discursive practice, inextricably linked with the social and cultural contexts in which it is produced” (Sterponi, 2014, p. 136), these studies investigate everyday family activities and the ‘small talk’ that underpins them as moral arenas where parents visibly assume, evoke, and convey to their children culturally appropriate ways of thinking and behaving. As studies in

this stream of research show, every social interaction involving children is pervaded by moral meanings and expectations: even in minute adult-child conversations, family members take moral stances, evaluate what they are talking about, and locate their ongoing experiences within cultural webs of principles and certainties (Caronia, 2012; Kremer-Sadlik, 2019; Sterponi, 2003).

Research on morality in family interaction has illustrated how children are socialized into ethical beliefs during various family activities (e.g., mealtime and sports activities, see among others, Ochs et al., 1996; Galatolo & Caronia, 2018; Kremer-Sadlik & Kim, 2007) as well as through different talking practices, especially parental corrections and “practices of control” (Goodwin & Cekaite, 2018). By resorting to threats and summons (Hepburn & Potter, 2011), requests for account (Sterponi, 2003, 2009), assessments (Caronia et al., 2021), and directives (e.g., Craven & Potter, 2010; Goodwin & Cekaite, 2012; Kent, 2012), parents reproach children for their misbehaviors, evoke presupposed moral orders, and channel children's moral development in culture-specific directions.

Building on such research on moral socialization, the present article contends that ordinary adult-child interactions like the ones occurring during homework are deeply imbued with moral messages and assumptions and are thus constitutive of the process whereby children become morally competent members of their cultural communities.

2.2. Between school culture and family cultures: homework morality

As research has recently pointed out, homework constitutes a crossroad between family and school (Pontecorvo, Liberati, & Monaco, 2013) or, more radically, the main means through which the ‘school voice’ enters the domestic space on a daily basis (Caronia & Colla, 2021; Colla, 2022; Hedegaard, 2014), thus fostering (or hindering) the so-called “family-school partnership” (Epstein & Sanders, 2000). As we mentioned above, despite its crucial role in bridging the school institutional culture and the families' small cultures, homework is still little explored as a ‘morality-shaped, morality-renewing activity’ (Heritage, 1984a): little is known about the ways in which moral beliefs, norms, and expectations are evoked and transmitted to children in the unfolding of this ordinary family activity. As we contend and empirically illustrate, this trans-contextual activity is far from being a mere way to acquire academic knowledge and exercise cognitive skills: these seemingly ‘pure’ learning goals are vehicles of the larger cultural models and worldviews embedded in the texts, artifacts, and tasks homework is made of. Indeed, homework is – by definition – an ‘ought-to-be’-informed activity: beyond the school-related subject matter, it presupposes right (vs. wrong) ways to be accomplished; it requires knowing and being oriented to this ought-to-be order, and it is subject to assessment by a socially-sanctioned epistemic authority, i.e., the teacher. How do parents and children orient to the ethical affordances embedded in homework (e.g., completing tasks in the appropriate way)? How do they contribute to addressing homework as a moral activity, i.e., an activity structured by the ‘right vs. wrong’ category? In the next sections, we illustrate that homework constitutes a “cultural site” (Ochs & Shohet, 2006) where children are socialized into the moral orders constitutive of their communities. The analysis shows how, through homework conversations with their parents, children acquire not only the list of school-aligned rules concerning the specific activity at hand, but also broader moral orders, first and foremost the assumption according to which human conduct is to be evaluated based on the ‘ought-to-be’ category.

3. Data corpus and analytical procedures

The data presented in this study are drawn from a corpus of 62 video-recorded homework sessions collected in Italy. The 19 middle-class families involved in the project were composed of two working parents and at least one child aged 6–9 years old, i.e., attending primary school. To reduce the potential impact of the researcher and video-recording tools as much as possible, the video-recordings were self-administered by the parents in compliance with the researchers' guidelines. Participants' consent was obtained according to Italian law n. 196/2003 and EU Regulation n. 2016/679, which regulate the handling of personal and sensitive data. For the sake of anonymity, all names have been fictionalized. Data have been transcribed by drawing on conversation analysis conventions (Jefferson, 2004; Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974). In line with a multimodal approach to social interaction (Goodwin, 2000; Mondada, 2016), transcripts have been enriched with notations for gaze, gestures, body movements, and orientations to objects when ostensibly relevant for the participants to unfold the interaction. The transcripts in this article are presented in two lines: the original Italian transcript is followed by an idiomatic translation in American English.

