



## Existential Field 2:

# Family Developmental Processes

### Working Report (April 2010)



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Funded under Socio-economic Sciences & Humanities

**FAMILYPLATFORM** (SSH-2009-3.2.2 Social platform on research for families and family policies): funded by the European Union's 7th Framework Programme for 18 months (October 2009 – March 2011).

## Working Reports

Funded by the European Commission's Seventh Framework Programme and co-ordinated by Technical University Dortmund, FAMILYPLATFORM gathers a consortium of 12 organisations working together to articulate key questions about the family for the *European Social Science and Humanities Research Agenda 2012-2013*.

There are four key stages to the project. The first is to chart and review the major trends of comparative family research in the EU in 8 'Existential Fields' (EF). The second is to critically review existing research on the family, and the third is to build on our understanding of existing issues affecting families and predict future conditions and challenges facing them. The final stage is to bring the results and findings of the previous three stages together, and propose key scientific research questions about families to be tackled with future EU research funding.

This *Working Report* has been produced for the first stage of the project, and is part of a series of reports, as follows:

- EF1. Family Structures & Family Forms**
- EF2. a) Family Developmental Processes  
b) Transition into Parenthood**
- EF3. Major Trends of State Family Policies in Europe**
- EF4. a) Family and Living Environment  
b) Local Politics – Programmes and Best Practice Models**
- EF5. Patterns and Trends of Family Management in the European Union**
- EF6. a) Social Care and Social Services  
b) Development of Standards for Social Work and Social Care Services**
- EF7. Social Inequality and Diversity of Families**
- EF8. Media, Communication and Information Technologies in the European Family**
- CSO Civil Society Perspective: Three Case Studies**

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## Introduction

The nature of the family has changed over time, shaped by the change of cultures and varying from one place to another. But while there have always been many distinct forms of the family, it is perhaps only in contemporary Western societies that this multiplicity has taken on the importance that it has for us today. Not by accident sociologists have substituted the singular term “family” with the plural “families” precisely in order to refer explicitly to the plurality and variety (as well as flexibility) of the forms of the family that exist today<sup>1</sup>. More precisely, the expression “families” has been adopted to refer to the various types of family that exist in contemporary society and to the multiplicity of modes of living together and of experiencing family life that individuals may encounter in the course of their lives.

If we consider the twenty-year period 1990-2010, focusing attention on the overall change in the nature of the family, it is possible to identify certain general trends. Broadly speaking, these trends run through all the various European countries but in some cases they pertain to particular geographic areas<sup>2</sup>. The approach with which these processes are considered here is both a macro and micro social one. Such a perspective makes it possible to take into consideration the relationship between changes in demography and family life on the one hand and on the other certain profound transformations of a cultural nature characteristic of contemporary society, and, in so doing, bring to the fore and valorise the role of the individual subjectivities involved.

In this report the developmental processes of the family will firstly be taken into consideration from the macro-social perspective, in particular by examining the principle changes in the forms and structures of the family and at the same time describing the cultural processes that underline them: individualisation, the subjectivisation of norms and the changes in the relations between the genders. Subsequently, our analysis of the new forms of the family will be conducted by focusing attention on the point of view of the subjects involved in “making the family” and in installing relationships within it (from this point of view particular emphasis will be given to the parent-child relationship, to that between partners and to the relationship between grandparents, parents and grandchildren).

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<sup>1</sup> The use of the plural alludes not so much to a break-up or irreversible crisis in the family as primary social group or as the *locus* of emotional life as to the profound transformations that it is undergoing.

<sup>2</sup> In our analysis and discussion of the dynamics of the transformation in the family use will be made of the criteria already developed and applied by other scholars, namely those based on the categories north/south, Protestant/Catholic, east/west. The type of welfare system that countries adopt can also serve as a useful criterion to classify them, as can the more general criterion of national wealth.

In the study of the developmental processes of the family the factor of age is certainly an important point of reference. In this respect, an approach involving the conception of the life course, which is founded on age, may well constitute a useful perspective. Nonetheless, as we will shortly seek to show, today it is also necessary to consider this approach with a critical eye.

### **The life-course approach**

It is well known that subjects of different ages tend to relate to each other and to the social world in different ways; in particular, relationships with the family and within the family undergo change in accordance with changes in age. Age regulates entries into and exits from various life worlds together with forms of action. Thus, age stipulates in a more or less rigid and binding manner the sequences of socially pertinent events *vis-à-vis* the various spheres of life and activity – for example, when it is appropriate to marry, have children, not have children, enter the world of work or exit from it (Elder, 1975; Elder and O’Rand, 1995).

The first studies to take into consideration the dimension of age were of an anthropological nature (Eisenstadt, 1956; Kertzer and Keith, 1984), and they initially concentrated above all on the phenomenon of age groups and the role they played in different societies. The social sciences in general – from sociology to anthropology, from demography to the psychology of development – took an interest in age-related phenomena to the extent that they constituted a social dimension with a very strong normative power. There is little doubt that at the basis of this new interest was the fact that starting out in the 20<sup>th</sup> century there emerged onto the socio-political scene a number of age groups (one need only think of youth or the elderly) with a hitherto unknown force and visibility and with social characteristics and forms of experience that were being progressively redefined on the basis of new social co-ordinates. On the macro level the affirmation of these groups points to transformations of a structural character, in the first place demographic, that have in their turn induced researchers and scholars to endeavour to understand the cultures and attitudes of their protagonists. On the micro-social level, i.e. that taking into consideration the plane on which subjects operate, this interest points in its turn to changes in individual life courses, in their rhythms and transitions.

In general terms then we can say that the advantage of this approach is tied to the concern that it shows for the social features of individual behaviours and actions, at the same time taking into account the dimension of historical time and the social characteristics connected with age. In this way the life course approach has been able to connect social change and the

models of individual life courses, thereby bringing together the macro- and micro-social dimensions.

To put it in the words of Haraven and Adams (1982, 2):

*The life course framework offers a comprehensive, integrative approach, which allows to interpret individual and family transitions as part of a continuous, interactive process of historical change [...]. The life course approach links individuals' biographies with their collective behavior as part of an ongoing continuum of historical change.*

The reference to time is also essential in order to understand why the term "life course" is regularly preferred to "life cycle". "Course" as opposed to "cycle" places the emphasis on the continuity of development and change over the course of time without however making reference to any form of circularity or necessary predictability. In this framework each existential (and social) phase has to be perceived as a successive construction, as the outcome of processes and experiences already laid down. In particular, thanks to the concept of "life course" it is possible to focus attention not so much on the definition of the life phases themselves as on the pathways and interconnections, on the intersections between the innumerable "career paths" or trajectories that make up an individual biography (Clausen, 1986; Elder and O'Rand, 1995). The life course approach then should not be circumscribed to the study of a particular trajectory or career path. Instead, it should be understood in terms of the way a given trajectory, whether related to the family or work, interacts with and combines with others. From this perspective, then, life courses are seen as interdependent and are considered in terms of how they continually intersect. Moreover, the path of a particular individual intertwines with those of other individuals that that person interacts with in a significant way.

In the new century this markedly age-related intersection of multiple choices and trajectories, has undergone some relevant changes, related to the decreasing normative strength of age itself. From this perspective, it should be kept in mind that in contemporary society biological age and social age tend to be separated: the former is no longer an obligatory reference point for the definition of the latter. Put in another way, biographical age no longer functions as the fixed organising principle in the construction of role models. It is possible, for example, to be pre-adolescent yet already have the status of an autonomous consumer or, alternatively, to be

categorised in the so-called “third age” – and so have a biological age that would qualify one as elderly – yet socially play important social roles.

