

## **Latest developments in the Italian family**

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### **Abstract**

Dr G. Nardone and two collaborators of C.T.S. of Arezzo, Dr E. Giannotti and Dr R. Rocchi, have carried out a five year project (published in the essay “Family Patterns: How to Know and Solve Problems between Parents and Children” Ponte alle Grazie, Milan, 2001) revealing a significant correlation between psychological disorders and dysfunctional relationships in family life. The observation of how family members communicate with each other has allowed the authors to find six recurrent patterns of interaction, in the contemporary Italian family, which they have defined as follows: overprotective, democratic-permissive, self-sacrificing, inconsistent, delegating and authoritarian.

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It is well known that Italian young people continue living longer and longer with their parents. Anyhow this phenomenon is evident not only in Italy, it is present in other European countries as well. Anyhow whereas in Northern Europe the phenomenon is limited and follows the course of studies, in Mediterranean Europe lots of young people, although they have a job, continue living with their parents. The continuous postponing in the formation of new families delays the process of becoming an adult which implies taking on personal responsibilities.

In the Mediterranean area, therefore, we can speak of what Donati-Scabini have defined "long family" where different generations live together but of adult subjects, and there is a perfect complementarity between the parents' protective attitudes and the position of privilege requested by their children; but it becomes a pathogenic form of family relationship blocking or delaying the natural development of the young boy or girl who need, in order to become autonomous and independent, to be able to take on personal and social responsibilities. These are the issues discussed in the book published by Ponte alle Grazie, 2001, "Family Patterns".

"Family Patterns" (E. Giannotti, G. Nardone, R. Rocchi) is the outcome of a 5 year research-intervention on the problems of adolescents and their families carried out in the Center of Strategic Therapy in Arezzo and in the 30 associated Therapy Centers present all over Italy. The research has allowed them to find out a meaningful correlation between psychological problems (school desertion, phobias, obsessions, deviance, eating disorders, etc.) and particular patterns of family interaction, patterns which needed changing in order to lead both disturbed children and their parents to unblock their difficulties.

The authors' aims in publishing the data of their therapeutic research are two:

1. to make Italian audience more and more aware of the growing importance family relationships have in mental problems, the stress is in fact to be laid not on the individual but on relationships; as the seat of mental sanity lies more in the relationships established by significant interactive bonds among different subjects, than in the single subject. Therefore the Batesonian ecological- systemic paradigm has been confirmed;
2. to carry on the research and show how a particular communicative interaction is chosen by the family as a key to any problem and difficulty and how whenever a type of communication is seen as the only possible resource at hand to solve any problem, it determines a rigid family structure which blocks the family in a hell-like prison.

The main purpose of the book is therefore to show how interactive prisons are formed and how, by using the most advanced ideas deriving from Palo Alto's model, it is possible in a short and very easy way, if compared to the complexity of the problem presented, to break the rigidity and lead the family towards an evolutionary cycle following the principles of constructivism, theory of complexity and 2° order cybernetics.

Our analysis started by observing what happens when families try to solve the problems they are trapped in. Among the verbal and nonverbal interactions recorded during counseling and therapeutic sessions, we have selected the most frequent and repetitive; the ones which appeared as a recurring refrain. Among multiple family interactions (to nourish, to protect, to cuddle, to educate, to renounce, to sacrifice oneself etc.) each family system usually tends to organize itself around the ones which will prove to be the most useful to

maintain family unity and create permanent relationships. In our experience we have noticed that those relationships are preferred which better fit one or both parents' beliefs. If rules become too strict they produce the "never-ending games", the "vicious circles" from which people cannot escape because nobody is able to change the rules reminding us of a record which gets stuck, cannot go on and produces the same sound ever and ever. Such repetitive types of behavior are often unaware processes for the people who enact them. For the researcher they become real "complexity reducers" that is reading keys of that particular pattern of family relationships which will guide him to build and apply a therapeutic intervention.

Behavioral and communicational redundancies in parents-children interaction, if repeated, produce different kinds of family patterns of interaction. The most recurrent in Italian society are:

- 1) Over-protective pattern: parents continuously substitute themselves to their children regarded as fragile, in so doing they prevent their growing up.
- 2) Democratic-permissive pattern: parents and children behave as if they were friends with the consequent loss of hierarchy and authority.
- 3) Self-sacrificing pattern: parents continuously sacrifice themselves in order to give their children as much as possible, expecting their children to do the same. The latter sometimes imitate them, sometimes they are ungrateful.
- 4) Inconsistent pattern: parents, feeling insecure and confused, shift from one model of communication to another. This behaviour makes them feel more and more inadequate to cope with educational challenges.
- 5) Delegating model: parents give up their leadership delegating their role of guidance to someone else (grand-parents, teachers, etc.). Consequently they are not perceived as a trustworthy point of reference.
- 6) Authoritarian model: parents exercise their authority in a despotic and inflexible way to point out that the strongest holds power.

Oscar Wilde's aphorism "It is often with the best intentions that we get the worst effects" perfectly fits with the Italian evolution of the relationship between adolescents and their families, as it has developed during the last decades.

Two tendencies in Italian parental educational style are, according to us, particularly common and dangerous if carried to their extremes: overprotection and friendship between parents and their children. Too much love offered unconditionally without the children deserving it prevents the assumption of personal responsibility and the making of personal life projects. Despite all those who are convinced love can only do good we have noticed how love might be suffocating and how unrequested love produces more damages than benefits. There is a perfect complementarity between the parents' protective attitudes and the position of privilege requested by their children which is actually a pathogenic form of family relationship, since it delays or even blocks the natural development of the young boy or girl who, in order to become an adult, needs to get autonomous and independent and he or she must be able to take on personal and social responsibilities.

Anyhow these patterns do not necessarily evolve into pathogenic systems or lead to a pathological condition in an adolescent. In the same emotionally stressing family condition a fragile subject, at risk of pathology, may emerge just as a stable and gifted one. It is rigidity and redundancy of modes of interactions between subjects or between the subject

and himself which lead to pathogenic vicious circles, if they are not changed. Therefore pathologies are the effects of complex interactions not of preconditions; what may be healthy in small doses, may be lethal in big doses.

Parents and children will find in the various chapters the analytic description of the rules of the above-mentioned patterns, of the meanings which emerge from their application and of the pragmatic consequences.

Theoretical descriptions are always followed by the presentation of real clinical cases. The strategies used to solve problems are simple and clear and show how therapy may effectively influence the negative mechanisms which determine the persistency of the problem.

On the whole what is offered is a clear picture of contemporary Italian families, but above all a map of effective strategies and solutions able to bypass resistance to change and break rigid patterns formed in the course of many years of protection and narrow-mindedness.

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