Within a phenomenological approach to language and social interaction (Caronia, 2021; Caronia & Orletti, 2019; Duranti, 2009, 2015; Ochs, 2012), language-in-interaction is here viewed and analyzed as both a resource for social action and the means whereby subjects experience their Lifeworld and demonstrate their culturally informed understanding of it. Consistently with the above-mentioned framework, in analyzing the contingent and interactive ways in which parents and children jointly accomplish homework, we adopt a discourse analytic approach. As literature has long demonstrated (Couper-Kuhlen & Selting, 2017; Sidnell & Stivers, 2013; Wetherell, Taylor, & Yates, 2001), this approach is particularly suited to tracing participants' orientation to cultural and moral assumptions as well as to illustrating how culture and morality are taken for granted, (re)affirmed in more or less explicit ways, and transmitted to new generations in the unfolding of ordinary conversations.

For the aims of this study, data were first observed on the basis of a broad definition of “moral talk”, i.e., any instance of “implicit and explicit messages about right and wrong, better and worse, rules, norms, obligations, duties, and etiquette” (Ochs & Kremer-Sadlik, 2007, p. 5). After repeated observation, we singled out 58 sequences where such moral talk occurs.¹ In these sequences,

¹ Instances of moral talk are pervasive in the corpus: they occur in 16 families and 54 homework sessions. Such moral talks vary a lot in terms of extension, ranging from a single parent turn (e.g., “Write well that R”, see ex. 2 below) to extended sequences composed by a variety of parents' and children's turns (see ex. 4 below).

parents visibly assume, evoke, and socialize their children into a variety of moral beliefs, norms, and expectations that concern not only the ongoing homework activity, but also broader concepts, more or less closely related to the activity at hand, such as learning, schooling, children's duties and autonomy, time management, virtue, authority, and bodily conduct. Using a post hoc categorization, we have then regrouped the identified sequences of moral talk into different clusters according to the assumptions evoked by the parents (e.g., "homework must be done neatly").² We also identified the different linguistic and non-linguistic resources through which parents make these moral assumptions relevant. By relying, even multimodally, on directives, negative assessments, rhetorical questions, and rule statements, parents reproach the child for their homework-related conduct, treating it as morally inappropriate. As the analyses will show, these resources contribute to conveying the taken-for-granted and unquestionable nature of the moral assumptions they build on.

The excerpts presented in this article belong to two different clusters of moral talk whereby parents socialize their children to the ideas that 1) homework must be done neatly, i.e., in compliance with a standard (see Section 4.1), and 2) homework is part of the child's duties (see Section 4.2). The examples have been selected to illustrate the main resources used by parents: directives, rhetorical questions, assessment, and (impersonal) deontic claims. Overall, the examples show the pervasive and interactive process whereby children are socialized into culture-specific moral worldviews and, in particular, into the taken-for-granted belief that human conduct is inherently morally assessable.

4. Findings

4.1. "Do it neatly". Socializing children into complying with a standard

The examples in this section illustrate how the parents in the study took for granted, evoked, and conveyed the moral obligation to do homework neatly (Colla, 2022; Kremer-Sadlik & Fatigante, 2015). By assessing children's homework performance and urging them to be tidy and write neatly, parents delineate high, school-like standards that the child should meet, and present failing to meet such standards as a moral breach.³ Yet, parents' (negative) assessments of the child's homework-related conduct also contribute to conveying another cultural principle, one that is at the very heart of human morality and sociality: the moral assessability of individual behavior (Keane, 2016). As we will show in the sequences analyzed below, this principle constitutes the invisible, yet foundational assumption participants orient to.

The next excerpt provides an example. By resorting to a series of upgraded negative assessments, the mother displays her orientation to a specific standard concerning writing quality and makes it relevant for the child to meet such a standard as an unquestionable, 'quasi natural' obligation.

Ex. 1. "This S is horrible".