Youth and adulthood itself today constitute two cases that are emblematic of the progressively autonomous nature of the relationship between biological age and social age. Thus, in the first case, in the face of the tendency for the time of youth to become ever more extended, it is now possible to reach a complete interior autonomy without possessing real autonomy on a social level (in this regard, the typical case is that of young people in the so-called “long family”, which we will discuss shortly, i.e. the prolonged presence of young people in the family of origin especially in the countries of Mediterranean Europe).

As for the second case, i.e. adulthood, the situation is not so simple. On a formal level becoming an adult implies a series of changes of status and assumptions of roles that lead to a progressive independence, accompanied by a growing exercise of social responsibilities. However, as Modell observed some decades ago (Modell *et al.*, 1976), today this construction appears to be somewhat artificial. In fact, the sequences that mark the passages from one social age to another are weaker than was the case some decades ago. Thus, for example, today the adult is no longer defined through a substantial existential stability (in the family, in work, in his/her personal relations) but rather to a considerable degree through his/her capacity to subjectively dominate the continuous flow of changes in which he/she finds himself/herself emersed (Saraceno, 1983).

In this climate of uncertainty that characterises societies in contemporary modernity (Giddens, 1990; Beck, 1994; Bauman, 1999), then, it seems that it is less and less feasible to construct biographical trajectories based on age that are consolidated and socially structured. The meaning that uncertainty assumes in the construction of the identities of subjects, up until now explored empirically by examining above all the condition of young people (and the destandardisation of the forms of transition towards adulthood, cf. Walther and Stauber, 2002), manifests itself through the loss of importance of social institutions (for example work) as points of reference for the regulation and planning of biographies. New spaces of liberty open up for their construction but at the same time there emerge new biographical risks, to the extent that not everyone may dispose of the economic, intellectual and social resources necessary to confront and stand up to uncertainty, by now a given component of the life experience of the young and not so young. Obviously the family cannot but feel the impact of this process, “paying” for it in terms of a growing level of instability.

But what exactly are the socio-cultural processes that contribute to weakening the life-course approach? Two in particular must be mentioned. In the first place, the process of individualisation, which involves a new representation of social action as a dimension more tied to individual choices than to the dynamics of systems; in the second place, the process of the transformation of cultural norms, in particular in the direction of their increasing subjectivisation (Bozon, 2004).

Let us now consider more closely how these two factors impact on the life of the couple and the family, noting at the same time the implications that they have for the life course approach and the weight of its analytical force.

So far as individualisation is concerned, it is necessary first of all to clarify what it is not. Individualisation does not mean an “unfettered logic of action, juggling in a virtually empty space; nor does it mean mere ‘subjectivity’, an attitude which refuses to see that beneath the surface of life is a highly efficient, densely woven institutional society” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001, 2). Rather, individualisation has to be viewed as a systemic social condition and, as such, something that cannot be associated primarily with individual choices and desires. In this regard Beck and Beck-Gernsheim point out that today “the individuals are condemned to individualization. Individualization is a compulsion, albeit a paradoxical one, to create, to stage manage, not only one’s own biography but the bonds and networks surrounding it and to do this amid changing preferences [...]” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001, 4).

In other words individualisation needs to be understood as the process wherein individuals take upon themselves the onus of making choices and existential decisions. Individuals feel in themselves the responsibility and obligation to decide on every aspect of their own lives, even where the degree of liberty in the society of uncertainty and risk is in fact extremely limited. From this point of view, on the one hand, the process of individualisation modifies the representations of social action on the part of individuals (and, therefore, also the relations within the family); on the other hand, it contributes to transforming the forms of the family. In fact, the dynamics of individualisation tend to “liberate” men and women from the traditional ties of gender and from familiar role models (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995), operating in effect in the direction of a de-institutionalisation of the forms of the family.

What has been defined as the “subjectivisation of norms” (Bozon, 2004) constitutes in its turn a process that goes back to the dimension of individualisation and that has a deep impact on family life. Analysing the subjectivisation of norms in reference to, for example, sexual morality, Bozon defines the phenomenon as the tendency on the part of individuals to modify and



transform norms in relation to the specific contexts in which they find themselves. Thus, for example, according to Bozon (2004, 23), in the context of the married couple the norms that regulate cohabitation and sexual relations can be manipulated by individuals, thereby being transformed into an instrument for evaluating and negotiating the relationship. In addition, the application of norms has to be continually justified<sup>3</sup>. As regards the dynamics within the couple (and, in particular, the concept of fidelity), Bozon draws attention to a particularly important transformation, i.e. the consolidation of the difference between principles and practical situations, between principles and everyday life. Thus, the very norm of fidelity in the couple tends to be transformed into a 'situational norm', i.e. a norm tied to temporal and circumstantial conditions that requires an *ad hoc* evaluation. All this inevitably impacts on the life of the couple, accentuating its traits of instability. By way of summary, it is possible to say that norms tend to be transformed from 'social' to 'private' norms: in other words, they can be re-elaborated on the basis of individual decisions and evaluations. In short, the moral codes relating to the life of the couple and the family are not dissolved but rather progressively pluralised and individualised (Leccardi, 2009b).

## **THE MAJOR TRENDS IN DEVELOPMENTAL FAMILIAL PROCESSES AND THEIR EFFECTS ON THE LIFE-COURSE**

Within this general framework we identify four trends in the European family today. We briefly present these below, before going on to discuss them in detail in the sections that follow.

**1<sup>st</sup> trend. The prolonged presence of young people within the family of origin** (the role, in this respect, of the negotiation-and-affection based family).

**2<sup>nd</sup> trend. Young people and parenthood: the new representations of parenthood among young people** (with reference to the transformations in gender roles and in male and female identities; the new care division; the new work-life balance in the return to work of young parents after the birth of their first child).

**3<sup>rd</sup> trend. Conjugal instability** (pre-conditions, modalities, social and cultural consequences on family life and on gender identities; the divorced fathers).

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<sup>3</sup> Bozon (2004) draws on the results of research into sexual behaviour in Belgium.

**4<sup>th</sup> trend. The new role of grandparents** (On the one hand, they draw satisfaction from their role as providers of support to children and grandchildren. This condition is at times characterised by a state of “reflected uncertainty”, deriving from the tendential precariousness of their children’s and grandchildren’s work. On the other (in case their health condition is acceptable) they start anew planning their life.

In respect of each of these trends we will take into consideration statistical data and offer comparative analyses that throw light on the transformations that are taking place both in the family as a whole as well as in the relations within it<sup>4</sup>.

### **1<sup>st</sup> Trend. The prolonged Presence of Young People within the Family of Origin**

In this initial section we consider the relationship between the transformations in the family and the construction of identities on the part of young men and women, examining in particular the relationship between young people and the family from two distinct but complementary points of view: firstly, in terms of the nature of the relations that young people have with their family of origin; and secondly, in terms of the strategies they adopt when they form a new couple.

