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Family Relationships at the Time of COVID-19: the Perspective of the Italian Sociological Review

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Abstract

The pandemic highlighted social processes that were unknown to many citizens. Not only did it reveal the high level of interdependency between nations and continents but also the marked disparity between the beneficiaries and victims of globalization. Some countries were provided with tangible proof of their underlying fragility, especially in terms of their economies and access to resources (such as vaccines). The gulf between rich and poor nations was also underlined, as well as domestic poverty gaps. Inequality and injustice emerged with all their tragic overtones.

It is necessary to come to terms with, rather than cancel, the past in order to imagine a different future, also as far as the family is concerned. The analysis of the research data shows that Italian households adopted coping strategies during the lockdown. Financially speaking, they drew on their savings and reduced certain forms of consumption, while couples – above all women – tackled the emergency by buckling down to care work and family responsibilities. The social and relational repercussions of all this have yet to be fully considered. In light of these remarks, envisioning the future of the current and new generations becomes a high-stakes game. Pursuing the dynamics triggered by the pandemic will herald a return to the traditional family model with the wife-mother as homemaker or homeworker and the husband-father employed in flexible work with little security (meaning also a family with fewer financial resources that can invest less in the care, upbringing, and education of children). The alternative is to rethink social policies. In this way, reinvestment in public services for childcare, healthcare, and welfare, as well as in labour policies, will ensure the survival of the various forms of family as the sphere of daily life where new generations learn justice and respect for others despite their diversity.

Keywords: family, social policy, COVID-19.

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1. 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...' Taken from a review, these words 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 edition.

This quotation was used to introduce a special edition of the ISR on the pandemic (vol.10 3s). Although the issue was published in 2020 shortly after the end of the lockdown in Italy, the return to a 'normal' life was still a long way off. The spread of the pandemic in Italy was extremely rapid: after the initial stirrings of the disease at the end of 2019, the country entered lockdown just three months later. Almost all economic activity came to a standstill, travelling was prohibited, schools and universities were closed, and many workers were made redundant, while those who were, so to speak, more fortunate worked from home. The subsequent road to recovery was sluggish, proceeding in fits and starts because of the spread of the different COVID-19 variants. At a time when everything came to a halt and city streets became deserted and lifeless, families and households became hubs of activity. They were called on to shoulder responsibility for numerous tasks previously performed by other institutions in the fields of childcare, welfare, healthcare, education, and leisure, responding to contingencies in one way or another by activating and/or creating new resources, skills, and abilities.

The special edition of the ISR in 2020 aimed to provide an overview of what Italian households had experienced and the situation at the time of publication. Despite facing objective difficulties, the contributing researchers conducted valuable empirical studies to understand the dynamics of the changes underway. There was (and still is) strong awareness of the upheaval experienced by Italian families with changes to their internal relationships, which sometimes exacerbated pre-existing problems and dynamics. Most of those who answered the call for papers were female researchers: women, workers, mothers, daughters, and sisters who in all likelihood had first-hand experience of the issues and dynamics under examination.

COVID-19 is a long-term phenomenon with a variety of impacts. While the initial approach of the ISR was to analyse family relationships, the journal subsequently published articles that broadened the perspective to include other fields and subjects. In 2021, Francesca Romana Lenzi demonstrated that the pandemic is the embodiment of globalization as it spread around the world through global communication networks; it affected almost every country,

albeit with different levels of intensity, and made no distinction between individuals or nations on the basis of wealth or age. In the same year, Lucia Boccaccin and Linda Lombi analysed how various Italian parishes responded to the needs of the Catholic faithful; Nico Bortoletto, Enrico Michelini, and Alessandro Porrovecchio devoted a special edition to sport at the time of COVID-19; and Maurizio Esposito and Iolanda Romualdi examined the role of scientific communication. A special issue on the relationship between policies and practices, again in reference to the pandemic, was published in 2022, edited by Elisabetta Carrà and Roberta Teresa Di Rosa. Further articles on the subject are forthcoming.

