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# ACCOUNTABILITY IN FAMILY DISCOURSE

## Socialization into norms and standards and negotiation of responsibility in Italian dinner conversations

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This article explores morality as situated activity and approaches the discursive practice of accountability in Italian family dinner conversations as an avenue for understanding the construction of moral behaviour in everyday interpersonal interaction. The article focuses in particular on *vicarious* accounts, namely accounts, or explanations, provided by parents for a child's misbehaviour. It examines the multiple socializing functions that vicarious accounts accomplish and the different dimensions of responsibility that they mobilize. While scaffolding children's participation in episodes of accountability, vicarious accounts set up constraints on children's autonomy of action, neutralizing more subversive and blameworthy interpretations of their problematic conduct. In this sense, vicarious accounts are qualified concessions and are face-saving acts both for the child whose action was signalled as improper and for the parent who initially requested the account.

### Introduction

Over the past two decades, studies in discursive psychology, linguistic anthropology and microsociology have explored *mundane morality* – that is, how people in everyday social interaction produce and are objects of moral evaluations, as well as how they assign and are assigned blame and culpability, praise and honour (e.g. Baquedano-López, 1997; De León, 2000; Drew, 1998; Duranti, 1993; Goodwin, 1998, 2006; Stokoe and Edwards, in press). These studies contrast with the more abstract and decontextualized approach to morality that has dominated developmental psychology since Piaget (1932). They also contrast with traditional sociological and anthropological approaches, which have conceptualized and analysed morality in terms of customs and rituals, depicted as preformatted patterns with a quasi-theoretical

status (Bergmann, 1998). Morality in these studies is approached as situated activity. Morality is *situated* insofar as it is lodged within specific interactional sequences (e.g. account sequences) and within certain social institutions. Moral action and moral discourse cannot be abstracted from the sequential and institutional contexts in which they are produced and which trigger and shape their production and reception.

In line with this trend in recent studies, this article explores the discursive practice of accountability as an avenue for understanding how morality is enacted and negotiated in everyday interpersonal interaction. Requesting and proffering accounts are practices that entail individual and interpersonal positioning within moral boundaries, which are concurrently being constructed in the same discursive activity. Thus the practice of accountability affords the enactment and reproduction of social order while contributing to the construction of participants' moral identity.

This article focuses in particular on account episodes in Italian family dinner conversation and analyses how parents support children's participation in such episodes. The multiple meanings and moral implications of parental scaffolding are explored.

An account episode is defined as a conversational sequence that originates with the signalling of a breach and then unfolds with the provision of an account that aims to mitigate or deny the moral charge associated with the breach. Account episodes in spontaneously occurring family interaction provide rich examples of how morality is encoded in the mechanics of everyday interpersonal and intergenerational exchanges: for instance, in account episodes we can witness which and how moral references are made explicit in conversation, how interlocutors acknowledge and align with those references and how moral attributions are assigned and negotiated. In addition, the analysis of how children are engaged by adults in account episodes – that is, how children are called to account for or remediate their (mis)conduct – sheds light on the transmission of moral values as well as moral discourse.

## Theoretical background

The study of *accountability* originated with Marvin Scott and Stanford Lyman's article 'Accounts', published in 1968 in the *American Sociological Review*. In their pioneering work, the two North American sociologists define an account as 'a linguistic device employed whenever an action is subjected to valuative inquiry. . . . a statement made by a social actor to explain unanticipated or untoward behavior' (Scott and Lyman, 1968: 46). Drawing on Austin (1961), Scott and Lyman distinguish two main types of accounts: *excuses* and *justifications*. The former are 'accounts in which one admits that the act in question is bad, wrong or inappropriate but denies full responsibility' (Scott and Lyman, 1968: 47). The latter are 'accounts in which one accepts responsibility for the fact in question, but denies the pejorative

quality associated with it' (Scott and Lyman, 1968: 47). The distinction between excuses and justifications is important not only because it introduces a useful systematization within the phenomenology of accounts, but also because it foregrounds the two fundamental dimensions of accountability, namely the negotiation of responsibility and the recategorization of the problematic conduct.

Despite recognition of the situated and dynamic nature of accountability, much of the literature that stemmed from Scott and Lyman's paradigmatic presentation of the phenomenon has examined accounts in isolation, abstracted from the sequential environment in which they are embedded (e.g. Schlenker, 1980; Schönbach, 1980, 1990; Semin and Manstead, 1983; Tedeschi and Reiss, 1981).<sup>1</sup> Besides dissecting the structure and components of accounts, in order to better understand how normative references and moral positioning are discursively constructed and transformed, it is necessary to focus attention beyond the account, taking into consideration what triggered it and what consequences follow. Furthermore, as I discuss later, it is crucial to consider the participation framework of account episodes, e.g. who solicits the account, to whom it is given, who actually provides the remedial move.

