Cultural change, family transitions and reflexivity in a morphogenetic society

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Abstract
The concept of family transition – both normative and non-normative, whether due to internal or to external factors – presupposes the passage from one relatively stable situation to another relatively stable condition. What happens when the relative stability of the transitional stages withers away? What kind of interventions (social policies, personal social services, etc.) can be envisaged in a society that configures the family's transitions as an unbound morphogenesis of its relations? The family becomes an unceasing transition due to many factors, basically because societal morphogenesis makes the reflexive abilities of families increasingly problematic. The paper suggests that we move beyond the conditional and "muddling through" models of the past. We need to adopt a new model of analysis and intervention, called the ODG-system, which is relational and reflexive. It consists of developing the *relational reflexivity* of the family as a social system.
        Keywords: family transitions; cultural change; relational sociology

1. The topic

Contemporary society is radically changing the essence of family transitions. We need: (i) a new analysis of transitions; (ii) new intervention methodologies.

By family transition I mean a phase of "crisis" (in the etymological sense) that follows upon an event that changes the family social system in a very significant way.

We speak of a transition in that the event requires a process of redefinition (adaptation) of family relations, at the end of which the family must find a new equilibrium, or *modus vivendi*.

In general, from the sociological standpoint, in present day society:

(a)   non-normative transitions are increasing in frequency at a faster pace than normative transitions, due above all to a more chaotic and less secure social environment;

(b)   the traits of what we refer to as "normative" and "non-normative" are changing in proportion to society's de-traditionalisation;

(c)   the number of transitions that families must cope with is growing, and the number of families in transition is growing in parallel fashion.

These tendencies are the product of a society in the process of configuring itself as an unbound morphogenesis galloping ahead unchecked, that is, a society in which social forms

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are being continually modified: many of these perish while others are created *ex novo*. Very few social forms can remain identical to themselves over time. This is the society of globalisation, characterised by migration which generates increasingly multiethnic and multicultural societal forms, and by a technologically driven society based on the knowledge economy and ICT (Information and Communication Technologies).

The family, like all social forms, is subjected to this process of unbound morphogenesis, which forces it to live in an internal and external environment characterised by growing levels of risk and uncertainty.

And so we ask: how are transitions being transformed? How can we observe and treat family transitions today? How do we configure social interventions to support families faced with the new modalities that the new transitions entail, especially as regards underage children?

2. Family transitions in a society characterised by unbound morphogenesis

2.1. The distinction between individual and family transitions

It is important to state immediately that I intend to speak of *family* transitions in as much as they refer to the family-subject, unlike transitions that have to do with individuals during their life course (that is, individual transitions in the family context). It seems to me that in much of the literature, especially the psychological literature, the distinction is often unclear.

If we analyse D. W. Winnicott's (1953, 1967) *transitional analysis*, we see that transitions are individual and have to do with relations from the standpoint of individuals, for example, in the mother-child relation. *The transition is of the mother and of the child, not of their relation as such.* The transition is seen from one side and from the other side, but not from what connects them.

Although they are speaking about relations, the majority of these "transitional" and "transactional" psychological analyses are basically referring to individuals, to their inner states, to the ways in which they express themselves (with verbal and non-verbal languages) or to the ways in which they take in others' messages. They claim to be addressing interactions, but the interactions are analysed as exchanges (the comings and goings) of actions or states or factors that are essentially individual and have repercussions considered to be important for individuals, who are the focus of attention.

In short, it seems to me that, until now, family transitions have been observed and addressed mostly as problems that thrust individuals into a situation of crisis in as much as transitions change individuals' interactions and exchanges, rather than as *situations, conditions and relational states* in and of themselves. A great many psychological approaches look at family relations as the place (space) and moment (time) of that which occurs in

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individuals as actors, objects or reciprocal victims, and at their relations, where relations are understood to be reciprocal projections for the most part. As they are focused on the individual (for example, on the child in the relationship with the mother and then with the father), these approaches relegate to the background the subjectivity of the family as a *sui generis* social relationship – that is, as a relational system – that possesses a reality of a *different order* than that of individuals (Donati, 2010).

What I want to emphasise is the fact that family transitions are of a different order of reality than individual transitions, and also than transitions having to do with interactions between individuals. Many scholars speak of the "family", but they treat it a reflection of individual states/actions and of reciprocal interactions. The family is observed as an aggregate of individual interacting agents, not as an order of reality in its own right.

