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Family and Family Relations at the Time of COVID-19: An Introduction

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Introduction

‘They do not come from another planet and they are not born out of thin air. The perpetrators of the next pandemic are already among us, they are viruses that today affect animals but that could at any moment make a leap of species – a spillover in technical jargon – and also affect humans...’ These words, taken from a review, feature in the blurb for the Italian translation of David Quammen’s *Spillover. Animal Infections and the Next Human Pandemic*, published by Adelphi in 2014 two years after the original English edition¹. Given the experience that the whole world is currently living through, it may sound like a

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¹ In his book, Quammen outlines the theory put forward by many researchers from different backgrounds involved in studying the spread of the virus, according to which the reduction in the natural habitats of many animals that are carriers of viruses prompts the latter to move closer to the human world. If the conditions of survival of the virus are reduced in this context, it performs a spillover. The decrease in natural habitats is due not only to deforestation processes but also the growth of cities and urban areas, and the construction of roads, motorways, and various infrastructure. Viruses are not ‘new’ but their relocation to the human realm is.

self-fulfilling prophecy has transformed the projections of the near or distant future in many science-fiction films into reality. Instead, though, the sentences actually lead us back to a distant past in antiquity and the Middle Ages when social isolation and distancing were adopted as measures to contain and fight the plague, a long-term epidemic that spread throughout Europe, tragically decimating the population and drastically slowing down economic and social development with negative repercussions that lasted for decades. The rapidity of the spread of the current pandemic and the difficulty in stemming the flow bring to mind the thinking of two scholars of modernity: Ulrich Beck² and Anthony Giddens³. While the former underlines that risks become global in an increasingly globalised and interconnected society, the latter stresses that issues of trust and risk have changed in late modernity, and that many of these risks are the result of the ever-more invasive and aggressive impact of man on the environment.

As Beck (2000) claims, the new risks are far more democratic as they affect everyone, even though the higher social classes have more resources to tackle them. As in all critical phases, there are those who gain and those who lose⁴. Although the aim is not argue that some will 'get rich' as a result of the current pandemic, it is already evident that the financial cost of lockdown has had more dramatic repercussions on certain sectors of workers and particularly vulnerable social groups. The impact of the pandemic varies in strength, with the most devastating effects felt by subjects who are already disadvantaged in terms of financial resources, work, access to digital services and resources, and living conditions. It was – and still is – difficult for these groups to protect themselves and organise personal resources to deal with the emergency and the isolation. This pandemic reminds us that the multiple layers of our societies are not reflected in the distribution of resources and life chances available to individuals, and that inequality has grown even in developed economies. It is said that nothing will ever be the same again and that regaining what has been lost will be much more complex than certain optimists would have us believe. Any recovery – if it happens – will be slow, and it is unlikely that we will all be able to return to the pre-COVID starting point. This is true for the world of work, but also for intermediate bodies and families.

² See Beck, U. (2000), *La società del rischio. Verso un a seconda modernità*, Carocci, Rome; Beck, U. (2008), *Conditio humana. Il rischio globale*, Rome, Laterza.

³ See Giddens, A. (1994), *Le conseguenze della modernità*, Bologna, il Mulino; Giddens, A. (2000), *Il mondo che cambia. Come la globalizzazione ridisegna la nostra vita*, Bologna, il Mulino.

⁴ See Stiglitz, J.E. (2001), *In un mondo imperfetto. Mercato, democrazia nell'era della globalizzazione*, Rome, Donzelli.

As Giddens (1994) argues, science often has no answer to the new risks produced by the human impact on the environment. The frenetic race for a vaccine is no more than an attempt to combat the effects of the new pandemic using the same approach adopted to tackle past epidemics. It is hoped that solutions which were effective in the past can also work today, even though COVID-19 is still being studied. Powerfully implemented science and technology are unable to provide a sure and efficient response: science no longer has a monopoly on the ‘truth’ but only ‘claims to the truth’. Scientific knowledge now interacts and clashes with lay and common-sense knowledge, which puts forward its own claims to the truth, above all through the media and new communication technologies. Everyone is talking about COVID and everyone has their own opinion, truth, and solution, resulting in an increased sense of uncertainty, insecurity, and vulnerability among citizens.

At this time of ‘frenetic suspension’ of activities – suspension because trading has largely stopped, just as social relations have been decimated; frenetic because of the intensity of the support work, with the use of technology and experimentation – we cannot ignore certain tendencies of change that might have a significant impact on the life of communities and social actors.