2. Why the family is the starting point

The overwhelming effect of the pandemic on every aspect of social life forced social actors to adopt new practices to guarantee essential services. In this way, despite being unable to lead a 'normal' life, citizens managed to survive a situation where the very concept of 'normality' was significantly scaled down, if not obliterated. The family was by no means the only sphere of life affected by the crisis, but this research focuses on Italian households for two main reasons: one political and the other cultural. The idea prevails that the Italian family is one of the most important social shock-absorbers as it can assume care responsibilities for children, teenagers, adults, and the elderly. It is said to be 'indestructible' with solid values and strong solidarity commitments; as a result, there is reluctance to accept social policies characterized by defamilialization (Di Nicola 2015). Attempts to support families through social policies are thus only made tentatively as they are not only unnecessary but also unwanted by families, who see them as an unwarranted intrusion into the private realm. There is no political awareness that such policies play a fundamental social role in promoting better life chances for all citizens. Similarly, social expenditure on policies for young people is seen as a cost rather than an investment in the future of the country.

In cultural terms, there has been a major shift in the way that choices are made and implemented in Italian households. This change cannot be attributed to the crisis but must be interpreted as the ability to adapt and respond to the changing economic, political, and social conditions (Di Nicola 2018).

Some socio-demographic indicators bear witness to this capacity for change, which gained momentum from the 1970s onwards.

Table 1 shows that the significant drops in the mortality and infant mortality rates (placing Italy as one of the most 'developed' countries) were accompanied by a notable increase in the ageing index, a fall in the rates of first

marriage for women and fertility, and a drastic reduction in both the number of women who were homemakers when they got married and the average number of family members. Although this is a static snapshot, it is the result of a long process of changing behaviour and strategies within the family: marriage is now less common; women have fewer children; almost 80% of households are dual income at the time of marriage; the family unit is increasingly small; life expectancy is higher; and there is a strong tendency to raise the age at which old age begins (which is no longer 65, with some even suggesting 75). All this is supplemented by higher average ages at which couples get married and at which women have their first children (Di Nicola 2018).

TABLE 1. Italian population: socio-demographic indicators.

Demographic indicators	**Years**			
	1929	1952	1976	2016
Population on 1 January (in thousands)	39,339	47,540	55,589	60,656
Infant mortality rate (per 1000)	126.5	63.5	19.5	3.1
Mortality (per 1000)				
- *Men*	*42.3*	*33.2*	*10.9*	*2.7*
- *Women*	*34.6*	*28.2*	*10.2*	*2.7*
Ageing index	23.1	31.4	50.4	161.1
Number of children per woman (per 1000)	3.51	2.34	2.11	1.35
Rate of first marriage for women (per 1000)	834.9	862.0	892.4	463.4
Homemakers at time of marriage (per 100)	62.6	70.0	42.3	18.0
Average number of family members	4.2	4.0	3.2	2.3

Source: ISTAT, Annual report 2016.

It is therefore ill-considered, if not outright wrong, to speak of Italy as a country where the transition to adulthood is marked by marriage and children. While individual life paths used to be structured by the timeframe and methods for starting a family, they now dictate the rhythm of the family cycle (Di Nicola 2018).

The start of the lockdown brought to the fore households with single people, couples aged over 60, and working couples with children, who are often of legal age (currently accounting for just over 30% of all households). The profile of Italian families is significantly influenced by the demographic dynamics of the population. As ISTAT highlighted (2016), the ageing index (the number of those aged 65 and over for every 100 individuals aged 14 and under) in Italy is 161, an extremely high figure. Indeed, Italy has one of the longest-living populations in the world, together with Japan (204.9) and Germany (159.9) (ISTAT 2016). At the same time, the low fertility rate triggered a dramatic dejuvenation process with a steady drop in the size of the youngest age cohorts and a growing adult population. The weight of new generations in

Italy is now one of the lowest figures in the world: the proportion of the population aged 0-24 almost halved between 1926 and 2016 (ISTAT 2016).

The level of intergenerational help and support in Italy is still high (especially between elderly parents and their non-cohabiting offspring). Therefore, the obligation to stay at home during the lockdown and avoid face-to-face contact meant that many elderly people could no longer see their grandchildren (for whom they played an active care role) or children and were unable to attend Mass (if they were churchgoers) or do the shopping at the local market. Although they attempted to fill this void with phone calls, online contact, and home deliveries of shopping and medicine, there was a significant lack of physical presence. They had to adjust to these new forms of sociability in their contact with friends and neighbours as well as with families; for the elderly, informal relations account for almost all interpersonal interaction (as pensioners have no circle of co-workers).

The medical emergency prompted by the pandemic forced the healthcare system to channel all its energies and resources into tackling COVID-19. Indeed, appointments with specialists were all cancelled, along with scheduled tests and surgery. Although this standstill applied to the entire population, households with elderly people were most affected as the demand for social, healthcare, and welfare services increases with age. Furthermore, lest we forget, the effect of the pandemic was most deadly among the elderly; never before has Norbert Elias's concept of 'The Loneliness of the Dying' (1982) been so real and tangible, with death and fragility drawing ever closer (Cersosimo and Marra 2021).