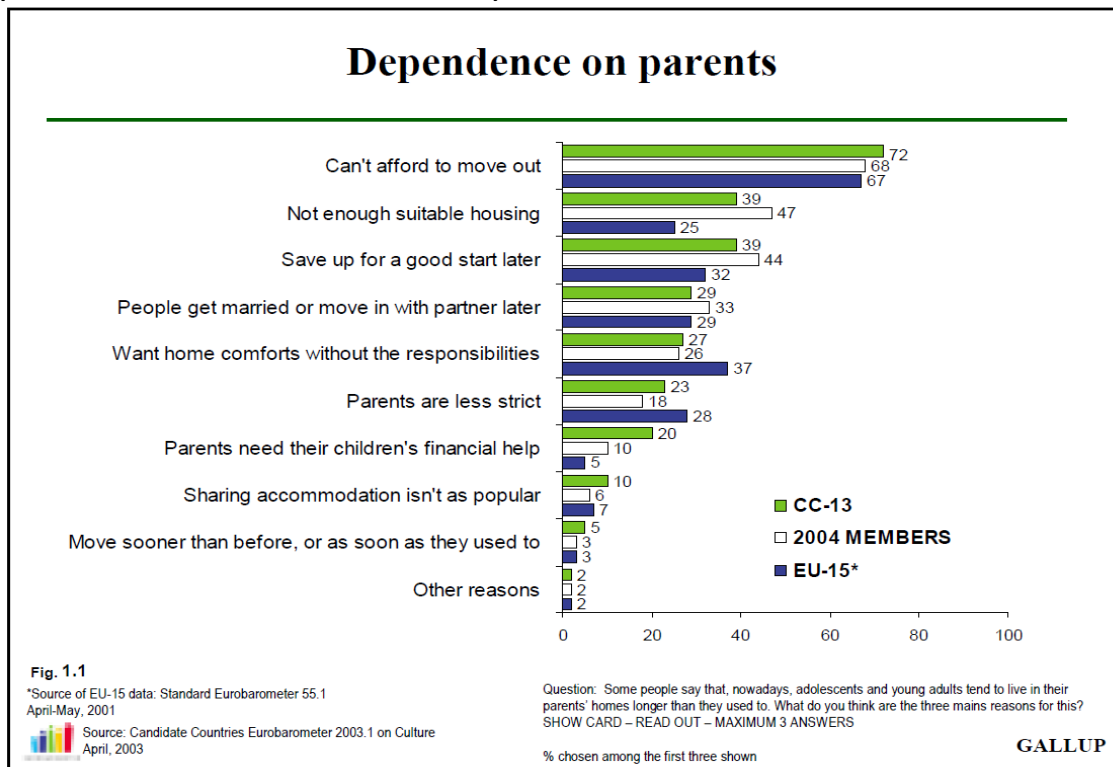
Today this delicate passage is effected later than was the case in the past, especially in the countries of central and southern Europe. This impacts significantly on the process whereby young people enter into adult life and, as the case may be, take on the role of parent.

Two distinct sets of factors and conditions contribute to this phenomenon: on the one hand, the temporal extension of educational/work training paths and the concrete difficulties of entering the workforce that, to an ever-increasing extent, lead young people, in particular women, into situations involving a high level of precariousness. On the other, the emergence of emotionally closer and more supportive relations between the generations.

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<sup>4</sup> In particular, in preparing this report, we have made use of the following European research reports: “Up2Youth” (2008), “SOCCARE” (2003), “DIALOG” (2006), “FATE” (2005), “Young Europeans, 2001” (2001), “European Population Conference 2005” and “Demographic Challenges for Social Cohesion” (2005). Use has also been made of Eurostat, OECD (for Italy) and ISTAT data (Italian National Institute for Statistics).

**Table 1. Factors accounting for the dependence of young people on their parents in Europe (“Candidate Countries” and EU countries)**

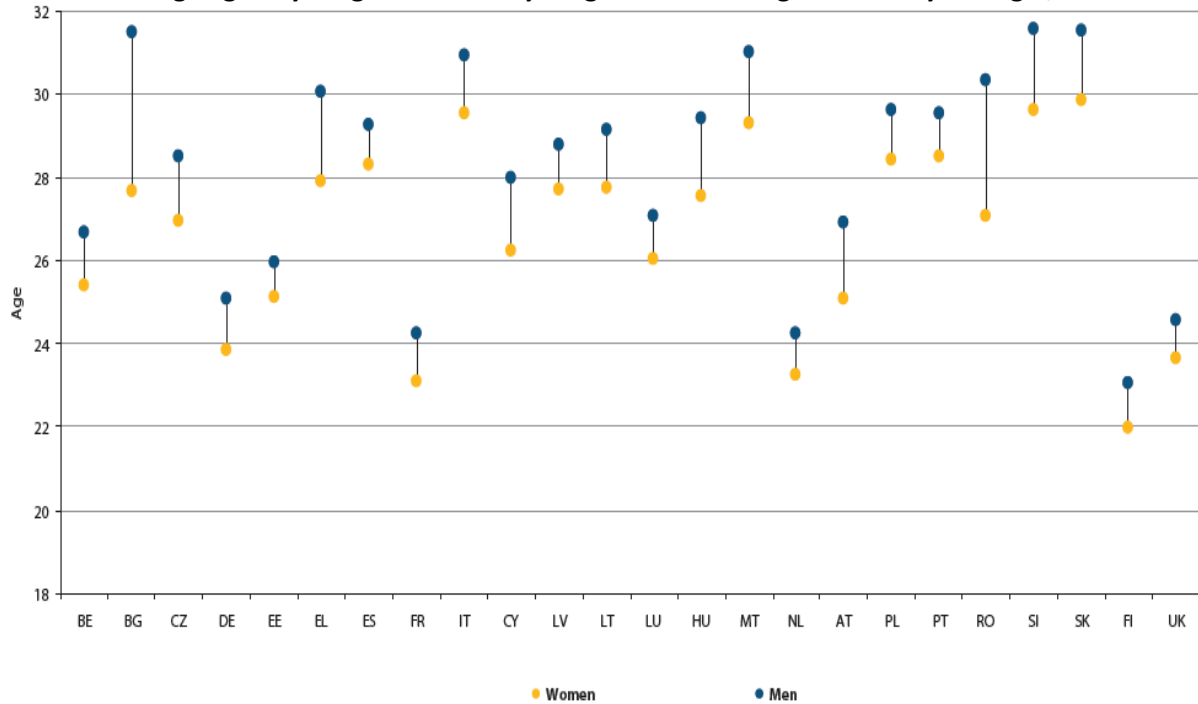


**Source: Eurobarometer, 2004**

The term CC-13 stands for the so-called “Candidate Countries”: Bulgaria, Malta, Cyprus, Poland, the Czech Republic, Romania, Estonia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Latvia, Turkey and Lithuania;  
 The term EU-15 stands for the countries making up the European Union as of 2001;  
 The term 2004 MEMBERS groups both the old and new countries making up the European Union.

Table 1 offers a range of interesting data in relation to what young people perceive as possible impediments/resources in the process of transition towards adult life. Their prolonged presence within the family of origin derives, apart from anything else, from the perception that it is possible for them to have “a good relationship” with their parents, characterised by a limited degree of strictness and a high degree of understanding. Ease and comfort, underpinned by a more hospitable and affectionate family environment, serve to facilitate their prolonged presence in the family of origin. Needless to say, a crucial role is played by concrete material factors - in particular, the availability and affordability of housing – which make it necessary for young people to dispose of substantial savings or financial assistance in order to be able to choose to leave their family of origin.

**Table 2. Average age of young women and young men on leaving their family of origin, 2007**



Source: Eurostat, EU-LFS  
 Note: DK, IE, SE: data not available.