While individual transitions are relatively observable, family transitions are invisible and latent. Neither family members nor the common external observer sees the family as a different order of reality. From a sociological perspective, however, the family belongs to the order of reality of the social relation as *emergent effect.* Since this reality is intangible, family transitions cannot be expressed with either verbal language or other communicative forms; in any case, they present obscure aspects, feelings of malaise that are difficult to decipher and do not lend themselves to being thematised. In general, those who experience family transitions have only a partial awareness of them, if not a distorted, fractured or hindered one.

 I will explain. "Seeing the family" is much more difficult than seeing the relational difficulties of the individuals who "make up" the family, occupying their roles and carrying out their proper functions. The family is not a simple composite or aggregate of individuals who have their own individual ups and downs, conflicts and traumas, and who influence one another in turn. The family is a *sui generis* social system because it is a relational set endowed with its own symbolic and communicative code.

This system can come to find itself in two conditions: (a) in certain cases it must maintain its own specific identity in a context that tends to not recognise it and to maintain its identity at the same time that it is forced, precisely as a system, to continually modify itself in time and space; (b) in other cases, the transition consists in the break-up of the family and in the birth of sub-systems (for example, in the case of divorce with children, two sub-systems are born – mother/child and father/child – while a third sub-system – the couple – is broken).

The problem with family transitions is that of maintaining, or, vice versa, of declaring the demise, of the symbolic code that supports a particular family. This code includes *family symbols* (which are specific and non-fungible) and *family rules* that indicate how those symbols must be treated as well as their relations as, for example, the symbols that are the objects of transitions: those having to do with marriage, with the fact of being a child or a parent, with making the distinction between the death of a stranger as opposed to that of a

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family member. As for the rules, these have to do with, for example, the modalities that guide the parent-child relation, the rules of conjugal relations, the norms of debt or reciprocation between generations, even distant ones.

Saying that transitions are changing means asserting that the symbols and rules of what makes a family and what differentiates one family from others, not to mention from other primary groups such as those of friendship or of care and reciprocal assistance, are changing.

This is true even when the family breaks apart. But, obviously, it is true above all when the family thinks of itself as a social *subject* in transition from one state/condition to another, remaining identical to itself (in that it remains true to its nature of family structure, that is, it remains *idem*) while, at the same time, it undergoes change (as the *we-relation* that changes in its climate, humour and *modus vivendi*; in this case, the family is the subject of change of itself because it is a "feeling together" that falls – "reflects" – upon each member: *ipse*).

I do not address in this setting the transitions by which the family ceases to exist, that is, when it breaks apart and each subsystem goes its separate way. In such a case, the family loses its identity, even if single relations continue to exist. Thus, the transition no longer has to do with the family, but with the new arrangement of the single relations that comes into being. In reality, the family does not disappear but becomes latent, that is, it goes toward the forming of individual experiences that have repercussions on the future of the relations between the single individuals. The process remains highly relational, but it is a very complicated one that would be too lengthy to go into here. I will limit myself, therefore, to addressing family transitions as *transitions of the we-relation,* where *We* is the subject of the same family identity that is trying to transit from one phase to another, recovering its *idem* in a new form.

2.2. Transitions in a new context

In a relatively stable society (that is, one that is morphostatic), transitions are fairly identifiable and foreseeable, or at least this is the collective representation. The social and cultural system dictates rather precise values and rules as to how to define and treat transitions – for families considered to be legitimate and legal, that is. Little is left to socio-cultural interactions.[1]

Marriage, the birth of a child, the rites of passage that mark the end of childhood and the entry into adulthood (in the past, the phase of adolescence was quite delimited in time) and, then, the exit from the parental home are all well defined. Freud's psychoanalysis was created precisely in order to understand problems related to this type of transition. In sociology Talcott Parsons became their interpreter.

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[1] On the distinction between socio-cultural system and socio-cultural interaction, see Archer (1988).

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However, to the extent that societies modernise and become hyper-modernised, everything changes.

Marriage, for which at one time the groundwork was prepared by rites of courtship and engagement, gave rise to the family in a precise moment: it was a transition at a "point" in the existence of the family as a group which descends from other family groups. In the morphogenetic society, these transitions disappear: pre-matrimonial rites disappear, and a wedding marks a point of arrival more than of departure in the sense that it establishes a relation that has already been tried and tested: it is not the launch of a life adventure.

To say that we are entering into a morphogenetic society is to say that the processes of socialisation are less often carried out on the basis of cultural traditions, customs and behavioural habits (*habitus*), or on routine procedures.