In investigating accounts as realignment and restoration devices, this article also draws on the work of Canadian sociologist Erving Goffman (1963, 1967, 1971). Goffman focused on accounts and, more broadly, on *remedial interchanges* (Goffman, 1971), extending analysis both to the other components of the remedial process (i.e. what initiates the episode and how it is closed) and to further remedial moves in the same sequential position of accounts. In Goffman's view, the *ritualistic* and *ceremonial* function of remedial interchanges is quintessential, to the point that remedial work 'is not communication in the narrow sense of that term . . . stands are being taken, moves are being made, displays are being provided, alignments are being established. Where utterances are involved, they are "performative". Mutually relevant figures are being cut. A ceremony occurs, something closer to a minuet than to a conversation' (Goffman, 1971: 119). While acknowledging the ritualistic and ceremonial features of account episodes, this article explores their constitutive and transformative aspects – for example, by analysing how individual moves that build account sequences activate different dimensions of responsibility, how moves are bound to each other and to what extent, and in what ways they can be negotiated and transformed.

In a previous article (Sterponi, 2003), based on the same corpus of data as this study, I have illustrated how constitutive moves and sequential patterns in account episodes are constructed and organized according to preferences that reflect and enact a deontic framework and a social order. More specifically, it emerged that Italian parents prefer to signal a child's misbehaviour first by requesting an account and then by expecting from the child an account in response. On an ideological level, requests for an account as a means of signalling misconduct and accounts as preferred remedial moves reflect a

moral perspective that promotes moral reasoning and thereby the negotiation of norms. By being asked to provide an account, children are positioned as moral agents who are responsible for their actions; and at the same time they are solicited to enact their moral agency. In this sense, requests for an account realize a practice of morality among Italian parents that tends to be inquisitorial rather than condemnatory, offering the benefit of the doubt (rather than condemning until proven innocent) and the opportunity to mitigate the ascription of fault before allocating guilt or punishment.

In this article, I focus on *vicarious* accounts, namely justifications or excuses provided by parents (and more rarely siblings) *for* children's misbehaviour. Vicarious accounts are produced when a child's conduct has been signalled as problematic but the child has not herself provided a remedy (i.e. an excuse, a justification or an apology) for the undesirable behaviour. In what follows, I first consider a few sequences in which a vicarious account is offered by the same parent who solicited a remedial move. Then I examine episodes in which the vicarious account is offered by a third party – that is, neither the parent who signalled the misbehaviour nor the child whose conduct was called into question. These examples illuminate the diverse functions of vicarious accounts and the different dimensions of responsibility that they mobilize.

### **Data corpus and analytical procedures**

The present study is based on 60 videotaped dinner conversations among 20 middle-class families living in four cities in Italy. In all 20 families, both parents were present. Selection criteria also included the presence of a child between the ages of 3 and 6, and at least one older sibling. The researchers recruited the families through principals and teachers in several elementary schools. In order to minimize intrusion into spontaneous unfolding of home activities, video recording of the family dinners was left entirely to the parents. The researchers only instructed an adult family member on the functioning of the video camera and were not present during the video recordings. The adult in charge of the video recording was asked to position the video camera, set on a tripod, in a corner or at the side of the room where the family dinner would take place so that all seated at the table would be within the frame. The video camera was turned on a few minutes before the beginning of dinner and turned off after family members left the table. A familiarization period of about a week was included in the research design as an additional device implemented to minimize reactivity – that is, the impact of the video camera on the behaviour of those being recorded. During that initial stretch of time, the families were asked to begin video recording their meals. These first few video recordings, however, were not included in the corpus of data transcribed and analysed.

Transcription of the dinner conversations was done according to the procedural and notational conventions of conversation analysis (Atkinson and Heritage, 1984). Besides linguistic production, transcripts contain information about prosodic and non-linguistic aspects of the conversations, such as emphasis, sound stretch, pauses, overlaps, eye-gaze, gestures, etc. (See the Appendix for the symbols employed in this article.)

For the purposes of this study, account sequences were singled out and analysed. A total of 243 sequences were examined; of these, 84 included vicarious accounts. The methodological procedures for data selection and excerpt analysis adopted in this article are drawn from discursive psychology (Edwards and Potter, 1992; Potter, 2003; Potter and Wetherell, 1994) and conversation analysis (Drew, 2003; Goodwin and Heritage, 1990; Sacks, 1992). Neither discursive psychology nor conversation analysis is a method as such; rather they are approaches that encompass both theoretical and analytical principles.

