

THE FAMILY IN DIFFERENT SUB-CULTURES

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Summary. - *The family has been considered, according to the different angles from which research has been conducted, as an anthropological reality; as an institutional segment; as an etiopathogenetic nucleus; as a communicative environment. The family, taken as a highly complex (open-closed) system, is by now a common conception not only among family therapists, but also for those concerned - from a transcultural point of view - with individual and family dynamics in connection with extra-familial dynamics in a society in constant and rapid transformation. The therapists must be able to contribute to a reconstruction of the interactive dynamics of the family network, stimulating the contribution that each member may make to reparative, and at the same time creative, development. In the various family typologies the model of a therapeutic network flexibly based on cultural identification may be introduced.*

KEY WORDS: open-closed system, therapeutic network, cultural identification.

Riassunto (la famiglia in differenti sub-culture). - *La famiglia è stata considerata, a seconda delle diverse angolature con le quali sono state condotte le ricerche, come una realtà antropologica; come segmento istituzionale; come nucleo etiopatogenetico; come luogo comunicativo. La concezione della famiglia, quale sistema (aperto-chiuso) ad alto grado di complessità, è ormai entrata a far parte del patrimonio teorico-pratico non solo dei terapeuti familiari, ma anche di coloro che si occupano - sotto un profilo transculturale - delle dinamiche individuali e familiari in connessione con quelle extra-familiari in una società in perenne e rapida trasformazione. I terapeuti devono poter contribuire ad una rielaborazione delle dinamiche interattive della rete familiare stimolando il contributo che ciascun membro può dare allo sviluppo riparativo e creativo nello stesso tempo. Nelle varie tipologie familiari può instaurarsi un modello di rete terapeutica basato flessibilmente sulla identificazione culturale.*

PAROLE CHIAVE: sistema aperto-chiuso, rete terapeutica, identificazione culturale.

Introduction

The family has been considered, according to the different angles from which research has been conducted, as an anthropological reality (by ethnology and structuralism); as an institutional segment (by sociology); as an etiopathogenetic nucleus (by psychoanalysis); as a communicative environment (by systemic relational doctrines), etc.

Among the models which have largely contributed to configuring the family as the set of nodes on a network united by significant interdisciplinary connections, we ought to point out those proposed by the social sciences [1].

The family, taken as a highly complex (open-closed) system, is by now a common conception not only among family therapists, but also for those concerned - from a transcultural point of view [2] - with individual and family dynamics in connection with extra-family dynamics in a society in constant and rapid transformation.

Here, more than a comparative (diachronic-synchronic) excursus among the different family systems of an ethno-anthropological and psycho-sociological nature, we may take the opportunity of examining certain "typologies of family formation", that allow us to consider the family as a "sub-cultural world" for the reproduction of psychological-cultural systems.

This evolution may lead to a family crisis that determines certain reflections of a therapeutic nature.

Family forms

All cultures, at the structural level, reproduce certain typologies (e.g. in cohesive, dispersive or mixed systems) which lead to the presupposition, outwith underlying genetic-hereditary factors, that the family is so deeply-rooted and inserted into the socio-cultural tissue to be considered, at least because of certain persistent characteristics, a *natural factor* and, by extension, a *universal event* [3].

But if it is truly a general fact, this is no more than an *ethnocentric pseudo-certainty* which, shared by a dominant social group, maintains that the family as such, on a par with other institutions linked to certain cultural contexts, may rightfully aspire to being regulated by the laws of nature.

As for the family, this is generally accepted as the more or less durable and socially institutionalised union between a man, a woman and their children [4].

This type of unit may be found as much in "primitive" populations (within so-called "traditional" cultures) as in "evolved" ones (within so-called "developed" cultures). The family structure can, in fact, be found in the Vedda groups of Ceylon among polygamous families and extended homosexual families.

There are, however, examples of complex societies in which the almost permanent type of family associations do not exist (e.g. in the Nayar of the Malabar Coast in India).

