

## Family relationship: a way to Equity, Ecology and Sustainability

### Introduction

*From private to political.*

The premise of my contribution is the pedagogical attention to the educative and care work, a constant of my public and private life. For more than twenty years I've professionally taken care of minors and their families, starting from the kinder garden and continuing with adolescents and young adults, in particular those with the risk of delinquency and subject to penal proceedings. For about twelve years I've lived this experience in my family, as a wife and a mother of two, and as the only daughter of my old parents. More recently I started to expand the horizon of my reflection to the social dimension, because of the possibility I was given to collaborate at an Help Desk for Women, resulted in the participation at the feminist associationism that brought me to discover the importance and the actuality of the Gender topics. From these areas I deduced the essential connection between private and political dimension and their mutual influence. The increasing diffusion of a critical position regarding the contemporary economical structure, the necessity to change course regarding the demands of *Degrowth* and *Transition* perfectly coexist with the questions that every adult, invested with educational tasks, has concerning the human beings that he has the responsibility to bring up "*What kind of world will we pass on to the today children?*", "*How to contribute at the preparation of the tomorrow adults?*".

My response to these questions chooses to consider the following issues:

1. *transforming the relationship systems*
2. *the specifics of the family molecule*
3. *gender roles and child care*
4. *reconciliation of the productive and reproductive work*
5. *a new education paradigm*

### 1. New relations for new perspectives

*The change needs the transformation of interactional systems*

More and more the close connection between personal choice and social change is being affirmed: the impossibility to make the difference by a change of structures (economical, habitative, productive) not accompanied by a inner work with oneself and on the way the relationship are intended. It has become necessary a constant and profound attention that keeps together form and substance transformation, in order to prevent the reproduction of the same dynamics from which one wants to stay away. The culture we are immersed in is so pervasive that autoriproduces itself, making the transparency of the social regulation based on the discrimination of the differences both in the possibility of self-determination and in the access to power. This conditions are generated inside the economical and political system of privileges that concur to perpetuate and are maintained by the diffused stereotypes regarding the peculiar attributes of the presumptive human categories.

Starting on this bases, the logics of the market and the image - based society "planted" the legitimacy of the instrumental approach among human beings. In this "objectification" of our fellows, the weak subjects that are still given today too little attention are women, children and youngsters, that are considered like things to use, contain, direct. Especially the minors are "burdened" with the preconception of a "natural" incompetence and irresponsibility that

turn them into ideal targets for the abusive attitudes of the adults, a mix of protection and subjection, that nowadays still dominates in education, both at home and at school.

I am sure that for the translation of the Ecology and Sustainability principles into daily practice, we need to proceed with a parallel work in progress that has the purpose to experience the resettability of the interpersonal relations between human beings on all levels, starting with the real employment of the concept of *equal dignity*. Capacity to recognize the other, consciousness, relationship competence, are together premises to attempt the construction of an existential sense that differs from the aprioristic and ideological paths that deny both the person and the bases to recreate a new vision of the human relations and of the formal and informal educational practices.

## **2. The family specifics (particularities)**

*A relational system that shapes how to be into the world.*

In this optic, the glance at the microcosm represented by the family is necessary for two fundamental reasons: because it is in the family that the first formation is accomplished and because the family, among the educational institutions, appears to be the most ductile and open to change. It is this interactional molecule the one that in the concreteness and informality of its experience acts as the forge of the social evolution regarding two crucial nodes of the citizenship: the relation between genders and the one between the generations. Our family of origin gives us the affective imprinting and consequently the way of being with the others and the world which characterizes us lifelong. This first matrix, positive or negative, will be searched and reproduced further in our relational life. Freedom of repetition compulsion requires a big effort of consciousness and self-control. It is in the family that bases of the inner well-being are built together with capacity of taking care of a world, lived as egosyntonic and the possibility to affirm an authentic inner being that comes from self-esteem and transforms into deep assertiveness. Even if the power of the family in modeling deeply the individual is obvious, there are other specific characteristics that make of it an example of a relational model for the other human systems:

- ✧ the family makes tangible the concept of no zero sum game, where the well-being of each other is necessarily connected with global well-being and so the logic of "I win/you lose" is not only ineffective, but harmful and potentially destructive;
- ✧ because it is an organization in which feelings predominate, family communication focuses on the process (*how*) rather than the content (*what*);
- ✧ while educational institutions are artificial structures, programmed to "learn how to be children / teenagers" by means of specific tasks, it is in the family that we learn to be adults from real adults living the real life;
- ✧ since children learn "copying" their parents in their actions and at a deep level (only 10% comes from intentional education and as much as 90% of the interactions go beyond the threshold of attention), the internal coherence and the communicative availability becomes of fundamental importance; in a word, the capacity of the adults to deal with themselves, to be authentic and willing to evolve.

## **3. Gender roles in the family: new fathers exist.**

*The men on the scene of reproductive labour, a family and silent revolution.*

From ancient times gender relations were based on the specialization of tasks between men and women, but while in the rural and artisan society the productive value of the family circle remained, the industrial mode of production has triggered a mechanism of strict division between the private sphere (heart of the reproductive labour) and the public sphere (location of the productive labour and therefore recognized and wage). The two schematizations have

gone overlapped so to determine a clear caesura between male and female regarding the functions related to gender and the position attributed in their life. For several decades the post-Fordist transformation of the work has challenged this model in the western world and the course of practical life of young women and young men has been more and more similar.

Actually, underlies a cultural constant that is represented by different attitudes towards parenting and care work: for women motherhood is still the central role and all the other belongings are structured around it, but for men fatherhood does not involve an equal redefinition of the priorities in the family and work context; and the inclination to give help is developed differently in girls and boys through formal education, vehicle of often unaware stereotypes, and identification with the traditional roles that occur in the family - as stated (in different contribution expected from sons and daughters to family *ménage*). This role education leads young women, long before becoming mothers, to consider care a task that is well suited to them, while many men discover this dimension only with their parenthood. It is no coincidence that in Italy professional educational caregiver are 90% female, a percentage that gives a image of a ghetto, underestimated and underpaid which concurs to remove the male interest in regard.

Despite of all, it's enough to look around in our cities to agree with those who identify the real revolution of the western family of the third millennium with the full ingression of fathers in the everyday household horizon: it is normal to find men occupied in care and assistance duties that only a generation ago would have been unthinkable. And these fathers, along with sharing home duties with a partner who works (new fathers are a direct consequence of two-income families), discover the pleasure of being with their own children, getting to know them, building with them an unique and unrepeatable intimate relationship that nourishes the affection aspect that is specific to all human beings, regardless of gender.

But what consequences are brought by this change? Men have to face up to their own responsibility about:

- ✦ the exit from the increasingly tight role of the authoritarian patriarch, of the forced breadwinner or the eternal son has its advantages in terms of individual well-being ... and its costs, material and especially psychological when it leads to dealing with the identity of the sedimented latin macho. The question if "is it really worth getting involved in" regards each single male and every parental couple;

- ✦ it is no longer possible to hide behind role stereotypes and social approval; when children arrive men have to decide which side to take: whether to enter into an authentic and deep relationship, and in that way being present, qualitatively and quantitatively for bonding fundamental years or stand on the threshold, being content to make appearances and reciting a subject not to displease his partner;

- ✦ it is important to make sure that the principle of role equality is not reduced only to taking charge of duties, but starts to include the real redistribution of emotional responsibilities between mother and father, a task that will probably take more than a generation to be accomplished;

- ✦ it becomes urgent to deal with the need to question ourselves about the consequences on the future generations of the valorization of men's relational potential and their ability to harmonize with gender attributions, as well as on male responsibility in violence against women and children, which remains as a result of family conflict and now assumes the character of a downside of the changes related to the gender attributions.