A fundamental theoretical principle of both perspectives is that talk is a form of action and the central medium of human socialization. Thus, ordinary conversational interaction is seen as a valuable locus for investigating various social and cognitive phenomena, notably the construction and transmission of epistemic and deontic stances (Edwards, 1997). In addition, this approach foregrounds the participants' perspectives; that is, it derives the categories employed in the analysis from the orientations and categorizations exhibited by the participants. By declining to use predetermined normative categories and instead founding the analysis on what the participants themselves make relevant and utilize in interaction, the researchers aim to attain a better understanding of social and psychological processes *in action*, such as the spontaneous practice of cognition and morality in everyday activities and interactions.

The following seven excerpts from family conversations are representative samples of vicarious accounts. My analysis considers: (1) the actions leading up to the signalling of a breach; (2) what preferred response that signalling action projects; (3) how the recipient responds to that action; and (4) how the interlocutors in turn react to the recipient's response, or lack thereof.

### **Socialization into accountability**

Accountability has an inherently dialectical character: to be assumed accountable for one's own conduct implies a positioning of the individual as an autonomous and responsible agent. At the same time, accountability exerts a controlling function, which limits individuals' actions. In other words, the request for an account grants autonomy to the individual as agent, but at the same time it limits autonomy of action. Similarly, socialization into and through accountability implies concurrently the transmission of norms and moral standards as well as a sense of individual autonomy and freedom.

As is common in other domains of learning, in the process of socialization into accountability competent members guide and assist novices' participation in the activity (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Resnick et al., 1997; Rogoff, 1990, 1995; Wood et al., 1976). Experts' scaffolding often consists of modelling the moves that novices seem not yet able to produce. Vicarious accounts perform this primary modelling function, showing the child how he/she should participate in episodes of accountability. In other words, the vicarious move exemplifies how to remedy improper conduct: what remedial move should be performed, plus which semantic and moral dimensions should be mobilized.

Excerpt 1 is extracted from the central phase of a half-hour long dinner among the Delfini family.<sup>2</sup> Since the beginning of dinner, 10-year-old Serena, who is recovering from the flu, has been displaying a lack of appetite. A few minutes before excerpt 1, the mother has served a tomato salad but Serena has refused to accept any. The bowl with the remaining tomatoes has been left on the table near Serena. When the father asks for the bowl (line 1), Serena replies with a blatant and unmitigated refusal to pass it (line 2). Facing this rude and face-threatening act, father asks Serena for an account ('why?') and shortly thereafter offers a candidate excuse ('you feel sick don't you?') (line 3):

*Excerpt 1*

Delfini family – Participants: Mamma (Maria); Papà (Elio); Serena, 10;7 years; Daniela, 5;6 years.

1. *Papà:* Serena puoi passarmi i pomodori  
*Serena can you pass me the tomatoes*
2. *Serena:* NO  
NO
3. → *Papà:* e perché? (.) ti senti male?  
*and why? (.) you feel sick don't you?*
4. (2.0) (*Serena lowers her gaze*)
5. → *Papà:* c'hai la faccia sbattuta (.) Serena  
*your face looks tired (.) Serena*
6. *Mamma:* è dimagrita Serena in questi due giorni.  
*she lost weight over these two days.*
7. (2.0)

Father's vicarious excuse is not fully ratified by Serena, who lowers her gaze and assumes a slumped posture (line 4), whereupon further evidence in support of the proposed excuse is provided (line 5). Thus the father first suggests that when a refusal is produced a reason for this unwelcome action should be provided. Then he himself offers an excuse for his daughter's insolent behaviour. In this way, the father both reminds Serena of his expectations with respect to dinner table manners and responses to requests, and at the same time socializes her into accountability, indicating the sort of excuse that could be employed to mitigate the negative implications of a refusal to pass the salad.

Mother's subsequent intervention (line 6) corroborates the father's claims that Serena has not been feeling well. Thus this move is both a defence of Serena and an alignment with the father's position. As such, it achieves a conciliatory effect and closes the sequence.

It is possible to further unpack the complexity and multifunctionality of vicarious accounts by considering additional meanings that the lack of a child's remedial move might take. Consider another conversational sequence. In excerpt 2, we find the Tempio family just a few minutes into their dinner (as a whole, 20 minutes long). Pasta has been served and everyone has started eating. Three-year-old son Mattia stops eating, raises his glass and asks for some water. The form and tone of his request are bold (line 1): the presence of the personal pronoun at the beginning marks the utterance as ego-assertive;<sup>3</sup> the employment of the modal verb 'I want' and of an emphatic prosodic contour strengthen the peremptory character of Mattia's request. The father first replies non-verbally, directing the child to calm down (line 2). Mattia does not reiterate his request, but also does not lower his glass or apologize (line 3). Father then offers a vicarious reason for Mattia's improper conduct (line 4):

*Excerpt 2*

Tempio family – Participants: Mamma (Donatella); Papà (Teo); Sara, 8;7 years; Mattia, 3 years.

