

INTRODUCTION

The volume presents psychological and sociological essays on family transitions as emerged during the 5th Congress of ESFR¹ (European Society on Family Relations) *Family transitions and families in transition*², hosted by the Athenaeum Centre for Family Studies and Research of the Catholic University in 2010 in Milan.

Aim of the Congress was to thematize the dynamics and context of family transitions/families in transition through a wide number of key themes, such as: transition to married life; transition to parenthood (including adoption and foster families); transition to adolescence and adulthood; transition to old age; transition to divorce and remarriage.

Furthermore the Congress addressed major contextual events affecting family life, such as political changes and family development, cultural changes and family structure, economic hardship, welfare state changes, intra- and inter-generational processes describing/explaining the transitions that families face during their life, strategies and approaches that support family transitions and families in transition at political, social, and relational level.

The volume is divided in two parts: the first one portrays different theoretical contributions by outstanding family scholars like Pierpaolo Donati, Johannes Huinink, Kurt Luescher, Froma Walsh, and Eugenia Scabini, while the second set of chapters presents a number of empirical studies concerning specific transitions.

¹ ESFR is an interdisciplinary scientific association for European research on families and family relations. Its purpose is to serve as a network, to support and to link family research as well as to exchange its results. It has been established as a federation of family researchers and of family research institutes within Europe in the first place, but ESFR also welcomes researchers and institutes outside of Europe as affiliates. The organisation was founded in Nijmegen, in The Netherlands, in late 2002 (<http://www.esfr.org/>).

² Major objective of the Congress was to present innovative research on family relations and facilitate the exchange of today's knowledge and current ideas in the vast and still-expanding area of research on family relations. Overall, the Congress brought together about 400 family researchers from thirty one countries, giving proof of a large participation and growing interest around family-related issues in Europe and beyond.

The major topics depicted in the present volume concern the transitions that the family faces during the course of life, the identification of resources and risks associated with such transitions, and the processes undergone by the family whenever a transition occurs.

The key transitions in the family life cycle are brought about by predictable or unpredictable events like gaining new members (marriage, birth, adoption...), losses or threats of loss (death, illness...) and breaking up of existing relationships (separation, divorce, migration, left-behind families...). Other equally specific events appear less focused and delimited, such as the transition to adulthood or old age. Families therefore have to reorganize their relationships in response to the challenges set off by these transitions.

Moreover, families are always in transition, as they are involved into the economic, social and cultural events characterizing the contemporary world, and thus have to manage the challenges prompted by setbacks like financial problems, job mobility or loss, natural disasters, political changes, and so on.

All the transitions that the family experiences may either point to a difficulty to cope with change, or represent valuable opportunities to transform relationships. When a transition occurs, the family finds itself at a crossroad: it can either re-organize its relations or let them degenerate. Hence in the process of coping with the difficulties brought about by the critical events of the family life cycle and the social context, families may access to both internal and external resources.

Today, in the individualistic climate typical of our post-modern society, transitions are increasingly represented and experienced as individual processes, barely defined (both in terms of how and when), little ritualized, highly negotiable and subject to a wide range of choices.

In a sociological perspective, transitions have for long been a central concern in international family studies; however now there is need for a new model of analysis and intervention, which considers transitions from a relational point of view. As Pier Paolo Donati underlines, "Transitions are relational situations and processes emerging from causal factors which, in interacting with each other, create stressful relations that have variable intensity and duration... The family is and remains a social and cultural structure that cannot be invented by individuals as such, nor does it consist of relations of individual self-realisation. Those who conceive of it in this manner put themselves in a position of not being able to identify and define any transition while, as a matter of fact, transitions are experienced by people as relational conditions and processes" (Donati, p. 29).