F4H1 (20.20–20.30)

Mother; Gaia (seven years old, second grade)

- | | | |
|---|--------|---|
| 1 | Gaia | <i>((writes in the notebook))</i> |
| 2 | Mother | <i>((looks at Gaia's writing))</i> |
| 3 | | questa S è bruttissima (.) ^non si legge neanche
this S is horrible (.) ^you can't even read it |
| 4 | | ^((takes the eraser and erases the letter S)) |

After looking at Gaia's handwriting (line 2), the mother produces a strong, multimodal negative evaluation of the letter "s" (line 3). First, she negatively assesses it through the superlative form of the adjective "bad" ("*bruttissima*" in Italian); then, after a brief pause, she accounts for the negative assessment by describing what makes the letter "horrible": its illegibility ("you can't even read it", line 3). In so doing, the mother conveys the taken-for-granted idea that the child's handwriting should comply with a standard. Concurrently, the mother erases the letter (line 4), thereby intensifying her previous negative assessment and making it necessary for the child to rewrite the letter. By imposing the correction, the mother stages herself as the 'guardian of school-like standards' in the home and she gives the child the sense that what is important is not only doing the assignments, but also and especially doing them neatly.

The next excerpt further illustrates the first cluster of moral talk occasioned by homework. Through a series of directives, the mother conveys the idea that the child's (homework-related) behavior should comply with a standard.

Ex. 2. "Write well that R".

² We identified 11 clusters of moral talk. The frequency distribution of clusters in the 58 sequences ranges from 2 (cluster 6 "Do homework early"; cluster 7 "Homework first") to 18 (cluster 1 "Do homework neatly").

³ The data and methodology used in this study do not enable us to investigate how teachers' instructions link to and impact on the unfolding of parent-assisted homework, prompting parents' and children's alignment (or dis-alignment) to school-like standards. Indeed, since our data consist of interactions occurring in the *family* context, we have no access to teachers' talk occurring in school, unless it is referred to by parents or children in the unfolding of their (recorded) homework interactions. We addressed the relevant dimension of the relationship between teachers' instructions and the ways that parents and children interpret and enact them in homework doing in previous studies, where we illustrated how parents and children quote or otherwise refer to teacher's talk and school rules, and abide by them (Caronia, Colla, & Bolognesi, 2023; Colla, 2023).

F2H2 (37.37–37.47)

Mother; Filippo (seven years old, second grade)

- 1 Filippo ((writes the word “rosa” in the notebook))
- 2 Mother scrivi per bene quella R FILIPPO:
write well that R FILIPPO:
- 3 ^MA DAI MO’ DUNQUE:
^COME ON NO:W
- 4 ^((moves her open left hand outward))^[fig. 1]
- 5 Filippo ((erases))
- 6 ((rewrites))

Through the directive in line 2, the mother problematizes the child's handwriting (particularly the “r” he has just written), conveying it as ‘bad writing’. Note that the use of the child's proper name in turn-final position (“Filippo”) emphasizes his personal responsibility for the problematic behavior (Galeano & Fasulo, 2009; Pauletto, Aronsson, & Galeano, 2017). The mother further conveys her annoyance with the child's writing through the following directive (“come on now”, line 3), which is issued at a higher volume and accompanied by a gesture conveying the mother's exasperation (line 4, Fig. 1). Through this brief, yet intense multimodal reproach (lines 2–4), the mother interactively establishes ‘writing neatly’ as an essential requirement when doing homework and conveys ‘writing sloppily’ as a serious, unacceptable moral breach. Importantly, by taking part in this exchange, the child acquires more than just the specific moral imperative of writing neatly. Being reproached and held accountable for the way he has written the letter ‘r’, Filippo is exposed to and socialized into the taken-for-granted assumption that one's behavior is an inherently morally assessable object, i.e., it is judgeable according to shared standards of appropriateness.

The assessability of the child's conduct is presupposed in the next example as well. Similarly to *ex. 1 and 2*, it illustrates how the imperative of ‘doing homework neatly’ is visibly assumed, made “actionable through talk” (Heritage, 1997, p. 222), and passed on to children as an unquestionable obligation in the unfolding of a mother-child reproach. By combining negative assessments, rhetorical questions, and directives, the mother in the next example constructs the inappropriateness of the child's handwriting, and therefore (yet subtly) conveys the obviousness of the principle she ostensibly orients to, i.e., the inherent assessability of homework-related conduct.

Ex. 3. “Do it neatly”.

F3H1 (03.46–04.00)

Mother; Benedetta (seven years old, second grade)



Fig. 1. The mother moves her open left hand outward.

1 Mother °scrivi° meglio:. (.) ^guarda sti due numeri (.)
 °write° be:tter. (.) ^look at these two numbers (.)

2 ^((points to the numbers on the page))

3 falli un po' per bene. cos'è quel due?
 do them a bit neatly. what's that two?

