

# Norm and Transgression in Family Education

## *Changing Families, Historical Features and Permanent Pedagogic Categories*

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### *Introducing the family as pedagogical subject*

We all have a direct experience of the shape and the meaning of a family, having been at least children of someone<sup>1</sup>. Families, in their historically defined shapes, are as ancient as the human being: if we broaden the definition of family to the clans, the tribes, or, at the opposite, to the singular mother-child relationship, we have to admit, that family must have been always there, since its necessity originates from the absolute need of the human beings to receive care as newborns, in order to survive<sup>2</sup>. Family, in its essential concept, could be seen as the body, which takes charge of this elemental surviving care.

In spite of this fundamental principle, the scientific or pedagogical interest towards family has developed at different paces in different countries, due to the particular role ascribed on it among their ideologies, traditions and cultures; the Latin speaking countries, for instance, started their disciplinary interest in the educational role of the family later than the English speaking ones, precisely, we might argue, because this role is taken for granted and non-meditated and – especially until recent decades – it has been deeply influenced by religious perspectives that focused on the

<sup>1</sup> Cf. P. Milani, *Una prospettiva internazionale sull'educazione familiare: ragioni, problemi, linee guida per l'intervento e la progettazione*, in P. Milani (ed. by), *Manuale di educazione familiare. Ricerca, intervento, formazione*, Trento, Erickson, 2001, p. 17.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. A. Gehlen, *L'uomo. La sua natura e il suo posto nel mondo*, Milano, Mimesis, 1983.

symbolic role of family as the human form in representing the divine gift of life. This symbolic perspective owns undoubtedly a value that transcends the religious dimension; in Italy, as a Roman Catholic country, it has had a remarkable representation, but a political and ideological perspective has been added to it – during the fascist era – that has held back scholars, in the reconstructing years after fascism, in addressing family issues, since they were worried to retrace the footprints of a dictatorial view and were unable, at least until the 1980's, to rethink the family's theoretical frames. Moreover, the Italian unemployment rates have been constantly high through different historical periods, a fact, which may have prevented rulers from a real work increasing women's policies, which would have also implicated a family supporting orientation<sup>3</sup>.

This neglecting of the female employment, we might argue, could have led for a while to a lack of influence by women in work/family matters, even if the Italian feminist movement represented, with its dynamism, a compensation to this gap.

According to Catarsi, however, as soon as Italy's family education emancipated itself from too strict ideological views and conflicts, it became able to open its perspective to different parental styles and familiar models, probably more than in the US or the UK, where family education seemed to be aimed at developing standard competences in parental educational activity and to be rather compensatory for families that weren't considered able at providing this competences by themselves<sup>4</sup>.

Among the Italian scholars who started a specific pedagogic interest in family, we would mention Norberto Galli and Luigi Pati, the latter considering family as a subject that must reconquer an educational role before incurring in the actual social communication's decay. He argues that, what is missing in the present society, is a real mutual communicating, due to social values that focus more and more on the individual<sup>5</sup>. Seen this, it is the family, which represents the essential model of the adult-young relationship, that has the task of shaping a relational frame being together reciprocal, dialoguing and value-oriented<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. E. Catarsi, *Pedagogia della famiglia*, Roma, Carocci, 2008, p. 15.

<sup>4</sup> *Ivi*, p. 41.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. L. Pati, *Pedagogia della comunicazione educativa*, Brescia, La Scuola, 1984.

<sup>6</sup> *Ivi*, p. 83.

Pati stands on the feature of circularity in educational communication, seen as the capability of the educator to incorporate in their ongoing action an interpretation of the child's responses. The idea of circularity in education, embedded in a systemic view of family and in a dialoguing and reflective educational approach, seems to be later resumed by authors, which may not be necessarily directly influenced by the forementioned: Formenti highlights circularity as one of the most important parental educational characters, while Donati underlines family in its relational role, as it will be pointed out later.

Proceeding along a critical and radical pedagogic view<sup>7</sup>, in order to examine family as educational subject, we will try at first to define some of the words we're using, words so plunged in our all-day language, that we might lose track of their deep meaning. It is the case of 'family' itself: it is possible to describe family employing different metaphors and perspectives. These could be the sentimental, the mechanical<sup>8</sup>, the organic, the systemic perspective; or these could be the cultural or memory related perspective<sup>9</sup>. Each one of the forementioned perspectives emphasizes different elements related to family, but there's an element, that insists – in different ways – as well in the mechanical, as in the organic and in the systemic perspective, for which family is a 'body' in its entirety and everything that comes in touch with a part of it, causes effects on every other singular part.

The approach that stresses the relational function of family, observing it especially under a pedagogical lens, is linked to this 'systemic' perspectives, in as far as it points out that relationship, in its features and meanings, is primarily a familiar creation and family has the main educational task to build the structure of an individual's human relationships<sup>10</sup>.

However, amidst the perspectives of the family as a relational educational core, we should find a way to observe it (and to work on it, in an operative perspective), not only highlighting its relational and systemic essence, but also its standing out singularities.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. R. Fadda, *Promessi a una forma*, Milano, FrancoAngeli, 2016, pp. 75-76.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. M. Knowles, E. Holton III, R. Swanson, *The Adult Learner*, Burlington, Elsevier, 2005.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. L. Formenti, *Pedagogia della famiglia*, Milano, Guerini, 1990, pp. 24-60.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. P. Donati, *La famiglia nell'orizzonte del XXI secolo: quale empowerment?*, in P. Milani (ed. by), *Op. cit.*, p. 88.