

CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES FOR INTRAFAMILIAL RELATIONS

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Abstract: *Nowadays we live in a time of rapid changes, from a social, industrial and technological standpoint. Profound mutations in family institution can be observed, regarding the family structure, lifestyle and the cycle of family life. Today's tendencies reflect a clear distinction between marriage and the activity of raising children, as we can notice the increased number of marriages without children or the number of single-parent families. That is why, the present paper focus on these two types of intra-family relationships: couple's relationship and parent-child relation, pointing out some changes and challenges of contemporary period.*

Key words: *family relations, couple's relationship, parent-child relationship.*

1. Introduction

Interpersonal relationships are the central part of human existence - this fact therefore justifies scientists' increased preoccupation to study them. Nelson-Jones (1996, p. 3) mentions that the main characteristic of relationships is connection, with the addition that: "humans are social animals who cannot avoid relationships. We are condemned not only to exist but to relate."

An important type of social bonds within an individual's life is represented by familial relationships. The interactions and social exchanges that happen between the members of a family can be found in varied shapes and forms. Therefore we can speak about: couples' relationships; the relationships between parents and children; as well as the relationship between siblings.

Although we spend more and more time at the workplace at the expense of household intimacy, familial relationships still exist and will always exist, despite the gloomy forecasts that claim family will no longer be viable in the future. Instead of seeing family as an old-fashioned, surpassed institution (as pessimists suggest), the optimistic view is that family will provide stability, the sense of belonging and communion, necessary to adapt to a new society defined by fluctuation, alienation and individualism. Familial roots can be tremendously helpful in an individual's quest to seek and obtain autonomy - this process being accomplished by diminishing the existential anxiety generated by an ever-changing world that's often meaningless as well. The theoreticians who are confident in the family's ability to adapt to the new changes believe that career plan and domestic life are rather complementary instead of opposing, and that their possibility to interact is a

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contributing factor to increasing individuals' performance in any domain.

Even before the third millennium has begun, profound mutations in family life could be observed - thus the nuclear, traditional family was seen as a thing of the past. These changes can be seen in the dynamics of divorce rates, marriage rates, fertility rates, life expectancy and the involvement of women in the workplace, as well as the transformations suffered by the family structure, lifestyle and the cycle of family life (Iluţ, 2005). Popescu (2010, p.7) synthesizes the characteristics of family today by stating that: "Family is going through a questionable period; therefore it is not possible to characterize it in simple terms. The postmodern family doesn't refer to a new family model or a new step in the evolution of family, but one in which the mere idea of evolution no longer stands."

In this era of rapid changes, from a social, industrial and technological standpoint, family values such as communion, belonging, loyalty, and dedication are often undermined by individualism, autonomy and the preoccupation to gain professional prestige. An example of this would be women prioritizing their professional accomplishments by allowing their roles within the family - wife, mother - to come second, whether it's by living with the other members of the family but spending few hours of their time with them, or by leaving the county/country in search of a more prestigious professional status.

Today, the only constant is change; therefore instability and diversity become defining characteristics of our daily lives. Bauman (2005) metaphorically addresses this issue by using the term: „tourist's syndrome”. In his view, an individual's life today is embedded with instability from all points of view: he changes his job frequently, his home, his friends, and his life partner, which makes him a “tourist” in his own life. Similar to this ideologically direction, a symbol proposed by Sprey (2000) can be mentioned here as well - he sees family as a “river” whose flow suggests the dynamic of family life throughout time.

The familial patterns don't change as quickly as society and not necessarily in the same direction, which is why the traditional and the modern can and even coexist in our times. An eloquent example in this sense is Eastern Europe, where the fall of the communist regimes led to new cultural models, new lifestyles that clashed with those specific to a patriarchal society. The diversity of these configurations is one of the aspects frequently seen in family life in Romania today. Popescu (2010, p. 7) believes that the essential transformations suffered by the Romanian family “can be reduced to the model of a more democratic family on the inside and more open on the outside”.

Today's family should be analysed, on the one hand, in the context of the dominant conditions of the time in which it appeared and, on the other hand, by looking into the conditions in which it evolves. In the industrial and post-industrial societies, the marital system was built especially to focus on the emotional and self-expression needs of the individuals, as opposed to their instrumental, economic or productive needs. The economic emancipation of women and the democratization and liberalization of social life in general are also characteristics of social realities which affect family (Iluţ, 2005). In regards to today's tendencies when it comes to the evolution of family life, it is necessary to address the distinction between marriage and raising children, because the roles of wife or husband don't automatically involve raising children too. These evolutions are reflected in the increase of single-mother families or marriages without children.