4 Benedetta ((erases))

5 Mother fallo per BENE
 do it NEATly

As soon as the mother sees the exercises done by Benedetta (i.e., a series of calculations), she problematizes the numbers written by the child. The unacceptable nature of the child's writing is constructed through a variety of interactive resources. First, the mother uses a series of directives whereby she urges the child to “write better”, observe her writing, and finally write the numbers “a bit neatly” (lines 1–3). With these directives, the mother evaluates the child's writing as sloppy and conveys the need to improve it. Then, the mother asks a rhetorical question concerning a number written by the child (“what's that two?”, line 3). By questioning the recognizability of the written number, the mother further points to the poor quality of the writing. In so doing, she conveys the idea of a standard to be met.

The mother's negative evaluation is tacitly accepted by the child, who quickly erases the problematized numbers (line 4). At this point, when the child is ready to write again, the mother makes relevant the imperative of ‘doing homework neatly’, making it work as an instruction: “do it neatly” (line 5). This moral imperative is formulated explicitly by the mother and thus passed on to the child as an unquestionable duty. Yet, the moral density and educational import of this contingent exchange extends beyond this specific moral imperative. By taking part in this conversation, Benedetta appropriates not only the particular obligation to write neatly, but also the far more foundational idea that her conduct is inherently assessable.

Similarly to *exx. 1 and 2*, what emerges in this excerpt is the mother's orientation to the principles that homework must be done neatly and, relatedly, the child is responsible for behaving according to standards of appropriateness. These excerpts show how, despite their apparently obvious and natural nature, these ideas are in fact the recursively produced, interactively achieved product of mundane social interactions occasioned by an ‘ought-to-be’-informed activity like homework.

The next section sheds further light on the moral relevance of everyday homework conversations as well as their role in conveying the moral assessability of human behavior as a taken-for-granted and obvious ‘fact’. In particular, it shows that homework interactions constitute an occasion for parents to socialize children into the belief that homework is the child's ‘duty’.

4.2. “Don't complain”: constructing homework as the child's duty

The interactions analyzed in this section show how children are pervasively socialized into the taken-for-granted idea that homework is one of their duties and must be done without complaining. The mother in the following excerpt relies on different linguistic resources such as directives, assessments, and deontic claims to reject the child's complaint and frame homework as the child's “job”.

Ex. 4. “It's your job”.

F3H6 (43.10–43.45)

Mother; Benedetta (seven years old, second grade)

- 1 Benedetta oh:: dobbiam colorare anche le MAschere
oh:: *we have to color the MAsks too ((whining))*
- 2 ma perché la maestra >ci ha dato< così tanti co:mpiti:?
but why did the teacher >give us< so much ho:mewo:rk? ((whining))
- 3 Mother ma dhha:i che non è vero=
but chho:me on that's not true=
- 4 Benedetta =son tanti:ssimi::
=it's a lo::t ((whining))
- 5 Mother ma va là (.) tu non hai mai visto come sono tanti compiti
that's not true (.) you have never seen what a lot of homework is
- 6 (2.0)
- 7 Benedetta c'ho da fare quarantamila operaz:ioni cioè
I have to do forty thousand calculat:ions, I mean ((in an irritated tone))
- 8 (3.0)
- 9 Mother è il tuo dovere eh.
it's your job eh.
- 10 (3.0)
- 11 Mother mica lamenta:rti
don't complai:n
- 12 Benedetta scherZAvò.
I was kIDDIng. ((taking the pencil case))
- 13 Mother eh sarà me:glìo.
eh you'd better ha:ve been.
- 14 Benedetta ((opens her pencil case, takes a pen, and starts doing the exercise))