**Source: Eurostat, 2009**

Table 2 shows the age at which young people, distinguished for gender, leave their family of origin in the various European countries considered in the Eurostat 2009 survey. Of particular note is the advanced age at which young people leave their family of origin in Belgium, Italy, Slovakia and Malta, where on average they continue to live in their parents’ home beyond the age of 28 (even though, as the research reveals, young women leave home earlier, at an average age of 28 compared with a figure of 31 for young men). In Greece, Romania and Slovenia too, young people leave their family of origin at a relatively advanced age (around 28).

The European country in which, again according to the Eurostat 2009 survey, young people leave home earliest, is Finland, where on average young women and young men become independent at the ages of 22 and 23 respectively; in Great Britain, France and Germany young people also leave their family of origin at a relatively young age (before the age of 25). In the remaining countries – Austria, Luxembourg, Cyprus and the Czech Republic – young people undertake this process of transition on average between the ages of 26 and 28.

The research dealing with transition processes has revealed a marked variability in the life trajectories of different individuals, which, in the opinion of a number of scholars (Arnett, 2004 and 2006; Coté, 2000; Leccardi and Ruspini, 2006), now follow paths that involve an ever-increasing degree of individualisation (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001).

The transformations that have taken place in the last twenty years have in fact brought with them profound changes in the nature of youth as a life phase; it has passed from being a condition that was well-defined temporally and structured in a stable manner to being a period of variable duration and characterised by multiple meanings (Cavalli, 1980). As a consequence, the particular phases that in the modern era marked the entry of young people into adult life – finding a job, preferably a permanent one; leaving one's parents' house to get married and set oneself up in another house; having children – have taken on a different ritual and symbolic value.

The traditionally and socially structured sequence of events once typical of the transition to adult life no longer constitutes the norm. Life trajectories, which for previous generations were more standardised, have become increasingly fragmented, without clearly identifiable connections between one phase and another; indeed, at times the phases can even be inverted. This process has been referred to as the destandardisation of life courses (see Walther and Stauber, 2002) and it manifests itself in what has been called choice biography (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997; du Bois-Reymond, 1998), characterised by a marked individualisation and an accentuation of traits of risk, especially related to social inequalities.

### ***The Role of the Negotiation- and Affection-Based Family***

This set of transformations finds in the negotiation- and affection-based family, typical of contemporary Western society, a significant support. The passage from the rule-governed family to the family based on sentiment, in which the affective pole prevails over the normative pole, makes way for the emergence of a picture of the family in which affection becomes the core of the experience of parenthood. This family then tends to be represented as a place dedicated to caring and protection, the principle purpose of which is to provide love and security to children, satisfying their economic, social and affective needs. This can lead to ambivalent consequences: on the one hand, a more open and richer affective relationship between parents and children but, on the other, a more marked and prolonged dependence of children on parents.

This new centrality of sentiment in the family is accompanied by a higher degree of overlap in the roles played within the family, which translates into a greater liberty and reciprocity in the relations between the components in the family and in an increased openness to and willingness to participate in dialogue.

The crisis of the father as holder of authority and power (Kimmel, 1987; Kimmel and Messner, 2010) has in fact led to the emergence, within the context of the new affective strategies within the family, of a hitherto unknown paternal figure, one that is capable of standing alongside that of the mother on an equal footing, as responsible for and as guarantor of the common parenting project. More loving and open to listen, this new paternal figure does not draw back from fulfilling the affective function that in the past pertained exclusively to the mother.

The progressive dissolution of the authority of the father in the context of the family has its roots both in the crisis of paternal values on the social scene and in the self-conscious abandonment on the part of both parents of values that inhere to the figure of an unaffectionate and distant father, a figure which today the majority of young couples reject.

The functions of the new father appear to be intertwined with “maternal” functions: the mother, in her turn, seems to have ceded her formerly exclusive dominion over affective communication within the family, obtaining in exchange responsibilities in areas that up to a few decades ago were instead the exclusive domain of the father. In fact, the “new mother” is a woman who has shifted part of her interests outside the family, though still actively sharing with her partner an affective commitment within it. She is a mother who not only “takes care”, but who is careful to promote her own independence, self-realisation and autonomy, both within and outside the family<sup>5</sup>. Thanks to her new role in the job market she has arrived at the point of covering the function of bridge between the family and society, which up until a few decades ago was the exclusive responsibility of men, so much so as to have become basically interchangeable with her partner.

The affective family has a wide range of distinct forms (women may engage in full-time or part-time work outside the family; grandparents may be actively involved in the rearing of children; children beyond the age of adolescence may continue to live with their parents and so on). Nonetheless, the sentiment at the basis of family relations, together with the values associated with it, represents a common element amidst all these variations (Mapelli, 2010).

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<sup>5</sup> This tendency may provoke new conflicts between the figure of the mother and that of the woman as subject. Cf. Badinter (2010).

### **Research Gaps**

A great deal of research has been done on the new and variegated forms and structures of the family. Much of this has been based on national statistics and a great deal has involved a comparative approach. What is missing, however, is research on the changes in relations within the family and, more specifically, within couples. Another noticeable gap takes the form of qualitative studies on homosexual parents or on homosexual couples and the dynamics that characterise their relations.

### **2<sup>nd</sup> Trend. Young People and Parenthood**

The passage to adult life brings with it at least potentially another substantial transition, namely that of becoming a parent. This phase too, compared with twenty years ago, takes place later.

As is well known, becoming a parent involves an extremely profound change not just in the life course of individuals but also in the nature of the relations within the couple. It is for this reason that couples today, whether married or not, tend to evaluate and weigh up ever more carefully a series of circumstances, both present and future - from the management of relations within the couple, to employment and the income deriving from it, to the organisation and upkeep of the house - before committing themselves to bring a child into the world<sup>6</sup>.

Right from the 90's decisions relating to parenthood began to be influenced by a series of novel considerations. Below we analyse these separately, following the guidelines of Hobcraft and Kiernan (1995):

- 1) having a partner: although an increasing number of children are born outside marriage, the majority are still born to a mother and father that live together in a married couple;
- 2) completing education and work training: the majority of young Europeans do not become parents before completing their studies<sup>7</sup>;
- 3) having a job that guarantees an adequate income: changes in the labour market have led to an increase in and prolongation of the financial dependence of young people on their families. This has contributed to raising the age at which young people are able to have an

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<sup>6</sup> The factors of uncertainty (Bauman, 2000) and risk (Beck, 1998) which distinguish contemporary society and which impact on the capacity of individuals to choose and act also have an undeniable influence on the decision to have children.

<sup>7</sup> Between the various European countries there are very marked differences in the proportions of young people under 25 who have completed full-time education/work training paths.

income that permits them to embark upon the process of starting a family. In short, young people, both men and women, have to evaluate whether it is economically feasible for them to become parents.

- 4) having a house of one's own: as demonstrated in research by Eurobarometer, having a house is considered an important prerequisite for family life<sup>8</sup>;
- 5) having a "sense of future": apart from the concrete factors discussed above, having a child also demands being able to anticipate events at least over the medium-term period.

The factors that Hobcraft and Kiernan (1995) identified as central to the choice of becoming a parent are even more starkly evident today. As a matter of fact, the tendency to rationally evaluate the timing and the conditions involved in the creation of a stable union - be it in the form of cohabitation or marriage - and the process of becoming a parent are an expression of the degree of insecurity that young people experience today.