The birth of a child is no longer a normative expectation. When it happens, it is carefully planned. A certain number of couples choose not to have children and, thus, do not experience the transition to parenthood. In other couples, the transition assumes the connotations of meticulous planning.

In the past, having children was normatively expected as a "legitimate" event, that is, as occurring inside of marriage. In the morphogenetic society, this quality of the transition to the birth of a child is no longer socially required, which means that a child's birth tends to no longer be exactly a "family" event because marriage is no longer socially required, nor indeed is the couple (at times, not even a heterosexual couple). Must we then say that this transition (having a child) disappears as a "family" transition (in that it seems to become only an individual transition)? We will return to this question later, but I will say now that my answer is negative. We can speak of a family transition even in the extreme case of a woman or man who wants to have a child by means of artificial reproduction because the parent-child couple can and must be observed from the standpoint of the quality of family relations and evaluated on the benchmark of the family (saying what the practical characteristics and effects will be is another matter).

The end of childhood and the entry into adolescence has almost no rite of passage. No one knows when one ends and the other begins, if not for the biological factor of puberty.

The end of adolescence and entry into adulthood are individual facts, but they are socially structured in one way or another according to the socio-cultural context. In some contexts the transition remains clear cut; in others it has completely lost its contours. No one knows for sure when it begins and when it ends. It is well known that young people tend to remain for a longer time in their family of origin, a phenomenon that was pointed out for the first time many years ago (Scabini & Donati, 1988).

Even what it means to be a spouse/partner and a parent is undergoing the same processes. Statistics reveal that separations and divorces are increasing, while co-habitation is on the rise and the number of marriages is declining. Increasingly, couple relations are

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becoming privatised and fluctuating. Even in cases of separation and divorce, the couple can maintain intense relations, even sexual ones, so that the fact of entering into and exiting the role of spouse is not so clear any more. Family mediation services claim that their purpose is to care for the end of a marriage (or couple relationship) and to pursue the children's well-being: but when did the marriage begin? When was the couple established? And when did the transition to having a child begin? Often these questions have no answer, so that, in a context of high levels of modernisation, the very concept of family mediation acquires another meaning: it becomes, in certain cases, the construction of a family, even of a fractured family, where in reality none ever existed. Often, this was the case of a narcissistic couple.

The topic of children moving out of the parental home has attracted keen interest in the past two decades after the publication of several studies highlighting the fact that the average age at which young people leave the family of origin is increasing and, in parallel fashion, so is the average age at marriage or at the inception of couple relationships, while the temporal gap between one generation and the other is growing. There are many transitions connected to these phenomena that cannot be addressed here.

We could compile a long list of family transitions that are changing. Their causes are complex and their repercussions on the family system and on society are even more complex. What I want to emphasise is the fact that, in all of these cases, several traits appear that are common to *new* transitions:

(i) the family transition is losing its institutionalised character because the institutions that regulated it are collapsing; no longer a social institution, *the transition has become a risk*, one that is both individual and social; one can call it an "opportunity", but this does not take away the risk;

(ii) more in general, *the transition is becoming de-normativised*; this then opens the problem of knowing whether the anomie thus generated by a society that leaves transitions without shared norms[2] is permanent or transitory, in which case the old rules are replaced by new norms; from a sociological standpoint, no society can live for long in conditions of anomie, so that our society is also faced with the choice between self-destruction or the constitution of a new normative arrangement in family transitions; as I will discuss later, families are forced to put into practice strongly selective processes in their modalities for change;

(iii) as a corollary to the phenomena of de-institutionalisation, *a growing number of families come to find themselves in a sort of "permanent transition"*, in the sense that a family's normal condition is not knowing between which two life phases or stages it finds itself; the

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[2] I am referring to hyper-modernized societies, especially those in metropolitan contexts, although other societies (for example, those in Brazil or the Caribbean) may have many similarities in terms of chaos in family relations.

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sense of a continuous process of change prevails, which deprives the family of a feeling of its own security and identity, of well defined spatial and temporal boundaries.

Saying that the family and its transitions are becoming "liquid" (Z. Bauman) is a nice image, but it is not useful for understanding what is really happening. A rather more precise way to describe the situation is to adopt the perspective of morphogenetic analysis and state that *the family no longer encounters single normatively defined transitions but is itself becoming an unceasing transition.* In a growing number of cases, the family never departs and never arrives. No one knows when the *family* transition begins and when it ends. The transition is depicted as a social form through which the individual must pass in order to realise him/herself, while in the meantime the individual must continuously modify his/her life course due to the presence or absence of life opportunities. Young people are forced into a longer period of education and training and have more difficulty in finding work as compared to preceding generations. Adults have children at a later age and increasingly as a result of planning. The temporal gap between generations (between the average age of parents and children) is growing. Life expectancies are increasing.