Instead, with regard to relatively younger families both with and without children, the situation generated other types of dynamics and difficulties alongside the problems that affected everyone.

To introduce the subject, reference will be made to the data in Table 2, which offers an overview of new families. It is striking that the twenty-year period under analysis saw an increase in households with a single non-widowed person, non-widowed single parents with children, de facto unions, and stepfamilies with both married and unmarried partners. In 2014-2015, ISTAT labelled more than 8 million households as 'new', accounting for over 13 million people, or 22% of the Italian population, more than double the figure in 1993-1994. This growth was underpinned by two main factors: the process of the deinstitutionalization and detraditionalization of the family, and marital conflict (Di Nicola 2018).

TABLE 2. New family forms. Averages for 1993-1994, 2014-2015. Households and number of members in thousands; number of people per 100.

Forms of family	Average 1993-1994			Average 2014-2015		
	No. of households (in thousands)	No. of constituent members (in thousands)	People in such a household per 100	No. of households (in thousands)	No. of constituent members (in thousands)	People in such a household per 100
Unwidowed single people	2,164	2,164	3.8	4,772	4,772	7.9
Unwidowed single parents of which:	624	1,522	2.7	1,548	3,815	6.3
- Unwidowed fathers	*92*	*232*	*0.4*	*277*	*656*	*1.1*
- Unwidowed mothers	*532*	*1,290*	*2.4*	*1,271*	*3,159*	*5.6*
De facto unions of which:	227	635	1.1	1,159	3,223	5.3
- Unmarried	*67*	*160*	*0.3*	*674*	*1,836*	*3.0*
- Stepfamilies with unmarried partners	*160*	*475*	*0.8*	*485*	*1,388*	*2.3*
- Stepfamilies with married partners	*443*	*1,325*	*2.9*	*547*	*1,649*	*2.7*
Total	**3,458**	**5,676**	**9.9**	**8,026**	**13,459**	**22.2**

Source: ISTAT, Annual report 2016.

While there has been an increase in processes of individualization in the Italian family (more single people and de facto unions), there has also been a shift in relational dynamics (single-parent households and stepfamilies). No longer the result of an uncontrollable event (such as the death of a partner), new family forms are now an individual choice (whether free or forced). Various forms of negotiation are underway in these new types of households regarding gender and generational roles, mutual expectations (within the couple), duties, and solidarity.

3. COVID-19 and daily practices in Italy: an overview

The surveys conducted for the thematic issue of the journal published in 2021 showed that households adopted coping strategies to deal with the new situation. This tenacity, however, cannot mask the fact that many families experienced difficulties during the lockdown as changes in partner and parent-children relationships redefined the balance between family and professional work.

This unprecedented emergency had quite different impacts on household units and their individual constituent members; once out of kilter, family relationships took a turn for the worse through the classic dichotomy of tension and adjustment. This strain was triggered by fear of death and disease, which grew in tandem with the pandemic and the common awareness of an uncertain future. It also stemmed from economic pressure weighing on already precarious personal and household finances, along with the expression of emotions that have changed our language and interpersonal relations by foregrounding prudence and circumspection (Cersosimo and Marra 2021).

A study carried out with 1391 subjects led to a greater understanding of reconciliation strategies regarding work and care duties during the lockdown, as well as coping mechanisms. The results of the multivariate analysis show that the medical emergency and the subsequent restrictions affected both the personal/parental and professional spheres, producing negative effects for working parents, above all women. Indeed, 78% of respondents stated that they continued to work mainly from home (62%) while caring for their children at the same time. The most effective coping strategies were implemented by married women, young people, and the childless. These results reveal the challenges faced by households where parents were separated from their family networks and had to balance their family and work schedules. Such issues were particularly challenging for women (Mazzucchelli, Bosoni and Medina 2021).

The results of a further study highlight an increase in parental stress due to social isolation and the persistence of gender inequality in the division of unpaid work. At the same time, though, families rediscovered the value of spending time together at home during the lockdown, which led to group bonding, improved expressive skills, and enhanced positive parenting. Overall, the study shows the resilience of Italian households: rather than being overwhelmed by family stress, they managed to adapt to the lifestyle changes. However, the social changes triggered by the emergency require suitable policies to support above all double income households with young children. These are needed to reduce parental stress and prevent an increase in problems related to the work-family balance and a widening gender gap, factors which could confine women to the domestic realm during the next stages of the pandemic (Balenzano, Moro and Girardi 2021).