The implications of becoming a parent are perceived and felt differently by men and women. In fact, it is necessary to view the two facets of parenthood - maternity and paternity - in relation to the other social roles that parents have (for example, professional roles). The potential contradiction in identity that derives from the multiplicity of roles that people, particularly women, are required to cover today (including being a mother and a worker at one and the same time) can manifest itself in an inner and/or social conflict at the moment that a couple finds itself before the choice of taking on the responsibility of becoming parents.

Today young women and young men in Europe become parents at a later age than twenty years ago. A comparison of the figures for the 80's and 2003 shows that the mean age at which women had their first child has increased in every country. In fact, in 1980 there were only nine countries (France, Germany, Holland, Sweden, Switzerland Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg and Spain) in which the mean age was higher than 25<sup>9</sup>. By contrast, twenty years later at the beginning of the new century there were only three countries in Western Europe - Armenia, Belarus and Moldova - in which the mean age at which women had their first child was less than 24.

Women in Europe now generally have their first child between the ages of 26.5 and 30. The women that have their first child at the youngest age, at around 26.5 years of age, are the Portuguese and the Austrians. They are followed by the Spanish and the British, who have their

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<sup>8</sup> In the various countries there are large differences in the cost and quality of the housing available.

<sup>9</sup> The data indicates that in this period it was women in Switzerland who had their first child at the most advanced age, viz at around 26.3 years.



first child at around the age of 29. At the bottom of the list are the Italians, who have their first child at around 30, when their European counterparts are already coming to grips with a second child. And it is precisely because of this delay that they tend to limit themselves to having just one child, thereby lowering the birth-rate of the country<sup>10</sup>.

From the 90's till today this tendency has also been accompanied by a substantial fall in fertility, which accounts for the fact that there is a growing number of couples without children<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> Source of data: Italian Republic Senate, Investigative study, Health Senate Committee (2004).

<sup>11</sup> In fact, as Hobcraft and Kiernan (1995) indicate, from the Seventies on the advantages associated with not having children increase and the perceived disadvantages decrease.

**Table 5. Mean age of women at birth of first child, 1980-2003 (Source: Council of Europe, 2005).**

Country/Period	1980	1990	2000	2003
Armenia	22,1	22,8	23,0	22,4
Austria	-	25,0	26,4	26,9
Azerbaijan	-	-	24,7	-
Belarus	-	22,9	23,4	23,6
Belgium	24,7	26,4	-	-
Bosnia and Herzegovina	23,3	23,6	-	-
Bulgaria	21,9	22,2	23,5	24,3
Croatia	23,4	24,1	25,5	26,1
Cyprus	23,8	24,7	26,2	26,9
Czech Rep.	22,4	22,5	25,0	25,9
Denmark	24,6	26,4	27,7	-
Estonia	23,2	22,9	24,0	-
Finland	-	26,5	27,4	27,9
France	25,0	27,0	27,9	-
Georgia	23,5	23,7	24,2	24,7
Germany	25,0	26,6	28,2	-
Greece	24,1	25,5	27,5	-
Hungary	22,4	23,1	25,1	26,1
Iceland	21,9	24,0	25,5	26,0
Ireland	25,5	26,6	27,6	28,2
Italy	25,0	26,9	-	-
Latvia	22,9	23,0	24,4	24,9
Lithuania	23,8	23,2	23,9	24,5
Luxembourg	25,5	-	28,4	28,7
Macedonia	23,2	23,4	24,3	24,7
Moldova	-	-	-	22,7
Netherlands	25,7	27,6	28,6	-
Norway	-	25,6	26,9	27,9
Poland	23,4	23,3	24,5	24,9
Portugal	24,0	24,9	26,5	-
Romania	22,5	22,7	23,6	24,3
Russian Federation	23,0	22,6	-	-
San Marino	24,1	26,7	30,2	-
Slovak Rep.	22,7	22,6	24,2	24,9
Slovenia	22,9	23,7	26,5	27,3
Spain	25,0	26,8	29,1	-
Sweden	25,3	26,3	27,9	28,5
Switzerland	26,3	27,6	28,7	29,1
Turkey	20,8	-	-	-
United Kingdom	24,7	25,5	26,5	26,9

Living in a couple without children has over the course of time become an actual choice, so much so that in a number of countries it is considered a preferable form of union by a significant number of women. In Germany this form of union is preferred by 17% of women between the ages of 18 and 34. In Austria, Holland and Belgium the figures are respectively 13%, 12% and 9%. For all the other countries of the Europe 25 group of countries, including Great Britain, the percentage of women that opts not to have children is very limited. Note, for example, the figures for Cyprus and Malta (2%) together with those for Italy, Spain and Portugal (4%), which are representative of Mediterranean Europe. Interestingly, these figures are in line with those of northern European countries like Denmark (2%), Finland (4%) and Sweden (3%).

**Table 6. Proportion of Women (%) in age groups 18-34 and 55 and over with “none” or “one” as ideal number of children.**

Country	Age 18-34		Age 55 and over	
	None	One	None	One
Austria	13	14	6	10
Belgium	9	11	6	13
Bulgaria	0	13	1	8
Cyprus	2	4	0	1
Czech Rep.	5	14	1	8
Denmark	2	6	2	5
Estonia	2	15	4	8
Finland	4	9	3	7
France	4	7	4	8
Germany	17	19	5	13
Greece	3	7	1	2
Hungary	4	12	1	5
Ireland	5	4	3	2
Italy	4	8	2	7
Latvia	2	15	2	8
Lithuania	2	14	1	5
Luxembourg	6	11	4	12
Malta	2	15	6	8
Netherlands	12	3	6	4
Poland	4	10	2	7
Portugal	4	15	2	13
Romania	3	20	2	9
Slovak Rep.	2	14	1	5
Slovenia	3	13	1	5
Spain	4	12	4	7
Sweden	3	4	2	6
Turkey	1	12	0	6
U.K.	4	7	4	3

**Source: Eurobarometer Survey, 2002.**

### ***The New Representations of Parenthood among Young People***

Given the strategic importance that the phenomenon of the new form of parenthood has in the transformations of the family today, in contrast with the approach taken in respect of the other trends, we have chosen in this case to give special attention to the situation in the various individual European countries.

As is well known, the birth of a son/daughter significantly changes the existence of parents, arriving at the point of influencing not just the identity of the young parents but also the organisation of the family as a whole, its times and its rhythms. From the point of view of identity, the birth of a son/daughter brings with it a redefinition of professional identity starting out from the role of parent, which is confronted by way of the adoption of strategies that vary according to gender. Women very often engage in a radical review and readjustment of their career ambitions. Men, on the other hand, tend to apply themselves to work even more energetically so as to satisfy the needs of the new family, working harder and even seeking additional jobs so as to increase the family income.

Moreover, if on the one hand the role of parent reinforces one's self-esteem and helps to establish one's identity, on the other hand it can provoke a considerable amount of tension between private life and work, especially if, as often happens, the work in question is not stable. If the presence of a child increases the expenses that a family has to face, it also demands that parents not be overwhelmed by work requirements (in particular, by a requirement to work more hours). In the majority of cases such contradictions remain unresolved and the negative consequences generally end up falling on the shoulders of women (in the first few years of the life of a child women often suffer a slow-down in their career while the opposite occurs for fathers).

Let us now examine more specifically how the assumption of the role of parent is faced in the European countries taken into consideration by the Up2Youth<sup>12</sup> research project, namely Germany, the United Kingdom, Holland, Italy, Bulgaria and Slovenia.

### **Germany**

The German longitudinal study "When teenagers become parents..."<sup>13</sup> (Friedrich & Remberg 2005) also confirms that repeatedly young couples fall back into traditional roles.