After reading the title on the homework page (not transcribed), Benedetta suddenly remembers (see the change of state token “oh” in line 1, [Heritage, 1984b](#)) an additional homework assignment (“we have to color the masks too”, line 1). At this point, the child produces a complaint formatted as a request for account ([Sterponi, 2003](#)) concerning the teacher's behavior (“but why did the teacher give us so much homework”, line 2). Through this request-formatted complaint, Benedetta presents the teacher's behavior as inexplicable, questioning its moral appropriateness ([Sterponi, 2003](#)). Furthermore, by evaluating homework as “so much”, the child presents the number of assigned exercises as too many. Finally, note that Benedetta explicitly refers to the teacher as the *agent* of the problematized state of affairs, thus attributing the responsibility for giving “so much” homework to her (on human agency coded in linguistic forms, see among others, [Ahearn, 2001](#); [Duranti, 2004](#)). In this way, Benedetta conveys her complaint not as generically relative to homework, but as specifically directed to its (assessed as “so much”) amount. In her reply, the mother openly disaffiliates with the complaint: she urges the child to stop (“come on”, line 3) and bluntly denies the evaluation of homework as “so much” (“that's not true”, line 3). Despite that, Benedetta continues complaining. She maintains the whiny tone and further problematizes the amount of homework by resorting to an extreme case formulation (“it's a lot”, line 4; [Pomerantz, 1986](#)). Such a rhetorical format legitimizes the child's complaint and makes the mother's affiliation sequentially relevant ([Drew & Holt, 1988](#); [Pomerantz, 1986](#)). However, the mother rejects the child's complaint once again (line 5). First, she denies the child's claim (“that's not true”), then she delegitimizes the child as a complainer on the basis of her scarce experience (“you have never seen what a lot of homework is”, line 5).

After a two-second gap (line 6), Benedetta continues her complaint sequence seeking the mother's affiliation, this time in an irritated tone: she indicates the number of assignments she must do by resorting to another extreme case formulation (“I have to do forty thousand calculations, I mean”, line 7). By shifting from the use of generic descriptions of the complainable (“so much”, line 2; “a lot”, line 4) to a detailed, albeit still exaggerated, description of it (“forty thousand calculations”, line 7), Benedetta provides a more accurate recount of her grievance, which makes the mother's affiliation even more sequentially relevant ([Drew, 1998](#); [Drew & Holt, 1988](#)). Yet, no affiliative action is provided by the mother. Rather, she explicitly formulates the moral belief that homework is the child's duty (“it's your job eh”, line 9) and issues a negative directive problematizing the child's complaint and ordering her to stop it (“don't complain”, line 11). Through these turns (lines 9 and 11), the mother dismisses the issue of the homework amount and explicitly addresses the child's moral obligation to do the assignments as such, regardless of the quantity. Doing homework is thus interactively constructed as “the job of childhood” ([Corno & Xu, 2004](#)): it is conveyed as an unquestionable moral obligation that the child must carry out without complaining.

After the mother's call to duty, Benedetta acknowledges her own complaint as deviant from the norm and attempts to neutralize its inappropriateness by retrospectively defining it as “kidding” (line 12). Concurrently, she displays her incipient compliance with the imperative of ‘doing homework without complaining’ (note that she takes the pencil case, line 12). Confronted with the child's characterization of the complaint as a joke, the mother maintains a serious attitude by issuing a veiled threat (“eh you'd better have

the general rule (“they all have to be done, one does them all”, line 11). While the subjective assessment in line 10 is hearable as an account based on the mother's personal preference, the general rule in line 11 accounts for the mother's directives based on (what is presented as) an absolute and unquestionable principle. Through the impersonal deontic declarative (“*si fanno tutti*”, in the original Italian, see Rossi & Zinken, 2016) the mother presents doing all the assigned homework as the taken-for-granted, morally appropriate rule the child should always comply with. Any behavior that can be considered as a way to skip this deontic claim is strongly sanctioned as morally inappropriate. However, like in the previous examples, the mother's reproach does far more than ratifying this homework-specific standard: it conveys the assessability of human conduct as a taken-for-granted and ‘relatively natural’ principle (Scheler, 2013 [1926]).