When it comes to the quality of familial relationships, Giddens (2000) believes that there has been a mutation considered fundamental: the pure relationship, a relationship that exists in and of itself, one that withstands social pressure. This type of bond is not only found in romantic relationships, but can also be identified in the case of other social connections, such as parents-children, relatives, friends.

The mission of the sociology of the family is to outline a global imagine that's also representative to family as a group. Therefore, family is not analysed separately, but within a macrosystem that also contains the individual, career, community, society and culture. The acquisitions of adjacent subjects are used in this frame, and this contributes to developing the study of the family, from thematically, theoretical and methodological standpoints.

In the analysis of the evolution of familial relationships, the following paper will focus on two important elements - romantic relationships and parent-child relationships.

2. Couples' relationships

When it comes to choosing a significant other, the transition from the options of others to our own involves not only a number of advantages, but it also comes with a price. The fight for the "survival" of the relationship requires the continual development of our negotiation and communication abilities, as well as our ability to relate and to solve the conflicts that arise inevitably in intimate relationships. Compromising may seem incompatible with the selfishness and individualism of today's world, but the reality of today's relationships shows us that they are necessary to move forward.

Couple's relationship can bring both pleasure and pain, they can prove to be a push in the right direction for the couple's evolution or they can be real burdens that are hard to carry. Will there ever be equality between "what I give you" and "what you give me" when it comes to the social and symbolic "exchanges" between the two partners? I don't believe so. Such a simplistic and quantitative approach of interpersonal relationships leads to an impossible situation, to a certain failure. The equity theory sheds a more comprehensive light on the issue by claiming that social actors in a context of co-participation judge "justice" by the balance between "how much I give, how much I receive" and "how much you give, how much you receive" (Iluț, 2005). If one of the partners or both perceive a profound inequality of that balance, then the relationship is rapidly devolving. A more accurate approach is the point of view that underlines the complementarity present in the "supply-demand" rapport, which focuses on fair distribution of gender roles and household chores.

The metamorphosis of the roles of husband and wife, enhanced by the increase of employed women and feminist movements is a consistent part of contemporary family life. Men and women juggle work, family and social obligations by seeking balance between the expectations required to fulfil these specific roles and their individual needs and available time.

Functional relationships involve, on both partners, the existence of an interest for the other's well-being and evolution, as well as the relationship's evolution. To relate effectively, a person needs the ability to experiment, to express and control their own emotions and feelings. The most important aspect of this capacity to relate is communication, in all of its forms. Being able to listen to the other person, being able to and wanting to share what you believe and what you feel are the basis of romantic relationships.

When it comes to the depth of the relationship between a husband and his wife, things are very different. On the one hand, we can mention “shallow” relationships, in which the two are rather consumers of material or symbolic products and services (very well integrated in today’s consumerist society), the discussions focusing mainly on questions such as what should we buy or where should we go for the holidays. However, all around us we also meet couples with a different type of relationship, where there is a willingness to think and discuss fundamental existential problems such as death, suffering, freedom, individual alienation. But depth is also a subjective concept and it is hard to label objectively a relationship as “shallow” or “lacking substance”.

A phenomenon that is becoming normal is the separation of marriage and parenthood. One of the consequences of this fact is a rise in the number of married couples who choose not to have children. Importance is still placed on the idea of an extended family and the reproductive function of a young family; however, nowadays it’s slowly losing ground in the favour of accepting and respecting the young couple’s choice. Therefore, we can talk about a decrease in social pressure regarding this aspect of a couple’s life. How does this alternative affect the relationship between the two partners? A possible answer is the increase of the supportive function, the two partners offering each other a more intense support, attention and understanding necessary for social and professional accomplishment.

An important source that generates satisfaction or disappointment in a marital context is represented by aspirations, expectations and the lifestyle of the two partners. The still relevant image of the “scolded” wife or even physically abused one because she refused to serve dinner for the husband when he demanded so, no longer fits our third millennium expectations.

We all desire relationships that reward us: a partner that cooks a surprise dinner for our birthday, children who thank parents for their love and support, a partner who’s willing to listen and put up with your pain, anger, confusion and helplessness. But between expectation and reality, there is often an abyss. Romantic relationships offer partners rewards too, among the inherent difficulties, increasing the longevity of said partnerships.

3. Parent-child relationships

A well-established tendency in contemporary families is the decrease in the number of children, and only child families have become more and more common.