1. *Mattia:* io vojo BEve:  
*I want to DRInk ((with an angry tone; raising his glass towards Papà))*
2. (0.8) ((*Papà looks at Mattia and moves his right hand back and forth urging Mattia to calm down*))
3. → *Papà:* mhm. sembri un pò stanco eh?  
*mhm. you seem a little bit tired, uh?*
4. (0.4) ((*Mattia nods and lowers the glass*))
5. → *Papà:* di solito a quest'ora si dorme.  
*usually at this time you would be sleeping.*

The father's vicarious excuse (line 3) portrays Mattia's impatience and effrontery as a sign that the child is tired. In addition, the father acknowledges Mattia's tiredness as legitimate given the late hour (when usually 'you would be sleeping' [line 5]). Father proffers the excuse in the form of a question: Mattia is called to explicitly ratify it. Thus, after signalling Mattia's unacceptable behaviour the father produces an excuse that circumscribes its negative implications. These two moves – which could be characterized both as face-threatening and face-saving acts (Brown and Levinson, 1978) – are not contradictory: the excuse acknowledges the normative value of the preceding warning rather than invalidating it. Furthermore, by characterizing the child's conduct as indicating tiredness, the excuse excludes other interpretations of the conduct that are potentially more reproachable and subversive. In this sense, the excuse provided by the father is a qualified concession: the conduct with which the child is charged is excused only if it is due to tiredness – that

is to say, only if the meaning assigned to the behaviour and provided by the father is accepted by the child. As such, the vicarious account not only helps the one from whom an account was requested but also is a face-saving act for the one who solicited the account by signalling a problematic behaviour.<sup>4</sup> In addition, vicarious accounts represent justifications for parents' educative choices, specifically choosing not to repress and punish the child's problematic conduct more severely.

In summary, vicarious accounts are complex moves that reveal multiple dimensions of responsibility embedded in episodes of rule violations. The priming move in account episodes – be it an explicit request for an account or simply the identification of a behaviour as problematic – not only mobilizes the responsibility of the one whose conduct is questioned; it also displays the assumption of a certain moral position and corresponding responsibility by the one who produces the priming move and makes an account relevant. Consequently, vicarious accounts have various meanings and functions that are differently modulated in different episodes: sometimes their face-saving function seems to prevail over other functions, such as in excerpt 2; at other times their socializing scope predominates, such as in the next excerpt.

In excerpt 3, we encounter the Tanucci family about 10 minutes into their dinner. So far, conversation has been led by the mother, who is planning her next day's working trip to a nearby town and arranging logistical details with her husband and older son's help. Younger son Leonardo has been silent, but twice he has been reproached for belching. Notwithstanding, he belches again, triggering his parents' annoyed reaction:

*Excerpt 3*

Tanucci family – Participants: Mamma (Paola); Papà (Fabrizio); Marco, 10;6 years; Leonardo, 3;9 years.

1. Papà: ((Leo belches))  
[Leo BASTA  
[Leo STOP IT ((with severe tone))
2. Mamma: [ma che c'hai oggi Leonardo:?  
[hey, what's happening to you today, Leonardo:?
3. Leo: ((shakes head no to Mamma))
4. → Mamma: ti scappa proprio eh?  
you can't really help it, mhm?
5. Leo: ((nods))
6. → Mamma: ti senti tanta aria nella pancia?  
do you feel a lot of air in your belly?
7. Leo: ((nods))
8. Papà: ha bevuto tanto al parco (comunque)  
he drank a lot at the park (by the way)
9. Mamma: hai bevuto tanto al parco?  
did you drink a lot at the park?
10. Leo: ((nods))

Leo's reply (line 3) to his mother's request for an account (line 2) is minimal and not satisfactory. Therefore the mother intervenes, again offering an excuse, which mitigates the gravity of Leo's improper behaviour (lines 4 and 6): when Leo's belching is depicted by his mother as an involuntary act, one out of the child's control, Leo becomes the victim of an uncomfortable physiological condition.

The list of motives offered by the mother, and added to by the father (line 8), guides the child to 'recognize' his emotional and physiological states and provides him with a varied set of excuses that he can employ in future episodes of accountability. Such guidance can be seen to defuse the event, excluding, for instance, certain psychological interpretations (i.e. that the belch is an intentionally offensive act directed towards the parents) and foregrounding others. Once again, we can thus see how offering the child a remedial move neutralizes potentially subversive meanings of the problematic action.