The claim that the family is not the place where transitions occur, but is itself an unceasing transition, may seem excessive. But this tells us that the tendency is toward an evaporation of the very concept of transition which depends on being able to identify the phases of departure and arrival of the family as such. Since the boundaries that define each phase are expanding and, in many cases, are superimposed or disappear altogether, it is quite difficult to identify each transition. Some go so far as to expunge the transition and thus conclude that the family is itself "evaporating" as a well-defined social form. Some claim that the family is becoming a continuous daily "reinvention" because the family's structures (and transitions) are constituted by individuals' actions (and transitions), which are increasingly uncertain and undecipherable. Advocates of this scenario, called "reflexive modernisation", are U. Beck, A. Giddens, S. Lash and Z. Bauman, among others.

3. A new perspective for the definition and treatment of family transitions: shaping family life as a relational endeavour

3.1. The scenario

Is this really the scenario of the new family transitions? It is necessary to discuss (i) how we identify the object (transitions), and (ii) how, as a result, we configure operative interventions.

3.2. Identifying transitions

The ability to identify the family transition depends on how we identify the family, what meaning we attribute to it and how we conceive of its changes. In a certain sense, we

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must discuss whether there exist an *idem* and an *ipse* of the family as a social subject, and how, as a result, we can think about its transitions.

If we give credence to the theory of reflexive modernisation, we have to believe that the family is losing its boundaries, becoming a network that can be varied at pleasure, and is formed by means of a continuous central conflation between structure and agency.[3] As a result, family transitions would assume the same characteristics: no boundary defining them and an elevated subjectification of their lived experience and of the responses enacted to cope with them.

U. Beck and E. Beck-Gernsheim (2004) claim that individuals today "invent" the family and are compelled to do so because there are no longer any normative models, not even those of early modernity. And so we must ask: if, as A. Giddens (1992) asserts, intimate relations become a "*pure relationship"*, that is, an unceasing negotiation on the basis of equality between individuals who live in/experience the couple as a place for personal self-realisation, how would we be able to address the couple transition? And what can we say about the transitions of relations with children, about which so-called post-modern authors (such as Giddens and Beck) do not speak?

My answer is that the theory of reflexive modernisation does not describe, does not interpret and, in the end, does not explain the reality of the family as the place of transitions that require reciprocal engagement and from which – for better or worse – true family transitions arise. It is the existence of a We context, of a we-relationality, that confers a "familial" quality to the transition, rather than an individual character. Those who do not see this reality are unable to give any practical solution whatsoever to the problems of family transitions.

The family is and remains a social and cultural structure that cannot be invented by individuals as such, nor does it consist of relations of individual self-realisation. Those who conceive of it in this manner put themselves in a position of not being able to identify and define any transition while, as a matter of fact, transitions are experienced by people as relational conditions and processes. The theory of reflexive modernisation sees transitions as systemic products that materialise in individuals' lives, of which the reflexivity is fractured, blocked, hindered, and thus unable to respond to the challenges posed by transitions.

To understand the new transitions, those determined by non-traditional factors in a context of elevated modernisation, we must interpret them as challenges that require a new sociological vision.

In reality, transitions are relational situations and processes emerging from causal factors which, in interacting with each other, create stressful relations that have variable intensity and duration. The intensity can range from a minimum (temporary depression) to a maximum (trauma, catastrophe). The temporal duration can be one of the registers of time or

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[3] On the concept of "central conflation", see the theory of morphogenesis of M. S. Archer (1995).

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a combination of them: "*event time*" (an interactive register of extremely limited and contingent duration), *social-historical time* (characterised by successive phases that render it discontinuous) or *symbolic time* (transitions that are timeless or "outside of time").[4]

Beyond these distinctions, interpretative and intervention approaches to transitions differ considerably when it comes to defining what the transitions consist of or the attitudes and orientation to take in coping with them. According to some, transitions have real causes, while others assert that they have "virtual" causes in the sense that they consist of non-objectifiable factors (non-rational by nature). For some, causes can be found in an objective way; for others they always remain obscure and are due to factors that cannot be expressed or rationalised.

We can synthesise the various approaches and relative models in a table (Table 1).