If the conjugal union is not to be stably found in different times and places, it can hardly be recognised as a requirement "of nature". In the same way, the biological mother-child link does not always result in the mother having to take global responsibility for the upbringing of her offspring (as, for example, in the Indi Tupi-Cawahib of central Brazil) [4].

The *cultural acceptance* of the family institution, founded on the conjugal union and maternal care of offspring, indeed not uncommonly reveals its wrinkles, at least according to ethnological research [3]. We note here that among the Nuer of the Sudan there exists a *legal matrimony* between women, one of whom is sterile, or, for economic reasons, among Yoruba males of Nigeria. Neither bear any similarity whatsoever to homosexual marriage [5]. While, on the other hand, one finds true male homosexual unions among the Navajo and Yuni with a traditional division of responsibilities.

There is also the *legal ghost marriage* (again with the Nuer of the Sudan) that recognises a family whose members are: the *dead party* (who is the legal husband); the *woman*, who, in the name of the dead party, is married to one of his relatives; the *substitute husband*; the *children* produced by this union.

The renunciation of the importance of physiological paternity is also found among Tibetans who practise a *polyandrous marriage*. The example of this family typology demonstrates that it is not the sex, nor the identity of members, nor biological paternity that holds a priority importance *per se* in the formation of the family. Today, we need only think of heterologous artificial insemination.

Returning to family situations closer to home, we find the *matrilinear society* in which paternal authority and inheritance do not pass between father and son, but between maternal uncle and his sister's children.

Among the Senufo of the Ivory Coast - matrilinear and polygamous - each spouse remains, after the marriage, within his/her original nucleus which, therefore, constitutes a family unit.

The *European family* also reproduces certain typologies reaching from ancient times to the present day in their various historic-social forms: from the people of the Mediterranean basin to the Italic races, from the Celts to the Greco-Roman civilisations, from Baltic societies to the Anglo-Saxons, from Slavs to Hungro-Finns.

Certainly the image of the European family and, by extension that of the western world, presents continuities and discontinuities between traditional and contemporary formations. The functions of economic production are now varied between the sexes with a new power assumed by women, the family is no longer united by religious constraints and educative functions have also been reduced.

Today, on the other hand, one may register perhaps a greater cohesion in terms of social assistance and care for the weaker members of the group.

We shall see (in paragraph "The family in crisis") what significance this evolution of the family may have.

The family as a "sub-cultural world" reproducing psychological-cultural systems

According to Donati [6] the family appears as a *sub-cultural world* which, other than the agent of genetic transmission, is also the source of psychological-cultural systems.

For *sub-cultures* one intends those cultural sub-systems defined on the basis of the quality and quantity of information characterised by one or more differentiated or specialized variants (ethnic, professional, political, sports, religious, auxetic, etc.) or as a form of opposition, distinction, or anomic deviance (e.g. drug addiction and crime) [7] or a minority.

The family may also be considered as a particular *sub-cultural formation* on the basis of communication criteria. It may present elements of continuity, but also of discontinuity, of conflict or deviance with respect to the general cultural system of a given society considered, at least statistically, "normal".

In this sense the family, as cultural sub-system, proposes itself as a *pre-interpreted universe* [2] by means of particular cultural micro-processes, specific relational tactics and also through its own existential semantics. In this way it mediates between man and society.

Psychoanalytic theories of the *Oedipus complex* brought interest to bear on the *family complex* and the entire *family constellation* consisting of the dynamics between the parental couple, their children and the other components of the *family network*, that, representing a *cultural sub-system*, may in fact be considered a significant communications network "closed" within the family nucleus and, at the same time, "open" to the outside world.

It was the Frankfurt school, and especially Horkheimer (1936), that in this regard furnished an interdisciplinary study concerned with the relevant interconnections bet-

ween personality structures, family dynamics and social structures, as well as the typology of human relations and changes in them.

From the methodological point of view, the Frankfurt hypotheses have been surpassed, especially in the work of Talcott Parsons [8]. It has in fact been maintained that psycho-cultural reproduction should be seen as a process of interaction between three sub-systems (individual, social and cultural).