At a macro level, globalisation – seen as a process or set of processes that transform the spatial organisation of social relations and transactions, producing transcontinental or interregional flows and networks of activity, interaction, and power – has led to growth in the level of interdependency between the different actors in the field (both collective and individual) and a weakening of the political, cultural, and economic boundaries of national states⁵. Some have interpreted this opening up as the driving force for community development and the broadening of individual life chances. However, the fact that the current pandemic has also spread through means of transport (as some have said, the virus travelled by plane, above all on intercontinental flights) shows that interdependency has become a risk factor that is difficult to control. Nation-states closed their airports and stations, and drastically reduced movement, taking us back (in Europe) to the pre-Schengen phase of history.

At the meso level of community relations, the imposed isolation has demonstrated the different nature of this epidemic. When dramatic events affect entire communities (earthquakes, floods and so on), social actors are prompted to help each other out of necessity or choice, making the community a source of solidarity and support. However, with COVID-19, contact with

⁵ See Held, D. and McGrew, A. (1999), *Cos'è la globalizzazione*, Trieste, Asterios; Held, D. and McGrew, A. (2003), *Globalismo e antiglobalismo*, Bologna, il Mulino.

others must be avoided, meaning that the community is no longer a source of support but one of danger. Suspicion and fear now circulate more than trust.

At the micro level of family relations, many of the functions that had been outsourced and ‘defamiliarised’ over the last few decades have been dumped back onto the family. Services for young children, schools, centres for elderly and disabled people, and places of entertainment have all been closed, and relations with different assistance communities have been interrupted (think of residents in rest homes or protected health units). Hospital access for conditions unrelated to COVID-19 is now significantly limited, while many have worked – not without difficulty – from home. The family has suddenly returned to being a ‘unit of production and consumption’. But what kind of family? It has been assumed that Italian families and the division of roles within them have not changed since the 1950s and the functionally strong Parsonian family, isolated from kinship networks, with the wife as mother and homemaker, and the husband as breadwinner. No account has been taken of the pluralisation of family forms characterised not only by structural diversity (composition of the family) but also and above all by the different relational ‘climate’. Power, authority, and affective relations in couples and between parents and children have changed over the last few decades. Women and their roles in the couple and the family have also changed, especially among the younger generations. The pandemic has led to the re-emergence of the pivotal tension between the drive for emancipation and the fundamental importance of care work mainly provided by women, who have supported communities and societies during lockdown, together with healthcare workers, by looking after the sick, the elderly, the disabled, children, and partners (OECD, 2020⁶).

The families forced to cohabit consist of groups of subjects characterised differently from the – even recent – past. Since most families and individuals were forced to live under the same roof during lockdown, this special issue of the *Italian Sociological Review* will explore the subject of family dynamics. Using empirical research data, attempts have been made to understand what has happened ‘in Italian families’ following the imposed redefinition of rhythms, times, roles, relations, and spaces. The contributions use quantitative and qualitative research techniques to highlight, on one hand, the strategies of adaptation and resilience implemented by families. On the other hand, however, the pandemic seems to have exacerbated differences and inequalities to the particular detriment of children and women. Despite belonging to different generations, women are united by the difficulty of having to cope with the stress

⁶ OECD (2020), *Women at the Core of the Fight against COVID-19 Crisis*. April 2020: <https://www.icvanetwork.org/resources/oecd-women-core-fight-against-covid-19-crisis>

caused by the intertwining of increased care work, the ubiquity of home working, financial and health worries, and the profound discomfort caused by social isolation, all in an emergency situation.

Contents of the special issue

This special issue opens with the article *'The Impact of COVID-19 on Family Relationships in Italy: Withdrawal on the Nuclear Family'* written by Sara Mazzucchelli, Maria Letizia Bosoni and Letizia Medina. The study is based on a CAWI study carried out during phase 1 of the emergency (full lockdown, from March to April 2020) that surveyed over 1,391 Italian people (73% of which are women). Findings show how the health emergency and the related containment measures impact both personal/parental and work spheres, producing negative effects on specific groups of working parents, especially women.

The second article, written by Giuseppina Cersosimo and Patrizia Marra *'In the Time of COVID-19: Love and Transformations in the Family'*, shows that, during a period of crisis, families perceive new needs. These are not necessarily material needs, although the incidence of economic necessity has been predominant in numerous interviews, carried out between May 2020-July 2020. Although social distancing protects against contamination, it exposes families, women and children to physical, emotional and economic consequences, as well as domestic abuse.

Santina Musolino's article *'Families, Relational Scenarios and Emotions in the Time of the COVID-19 Pandemic'* focuses the impact that the COVID-19 emergency, lockdown and social distancing have had on interpersonal relationships. In particular, it explores the changes and relational scenarios which have emerged within the patterns of daily family life in the context of a temporary social deprivation caused by the pandemic. The paper also sheds new light on the analysis of everyday life as a terrain of socially relevant dynamics, especially under the pressure of this extraordinary situation.