It 's interesting to note that, at least in Italy, this changes have difficulties to "come out": the percentage of men seeking parental leave is still very low. It appears that redefinition of

roles, with the corresponding renegotiation of power spheres, occurs easier in the protected ambit of the family, where the man is entitled to leave the mask of the breadwinner without risking the social disapproval. And the biggest obstacle to change indeed is one's perception of the self-image related to the gender and the social pressure of the common sense.

So it is in the families that the game of redefining gender roles is being played, starting from the necessities of reconciliation between productive and reproductive work, with the demands of a dual-income, with the women's desire to have a place on the public arena and men's to enter into the private life. Men and women that find very personalized solutions to joints and redefinitions of themselves, that deal with the desire and the need to go beyond the pervasive stereotypes in the search for a personal, family and couple identity that is similar as much as possible to the main characters. And this redefinition is not pursued without anxiety and without difficulty: what does it mean for a woman to give up her absolute power of determine on children? Sharing the daily practical management and the responsibility of the home atmosphere with a new protagonist? What does it mean for a man to stop identifying himself only with the social mask of the bread winner? What are the fragilities connected to leave historical certainties of a perhaps uncomfortable but sedimented identity? What these new fathers and mothers will hand down to their children? Will parents be able to recognize equal dignity to their sons and daughters, to get out of the education pervasive stereotypes and to allow them to become what they want, regardless of the gender? What explanation will give to these paths men and women of tomorrow?

To practice new forms of gender role it will require awareness, great vigilance, availability to confrontation and courage to measure oneself to new forms of subjectivity, beyond clichés and acquired certainties. Transformation into new fathers and new mothers is not a linear and predictable path, but a road full of contradictions and inconsistencies.

#### **4. What does "conciliation" means**

*Beyond the division wage / not wage labour: a possibility for everyone.*

A meaning frame that is well suited to express the research for a new connection between domestic/family/relational experiences, work organization and social dimension, is represented by the area of the so-called *reconciliation policies*, that are being discussed in Europe for almost twenty years (with the establishment of the network "Family & Work" in 1995, the following directives to the member countries, the axes of intervention of the Equal projects). It is not only a "technique" to make sure that the work is done and to render more, and not even another measure once again in favor of the market and of its expansion or the national economic systems that in order to raise the GDP need women's work. It is not only the demand for a more appropriate working timetable or the requirement for new care services, but rather the perception of the necessity for a better quality of life that takes into account the need for harmony between the different parts of the oneself. Between the right to have a professional life and not being in contradiction with the desire to have something else. The conciliation system becomes, then, the collective background that situates interprets and supports individual strategies and the daily work of the intelligence in putting the pieces together. Making compatible the two appearances becomes the subject of a social question that needs a social response, not left only to the balancing virtues of individuals - particularly women. The conciliation needs a social pact that appeals to different players, different levels, different institutions because of the complexity and the transversality of its measures that cover all the policies referring the daily lives of men and women. We can therefore define conciliation like an ecosystem that is based on three complex systems:

- ▲ the single individuals, considered in the plurality of their choices, relationships and family needs: policies that encourage the sharing of family work between men and women;

- ⤴ the workplaces with their time schedule more or less rigid: policies to promote a greater flexibility to respond not only to companies needs, but also to those who work there and with support systems for more free time;
- ⤴ the city and the territory with all the offered services, transport, mobility: policies that go towards a major consultation; that find positive interactions and are able to govern internal and external conflicts: the conciliation system also requires a positive-sum game, otherwise does not exist.

Despite the difficulties, the resistances, the uncertainties, it makes sense to continue to proceed along the path of reconciliation for several reasons:

- ⤴ because the care work will become more and more a social issue and not an individual one, solved so far with women's acrobatics and with an intergenerational pact between daughters and mothers that will no longer assume the crucial centrality that has today;
- ⤴ for the increasing trend among men not to solve their life only within the professional work;
- ⤴ because facing the topic of conciliation you can redesign a new "welfare map" that is able to respond to the new needs brought by the transformation of the persons identity - men and women - and the transformation of the labor market.