Kurt Luescher also acknowledges that family theory and research are nowadays faced by the dynamics of the manifold ways people live and

understand their family life. This is accompanied by changes in knowledge and the guiding ideas about these developments. For this reason, the Author suggests the notion of “dynamically contradictory diversity” as a phenomenological “definition of the situation”. This idea relates to a “practice turn” in family studies, requiring us to take an unbiased look at basic familial tasks. Luescher locates the turn to practice in a comprehensive understanding of generativity, which takes into account the experience of alternatives, tensions and conflicts and proposes an elaborated notion of ambivalence as one of the keys for an analysis of contemporary family life.

In his contribution, Johannes Huinink considers the transformation of family development in terms of de-standardization of family dynamics and family structures as a consequence of de-institutionalization, equalizing sex roles, and weakening traditional family values. The Author looks theoretically and empirically at this transformation to show that in Europe not only traditional patterns diminish but new standards of embedding family life in individuals’ life courses emerge. The national and international diversity is result of the ongoing transformation.

From a psychological point of view, Eugenia Scabini notes that “It is precisely because transitions reveal and challenge relationships that they should be seen as an outcome of group dynamics. In our view, family grouping is inter- and trans-generational. The fact that transitions challenge and provoke the entire family organization, casting doubt on existing relational balances, can certainly result in development and transformation, but it can also lead to blockage and collapse in the relationships themselves” (Scabini, p. 17).

In such changing societies and turbulent times, Walsh points out, the concept of resilience – the ability to rebound from adversity – is especially valuable for families facing serious life challenges. How families respond can foster positive adaptation, with potential for personal and relational growth for all members. Her paper presents a research-informed Family Resilience Framework, identifying key processes that enable families to recover from trauma and loss; to navigate disruptive transitions (e.g. migration, divorce/stepfamily reorganization); and to thrive despite multi-stress, chronic conditions (e.g. illness/disability, financial strains). This collaborative resilience-oriented approach to practice strengthens family functioning, relational bonds, vital community connections, and resources to meet future life challenges.

The study of the family facing different kinds of transitions allows researchers from various disciplines to focus on the relational, symbolic, and structural aspects that constitute the family itself, while identifying resources, risks, strengths and weaknesses.

The second part of the volume collects some empirical studies, which can be classified in two broad categories: studies concerning the transition to adulthood, and studies whose primary reference is the couple and the expected transitions a couple has to deal with – marriage and parenthood – as well as unpredictable transitions like immigration.

Let's see in details the features of these studies.

1. Transition to adulthood

The transition to adulthood occurs either within the family of origin, or depends on the family of origin for its successful outcome. In other words, the transition to adulthood is a “joint enterprise” of both children and parents. Indeed, parents are in some ways actively engaged in this developmental task. The family, with its crucial position at the intersection of gender and generational lines, has always carried out this function of sustenance and support for its offspring. However, families' likelihood to support their younger members in a longer transition to adulthood is a new phenomenon. The slowing down of this transition is possible only because adolescents and young-adults can count on their families, and this applies to the Italian context as well as the rest of Europe.

Three contributions analyse family conditions enabling and supporting the transition to adulthood of young adults in different European countries. Marta et al. tested on an Italian sample a model aimed at measuring correlates of a new construct developed by the authors, the so-called “generative family atmosphere”. Different levels of analysis of generativity and different components of generativity – creating, caring and letting go – are investigated. Findings show how generativity can be regarded not only as an individual characteristic of the adult person but also as a process and an outcome within family relationships, a result of positive exchanges between generations.

It is well-known that the models of transition to adulthood are not similar across European countries. Drawing from the comparative research project YAGISSP (“Young Adults in Germany, Italy, Sweden, Spain, and Portugal”), the contribution of Thoennissen and Walper intends to show how different welfare regimes and specific family culture are likely to affect the linkage between the parent figure and the parental support provided to young adults, the so-called “offspring relationship quality”. While some findings confirm cultural differences in living arrangements, it's noteworthy that, across all the samples, emotional support from both parents results the most robust indicator of young adult successful individuation.