In summary, the excerpts presented so far have revealed the various meanings of vicarious accounts offered by the one who, explicitly or indirectly, solicited a remedial move. More excerpts are examined in the next section. In these excerpts the account is offered by a third party – that is to say, neither by the parent who signalled the misbehaviour nor by the child whose conduct was called into question. It is shown that these vicarious accounts provided by a third party have different meanings and functions that are consequential for the unfolding of account episodes.

### **Vicarious moves and multiparty participation in account episodes**

In a previous study of the participation structure in Italian family dinner conversations (Pirchio et al., 2002), it emerged that family members frequently engage in shared conversation while seated at the dinner table. In other words, discursive activity unfolds along one conversational path and all the parties present can contribute to its development. Such permeability to collective participation also characterizes account sequences, in which a third-party intervention – in the form of a vicarious account – sometimes occurs as a subsequent and complementary response to another participant's priming move. Third-party vicarious accounts can activate further dimensions of responsibility that open up account episodes to the negotiation of responsibilities and moral positions.

An ordinary weekday dinner has just begun for the Quinto family. Upon arriving at the dinner table, 4-year-old daughter Adriana has declared that she is not hungry. Both parents have prompted the little girl to eat at least a few forkfuls of pasta. Adriana delays each bite of food and moves the pasta around on her plate. After prompting correction of this improper behaviour (line 1), the father asks Adriana to provide a reason for her impolite conduct.

It is, however, Adriana's older brother, Samuele, who responds to the father's request by offering a *motive* for his sister's misbehaviour (line 4):

*Excerpt 4*

Quinto family – Participants: Mamma (Flavia); Papà (Sergio); Samuele, 11;11 years; Adriana, 4;4 years.

- ((Adriana just keeps moving the food around on her plate))*
1. Papà: mangia bene. *((to Adriana))  
eat properly.*
  2. (.)
  3. Papà: ma perché stai mangiando così male?  
*but why are you eating so badly?*
  4. → Samuele: ha sonno. *((to Papà))  
she's sleepy.*
  5. (6.5)
  6. → Mamma: pare che non ie va. *((to Papà))  
it seems she doesn't want it.*
  7. *((Adriana puts down her fork. Father turns to Samuele and opens  
a new topic of conversation))*

Samuele's proffered excuse, 'she's sleepy', mitigates the gravity of the infraction by characterizing it as unintentional and unavoidable.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the vicarious account is also a valid excuse for Adriana's failure to respond to her father's request. The little girl does not resume eating and gazes sullenly at her plate. After a prolonged silence (6.5 seconds [line 5]), the mother intervenes, offering another excuse for Adriana's misconduct (line 6): Adriana does not feel like eating more, so she pushes the food around on her plate.

Besides presenting a vicarious account for the benefit of her daughter, the mother's intervention foreshadows that she will not continue to insist that Adriana finish her pasta. Father tacitly aligns himself with this position and begins a new conversation with older son Samuele.

Excerpt 4 thus highlights that when a vicarious account is offered, different stances may be taken by the different participants involved. A vicarious account may be a concession to the child whose conduct has been deemed problematic, and at the same time it may indicate disagreement with the person who has requested the account. Such twofold positioning has both moral and interpersonal implications, as is further illustrated in the following sequences.

In excerpt 5, the Minelli family is approximately halfway through their dinner (27 minutes long). Upon arriving at the dinner table, older son Luca commented that he'll have to be quick with his meal because he has to finish some homework for the next morning. While not picked up by the parents as problematic at that moment, this information will later trigger a tense exchange. As is the usual practice in this family, the dinner conversation has started with the children giving their mother a report on their activities of the day. Sara, the mother, has a full-time job as a state worker, while father works

part-time as assistant director for exhibitions in a public museum. Owing to their work schedules, the father picks the children up from kindergarten and school. Older son Luca has just finished relating his afternoon, which he spent playing at a friend's house. After a 12-second pause, during which all family members have been eating, father sternly asks Luca a question,<sup>6</sup> which the child does not answer. Silence (line 3) is broken by a third party, the mother, who produces a vicarious account (line 4) for her son:

*Excerpt 5*

Minelli – Participants: Mamma (Sara); Papà (Matteo); Luca, 10.9 years; Luisa, 3;10 years.