(I) *Developmental models.* According to these models, transitions are above all "natural" events, inherent in the family's natural life course: the formation of the couple, the birth of children, the death of a member, etc. While there are many possible factors that bring about family stress, transitions are developmental phases of a family cycle that can and must be "normalised". Transitions are phases of subsidence as a consequence of people's mal-adaptation and the family's poor or bad functioning which can be caused by various external and internal factors, but which should be understood essentially as problems of readjustment for family life in its internal, natural course of development within the specific culture that defines it as such (for example, the Oedipal transition is present in the West, but not in other cultures). The causal factors can be biological, cultural, economic, social and communicative, but what matters is to consider them as imbalances that can be resolved through measures that give family members opportunities to redefine their role in the natural course of the family community that must cope with the new situation.

(II) *Adaptation models.*[5] Here transitions are considered as "events" that amplify contingencies and open the family system to the spectre of developmental possibilities that are different, and generally conflictual, with respect to expectations. Responses are thus configured as decisions of opportunity in the moment (they are "opportunistic" in Luhmann's definition of the term). In any case, they cannot be subject to "planning" or be "strategic", in the sense of charting out life plans, because the event-by-event approach sees them as improbable, if not impossible. Interventions thus do not aim to shape a family's *modus vivendi,* as in the preceding approach, but only to produce adjustments of which the outcome is evaluated situation by situation.

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[4] See Donati (1991, pp. 180-181). The concept of "event time" corresponds to the idea of a "society of pure interaction", in which social change becomes *histoire événementielle*, i.e. an indefinite series of short-lived, single, idiosyncratic and liquid events.

[5] I prefer to use the term *adaptation* here, as opposed to *adjustment*, for example, in that the concept of adaptation recalls the A function of AGIL, which is a pure means or instrument, not a solution, and is even less normative.

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(III) *Individualisation models*. Here transitions are considered events essentially arising from social and cultural factors that have to do with society and are reflected inside the family because of the dominance of the principle of "institutionalised individualism". So-called "natural" events are powerfully modified by technology and, in any case, have to do with the biological existence of individuals as such. Their repercussions on psychic existence are always individual. A transition is considered a family transition in that the crisis factors reverberate from one individual to another, but it does not have its own specific existence. Family transitions are passages or steps in the process of the individualisation of individuals. And they must be addressed as such.

(IV) *Relational models*. Here transitions are considered as real states/processes caused by natural, cultural as well as social factors. However, they are no longer comprehensible as direct consequences of single causal factors, nor of their combinations. Neither are they treatable as responses based on reparative and compensatory types of interventions, nor even less on an *a priori* normative type of basis. These are instead processual events of a relational type that have the character of emergent effects to which it is possible to respond only by modifying the morphogenesis of the structural, cultural and agential process. Briefly, the transition becomes a relational phase in various senses: because (i) it arises from relations and consists of problematic relations; (ii) it produces critical conditions from the relational standpoint; (iii) it must be treated relationally.

Table 1 – Family transition approaches and models

Models	Definition of transition	Causal factors of the transition	Where to look for answers
Develop-mental models	Transition is a "natural" event of growth and then decline of the family	Mostly internal and inherent in the family's natural life cycle	In an intervention that reflects the "natural" character of the family, as defined in a cultural context
Adaptation models	Transition is a phase of crisis which must be addressed in terms of an event-by-event and opportunistic "adjustment"	Both inside and outside the family	In the adaptive abilities of individuals
Individuali-sation models	Transitions are tensions between individuals caused by individual problems that have repercussions on those with whom one lives	All societal processes that individualise individuals and reflect on others with whom one lives	In the inventive abilities of individuals
Relational models	Transition is a change that generates problems (from stress to trauma) of a relational nature	The interrelation between internal and external factors	In the search for the family's relational good

3.3. Operative interventions

How do practitioners think about addressing family transitions? As I have already alluded to, there are many models. Some propose supporting the natural family cycle, others

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focus on augmenting the ability for tolerating ambivalence (the conflictual model), others seek to increase the family's resilience (reproductive model), and so on. I have synthesised them in Table 2. My intention is to demonstrate the insufficiency of existing models and to propose a model that, being obliged to respond to society's unbound morphogenesis, must operate by means of an appropriate family reflexivity (relational model).

(I) Developmental models. I include under this rubric all those approaches that treat transitions through interventions of a conditional normative type (that is, of the type: "if X occurs, then you do Y"), which have a certain family model in mind. The limited practicability of these approaches resides in the fact that normative procedures can rarely respond to the family system's demands (one need only think of the traditional ways that social workers operate in enforcing their agency's bureaucracy), especially when individuals are in trouble precisely because they lack the ability of self-regulation with appropriate behaviours, assuming that they even have access to resources and material means.