The personality structure is in continuous evolution in the interconnections with which it is progressively involved (mother, father, siblings, other relatives and community group).

Personality structures take form through the progressive assimilation of the culture; they depend in part on the microcosm of the family but also on the supporting structures of society as a whole.

And starting out from these considerations, which in their turn have undergone further development [6], it would seem appropriate to use a *network model* which takes into account, from the interdisciplinary point of view, not only the various methods, but also the different contents that are inherent in relational and historical intrapsychic dynamics as well as the place the family occupies on the social scale and the relationships it establishes with other institutional systems (economic, political, religious, military, legal, etc.) [9].

Thus may be proposed *ideal-typical reproductions* synthesizable in different modes according to the prevailing type of psychological-cultural reproduction:

a) predominantly *traditional* type of transmission. Information is handed down, through time, in a manner very similar to the model. Eventual malfunctions could be provoked by excessive conformity, passivity or ritualism;

b) predominantly *acquisitive* rational-instrumental type of transmission. Here the family adopts strategies oriented towards social achievement, success, and a fulfillment that tends to value the advantages while discounting the cost of its achievement. Risk is greatest in the direction of anomic deviance [7] with a resultant crisis of values and norms or the risk of personal and social alienation;

c) predominantly *expressive* type of transmission. At the present time this is the most common means of psycho-cultural reproduction. Here the family system tends to positively reinforce the spontaneous manifestation of impulses and aspirations connected more with the pleasure principle than with reality or duty. Problems may arise connected with *narcissistic attitudes* not only in the rigorously psychoanalytic sense of regarding this sexual psychopathology as a perversion, but also in a wider acceptance of the evaluation of the "objects of emotional investment" and sexual and social relations where all function for mere egocentric and individual gratification. This type of formation, if generalized, could lead to a *culture of narcissism* which might distort the sense of community membership and impoverish the social sentiment.

A typology of family relations such as that described, has a certain descriptive validity at the level of empirical generalization, but certainly cannot propose itself as a strong reference model. Historically, there has in fact been a mix of the various ideal-types, especially regarding the symbol-leader system (e.g. professional religion), placement in the social scale (demands, ambitions), and prestige (status).

Today there are in fact many variables that intervene in the reproduction of psychological-cultural systems and that should be understood in relation to new resources and opportunities. One thinks, for instance, of the aforementioned conditions of today's woman who, with her awareness of new status roles within the socio-labour tissue, has changed her attitude towards sexuality, pregnancy, family planning and the raising of children.

These and other aspects have modified family style leading to a rapid evolution, if not indeed a veritable crisis in the psychological-cultural reproduction of the family.

The family in crisis

If the family institution constitutes one of the fundamental nuclei of the psycho-social context, one must ask what significance the evolution of the contemporary family assumes; if this evolution should be considered as a crisis; if the crisis is leading towards the extinction of the family as such. The different forms of human society demonstrate, moreover, that kindred or exogamic alliance determine development in different directions.

Where the accent is placed on the couple, conjugal solidarity will prove stronger than family ties and vice versa. The exercising of these alliances will assume a different weight according to the sexes, the type of social organization and work.

The family founded on conjugal ties, essential in certain historical contexts for a rigid social structure, would nowadays appear unable to easily survive.

Here, the fundamental cementing role linked with maternity is not denied, but it ought to be emphasised that, in the contemporary family there could be a shifting of role and emotional investments to other members of the group (especially the father, but also other components of the familial constellation) up to the point of a variation in the distribution of caring and educative responsibilities.

Such events may not only determine change through progressive evolution, but rapid mutation. This mutation manifests itself as *family crisis* [6] and appears to present itself today in certain groups that could be defined as *symptomatic*:

a) *crisis as differentiation*. The outline of individual families is highlighted by sub-cultural microprocesses which offer different solutions to different functional and structural requirements;

b) *crisis as catharsis*. This is a kind of purification of the family through forms considered "superior", such as areas of expressiveness and emotional communication directed especially towards the individual;

c) *crisis as deinstitutionalization*. The family irrevocably loses its traditional institutional characteristics, with no prospect of substituting other guidelines;

d) there is no shortage of other models formed according to new lifestyles or family styles in relation to emerging needs: all this must however undergo the scrutiny of the historical and scientific critic.