1. *Papà:* e perché non hai fatto il riassunto di artistica  
*and why didn't you do the art summary*
2. ancora non l'ho capito.  
*I still don't get it. ((to Luca))*
3. (4.0) *((Luca lowers his gaze))*
4. → *Mamma:* non ha avuto il te:mpo.  
*he didn't have ti:me ((head shakes no; threatening tone))*
5. *Papà:* beh il tempo ce l'aveva Sara  
*well, he did have time Sara*
6. (3.5) *((Mamma looks at Papà with interrogative glance))*
7. *Papà:* sono tornato dall'ufficio e gli ho chiesto  
*I got back from the office and I asked him*
8. c'hai compiti da fare Luca? (.) lui m'ha detto  
*do you have homework to do, Luca? (.) he said*
9. c'ho da imparare una poesia a memoria e basta.  
*I have to memorize a poem and that's all.*  
[...]
10. *Mamma:* embeh ma adesso finisce di mangiare subito  
*well now he's quick to finish eating*
11. e se lo [va a fare.  
*and he's going do it.*
12. *Luca:* [ma tanto non è- non è un riassunto lungo.  
*anyway it's not- it's not a long summary*
13. neanche una paginetta è.  
*it's not even a small page.*
14. *Papà:* sì ma non va bene ugualmente.  
*all right but that's not good all the same*
15. (5.0)

The mother provides an excuse, which lessens Luca's culpability by pointing to the father as responsible for the inconvenient situation. The fact that the father immediately replies (line 5), rejecting the accusation, makes it evident that the mother's intervention was not only *pro parte* but also *contra parte*. Thus, as the exchange unfolds, participation structure and interpersonal positioning are dynamically transformed: Luca, who was initially addressed and accused, removes himself from the exchange, lowering his gaze and remaining silent (line 3) until the end of the sequence. The father, at first the

accuser, is then considered responsible for the problematic event and is called to account for his conduct. At the beginning the mother is not involved in the exchange, but then she intervenes and becomes the primary recipient of the father's reply (lines 5 and 7–9). The episode closes with all three participants moving towards reconciliation: the mother accepts the father's account and at the same time reaffirms her protective stance towards her son (lines 10 and 11). Luca minimizes the consequences of the situation by pointing out that the homework still to be completed is not at all demanding (lines 12 and 13). The father, while reiterating that the situation is not ideal, accepts the mother's and Luca's concluding statements (line 14).

Different stances with respect to duties and responsibilities are articulated and negotiated in account sequences through the participants' moves, such as the signal of problematic conduct, the request for an account, or the proffer of an excuse, a vicarious account, or an apology. Collective participation in account episodes activates multiple dimensions of responsibility and moral reasoning among family members, as is also illustrated in the following excerpt.

The Tanucci family has been seated at the table for approximately 13 minutes (of a 35-minute long dinner). While all other members have been enjoying the day's main dish, lentils, 3-year-old Leonardo has been very reluctant to eat. Both parents have been trying different strategies to persuade Leonardo to eat his lentils, notably verbal prompts, spoon-feeding and using the example of older brother, Marco. None of these strategies has proven particularly successful. As a further strategic move, mother then reminds Leonardo that on a previous occasion, when his little friend Pamela was there, he had in fact eaten lentils. It is thus Leonardo's lack of coherence between past and present behaviour that is called into question by the mother. Leonardo doesn't reply; rather, it is his older brother, Marco, who offers an account for Leonardo (line 6):

*Excerpt 6*

Tanucci family – Participants: Mamma (Paola); Papà (Fabrizio); Marco, 10;6 years; Leonardo, 3;9 years.

1. *Mamma:* ma proprio queste lenticchie  
*these lentils you really*
2. *proprio non ti piacciono?*  
*you really don't like them, do you.*
3. *Leo:* ((shakes head no keeping a sad gaze on his plate))
4. *Mamma:* e quel giorno quand'è venuta Pamela co-  
*and that time when Pamela came ho-*  
*com'è successo che te piacevano?*  
*how did it happen that you liked them?*
5. *→ Marco:* voleva fa' bella figura.  
*he wanted to make a good impression.*
7. *Leo:* ((shakes his hand and head no))