So, the conciliation is not just a women's issue, a private matter, a creative way to put together life and work. It 'a way of social renovation to pursue with appropriate policies; an opportunity to overcome the obviousness that views the work in the fordist sense as the basis of the human life; the separation between life time and working time is not ontologically determined. It's a thinking paradigm that makes possible the existence of creative alternatives that respect the subjectivity of each individual, male or female. An approach that shows the way to rediscover the existence of a more egosyntonic world to relate with, without losing your own integrity. The conciliation is a practicable way for everyone to go back to living fully their humanitas ceasing to be only "work machines."

### **5. Rethinking the growth of new generations**

*We need to make a choice between individual development and collective conditioning.*

The growth of the younger generations is an area too little explored in a critical way, so the risk of trivialization and transparency are very high, even in sensitive and attentive adults. Yet, the practices used by the family and the institutions to treat and educate children and youngsters, are not anthropological absolutes, but originate from precise historical, cultural and economical roots, in terms of places delegated for it and premises and practices in use.

Just to give an example: the spread of nurseries is an offer to families in which both parents work, but it is also an expanding professional field, so it is a dual response to the needs of this society to extend the basis of the workforce. But how much consideration is given to the real needs of the smallest?

Do we realize how the adults/children relationships reproduce the authoritarian settings, being functional to the conformation of an individual that is subject to the logic of domination and production? How much of this contributes to an uncritical assumption of the central role assigned to the respect of the rules and the reproduction of procedures often self-referential? How often, in the name of the end that justifies the means, has been legitimized the use of psychological, physical, verbal violence as an educational tool? Do we realize how indiscriminately and often unconsciously we use manipulation or the proliferation of behavioral training based on critics and praise?



The fact that the major educational institutions pass through a crisis should make us ask ourselves what education we are developing, for which men and women of the future and for what kind of society. The adults, starting with the parents, should ask themselves what goals want to achieve educating their children and on what values want to base it. Do they want to grow up obedient subjects or make autonomous and responsible citizens? To save the Earth and live in the tomorrow society we have to keep intact planet's resources, but also the resources of every child, develop their potential and peculiarities, accepting their differences ... or do we think that we can continue to define as education the mechanisms of the collective social conditioning?

From the manifested behavior of the today's young adults it is clear that 90% of their personal integrity has been violated, that they have a low self-esteem and that most of them are not able to fully assume their individual and social responsibility. Do we want the education that has these effects?

### **New education and the benefits for the society**

Are children's interests in conflict with society interests? The answer depends on the type of the society we want and the targets that we set to ourselves. The promotion of the physical and mental health and the psycho-social skills of the people is an advantage for the individual, but also for the entire society - even for the mere calculation of the cost/benefit ratio. If it is important for us to avoid emotional abuse and physical violence - two of the most harmful phenomena for the growth of children - it will be impossible to plan with certainty the outcome of the educational process, regarding both the personality and the unique characteristics of each individual.

This unpredictability has got on the ropes the school world, which discovered that today's children (and their parents) are no longer willing to comply with a school system designed to serve as an early industrial society, in need of disciplined, obedient and submissive workers. While the parents abandon the authoritarian methods, the formal system is entrenched in itself and continues to think in terms of opposites, rather than seeking valid alternatives. The fact is that today's children and adolescents want to be recognized as real people and not just as pupils, reflecting the change that occurred in a similar way in the labour world.

If it is undeniable that the discipline understood as self-regulation constitutes an important quality, it is clear that we must stimulate the internalization and abandon the traditional means of control: the fear and the anxiety of being punished and losing love. Scientific brain studies and the psychology of human relationships show us how motivation is nurtured by the possibility of choice: children, just like adults, are competent individuals who can prove to be obedient with awareness and participation for a shared goal, if they are treated with respect and dignity.

The rebellion against the authoritarian rule and violence took place in the '60s/'70s of the last century. However productive, the results were limited by the fundamentally oppositional nature of the movement; besides, thinking in contrasting terms is a process that our brain performs in a natural way unless it is taught to do otherwise. Now that we are gradually coming to terms with a whole new paradigm, and meanwhile we have to live with our children that we have to rear, without the illusion that we can rely on absolute principles outdated by now, the time has come to make an effort to think in a creative way. And it is precisely this "thinking out of the box" that the contemporary society, at all levels, needs more than anything else.