20 in-depth interviews conducted online with 10 heterosexual couples highlighted that remote working exacerbated the existing encroachment of work into other areas. Although a few respondents seized the opportunity to become more involved in the experience of paternity, it was inconceivable for the majority to rethink their work schedules. While mothers were more inclined to consider the demands of work as negotiable, aware of the significant clash between career and family life, their husbands often stated that childcare duties

sometimes reduced their level of productivity. Remote working did not allow professional schedules to be redefined and did not improve the work-life balance of the couples interviewed. Indeed, this balance is still significantly skewed towards work, with limited time and space available for individual activities. Furthermore, even in these extreme and unprecedented circumstances, distance working did not modify the normative gender roles in the domestic realm. As a result, gender inequalities were recreated and sometimes even exacerbated, with mothers attempting to balance their dual role and fathers increasingly devoted to work (Cannito and Scavarda 2021).

The data from a study carried out among 300 families in different Italian regions show that women with children had more normative and relational routines during the lockdown than their childless counterparts and that both types of routine became less consistent. It is also apparent that women believe they devoted more time than their partners to housework and childcare, with the time spent on the latter peaking in households with very young children (aged 0-6). Finally, balancing working from home with the family realm was clearly not always straightforward (Lagomarsino, Coppola, Parisi and Rania 2020).

Although not necessarily representative of the Italian experience, the different studies show that the coping strategies adopted by families relied on women balancing their family and professional duties in various ways, creating a greater burden on families with young children. This confirms that the lockdown often led to the retraditionalization of roles in the couple. Furthermore, the findings demonstrate that although home working was heralded as the ultimate policy for coordinating family care and professional duties, it effectively brings work into the family, thereby removing the boundaries between the home and the workplace and transforming households – above all their female members – into efficient mini-production units. The risk is that this will signal a return to the nineteenth-century model of the family as a unit of production and consumption which does not require external child and elderly care services as they are provided by women.

4. The family atmosphere during the lockdown in Italy: a national survey

What atmosphere was created when families adjusted to the lockdown and implemented their coping strategies? Did everyone play happy families in a loving and agreeable environment? In fact, the lives of many households were characterized by varying degrees of conflict. To help answer these questions, reference will be made to the results of the third household consumption survey

conducted by the Observatory on Consumption at the University of Verona (Tronca and Secondulfo 2021)[1], which featured a section focusing on the pandemic. In the final report, I wrote the section on family relationships at the time of COVID-19, working with an index of conflict that is explained in greater detail therein. I have conducted further analysis of the data using the technique of comparison of averages (ANOVA).

Out of a sample of 2,054 subjects, 76.5% responded to the items on conflict. The level of conflict is low, with 50.4% of respondents stating that they never argued and the remaining 50% admitting to quarrels with the following regularity:[2]

- 1-2 times a week: 34.6%
- 3-4 times a week: 11.4%
- 5-6 times a week: 3.8%
- every day and several times a day: 0.2%.

The mean value of the index of conflict is 1.69. The analysis of variance in the mean index values with regard to certain independent variables shows (see Table 3) that arguments tended to decrease with age: the highest figures were recorded by the youngest age group (18-24), followed by adults aged 35-44. The former experienced lower levels of serenity because they were deprived of their social and working lives, while the latter were forced to share their domestic space with more family members, often including young offspring. The quality of the family atmosphere also depended on the composition of the household. Extended families, couples with children and, above all, single-parent families experienced higher levels of conflict due to both the increased number of cohabitants relying on the household unit for their daily activities (problems of

[1] The sample survey was conducted by the Observatory on Family Consumption (OFC), directed by Luigi Tronca, at the Department of Human Sciences at the University of Verona. The survey examined a total of 2,054 cases, all individuals of majority age resident in Italy. The construction of the sample, the computerization of the questionnaire devised by the OFC research team, and the data collection and systematization were carried out by the market research company SWG S.p.A., based in Trieste. The sample sizes were defined by SWG S.p.A. on the basis of the data on the number of individuals resident in Italy on 1 January 2020, made available by ISTAT (see http://demo.istat.it) at the time when data collection started. Data collection took place between 4 and 21 December 2020. The reference population for establishing the sample sizes was adults resident in Italy. The sample reproduced the numbers of residents with regard to: sex, age group (18-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55-64, over 64), and geographical area of residence (North-West, North-East, Centre, South, Islands).