8. *Mamma:* com'è successo? [spiegamelo.  
*how did it happen? explain it to me.*
9. *Leo:* *[(shakes his hand and head no)]*
10. *Mamma:* no non fa' così che-  
*no don't do that-*
11. *(puts her hand on Leo's and lowers it down)*
12. → *Papà:* diciamo che s'è mangiato anche un pezzetto de  
*let's not forget that he also ate a little slice of*
13. → *pizza. eh!*  
*pizza. Mhm! ((moving his gaze from Mamma towards Leo; the*  
*interjection has a scolding tone))*
14. *Mamma:* e perché papà t'ha comprato un pezzetto  
*and why did dad buy a little slice*
15. *de pizza però?*  
*of pizza for you? ((in annoyed tone))*
16. *Papà:* eh papà non gliel'ha comprato. è quello  
*eh daddy didn't buy it. it was the bakery guy*
17. *dell'alimentari che pe' non sentillo che papà*  
*who in order to avoid hearing daddy*
18. *je diceva de no alla pizza lui jel'ha data.*  
*tell him no to the pizza he gave it to him.*
19. *Mamma:* *((laugh looking at Leo))*
20. *riesce sempre a farsi ascoltare.*  
*he always manages to get what he wants.*
21. *((Papà nods with smiling face))*

Marco's account in line 6 has a teasing tone; therefore, on the one hand, it is a face-saving account for Leonardo with respect to the present problematic circumstance, but, on the other hand, it is face-threatening with respect to the evoked past episode. This is probably why Leonardo is unwilling to ratify it (line 7).

The father's subsequent intervention (lines 12 and 13) has the same twofold import. By revealing that Leonardo has eaten a slice of pizza just before dinner, he justifies Leonardo's present lack of appetite. However, the severe tone of the final interjection, when the father directs his gaze towards Leonardo, casts a reproachful shadow on the very same conduct he evoked to account for Leonardo's lack of appetite.

In lines 14 and 15, the mother receives this reported event as a problematic one, but she reattributes the responsibility for it to the father. The criticism of the father is expressed using a third-person pronoun and reference to the parental role. In this way, the child remains mother's primary recipient, thereby keeping him involved in the exchange even when the charges are transferred to another participant. The father then replies, denying his responsibility for the problematic event (lines 16–18), and the episode is closed with the mother's withdrawal of accusations and reconciliatory appreciation of Leonardo's ability to obtain whatever he desires (lines 19 and 20).

## Conclusions

In this article I have used Italian family dinner conversations to illustrate how moral standards are enacted and negotiated through the discursive practice of accountability. My analysis sheds light on how deontic guidelines and moral positioning are situated productions and how the normative is encoded in the various occasioned contexts of actions and discourse in everyday life.

Through an analysis of account episodes, this article offers specific insights into the multiple meanings and functions that vicarious accounts may have in parent–child interactions. When children do not provide a solicited remedial move, other participants may intervene in the space left empty.<sup>7</sup>

More generally, vicarious accounts have a socializing function, showing and modelling for children preferred interpretations of human conduct, expectations of them and discursive resources for interpersonal moral positioning. In other words, the vicarious account shows the child what he/she is expected to feel and do as well as how to remediate his/her improper conduct. While it was beyond the scope of this article to follow up on the efficacy of parental scaffolding in account sequences, it is worth mentioning that older siblings were less often the recipients of requests for accounts or of vicarious accounts than younger children. Considering that older siblings were also less frequently the target of immediate correction – yet in their case (and differently from younger children) the percentage of immediate corrections is greater than that of requests for accounts – it is legitimate to speculate about the socializing outcomes of account episodes.

When a vicarious account is offered by the same interlocutor who made it relevant (as in excerpts 1–3), the remedial move usually consists of an excuse, which mitigates the negative valence of the infraction without denying that it is untoward. The parent positions him-/herself as the warrantor of the community's system of norms and values, and from that position he/she also grants concessions and extenuating reasons. The parent's move is not, however, an indication of unconditional forgiveness. Acceptance and ratification of the vicarious account is the inescapable *viaticum*. At the same time, the vicarious account, by excluding potentially more seriously offensive and/or subversive meanings of the problematic conduct and of the absence of a remedial reply, accomplishes a face-saving function for the parent who opened the account sequence. Therefore, while encouraging children's participation in episodes of accountability – assisting them in constructing and defending a satisfactory moral position – vicarious accounts set up constraints on children's autonomy of action, neutralizing more subversive and blameworthy interpretations of their problematic conduct. In this sense, vicarious accounts are qualified concessions and face-saving acts, both for the child whose action was signalled as improper and for the parent whose priming move made an account relevant.

When it is a third participant who produces a vicarious account (as in excerpts 4–6), the remedial move usually provides defensive arguments for

the accused. Such moves often mobilize further dimensions of responsibility and moral reasoning that expand the participation framework, trigger new accounts and produce the negotiation of norms and moral positioning.

Across the various ways in which account sequences unfold, there emerges an overall orientation of family members to end these episodes with the attainment of collective realignment (Stokes and Hewitt, 1976). When a problematic event disturbs the family equilibrium, it is crucial that a reconciliatory move be produced, and any family member can initiate such an act of realignment. In this sense, the responsibility for resolving problematic situations is spread among family members, and it is also the family as a collective entity that is involved in the front line of the activity. As such, accountability in the Italian family emerges as a polyphonic and choral activity.