For women, marriage and motherhood are different aspects - they both offer optimal conditions to raise a child, even if they are not married to said child’s biological father. Among the causes of this phenomenon, we should mention the increase of women’s economic independence, the liberalization of social life (the decrease of social pressure), the development of “high-tech” reproduction procedures and the changes in mentality.

The parent-child relationship has moved from the stage in which the parent was “in charge” and threatened, and the children “obeyed” (specific to traditional societies) to a stage that is characterized by the verb “to negotiate”. Also, we hear the sociological saying: “the socialization of parents by the children” more and more often. The negotiation technique and the new morality based on respecting children’s individuality made their lives easier and allowed them to forge a path for themselves. The price of this freedom is children taking increased responsibility for their choices.

A parent's main responsibility is to be attentive and receptive to their child's needs for a long period of time, but, as technology progressed, the roles change and parents are the ones who receive their children's help. The cultural and social change, present in the digital media society, creates new ambiguities, complexity, fears and expectations. Therefore, the digital revolution and the internet can create a significant inversion in the hierarchy of knowledge shared by parents and children.

For the first time, in many families, children are more knowledgeable than their parents. But the parent's openness to the children's influence and willingness to receive help from them depends on the general characteristics of the parent-child relationship. Grossbart et al. (2002) claim that the most susceptible to be influenced are "warm" parents (those who have a democratic or egalitarian relationship with their children) as opposed to "cold" ones (autocratic).

The increased life expectancy for both men and women affects the parent-child relationships too. People live long enough to not only see their children grow up, but they are also often present at their grandchildren's weddings. This phenomenon brings forward a new type of relationship, with its inherent benefits and costs, the one between parents and their children who became adults. Grandparents are, on the one hand, a much needed help when it comes to "babysitting" and a source of support during crisis in general, but, on the other hand, they are the "voices" of a different generation, the bearers of an opposing mentality. Therefore, this extension in duration of potential familial relationships requires a change in their nature, an increased flexibility on both sides, as well as tolerance to different opinions and options.

4. The relationships of the adults with their elderly parents

The parent-child bond is one of the most long-lasting, strong and stable social relationships that people create and maintain. This can be positive because it involves mutual support or can be characterized by irritation, tension and ambivalence. Parent-child relationships suffer or should suffer deep transformations along their cycle, because in one stage both adults and children are involved, and, in the other, only adults.

The ideal parent-child relationship is defined by the presence of two main components: warmth and affection on the one hand, clear rules and monitoring on the other hand, these two components varying throughout the years. If one of these ingredients is missing, problems will not cease to appear.

The relationship between mature individuals must be based on warmth, support and respect for the other's intimacy and choices. Therefore, one of the most frequent challenges in life is the dynamic that we have with our aging parents. Old age brings about a series of significant changes: along with the physical and intellectual decline, there are major changes in the importance of social roles (professional, marital, paternal). For some parents, admitting that their children are mature and no longer financially, emotionally and socially dependent on them often triggers a feeling of inner hollowness and uselessness. Within the family, an elderly parent doesn't have the same attributions they used to have in the earlier stages. Their involvement in their children's lives decreased, as well as the support given. In this situation, it is important to understand that the financial independence, gained by the child who later became an adult doesn't mean abandonment or that they lack gratitude, it reflects a normal stage in their development.

In his adult life, the individual can simultaneously play three different familial roles that clash with each other - parent, partner and child. It is the situation suggested by the expression “sandwich generation”. They must share their time and other resources between their own children, husband/wife and their elderly parents (who need different types of social support). This overload of roles generates a situation in which most adults experience tension and lack of free time.

The increase in life expectancy can also be reflected in the slow succession of generations. To assume responsibilities in the case of a family business, the child who later became an adult must wait until he/she reaches the age of 45-50 or even more. A lot of parents who wish for their offspring to inherit the family business learned that, in order to involve the young generation in their activity, they must treat their “children” as almost equal partners, otherwise they lose them, because they choose other fields to specialize in. (Goldscheider, 1997).

5. Conclusions

We are and will always be shaped by the mentalities we were taught. In most cultures and societies, stereotyping occurs very frequently, depending on the socio-economic conditions, the education level and intellectual openness. These stereotypes can be more or less pregnant and they are more or less accurately integrated in practical endeavours; but they provide an epistemological and assessment frame for the analysis of male-female and parent-child relationships.

To sum up, even though the social reality has become extremely complex and it is rapidly and continually changing, family is still alive and functional, it has a high adaptive potential to successfully withstand the challenges posed by today’s society and the tendencies we can already outline for the future.

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