[2] Arguments took place for various reasons: failure to comply with the hygiene rules, intolerance stemming from forced cohabitation, the desire to go out, use of household spaces for study and work, underestimating the risk of contagion.

space management) and the difficulties of combining cohabitation with children with partners (single-parent families). The distribution of the index for the other independent variables is not significant, partly because the pandemic was highly 'democratic' in many respects, affecting individuals with both high and low levels of education in different regions regardless of their social class or gender.

TABLE 3. Distribution of index of family conflict (ratio: mean between groups/mean in groups), on the basis of certain independent variables. ANOVA.

Independent variables	**Index of family conflict**	**Independent variables**	**Index of family conflict**	**Independent variables**	**Index of family conflict**
Age groups	Ratio between the means	Area of residence	Ratio between the means	Houshold type	Ratio between the means
18-24	2.12	North-West	1.61	Single person	1.5
25-34	1.93	North-East	1.77	Single person with others	1.96
35-44	2.07	Centre	1.62	Childless couple	1.38
45-54	1.66	South	1.79	Couple with children	1.75
55-64	1.49	Islands	1.64	Single-parent family	1.94
64+	1.37			Extended family	2.08
F	*40.92*	F	*3.30*	F	*24.52*
Sig.	*.000*	Sig.	*.004*	Sig.	*.000*
Level of education		Social class		Sex	
No qualification	1.61	Upper-middle class	1.52	Male	1.67
School diploma	1.69	Middle class	1,56	Female	1.71
Degree	1.72	Working class	1.68		
Postgraduate degree	1.71				
F	*.660*	F	*1.93*	F	*.640*
Sig.	*.577*	Sig.	*.145*	Sig.	*.424*

Source: Processing of data from the national research conducted by Tronca and Secondulfo (2021).

Being directly affected by COVID-19 had a profound and significant impact on levels of family conflict (see Table 4), as it meant dealing with a more complex situation.

TABLE 4. Distribution of index of family conflict (ratio: mean between groups/mean within groups), on the basis of variables of proximity to COVID-19. ANOVA.

Proximity to COVID-19	**Index of family conflict**	**Proximity to COVID-19**	**Index of family conflict**	**Proximity to COVID-19**	**Index of family conflict**	**Proximity to COVID-19**	**Index of family conflict**
If you contracted COVID-19, did you require hospital care?	Ratio between means	Were you in quarantine?	Ratio between means	Did any of your loved ones test positive for COVID-19?	Ratio between means	Did you know anyone who died of COVID-19?	Ratio between means
Yes	2.52	Yes	1.95	Yes	1.70	Yes	1.65
No	1.65	No	1.62	No	1.65	No	1.66
F	*25.92*	F	*27.88*	F	*.913*	F	*.138*
Sig.	*.000*	Sig.	*.000*	Sig.	*.339*	Sig.	*.710*

Source: Processing of data from the national research conducted by Tronca and Secondulfo (2021).

TABLE 5. Distribution of index of family conflict (ratio: mean between groups/ mean within groups), and changes in support relationships with others. ANOVA.

Support relationships	**Index of family conflict**	**Support relationships**	**Index of family conflict**	**Support relationships**	**Index of family conflict**	**Support relationships**	**Index of family conflict**
Since the beginning of the pandemic, have you: dedicated more time and attention to intimate conversations with people you know?	Ratio between means	Since the beginning of the pandemic, have you: helped relatives, friends, or neighbours with their daily needs (doing the shopping, buying medicine etc.)?	Ratio between means	Since the beginning of the pandemic, have you: dedicated more time and attention to conversations with sick friends or acquaintances (including those with illnesses other than COVID)?	Ratio between means	Since the beginning of the pandemic, have you: shared homemade food with relatives, friends, or neighbours?	Ratio between means
As before	1.58	Never	1.58	Never	1.56	Never	1.56
Sometimes	1.74	Sometimes	1.76	Sometimes	1.80	Sometimes	1.73
Often	1.75	Often	1.75	Often	1.69	Often	1.87
F	*9.35*	F	*14.66*	F	*15.04*	F	*15.18*
Sig.	*.000*	Sig.	*.000*	Sig.	*.000*	Sig.	*.000*

Source: Data processed from the national research conducted by Tronca and Secondulfo (2021).