(II) Adaptation models. I include under this rubric all those approaches that treat transitions through types of interventions that have the character of a pragmatic and "opportunistic" (in Luhman's sense of the term) adjustment. They start with a rather generic definition of the family, as a social group of mutuality and reciprocal assistance in which individuals are the ones to subjectively define their rights and obligations.[6] Among these we find models that aim to reduce damage and increase individuals' capacity for resilience, that is, the capacity to absorb the blows (frustrations, delusions, traumas) that they are experiencing, the thinking being that by modifying the family network to the liking of individuals, the family system can find a new equilibrium. Often these models focus on supporting seriously deficient personalities (one should think of traditional psychoanalysis) based on the supposition (in reality badly formulated) that individual therapy benefits the family network. Alternatively, in this category we find the "conflictual models" that address transitions by trying to make people accept the conflicts and ambivalences of their situation (one should think here of so-called "family mediation" which aims to safeguard the parental relation when the couple relation falters). The fact is that individuals' resilience and their ability to live with ambivalence do not produce a resilient family or a family able to tolerate conflicts and ambivalence, if not for a short period of time only. And, in any case, they do not produce the elaborations – structural, cultural and in terms of agency – that are necessary for overcoming challenges in a positive and deliberate way. In general, these models propose temporary solutions that can be useful to individuals, but that do not produce a true family transition. At the most, they serve to redefine, in a non-traumatic way, a family network that always experiences the sense of "We" in a precarious way.

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[6] For example, Wilfried Dumon (1997, Ch. 11) defines the family "as a person-supporting network, which has different subsystems and in which there is a growing autonomy of each individual to define his or her boundaries, including rights and obligations".

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(III) Individualisation models. I include under this rubric all those approaches that, having taken note of the limitations and failures of the preceding approaches, propose a simple solution: resolve the family transition by dissolving it. The family transition is no longer seen as the problem of a family's transition, but is conceived as a problem of redefining individual goals, leaving aside family relations. This is generally said to be the post-modern vision of the family, which resolves the problems of transition by letting the family dissolve or continue to exist as a variety of fragmented relations. Here transitions are "resolved" by means of their dissolution.

The above-mentioned three types of intervention refer to a wide variety of schools of thought and therapeutic practices in a broad sense. Each type can be successfully applied to very specific cases or to particular "social segments" (groups) of families. In the post-modern climate, the developmental approach is losing strength. As to the other two models, we notice that their shared characteristic is that of acting as "stopgaps" in a *transactional* situation. They do not offer prospects for intervention that have as an outcome a positive and deliberate redefinition of the family as a social subject. Except in a few cases, they do not lead to a structural, cultural, and agential elaboration that is able to generate a new way of living in and of the family as a transition endowed with meaning and as a place in which fundamental concerns can be pursued. In order to obtain these elaborations, what is needed is a theory and intervention model that is more comprehensive than the preceding approaches. This theory, in my opinion, is the relational theory.

Table 2 – Operative intervention models for family transitions

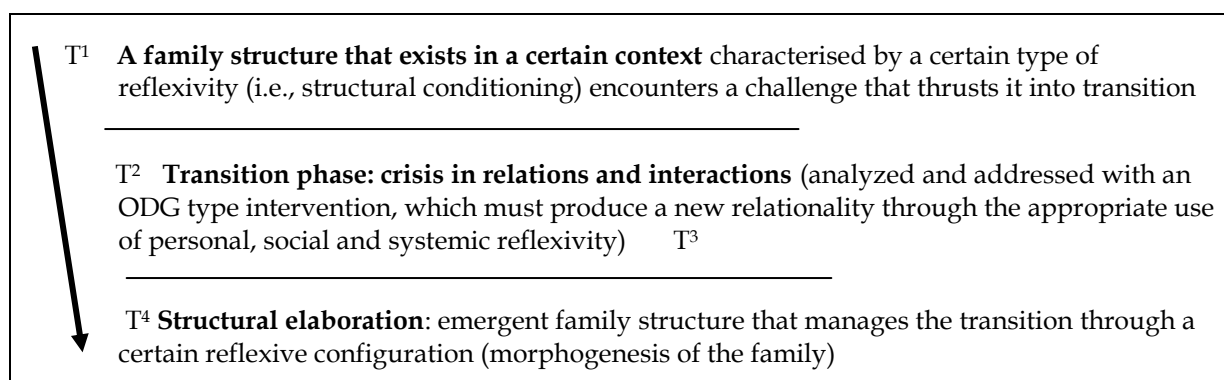| Models	Type of intervention in the transition	Guiding idea of the intervention	Examples
Developmental models	Conditional normative	Adhesion to the natural development of people as members of a family	Planning transitional steps according to the classical model of the nuclear family
Adaptation models	Adaptive, pragmatic, opportunistic	Family constructivism	Mixing people and relations coming from different families as if they were the same "new family"
Individuali-sation models	Inventive pragmatic	Focusing on each individual's maximum autonomy	Resolving conflicts by separation that frees the individual from other family members
Relational models	System of relational Observation-Diagnosis-Guidance (ODG)	Intervening in relations as the way towards reciprocity between family members	Increasing the potential for development of family relations as a way to create relational goods among people