As far as the figure of the father is concerned, a lot has changed but still a lot of fathers trail behind mothers when it comes to taking over responsibility in family and caring work. "Fathers on paternity leave are in fact still very rarely seen" (European Commission, 7<sup>th</sup> Family Report,

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<sup>12</sup> The research project Up2Youth (2006 - 2009) was dedicated to the study of young people as actors in social change. It involved an analysis of the conditions on the basis of which young people are included in and exert full citizenship status. This means discarding a perspective according to which young people are merely affected by social change in a passive way. Up2Youth tried to identify to what extent young Europeans play an active role in these processes by reinforcing or modifying structures through individual coping strategies and life styles. Therefore, secondary and comparative analysis is carried out with regard to four main dimensions across the three sub-themes: young parenthood; transitions to work of ethnic minority groups; civic participation.

2005), states one family report. Many quantitative studies reveal the importance of the male partner for the building and functioning of family. Nevertheless, all these studies also point out a return to traditionalism in the course of the partnership, especially when the first child is born (cf. Fthenakis, Kalicki and Peitz 2002; Keddi 2003; Hank 2004). However it has still not been made clear why the noticeable changes in men's identities do not seem to alter everyday patterns of family life (in relation, for example, to gender responsibilities)<sup>14</sup>. The majority of studies on work-life-balance confirm that by starting a family traditional gender roles reappear and are strengthened in the course of family and partnership development (this process is called in German: *Re-Traditionalisierung*).

In the transition to parenthood life of mothers changes more dramatically than that of fathers. There is a restructuring process that nearly affects all parts of life. According to the European Commission (7<sup>th</sup> Family Report, p. 111), whereas young couples may have the idea to innovate as regards gender roles (at least at the very beginning of the life as a couple), "this is not true for the long-term practiced roles. These are seldom the result of active negotiation and decision making processes of the partners. Rather, certain patterns of dividing work seem to stabilise more and more over time". In other cases, young families agree on equal division of duties but even these couples often unintentionally slide into traditional roles (see Keddi, 2003; Lenz, 2002).

### ***United Kingdom***

In a review of research on family life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century Dex (2003) stresses how some interesting findings have emerged in relation to fathers and families in the United Kingdom. These contradict the stereotypical view that fathers give priority to work over family, and mothers the reverse. Mothers and fathers were seen to be similar in many ways (here are some examples: both of them think that it is important to be there for their children, that family life is central to fathers as to mothers, that family life affects fathers' as well as mothers' identities, their levels of fulfilment and satisfaction, their motivation for work and the their sense of responsibility, that fathers' and mothers' choices about work and working hours are often made with the children's needs in mind, although parents differ in the needs they prioritise, etc.).

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<sup>13</sup> This analysis was commissioned by the *Bundeszentrale für gesundheitliche Aufklärung*..

<sup>14</sup> The "father's movement" in Germany has to be acknowledged as a recent trend. See <http://www.vaeter.de/>.

Recent research suggests that the pace of change surrounding fatherhood is particularly rapid. For example, the proportion of fathers taking more than two weeks leave around the birth of the child increased from 22% to 26%, between 2002 and 2005 (Smeaton and Marsh, 2006). Over half of fathers of babies do not see the breadwinner role as the most important aspect of being a father, with 87% reporting that they feel as confident in caring for their child as their partner and 70% wanting to be more involved with their child (Thomson et al., 2005).

While in the UK there is little evidence that young women in general are renouncing parenthood as a deliberate choice, the choices and decisions relating to parenthood are clearly differentiated according to a variety of factors including level of education. Hakim (2000) although not restricting her analysis to young women has suggested that there are three qualitative different types of women which demonstrate a different type of work life balance: “home-centred” (20% of women), “adaptive” (60%) and “work-centred” (20%). Crompton and Harris (1999) on the other hand have developed a wider typology that places a greater emphasis on women’s constraints (“Domestic life”, “Satisfier”, “Maximizer”, “Careerist by necessity” and “Careerist by choice”)<sup>15</sup>.

### ***The Netherlands***

In several studies of the Dutch family council, two distinct features of family ideology are put to the foreground: tolerance and traditionalism. Together they build a complex which was referred to as “modernization paradox”: on the one hand, the Netherlands is one of the most liberal countries in the world with respect to acceptance of lifestyles and diversity of living arrangements;<sup>16</sup> on the other, the Netherlands has strong roots in traditional motherhood (mother waiting with the tea for their children coming out of school; the little ones at her feet is still a much remembered situation by present day adults). For centuries the country is known as a family oriented and child-loving society (Georgas et al. 2006). A two-child family is still the ideal of young parents.<sup>17</sup>

In a recent survey, 75% of both men and women responded negatively to the statement that a woman must contribute to the family income (Georgas et al. 2006) and in another survey only

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<sup>15</sup> This typology is taken from the report “Up2Youth”, United Kingdom, p.19.

<sup>16</sup> This liberal attitude and tolerance more in general has changed in recent years and is replaced by more open aggression against multiculturalism and Islamic religion but is not directed so much against non-Dutch and/or Islamic families as against young Muslim males and misbehaving young non-Dutch, in particular Moroccan young men.

10% of women and – perhaps even more astounding – 15% of men agreed to the statement: *I am ready to neglect my family a little in order to make career*. Over 90% of all working mothers and almost as many fathers agree that parenthood gives them much satisfaction<sup>18</sup>. “New fathers” are discussed with vigour in the media and literature and are presented as a new ideal for family life. Nevertheless, as research about task division in the family shows, the ideal does not match the reality in most families.

Since 2006 Dutch government has issued law which must mitigate between work and family obligations and allow for a better work-life balance (the so called “life-course policy”), allowing flexible and longer parent leaves. Up to now not many parents use this new arrangement but try to deal directly with the employer about work schedules. Although each employee has the right to part-time work in the Netherlands, not everybody who would want it actually makes use of this right - men especially not<sup>19</sup>.

On a general level it must be underlined that although employers do not like pregnant and part-time female workforce (and young fathers who insist on their right to adapt their work), they have to comply because of scarcity of labour supply, in higher and more specialized functions more than in lower qualified jobs<sup>20</sup>.

### **Italy**

Italy’s current situation is, we believe, very peculiar in many respects. On the one hand the typical dynamics underlying the changes in the family formation recorded in several European countries are well known in Italy; on the other hand, they are embedded within a cultural context that still has to come to terms with tradition (for example, regarding the family the gendered “division of labour” is still very strong). This produces a state of affairs where, while the behaviour of young Italians reflects European modernity, traditional family models are still widespread.

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<sup>17</sup> A new discussion about emancipation and motherhood has started in the Netherlands, dividing women and the public at large in two camps: those who adhere to the “old” emancipation values of economic independence for women and equal task division between the genders, and those who claim a “new motherhood” ideology.

<sup>18</sup> 60% of the population finds that care and working tasks must be divided equally between men and women and 90% finds that care tasks are just as well the responsibility of men and women (Georgas et al. 2006).

<sup>19</sup> After re-entry the mother has the right to breast feeding. While these regulations are to the protection of women, in practice they are not always applied (for example, women complain about stress and misunderstandings on the work floor).

<sup>20</sup> As it is well known, in comparison with other European countries, Dutch employees have much better part-time working conditions.



