

Family Matters. Portraits and experiences in family today

Francesco Carelli

Professor of Family Medicine, Milan, Italy

Date of Submission: 05-02-2022

Date of Acceptance: 18-02-2022

What do we mean by family? One of the foundations of this apparently natural concept lies in Article 29 of the Italian Constitution, which states that "the family is a natural unit of society founded on marriage". It is a topic which anyone can relate to because of individual common experience of family realities, images, languages, settings; either because of the presence or absence of such ties in our own lives. It'd be useful to develop a participative meditation on values and images that are part of everyone's lives and that become a crucial instrument for reflecting on the dynamic between the individual and a community, the single man or woman, in relationship with the collective.

The argument over "what the family is", in ideological terms, is accompanied by the complex political definition of the rights, obligations and responsibilities of its component parts and by broader sociological deliberations, which have recently identified the family as the primary setting for socialisation and cultural and symbolic transmission, but also a place of inequalities. At the same time, there are the deliberations on the family in terms of its representation, the construction of its image and its dynamics in both the private and the public spheres.

Many contemporary artists have combined the autobiographical element with a search for a common experience in this subject. Whilst some work with the image of the family as the legacy of a traditional anthropological or religious tradition, such as the concept of nature, honour or belonging, others reflect on the dynamics that give rise to a mechanism of reciprocity between parents and children, such as the practice of education or the transmission of values. By means of different vocabularies and poetics, these artists reflect on the cultural, moral, ethical and biological ties that still define and identify a family, causing us to consider the contrast between free individualism and the need to create and live within relationships and ties. At the same time, their works provide the opportunity to ponder the artificial or spontaneous construction of the family, an investigation of its workings and its dynamics of self-representation or external representation.

The concept of family has changed over the centuries, not only reflecting but also actively influencing changes in society as a whole. In recent decades, a low birth rate, secularisation, the new role acquired by women, the social and then political establishment of homosexual partnerships and more liberal habits have gradually brought about a crucial change in this concept. The social cell today is the individual. The family is no longer experienced or regarded as the primary unit of society. The leading actor has become the individual, the single person, enjoying free choice and shouldering responsibilities that have increased proportionally with the decline of the traditional family and of the 20th-century attitude to the welfare state. This is the context for a redefinition of the image and actual functioning of the family. We need to think about the family within the wider reflection on a relational society although individually-oriented.

The term *familia* referred to all the persons and things placed under the hierarchical protection and authority of a *pater familias*, to whom they literally "belonged". The factor that defined the family was its members' dependence on a family head, to whom they owed respect and whose honour they must defend, as representative of their own identity group. In a continuation of this pattern, the traditional farming family was based on the concept of an economic and productive bond, as was the aristocratic family, with the transmission of title or of social or economic status.

The bourgeois revolution of the 19th century had a profound impact on the idea and reality of the family, granting a new central position to conjugal love and care for children which, however, led to the increased stereotyping of social roles and emotional dynamics.

The ideal bourgeois family acquired different names - "Victorian" in England, "Biedermeier" in Germany. Everywhere, it displayed the same characteristics: the emphasis on lofty morals, a huge concern for

children's wellbeing and the transmission of civic, religious and productive values. This idea and image of family was already being challenged. Following the early examples by Emile Zola or Lev Tolstoy, great generational novels such as *Buddenbrooks*, the first work by Thomas Mann, or *Karamazov Brothers*, the last by Fyodor Dostoyevsky, displayed and anticipated the decadence of such a model, stressing its complex and often unresolved functioning based on religious or moral values.

20th-century society has been even more ambivalent toward the family: on the one hand it elevated it as the private setting for affection, the primary cell of the market and of political consensus, while on the other hand it fought against it, identifying the family as the symbol of a solidarity of strong and stable ties that prevent the free development of the individual. As Herbert Marcuse stressed as early as the 1940s, the family has become the place in which the tension between freedom and authority characteristic of contemporary man was manifested.

As for today, what is left of the family and what is its value or image? Through the work by different contemporary artists, art can help to reflect on the contradiction between the nature and the naturalness of the family, the tension between freedom and authority, the persistency of traditional iconography and moral principles opposed to the deconstruction and the ambiguities of these values.