5. Concluding discussion

5.1. Beyond academic topics: the moral engineering of homework

Homework is mostly and extensively addressed by research as a school practice fostering (or hindering) pupils' subject-related learning, academic success, and the building of the family-school partnership (Colla, 2022; Epstein & Sanders, 2000). However, there is much more at stake in the unfolding of this everyday activity. As we have illustrated, this activity is endowed with “ethical affordances” (Keane, 2014; Kremer-Sadlik, 2019) that trigger moral talk and prompt participants to assess their ongoing behavior. Beyond addressing academic topics and school-aligned morality, the ‘moral engineering’ of homework contributes to the multifaceted and multisite process through which children are socialized into becoming moral beings. This is particularly visible in parent-child interactions where the main moral stances constitutive of children's socialization are voiced: the family's and the school's. In this paper we focused on two clusters of moral talk emerging in the unfolding of homework interactions: the ‘do homework neatly’ cluster (exx. 1, 2, and 3) and the ‘homework is the child's duty’ cluster (exx. 4 and 5). Each cluster includes logically implied moral ideas (e.g., homework deserves the effort and commitment needed to comply with a standard, exx. 1, 2, and 3; homework must be done without complaining, exx. 4 and 5; pupils cannot question teachers' homework-related decisions, ex. 4) and morally assessable behaviors (e.g., writing sloppily, not putting effort in writing neatly, exx. 1, 2, and 3; failing to complete homework, exx. 4 and 5). These principles are both ‘talked into being’ and ‘made actionable through talk’ (Heritage, 1984a) by parents through the use of different, linguistic and gestural resources such as directives (ex. 2, line 2; ex. 3, lines 1, 3, and 5; ex. 5, lines 2 and 6), rhetorical questions (ex. 3, line 3), threats (ex. 4, line 13), and accounts (ex. 5, line 11). By reproaching the child as well as accomplishing companion activities such as pointing to the assessable (ex. 3, line 2), assessing (ex. 1, line 3) and justifying the assessment (ex. 5, lines 10–11), parents convey a ‘morally framed world’: they make sense of ongoing experiences by locating them into morality-informed categories (‘right vs. wrong’, ‘appropriate vs. inappropriate’, ‘good vs. bad’), and return them to children as morally laden events. Importantly, beyond the school-aligned imperatives related to the specific ongoing activity (e.g., homework must be done neatly, homework is the child's duty), the moral talk occasioned by homework socializes children into more abstract and foundational levels of mundane morality. First, the local but systematic use of the basic categories of moral reasoning introduces children to the taken-for-granted moral assessability of the Lifeworld. It is by participating in task-oriented, language-mediated activities like parent-assisted homework that children are socialized into the idea that what we do is sanctionable, judgeable, and performable according to an external standard (see also Fasulo et al., 2007). Second, this moral viewpoint is interactively constructed as self-evident and unquestionable, as if culture-specific moral principles and valued ways of behaving were natural and obvious ‘facts’, unquestioned and unquestionable certainties working as the “hinges” of everyday life (Wittgenstein, 1969). By drawing unique analytical attention to a routinary family activity like parent-assisted homework, this study contributes to our understanding of ordinary parent-child conversations as ‘morally saturated’ events (Ochs & Kremer-Sadlik, 2007) whereby parents contribute to reproducing and crystallizing a moral Lifeworld, children are exposed to taken-for-granted cultural worldviews, socialized into morally appropriate ways of thinking and behaving, and raised to become ‘moral beings’. Revealing the moral density of parent-assisted homework, the study results can support both teacher training and parent education programs based on video-recorded, real-talk data, with the aim to promote teachers' and parents' reflexivity concerning respectively the non-neutrality of home assignments and the unnoticed moral dimension of everyday interaction with children.

5.2. Limitations and directions for future research

The main contribution of this study consists in shedding light on the socializing function of parent-child homework interactions. Despite being mainly viewed as an activity devoted to subject-related learning and aimed at promoting children's school success, homework also provides ethical affordances prompting moral talk whereby parents introduce their children to some constitutive, taken-for-granted pillars of human sociality. Even though previous research has shown that there may be either alignment or tension between family and school (Lewis & Forman, 2002; Caronia, 2023), in our corpus we only found cases where the moral principles evoked by parents were essentially aligned with the prototypical “morality of the school” (Thornberg, 2009). We acknowledge that a limitation of this study is related to a sample bias deriving from the ethnographic, video-based research design adopted. Indeed, participants who accept to take part in this kind of research are typically those who perceive themselves as (and often are) aligned with the culturally established ‘ought to be’ orders implied in the educational practice under scrutiny, in this case homework. It is unlikely that those who perceive themselves as (and often are) not aligned with mainstream educational models accept to have their everyday life video-recorded. Consistently with this well-known sample bias, in this study we did not have access to homework as it unfolds in ‘uninvolved’, hard-to-reach, or vulnerable families: our corpus only includes parents who visibly share the educational model of

‘involved parenting’ and play an active role in homework. Further research would be necessary to investigate how the homework activity is accomplished in such ‘uninvolved’ or vulnerable families, in order to discover if and how homework prompts parent-child moral talk and what kind of moral assumptions and values are made relevant in the unfolding of interactions in these families.

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None.

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