One final observation, which can be viewed in a positive light, is that those who experienced higher levels of family conflict were more favourably disposed towards interacting with and helping individuals outside their household like friends, neighbours, and relatives (see Table 5). Paradoxically, those who were overburdened with various everyday responsibilities (doing the shopping, cooking, managing use of household spaces, helping children with homework, finding ways to occupy teenage children at home, and so on) and/or experienced hospitalization and quarantine were more aware that the pandemic was a common 'evil' and that sharing the experience with others (through speaking, listening, and concrete assistance) alleviated the feeling of isolation and solitude. The logic of the gift was thus activated (or reactivated) in a tentative and embryonic form. In other words, people helped others in the knowledge that someone else would do the same for them and their family should the need arise.

5. Conclusions

Although the return to normality is still some way off, various sources have predicted that nothing will be the same again. We need to pluck up the courage to imagine a different future, in the knowledge that the pandemic is simply one aspect of the many economic, environmental, political, and social problems created by our model of development. The pandemic highlighted certain social processes that might have been unknown to the average citizen, revealing the high level of interdependency between nations and continents, and the huge gulf between the beneficiaries and victims of globalization. Some countries had first-hand experience of their own fragile status, especially in terms of economy and access to resources (such as vaccines). The deep divide between rich and poor countries emerged as a prominent issue, along with domestic poverty gaps, while the tragic levels of inequality and injustice became fully apparent.

Imagining a different future does not mean cancelling the past but rather coming to grips with it.

With regard to the Italian context, the political management of the pandemic illustrated all the limits of increasing state disinvestment in education and healthcare. Teachers should not be blamed for the problematic transition from lessons at school to online learning. Such difficulties were the result of decades of policies that failed to guarantee a turnover of teaching staff, did not provide training or refresher courses, and increased the average number of pupils per class. Schools were forced to tackle the emergency with insufficient resources in terms of social capital and equipment. With regard to healthcare, the outsourcing and privatization of many services meant that the national

health system was thrown into the frontline to tackle a serious emergency with reduced personnel (which was also the result of a lack of turnover of medical and nursing staff). In addition to its stunted countrywide development, the health and welfare system was often neglected by a policy that aimed to introduce productivist logic into the management of essential services. And as if this were not enough, it all happened in a country with a significantly ageing population.

As far as the family is concerned, Italian social policies are tentative and ineffective. Policies for balancing professional and family work were devised with permanent employees in mind, above all those in the public sector. They thus overlook (or deliberately ignore) the fact that such positions have been in increasingly short supply in the labour market for decades, replaced by individual fixed-term contracts even in the public sector. Unemployment was a constant threat during the lockdown, and many households were deprived of a breadwinner, above all young families with dependent children (elderly people are retired with a guaranteed source of income). Defamilialization policies are few and far between and, most importantly, expensive. For example, facilities for young children (0-3) require a financial contribution from families (which is often significant and is only waived for the most impoverished citizens). Similarly, as care facilities for the elderly are private, they need to be paid for: the local authority covers or contributes to board and lodging costs for those in financial difficulty,[3] while pensions are used in other cases. However, if there are not sufficient funds, especially for all the additional costs of the service, children and grandchildren are forced to step in.

Finally, apart from the introduction of a basic citizenship income, devised as an experimental measure, Italian families do not take advantage of monetary support to bear the cost of children. This is one of the factors, though by no means the only one, helping to maintain a low fertility rate among Italian women.

The analysis of the research data has shown that Italian families adopted coping strategies during the lockdown. In economic terms, they drew on their savings and reduced certain forms of consumption, while couples – especially women – tackled the emergency by knuckling down to care work and family duties. This all came at a price, however, and the social and relational costs still need to be analysed.

[3] To put it somewhat bluntly, the death rate among the poorest social groups is higher than among the rest of the population: public authorities only have a short-term financial burden to bear for board and lodging expenses for an impoverished elderly person in a care facility.

In light of these observations, imagining a future for current and new generations becomes a high-stakes game for the family. If the dynamics triggered by the pandemic continue, it will mark a return to a traditional family model with the wife as mother and homemaker or homeworker and the husband-father engaged in flexible and precarious jobs (signalling a family with fewer financial resources and less to invest in the care, rearing, and education of children). The alternative is to rethink the way that social policies are channelled. If we reinvest in public services for childcare, healthcare, and welfare, and redirect our labour policies, families will continue to be – in whatever form they may take – the area of daily life where new generations learn justice and respect for others despite their diversity (Okin Moller 2012).

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