(IV) Relational models. I include under this rubric all those approaches that see the family as a "*space* that is both *transitional* and *transactional*". The family is viewed as a social subject able to elaborate a symbolic code suited to managing such a space provided that it is empowered to do so. The transactional space has its transactional objects, rules and

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dynamics to overcome difficult and traumatic events. That objects, rules and dynamics are relational was pointed out by Bromberg (2009). Another model is called the relational Observation-Diagnosis-Guidance intervention (the ODG-system) (Donati, 1991, Ch. 5). The differences between the various relational models reside, in my opinion, in the way that one conceives of social relations and the ways that one uses them (Donati, 2001). The topic is too far-reaching to be addressed in this setting. What I want to emphasise is the difference between *relationalistic* approaches and those that are truly *relational.* For the former, relations are subjective and even virtual constructs: they are instruments that serve as ends in themselves. For relational approaches *in a strict sense*, instead, relations are emergent effects endowed with their own reality that should be treated as *sui generis* goods and not as instruments to be used in achieving any goal at all. In this second case, transitional relations should be managed so as to support a "family reflexivity", which is a relational meta-reflexivity (Donati, 2011).

In Figure 1, I synthesise the relational vision of family transitions (according to the paradigm introduced in Donati, 2010[7]). At the start (time T^1), there is a family structure that exists in a certain social context (structural conditioning). The way in which it copes with the challenge posed by the transition depends on the type (the degree or quality) of reflexivity that this structure favours (or inhibits). The phase of transition (time T^2) is that in which the catalyzing event presents challenges that can be analyzed and addressed with a relational Observation-Diagnosis-Guidance intervention (the ODG-system). The task of this intervention is to bring the family to a structural elaboration able to withstand challenges in a suitably reflexive manner in order to generate a physiological morphogenesis of the family (time T^3).

Figure 1 – The place of transition in the family's morphogenesis/morphostasis

T^1 **A family structure that exists in a certain context** characterised by a certain type of reflexivity (i.e., structural conditioning) encounters a challenge that thrusts it into transition

T^2 **Transition phase: crisis in relations and interactions** (analyzed and addressed with an ODG type intervention, which must produce a new relationality through the appropriate use of personal, social and systemic reflexivity) T^3

T^4 **Structural elaboration**: emergent family structure that manages the transition through a certain reflexive configuration (morphogenesis of the family)

Thus, the most appropriate interventions are those that conceive of services in terms of networks of relations (non only as webs consisting of nodes, as in network analysis!!). This is

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[7] Cf. pp. 194-197.

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required by the fact that, in a morphogenetic society, family transitions are less and less defined by the cultural system (Cs) and are increasingly entrusted to socio-cultural interactions (S-ci).[8]

4. Understanding and strengthening family reflexivity

The scenario of the new family transitions, those due to the ever greater contingencies of causal factors and their effects, requires answers that consist in *increasing the reflexive abilities of families* (and not only of single individuals as individuals).

The most recent studies on reflexivity have revealed a typology of reflexivity forms and of their progression in present day society. M. S. Archer (2003) is credited with a typology that identifies four forms of reflexivity, understood as the "internal conversation" of people.

Archer's fundamental thesis is that these reflexive modalities mediate between socio-cultural structures and subjects' ways of life. Briefly, the socio-cultural structures influence, but do not entirely determine, people's actions because between the structures' influence and concrete action there exists an "internal conversation" with various types of personal reflexivity.

In a subsequent investigation, Archer (2007) reaches the following conclusions.