Also Oliveira's and Fontaine's qualitative research on a Portuguese sample stresses the importance of family support for dealing with the uncertainty of the transition. Within a context where young adults nowadays risk to live a flattened present, with the prevalence of short-term, often disconnected goals deeply focused on the present, the different forms of support provided by the family are likely to enhance the young generation to manage the temporal dimensions of life according to their medium or long-term goals, and to benefit from the best opportunities their socioeconomic environment has to offer.

2. Couples in transitions

A shared feature of the studies presented in this section is to shed light on relational factors and processes affecting the transitions that marital and/or parental couples have to deal with in different phases of their life.

Parise's, Iafra's and Manzi's paper investigates an interesting issue rarely considered in the literature concerning the transition to marriage: the development of couple positive illusions.

According to an intergenerational perspective the authors show both the family and the individual antecedents of these settings of beliefs and also their consequences for the couple and individual well-being. The findings describe the role of the family of origin and the interplay between individual and relational factors, and highlight how the process of differentiation from one's own family of origin is critical for the consolidation of the couple identity.

The way couples cope with major family transitions depends also on the acquisition of interpersonal competence developed during the daily family life. The ability of marital partners to regulate the emotional experiences and develop an adequate emotional interdependence is an important regulative function which helps the couple develop a reciprocal understanding and responsiveness. Adopting a social-functional view on emotional interdependence in marriage Schoebi's and Perrez's study shows in different European countries the importance of emotional responding for individual and interpersonal well-being, and points to the close interconnection between symptoms of depression and relationship functioning.

The transition to parenthood challenges the couple at different levels. Partners have to develop and strengthen a parental identity, which has to be distinct but also in continuity with the marital identity. At a social level, the family has to find an adequate balance between work and family demands, a well-known, never-ending, controversial task.

These challenges can be intertwined. Tina Miller's paper focuses on the role of fathers and investigates the extent to which the introduction of specific laws – such as parental leave for fathers in UK – is going to affect the practice and the social representation of child care and distribution of tasks in childrearing within the family. The longitudinal data clearly show that changing the practice of care is possible, though it still remains a slow process, influenced by ambivalent social policies. Nevertheless it seems clear that as time goes by the narratives of the family members are likely to anchor to more traditional roles and identities.

Despite the many difficulties encountered, couples appear also able to develop adaptive strategies to deal with work-family balance. In their paper, Matias and Fontaine analyze the coping strategies of a sample of Portuguese dual-earner couples. Interestingly, cross gender effects were revealed and show the pivotal role of the women in promoting and using strategies that have an impact on work-family conflict for both members of the couple. These findings confirm the high interdependency of marital dyad and the contribution of gender roles in the way families face critical events in the course of their life.

Another empirical study particularly interesting is the one conducted by Greco, Rosnati, Comelli and focused on the emerging issue of the transition to parenthood from the perspective of adult adoptees. The qualitative research carried out on a sample of Italian parental couples draws a comparison between the adoptee's mental representations of the transition to parenthood with those of their partner. The findings show some psychological and relational mechanism that offers the adoptee parent the opportunity to maintain the complexity of the dual connection, along the axis of their origin and that of their adoption.

Finally, an Italian contribution investigates a critical transition that is shared by a increasing number of families across the Europe and world-wide, the immigration to a foreign country. In their qualitative study, Gennari and Accordini analyze different ways in which immigrant couples coming from several countries adapt to the Italian context, highlighting in particular how those couples deal with and confront the cultural differences they encounter in the hosting country. Different outcomes are outlined and show a wide range of paths that these couples can navigate through in order to elaborate the migration process at individual and relational level.

In conclusion, it is important to underline the great variability of perspectives, methods and data analysis across these papers. The complexity of the family as a subject of research enhances the choice of different methodologies in relation to the objectives of the study and the phase of the life cycle under study.

The contributions presented offer a non exhaustive but significant sample of the state of the art of the research on the family. Not all the voices from Europe are included, nor all the transitions. But the voices included in the volume and their quality are encouraging and tell us that there is a growing number of family researchers whose goal is to promote the advancement of theoretical and empirically-oriented research at both the basic and applied levels.