**The pedagogical tradition and the exercise of power reproduction**

The most common pedagogical matrix identifies the fundamental conflict in the difference between individual and social needs; as a consequence task of educating adult individuals has been identified in the need to preserve group identity, preventing newborns to develop self-centered. This view accords perfectly with the lack of consideration for the individuality that has prevailed in most of the societies of the last century and with the Freudian theories according to which the human beings come into the world as carrying essentially asocial impulses and therefore destructive to the community.

On the contrary we believe that children are essentially empathic and collaborative and that the relevant question today is in what way the adult leadership, in the family and in the institutions, is oriented to help them develop their prosocial potential or rather to destroy it. We, the adults, have to acquire major relational competences, rather than simply adopt the preventive conditioning, regulated by one of the many educational methods developed over time.

The revolutionary premise to restart with is that the freedom of the individual is not a threat to the community, but in fact the exact opposite is valid: the ground of the success of any social group is the strength and autonomy of all its components.

**Rules and restrictions: obedience or responsibility?**

The inevitable passage of any educational theory concerns the definition of the threshold that every child must learn to respect. The determination of the limits from above is a process aimed to maintain the power structure ruled asymmetrically by the parents, establishment which excludes any possibility of equal dignity within the family.

Societies of the twentieth century that came from totalitarianism were aimed to achieve results that were evident and in line with the following principle: *"Try to behave as you should, so that people understand that you have been well educated."* The priority of the parents was the achievement of external values, socially recognized, which were an undeniable consensus. With this training children learned not to be themselves, but to behave themselves and to play their part for the benefit of the others; the motivation that moved them, as we have already said, was the desire for approval and love from their parents and the fear of losing them both.

Of course it's not questionable that limits are a useful condition to the harmonious growth in the developmental age, as there is need for some form of regulation to facilitate the relational and learning processes in institutions and families. Problems arise when the rules and the obedience become central in the way the adults read and interpret human beings behavior in the developmental age. The obedience to the rules is considered to be a desired quality in a child, but emphasizing this attitude can make him unable to listen to his own needs, to know himself deeply and consequently to develop that responsibility, individual and social, which is the essential quality for the well-being of children, youth, adults and society as a whole.

**Equal dignity in the family.**

The middle of the last century brought the democratic wind that inspired the democratic political institutions and the family institution. The error that prevented a generation of parents armed with the best intentions to carry out the renovation was the same one that spoiled the alternative for the authoritarian matrix from which this generation came: the power structure that had been modified in the laws and regulations, continued to be based on the same principles which excluded the recognition of the competence of our children and the equal dignity in the relationship with the adult.

Coming from a highly authoritarian past where everyone had the certainty of what was right and what was wrong, the parents who introduced the democratic values found themselves without role models to inspire from, if not those from the political field in this way they reproduced the mechanisms of the struggle for power. That's why the internal conflict has always been considered a sign of the defeat of the family relationships, making it impossible to recognize the differences and listen to the others.

The reality is that democratic values are not sufficient to determine the *quality of the interpersonal relationship*, on the basis of which are two fundamental questions: "*How do we relate?/How do we feel?*". And the responsibility of this quality is definitely entirely in the hands of the parents and the adults, because the competence of children and young people has limits that preclude any possibility of delegation.

The concept of equal dignity is a step forward compared with the democracy concept: it means that children can no longer be programmed to tolerate violations inflicted on them by their parents and the adult world in general; it goes beyond the concept of equality: in fact, if it recognizes that people are different, it does not claim that they should be equal but they should be considered in their uniqueness.

And it is therefore essential to help children and adolescents to consider themselves valid members of the community starting from the first months of their lives to treat them as such, persons in every sense and not "defect" creatures.