Three positive modes of reflexivity (those that are neither hindered nor fractured) prevail in differing social contexts.

a) Communicative reflexivity prevails when there is contextual *continuity* and is correlated with social immobility; it is found above all in the family.

b) Autonomous reflexivity prevails when there is contextual *discontinuity* and is correlated with upward social mobility; it is exercised above all in the market.

c) Meta-reflexivity prevails when there is contextual *incongruence* and is correlated with lateral social mobility; it is found above all in the third sector.

Archer's research is of extreme importance. Nevertheless, I would like to point out that it can be improved by attempting to provide responses to some issues that it raises.

(i) The first issue has to do with the fact that Archer emphasises that the reflexive ability is becoming increasingly essential in the morphogenetic society, but at the same time it is becoming increasingly problematic and difficult to sustain. If it is true that communicative forms are decreasing, as Archer asserts, and that autonomous reflexivity is no longer suited to coping with the growing discontinuity and incongruity of life contexts, I must then ask: can meta-reflexivity be the best way to resolve family transitions? We must consider the fact that if, on the one hand, it is true that meta-reflexive forms are increasingly needed in our complex societies, on the other hand, the latter have outcomes which are

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[8] For more details on the definition of cultural system (Cs) and socio-cultural-interactions (S-ci), see Archer (1988).

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increasingly problematic and more inclined to end up as those forms that Archer calls "fractured" and "impeded".

(ii) The second issue has to do with the fact that the forms of reflexivity highlighted by Archer refer to the individual and to his/her subjectivity, not to social relations (such as, for example, the family). To what extent are types of reflexivity transferable from an individual subjectivity to interpersonal relations or, better, to a social subjectivity?

In my opinion, Archer's theory must be amplified to take into account the fact that we need to locate and activate new forms of reflexivity in order to respond to family transitions – forms of reflexivity that are such as to be applicable not so much to individuals in and of themselves, but to social relations, for example, family relations. For this reason I have introduced the concept of "relational reflexivity" (Donati, 2008, p. 121), to indicate the reflexivity that social agents/actors apply to relations (not to one's own Self) to render their relationships with others and with the world reflexive, bringing to bear one's own personal internal reflexivity.

The family has its own reflexivity as a *sui generis* social relation. It is the we-reflexivity that can be observed in its we-relationality. We can understand how we-relationality "works", and what type of reflexivity exists in it, from the way in which various family members interact with each other.

We could ask: how is all this relevant for defining and addressing family transitions?

If transitions are addressed with a *we-reflexivity close to zero*, they are addressed based on purely cultural traditions that do not stand up to the processes of modernisation. One has scant or no awareness at all of transitions. Traumas are addressed with a normative framework of a reproductive type, in which case the choice is clear: either the previously existing condition can be re-established, or there is passive acceptance of what is happening, and the transition is overcome reproducing the rules of the clan. We can take Africa as an example: when a parent dies in a situation of genocide or due to Aids, the relatives take the place of the parent, and if both parents die, they take the children into their homes as their own. There is no negotiation of different possibilities and opportunities that would animate the search for other possible solutions in a so-called "Western" family. There is no search for alternatives because the We is immediate (without mediation) and cannot be fit together with other relations. The only opportunities are those that arise in a morphostatic context. The same holds true for all parts of the world, for a great deal of Asia in the first place, but also for the Mediterranean area where a pre-modern social and cultural model is still in force.

If transitions are addressed with an *aggregate we-reflexivity*, there will be spaces for negotiation and it will come down to seeing what one can and cannot put together, case by case. The family will still be at risk and, in any case, will have difficulty in elaborating a new awareness of We.

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On the other hand, if transitions are addressed with *relational we-reflexivity*, efforts will be made to emerge from the transition producing a new way of "being" and "making" the family as a relational good for its members.[9]

The morphogenetic society necessarily erodes merely reproductive we-reflexivity and fuels the we-reflexivity of an aggregate type. In both cases, family transitions are not addressed in a satisfactory manner. In the first case, they are simply misfortunes that must be borne. In the second case, they are occasions for the breaking up, shattering and loosening of family relations, which can entail "relational evils" (Donati, 2010, p. 204). Only the we-reflexivity of a relational type can hope to enable the transition to be an opportunity to redefine the family and its vicissitudes in such a way as to reprogram the family's life course and retain the potential to generate relational goods. The solution resides in shaping family life as a reciprocal good in which each member finds a sufficient measure of trust and collaboration in him/herself because there is a sufficient measure of trust and collaboration with others. The fundamental idea is that of shaping family life as a relational good.

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[9] On the concept of "relational good", see Donati and Solci (2011).

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