The paper by Maria Camilla Fraudatario and Riccardo Zaccaria *'Families and Intimate Relationships during COVID-19: Family Networks of Neapolitan Students'* is aimed at analysing how lockdown affected the daily lives of families. Starting from a survey on families of students at University of Naples Federico II, it aims to reflect on family network' dynamics pre and during the lockdown. Results show that families form very dense and connected networks, contrasting with the vision that supports a gradual deterioration of ties.

Caterina Balenzano, Giuseppe Moro and Sabrina Girardi's article *'Families in the Pandemic Between Challenges and Opportunities: An Empirical Study of Parents with Preschool and School-Age Children'* explores the effects of social isolation on Italian

families with preschool and school-age children in terms of work-family balance, family functioning and parenting during the lockdown. 104 parents (80.8% of which are mothers) participated in the study. Results show that Italian families have been resilient. However, the social changes caused by the emergency requires to implement adequate policies to especially support dual-earner families with young children, to reduce parenting stress and to avoid that work-family balance problems and gender gaps are exacerbated.

The paper written by Maddalena Cannito and Alice Scavarda '*Childcare and Remote Work during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Ideal Worker Model, Parenthood and Gender Inequalities in Italy*' illustrates the results of a qualitative study, conducted in Italy during the lockdown, aimed at investigating the consequences of remote work on work-life balance and gender inequalities in the division of paid and unpaid labor within heterosexual couples. Drawing from 20 online in-depth interviews with 10 heterosexual couples, the paper highlights the expansion of work over other domains, which have been worsened with remote work.

Anna Carreri and Annalisa Dordoni's article '*Academic and Research Work from Home During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Italy: A Gender Perspective*' offers an empirical analysis of working from home with a specific focus on the academic context, a privileged setting for the investigation of gender inequalities. The analysis, based on narrative non-directive video-interviews, shows that the organisational culture of the neoliberal university increases the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on boundaries management and intimate relationships, exacerbating social inequalities especially between women with and without children.

Francesca Lagomarsino, Ilaria Coppola, Rosa Parisi and Nadia Rania's paper '*Care Tasks and New Routines for Italian Families during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Perspectives from Women*' is aimed at understanding how family routines were structured during the lockdown and how women's emotional regulation developed during this period. A further area of investigation focuses on the distribution of domestic work and childcare among partners and on the relationships between smart working and the family dimension. Data were collected through an on-line survey on 300 women living in different Italian regions. Results highlight how during the lockdown women with children have more regulatory and relational routines than women without children and that during this period both regulatory and relational routines become less consistent. The study also discusses the challenges for work-life balance during COVID-19.

The contribution by Stellamarina Donato '*Gender-Based Violence against Women in Intimate and Couple Relationships. The Case of Spain and Italy during the COVID-19 Pandemic Lockdown*' addresses the issue of gender-based violence against women (GBVAW) during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. It

focuses on the degree of government responsiveness to this issue and compares the case of Italy and Spain, the two European countries that – from March to May 2020 – were among the hardest hit in the coronavirus pandemic. While the Covid-19 was spreading, the country ruled by Pedro Sánchez proved to be very active in advancing practical guidelines and measures to deal with GBVAW whereas Italy was, undoubtedly, less prone to do likewise.

Luca Toschi's research note '*Relational Violence in Emergency Conditions. A Methodological Proposal Based on Personal Network Analysis*' also focuses on the issue of gender-based violence. The study employs a Personal Network Analysis approach. The pandemic condition worsened situations and risks of domestic violence also due to the forced proximity, suggesting specialists new ways of research and help strategies for both confirmed and potential victims.

The article written by Annamaria Rufino '*Systemic Regeneration and Circular Society*' discusses the effects of the coronavirus outbreak in terms of the dynamics within the EU, the relationship between the various political systems and the disarticulation of social and relational models. The article argues that society will have to rethinking the regulatory and decision-making processes, starting from the redefinition of needs, expectations, and essential rights.

Last but not least, Sandro Stanzani's paper '*Trust and Civic Engagement in the Italian COVID-19 Lockdown*' shows that the pandemic and the lockdown (March-May 2020) have led to a strong intensification of primary relationships, especially in families and households in general. At the same time, though, especially at the beginning, they triggered a strong symbolic integration, highlighted for example by events such as flashmobs and other forms of bottom-up involvement of individual citizens (evidence of solidarity such as the readiness to do voluntary work or donations to public institutions, above all in the healthcare sector).

This issue of the Italian Sociological Review provides a snapshot of the complex relational dynamics that have been activated within and between families. The result is undoubtedly an alarming overview of the situations that have emerged during this pandemic. In many respects, there is a clear impression of backward steps taken with regard to situations that were believed to have been partially – if not totally – left behind (such as the overburdening of women, the upsurge in domestic violence, and social inequalities).

The editors and the researchers who have made significant and original contributions to this issue hope that the content will encourage reflection on the fragile foundations on which our society claimed to have created an 'almost perfect' world.