These reference outlines also define the field of sub-cultural alternatives [6] which refer to certain family formations:

a) *neo-structural forms of the two career family* (i.e. a professional career for both partners) and the *symmetrical family* (attempt at equality) with adult sexual roles interchangeable inside and outwith the family;

b) *alternative forms*. This is the union of free couples and the so-called *open* (with sexual liberty) or *plural* (with open sexual exchange) marriage, or in particular community situations such as the Israeli Kibbutz;

c) *problem forms*. Such as the voluntarily one-parent family, or those who decide to form a family through the union of several couples or homosexuals, both male and female.

Reflections on the theme of intervention

Such evolution of the family may lead to its gradual extinction or even to the so-called "death of the family" [4].

Even though today we are witnessing notable and frequent changes in the typology of the family, it would appear, however, that these, rather than mutations and dissolutions, lead to sub-cultural selection (morphogenetics), i.e. the agents of new structural codes [6].

It is possible that these changes affect the cultural evolution of the family through the accumulation of stress, conflict, communicative distortion and break-ups. All this may lead to an increase in pathogenic situations.

These subjects inform present day psycho-pathological and clinical debate in a transcultural scenario (from scientific-descriptive, phenomenological-comprehensive and dynamic-interpretative approaches); secondly, they are of notable significance in the forms of therapeutic intervention and types of individual, family and social intervention that, as we know, respect different theoretic-practical conceptions.

With the intention of uncovering the significance of the crisis and preparing articulated intervention in the case of family breakdown, we may think of certain principles of the individual-psychological model. These are implemented along the following guidelines:

a) development of the authentic realization of each individual;

b) analytic perception of the interactions and dynamics of the family system, intended as a network tending towards holistic unison;

c) consideration of the social context deriving from multiple institutions of which the family and its components are functional elements;

d) evaluation of the objectives that all members of the constellation, individually and/or collectively, aim to achieve.

The various paths of intervention within the family may largely overlap one another or remain discrete, but account must always be taken of the interaction of individual lifestyles and the family style as a distinct network.

The association of values and beliefs or expectations, in fact flows from one member to another of the constellation and the therapists can help them to identify themselves, explain, negotiate or change the many expectations.

If the family is organised as a network, each member ought to contribute to its function, subordinating and channelling a part of his/her own resources to the other "nodes" of the family-network. For the network system to remain unbroken, it must re-establish correct communication and plan and reorganise social sentiments.

The therapists must be able to contribute to a reconstruction of the interactive dynamics of the family network, stimulating the contribution that each member may make to reparative, and at the same time creative, development.

Family interaction, even in the different types attributable to various sub-cultural systems, reveals notable dynamic qualities: power; decision-making capacity; territories determined by distance, intimacy and unconscious collusion, coalitions, status-roles, rules, similarities, complementaries, and differences, myths and rites, styles of communication.

It is known, moreover, that the family constellation describes the position occupied by each person *multigenerationally* and that the subjective routes operating in families vary according to the positions occupied within institutions and society.

But it is for this very reason that in the phenomena of integration, non-integration and cultural transition [2] there converge many communicational universes with the use of verbal and non-verbal languages that may be of descriptive, expressive and normative types.

In the various family typologies the model of a *therapeutic network* flexibly based on *cultural identification* may be introduced [2].

The "transcultural subject" (individual, family, collective) that is disturbed or presents evident pathologies is configurable in a kind of map, landscape or portrait that reproduces interactions, power relations, conflicts, emarginizations and alienations.

These perspectives, alongside their medico-scientific counterparts, must be articulated in order to bring about a greater comprehension of family forms, their crises, their disfunctions and to improve the possibility of effective global intervention.

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