### **Giving up the power of definition.**

To acquire a new relational competence, the fundamental challenge that the adult world is facing is to give up their power to define the non-adults: "*You're really good at this, you are able in that ...*" But also: "*You're a mess. You do not understand. You do not know ...*" And this power is legitimized by the belief that: "*If something goes wrong in our relationship, it's you that is difficult.*"

In the past the idea of controlling children telling them how bad they were was completely normal. This perspective, which excludes the children's feelings, is clearly destructive for them, because it teaches to give up the self-respect in exchange of parental love. The relationship children/adults becomes one between *subject and object* with the consequent feeling of loss of the value for the objectified child.

The parents think that children *must listen to them*. In fact, no healthy person can voluntarily comply with a destructive perspective, so if the goal we propose is that of obedience at all costs, then the only possible instrument is the use of violence. That will have its results - at least until the children are little - but in exchange of a very high personal price. It is painful for children to feel judged because they have no references to interpret events that happen nor words to express their feelings and are therefore totally helpless and at the mercy of the other. And their personal experience will ultimately be determined and read completely from the outside.

Moreover the parents themselves are the first "victims": of the educational treatment that they have received and of the conditionings that continue to influence them; without a consciousness raising is therefore impossible to escape from the coercion to repeat the learned patterns .

The only way to teach children empathy and responsibility is to make them experiment it confronting adults that are aware of their boundaries. The parents should therefore work to



recover authenticity, that is the contact with deep needs and desires, and the coherence in expressing themselves. If children grow up with parents who uncritically follow ideals and requirements that come from the outside, at the age of four years will have lost their empathy capacity, because without feedback they were unable to learn who are their parents and what they really want.

If for a coach or instructor praise and criticism can be tools for working on the *ability to do*, a parent or an educator, which instead are dealing with the *existential dimension* of self-esteem, can not afford to do the same, even if they put the emphasis on the positive results.

In the end the achievement is always the known mechanism of Pavlov, with the difference that instead of punishing reward makes all of us feel more human. Of course, apparently everything seems to be working for the best: parents are satisfied because no one questions their power, there aren't many conflicts and thus in the family persists a certain serenity. But what have these children learned? That is normal to respond to the demands of "external eye" because the feedback to the correctness of their behavior is in critics and in praise that comes from the outside. When they became teenagers they rediscover the same dynamics with peers and it will be impossible for them not to be like the others, regarding also the deviant or risky behavior. You need a good level of awareness and self-esteem to escape the logic of the leader or loser. Only the one who can say "*I do not take drugs because I don't want them*" becomes a social equalizer: will have no power, but they will all trust him.

For a future more harmonious and balanced society, it would be desirable to overcome the dichotomous judgment between good and bad, skilled and scarce. The goal to achieve is to know each other and claim to deeply accept each other for what we are; the people we have around may or may not like us but this should not be affecting the consideration of ourselves. And all this of course is reflected in the attitude towards others. The task of the educators is therefore helping children to know themselves, giving space and words to what they want and do not want, what they feel, what they do ... It's not just about the liberal idea that everyone has to have at hand comfort and happiness, but about the ascertainment that in the relationship integrity/conformism or one takes the responsibility for themselves or becomes dependent on others.

This implies for the parents to reassume their personal responsibilities, leaving the same space for the children. When the individual responsibility of the family (mother's and father's) is good, children are capable of great social responsibility. If, instead, the family is concerned about the social responsibility ("*Give your game to your friend to play with - even if this means you can not play*"), then the child will not develop personal responsibility with consequences for his integrity and self-esteem .

We know that historically we have focused mainly on social confirmation, assuming the equation that if the children obey we are good parents. But, instead, we probably compromised the individual potential forever.

## References :

✎ regarding Gender studies: the activities of the Faculty of Sociology and Educational

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- ✧ for the conciliation policies: Marina Piazza
- ✧ for pedagogical practices: the Faculty of Educational Sciences of the University of Milan Bicocca which refers to Riccardo Massa's studies and researches
- ✧ for the family perspectives and the new educational paradigm: the teaching of Jesper Juul, therapist and family mediator