On the whole, parents feel a strong normative and cultural pressure to dedicate more time to their children in order to be “good parents”. Higher expectations are placed on fathers. Fathers have the desire and feel duty bound to spend more time with their children. In order to fulfil the standards required to live up to the notion of the “ideal parent”, parents need to allocate a substantial part of their time to childcare. This is due to the great importance attached to the bond between parents and children in Southern Europe (Micheli, 2000).

What are the models of young mothers and fathers with reference to their greater involvement in childcare? Some qualitative studies (IRER, 2005) show that fathers have problems finding adequate role models. Due to the lack of male role models in care tasks, these studies point out the danger that the role of young fathers might overlap with that of the mother. This might lead to discomfort and to increased vulnerability in their relationship with their partner and with their children (like, for example, the inability to manage conflict with them) (IRER, 2005). This study also illustrates some contrasting models of fatherhood. Highly dissimilar behaviours are a further proof that male adult identities are undergoing a transition phase, which is experienced and made sense of in different ways (looking back, or rather, looking forward).

All the studies considered focus on the specific meanings attached to family and intergenerational relationships and let emerge the fact that the support given by the family of origin is a fundamental asset for young people. This intergenerational solidarity is essential for young parents, mainly because the Italian situation is characterised by severe intergenerational inequalities where young generations are penalised to the benefit of older ones. One only needs to consider those policies aimed at creating greater flexibility in the labour market, which have especially penalised young workers by means of atypical or fixed-term employment contracts, which are usually low paid. These changes introduced in work contracts have progressively weakened the position of younger generations in the labour market while, on the other hand, they have guaranteed employment stability and security to older generations – although things are now shifting towards a general worsening of working conditions (Saraceno, 2000; Piccone Stella, 2007). Intergenerational support plays a key role for parents working under atypical employment contracts as well as for those holding permanent contracts. The help offered by the family of origin is also vital to alleviate job dissatisfaction resulting from the difficulties and the stress of finding a work-family balance.

## **Bulgaria**

The transition to parenthood is influenced by the opportunities and constraints in achieving a work/life balance. The dominant pattern of combining work and family life in Bulgaria is for both genders to work full time and bring two incomes in the family while domestic work and in particular child care are seen as primarily mother's responsibility (Kovacheva and Matev, 2005).

While childcare, especially for very young infants, had always been considered a (mainly) mother's task, under the new conditions working mothers were found not enough committed to the workplace and the long maternity and parental leaves (commonly used by young women) reduced their chances of career advancement.

A negative factor for individual and free choice of the time and style of parenthood is the concentration of young people in Bulgaria in the sector of undeclared work. The informal employment consists of numerous forms among which the most wide spread are the unpaid work in a family business, work with an employment contract albeit with false contents which means that social insurance is paid on a small part of the stipulated wage and the rest of the wage is paid in cash (according to MBMD this concerns about 25% of young people), and most commonly work without a labour contract<sup>21</sup>.

The unequal gender division of housework is a relevant factor for limiting young women's reproductive behaviour. Employed women spend an average of 4.5 hours daily in housework, which is three times more than what men are spending (Mihova and Nikolova, 2005). This problem is exacerbated by the low mechanization of daily activities (according to the Agency for Social Services and Analysis, only half of Bulgarian women have a washing machine at home, 1/3 do not have a vacuum cleaner and only 2% have a dishwasher). Not only the time but also the kinds of work, which men and women do in the home are significantly different, characterized by different responsibilities and constraints. 'Women's' activities are the daily and time consuming household cores: childcare, cooking, washing dishes, cleaning, laundering. Women do 75-80% of these activities regularly. Men are usually involved in the more irregular activities such as repairing the house, electronic devices, and the family car<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>21</sup> Vitosha Research National Survey (2004) determines the share of young people who are employed without a labour contract to be 17%. In particular, such an employment does not make the mother eligible to receive paid maternity and parental leave.

<sup>22</sup> This study shows that the unequal division of labour in the family is more common for young couples (up to 30 years of age) with smaller children, among the low educated and in the villages and small towns. Completed higher education, higher income and urban living bring about to more equal involvement in housework and greater partnership in childcare.

The young parents managed to create an acceptable work-life balance by relying on a fulltime five days a week public childcare, still well developed in the country, as well as on the informal support from the extended family, again mainly from grandmothers.

### ***Slovenia***

The family and parenthood trends among young adults in Slovenia are the same as in Western Europe, and are orientated towards continuously increasing individualisation of life courses.

The transition to parenthood is connected with the level of education. The lower the education the earlier in life the transition is likely to happen. For well-educated the transition happens after completing the formal education, entry into the labour market, establishment at job, and gaining a foothold in the housing market. People from rural areas start families on average earlier in comparison to those from urban areas (Ule and Kuhar, 2003).

As far as their perception of themselves as parents is concerned, in the study "Social position of young families -SIPA-" (Ule and Kuhar, 2003) young women underlined that they do not intend to be as burdened as their own mothers so they expect their partners to help them with domestic chores and in looking after children. A fair number of participants mentioned their own unpleasant family past or the stories of their parents, whom they do not wish to emulate.

Empirical research of personal value orientations of the young in Slovenia shows that their life plans continue to include a desire to set up a family and have children, although it has a number of objective barriers and rivals in other life goals, such as professional career, personal self-development, enjoyment of life etc (Ule and Kuhar, 2002).

The qualitative research pointed out that the decision to have a family and/or children is extremely carefully planned and weighed up today. While young people desire in principle to have a family and children in the future, the decision to create a family is tied to many conditions and is no longer spontaneous and automatic. The formation of a family is increasingly similar to the planning and execution of a demanding project. Numerous objective and subjective criteria and circumstances influence the decision-making related to partners, marriage and children. Parenthood is a highly responsible decision for the young which they, when considering it, usually set at the very end of an entire series of preconditions to be fulfilled, i.e. a so-called 'unbreakable chain' (Ule and Kuhar, 2002). The young state that the most important condition for deciding to have children is their feeling of being sufficiently mature for such a demanding and responsible task as parenting.

Although there is a trend toward more active role of fathers in the family life also in Slovenia, the main changes are going on the level of values, perceptions, images. Division of domestic

child care remains gendered and male role in this context is limited to the assistance. The majority of child care is still appointed to women<sup>23</sup>.

Among the factors that negatively influence the active fatherhood after the first part of the paternity leave are attitudes of the employers who are not in favour of active fatherhood and traditionally well-developed kinship network (very supportive especially in the case of child care: grandmothers often take care of children) (Rener et al., 2005; Rener et al., 2006).

By way of summary, it seems possible to identify certain common traits among the representations of the maternity and paternity of young Europeans today. This also seems to be true in respect of the division of roles and tasks within the family. A first point to note is the discrepancy between the ideas expressed by young women and young men and the actual practices put into action in family life. While there is a tendency to aspire to more equal and balanced relations within the couple, it seems that in everyday life these aspirations do not find expression in terms of the actual distribution of domestic work, which still penalises the maternal figure as a different national time-budgets show.

It should be underlined, however, that alongside traditional visions of parenthood, on the basis of which the woman continues to have to take responsibility for the family, there are beginning to emerge in Europe some new models of parenthood which make provision for changing gender roles and obligations and a reallocation of tasks within the family.

On a different level it needs to be noted that the various European countries are jointly characterised by a widespread refusal on the part of employers to concede to employees – especially to men – periods of parental leave aimed at ensuring that parents are able to spend more time at home and be more involved in the organisation of the life of their family. Thus, it appears that there still prevails a conservative vision of gender roles, incapable of appreciating the tendency, present in young fathers, to willingly allow themselves to become involved in taking care of new-born babies. As a result, on a general level legitimacy continues to be denied to that new paternal figure that desires to participate in the everyday activity of care-taking within the family.