Family meals are cultural sites where a community ethics is instantiated and transmitted, through activities such as narration, planning and accountability (Ochs and Shohet, 2006). What emerged in the present investigation on vicarious accounts, converges with findings from previous studies of Italian dinner conversation (Fasulo and Pontecorvo, 1994; Fatigante et al., 1998; Menghini et al., 2000; Ochs et al., 1996; Pontecorvo and Arcidiacono, 2007; Pontecorvo and Fasulo, 1999). These works discerned patterns of socialization and sociability among middle-class families that are concurrently oriented to the cultivation of the individuality of each member (including young children) and to the strengthening of family bonds and a sense of shared responsibility. Notably, in a seminal cross-cultural study examining the discourse of taste among 10 middle-class Italian families living in Rome and Naples and 10 middle-class Euro-American families living in Los Angeles, anthropologist Elinor Ochs and psychologists Clotilde Pontecorvo and Alessandra Fasulo observed that Italian family discourse about food as pleasure and about taste as undisputable personality characteristic socializes children to an early recognition of their individual identity and fosters children's expression of personal preferences and perspectives (Ochs et al., 1996). At the same time, the Italian orientation towards nurturing individual tastes consolidates a relationship of emotional interdependence among family members as recognition and fulfilment of individual food preferences are achieved through elaborate acts of culinary labour, which in turn require expression of gratitude and praise in response (Ochs et al., 1996: 41).

Moral discourse and account episodes in the Italian families considered in my study exhibit comparable socialization patterns: the request for an account positions the child as a moral agent and calls for the expression of his/her individual moral stance. Vicarious accounts work to scaffold children's exercise of moral agency. At the same time, however, we have observed that vicarious accounts constrain children's space of manoeuvre and set conditions for satisfactory remedial moves. Furthermore, the propensity to offer vicarious accounts to share moral responsibility and restore order and equilibrium resonates with socialization patterns that instantiate and reinforce family ties

and collective identity. It is thus possible to conclude that the multifunctionality of vicarious accounts in the observed family dinner conversations reflects and reproduces distinctive characteristics of Italian cultural apprenticeship.

### Appendix: Transcript notations

- . The period indicates a falling, or final, intonation contour, not necessarily the end of a sentence.
- ? The question mark indicates rising intonation, not necessarily a question.
- , The comma indicates 'continuing' intonation, not necessarily a clause boundary.
- ::: Colons indicate stretching of the preceding sound, proportional to the number of colons.
- A hyphen after a word or a part of a word indicates a cut-off or self-interruption.
- word Underlining indicates some form of stress or emphasis on the underlined item.
- WOrd Upper case indicates loudness.
- ° ° Degree signs indicate segments of talk that are markedly quiet or soft.
- > < The combination of right- and left-pointing angled brackets symbols indicates that the talk between them is compressed or rushed.
- < > In the reverse order, they indicate that a stretch of talk is markedly slow.
- = An equals sign indicates no break or delay between the words it connects.
- (( )) Double parentheses enclose descriptions of conduct.
- (word) When all or part of an utterance is in parentheses, this indicates uncertainty on the transcriber's part.
- ( ) Empty parentheses indicate an inaudible stretch of talk.
- (1.2) Numbers in parentheses measure silences in tenths of a second.
- (.) A dot in parentheses indicates a 'micropause'; ordinarily less than two-tenths of a second.
- [ Separate left square brackets, one above the other on two successive lines with utterances by different speakers, indicate onset of a point of conversational overlap.
- hhh the letter 'h' indicates audible aspiration.

### Notes

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1. Several more articulated and multilayered typologies of accounts have been put forward. For instance, social psychologist Peter Schönbach (1980, 1990) has proposed a classification that includes concessions and refusals, besides excuses and justifications. Each of these four classes is then further broken down to a total of 122 types of responses to deviant acts.
2. All participants' and family names are pseudonyms.
3. Italian is a pro-drop language.
4. The lack of a reply from the child, for instance, could be an act of resistance against the normative framework being activated, an act of rebellion against the one who has appealed to those normative references.
5. The excuse implies a causal link between the physiological condition and the problematic behaviour.
6. The severity of the father's enquiry is conveyed both syntactically – through employment of a negative construction – and paralinguistically – through a steady voice quality and tone.
7. In conversation analytic terms, the space left empty constitutes a noticeable absence, which affects the interpretation of what follows and to some degree of what preceded (Schegloff, 1968, 1972).

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