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<sup>23</sup> Regarding the paternity leave, the “obligatory” part of the paternity leave (15 days after the birth of a child) seems to be effective, when fathers are actively involved in family life, especially in a form of support to mother (household tasks, care and play with older children and partly care for the new-born). Rate of fathers making use of paternity leave is increasing (70,5% of fathers in 2004). On the other hand, the data show that after the first part

### **Research Gaps**

For a number of European countries there are still no or very few analyses or qualitative studies specifically dedicated to the new parenthood and to the transformations that this experience generates in the modes and forms of transition toward adulthood. Very few studies have been conducted on fathers as primary care-givers. The redefinition of masculinity in terms of a more active participation in the caring work within the family has not yet been adequately explored, in spite of the fact that it now fulfils an important strategic role within the 21<sup>st</sup> century family.

Very little is also known about migrant parents, about the division of roles within the migrant couple and the tensions that might be created from this point of view between the culture of origin and the family culture of the host European country.

### **3<sup>rd</sup> Trend. Conjugal Instability**

#### ***A Crisis of Marriage?***

What today emerges is a change in the very concept of marriage. Marriage has increasingly come to be conceived as a subjective experience: choosing to marry or not to marry has become a fundamentally individual decision. The French sociologist Théry (1993) has called this phenomenon “*démariage*”. From this point of view, the traits of instability and uncertainty which distinguish the transformations in the contemporary family are in line with the atmosphere that characterises society at large, marked by a climate of extreme uncertainty so far as work and social stability is concerned, aggravated by a high level of economic instability. In this context, there is a perception that even creating a family becomes a “risk-bearing enterprise”, to adopt the expression used by Beck and Beck-Gernsheim in reference to the consequences of the process of individualization (1994, 29).

Scholars have identified many different factors that have contributed to the crisis of matrimony in contemporary Europe. As discussed above, on the socio-economic plane the development of and transformation in the labour market, with an increasing presence in it of women, have rendered the establishment of a marriage tie a choice subject to ever more careful reflection as opposed to a “destiny”, a rite of passage into adulthood. On the cultural plane, the process of secularisation, understood as the waning of religious control over social

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of the paternity leave, when fathers return to work, the division of labour slips back to the traditional gender

life and the tendency to consider faith as a private matter (Norris and Inglehart, 2004), have contributed to the gradual spread and affirmation of the cohabiting couple, at the expense of the married couple founded on the sacredness of the marriage tie. Universal education and the emergence of collective movements such as feminism have for their part played a key role in undermining the model of the traditional, patriarchal family.

These observations are supported by the results of a recent study conducted by Weigel (2008), from which it clearly emerges how important a role love within the family and the bond between the couple play as the institutional basis of a union, irrespective of any formal marriage tie. In other words, it is no longer the marital tie in itself that is crucial but rather the individual sentiments that induce each of the partners to autonomously seek a union. The shift then takes place between a plane of feelings – considered to be of vital importance – and the plane of the traditional institution, whose importance turns out by comparison to be much more limited.

It may be useful, in order to appreciate the scope of this change, to consider more closely the study conducted by Weigel. In an initial phase the subjects involved in this study were asked to list the things that they held to be characteristic of the family; in a second phase other subjects were asked to place these characteristics in order of importance on a scale from 1 (not at all important) to 8 (crucially important). The defining characteristics of the family emerged as (in order of importance): love, trust, respect, support and honesty. Love was recognised by the majority of the respondents as the essential trait of family ties. By contrast, the corresponding institutional definition, *viz.* marriage, appeared in only 56<sup>th</sup> position. The first ten places moreover saw the presence of various analogues of love, such as trust, respect, support, encouragement, care-taking and constant presence.

These trends, together with the spread of attitudes oriented towards the valorisation of subjectivity and the private sphere, typical of contemporary society, have further contributed to the process of change in the family. Paradoxically, it is precisely the tendency to place love at the basis of contemporary marriage that constitutes one of the elements of its fragility and instability. In fact, in an initial phase of the modern era the married couple freed itself from the invasive, all-encompassing control of the enlarged family and the community, thereby reinforcing the sentimental relationship embodied in it as well as the emotional relationship between parents and children. Today, in a later phase, there has been a tendency to affirm the independence of the individual within the couple itself, in response to a pressing need for the

individual to realise herself/himself, a tendency that often takes priority over the needs of the family unit as a whole<sup>24</sup>.

It would appear that today it is above all women who manifest these tendencies. One person who argues that this is so is Touraine (2006). According to the French sociologist, women today are less and less inclined to define themselves in respect of the figure of a man; instead they perceive themselves and define themselves starting out from their own being in the world, their own subjectivity. Put in another way, in the course of affirming themselves as subjects, women do not just limit themselves to refusing the male social dominion; rather and above all, they think, act and behave autonomously, all the time making less and less reference to established identities and gender roles. The centrality of subjectivity, as Touraine underlines, implies directly or indirectly the idea of a right (to be subjects), and it is therefore tied to the constant and impelling demand on the part of women for social, cultural and political recognition. It follows that all the forms of relations that find expression in the couple and the family are less and less tied to a relationship of dependence of women on men<sup>25</sup>.

As has been underlined, then, the change of the family includes within it both a process of subjectivisation of cultural norms (tied, for example, to the sphere of sexuality: Bozon, 2004) and the transformation in the relations between the sexes. According to Giddens (1991, 89), in this context takes form the so called “pure relationship”, i.e. a relationship which is “not anchored in external conditions of social or economic life” (Giddens, 1991, 89), through which marriage “becomes more and more a relationship initiated for, and kept going for as long as, it delivers emotional satisfaction to be derived from close contact with another” (ibid., 1).

It has to be underlined that the potential for intimacy which a “pure relationship” has within it draws its strength from the increasing autonomy of women, no longer held back by a traditional view of morality, differing according to the gender of the partner<sup>26</sup>.

As a result of these processes today in a number of respects the couple is quite different to that of a few decades ago. In contemporary society the two adult members of the couple choose to establish a relationship, fixing their own norms of behaviour, constructing their own project, drawing strength from values, desires and expectations that they themselves establish. But, above all, the factor of cohesion underpinning the union is constituted by the sharing of a

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<sup>24</sup> It is in these terms that Pocar and Ronfani speak of a passage from a “fusional” model of the couple (in which one + one = one) to an individualistic one (in which one + one = two) (cited in Zanatta, 2008, p.12).

<sup>25</sup> This process of subjectivisation in women also turns out to be crucial in relation to marital instability, which it tends to promote.

code of sentiment capable of substituting the contractual agreement and the external regulation of the conjugal commitment. In this way concrete form is given to what has been defined as “sentimental individualism” or, in other words, the affirmation of individual autonomy within the field of sentiment, be it at times at the cost of the longevity of the ties (Beck and Beck- Gernsheim, 1995).

In this way the family tends to be increasingly seen as a “private matter”, as an area of life and relations that is “personal”, exclusive and negotiable<sup>27</sup>. This is reinforced by a form of solidarity regulated by internal codes - generated by the family relations themselves – conceived more and more in psychological and emotional terms.

### ***Marriage, “new” families and conjugal instability***

Alongside unions founded on marriage there has also been a significant growth in the number of people that choose different forms of family life including cohabitation and single parenthood.

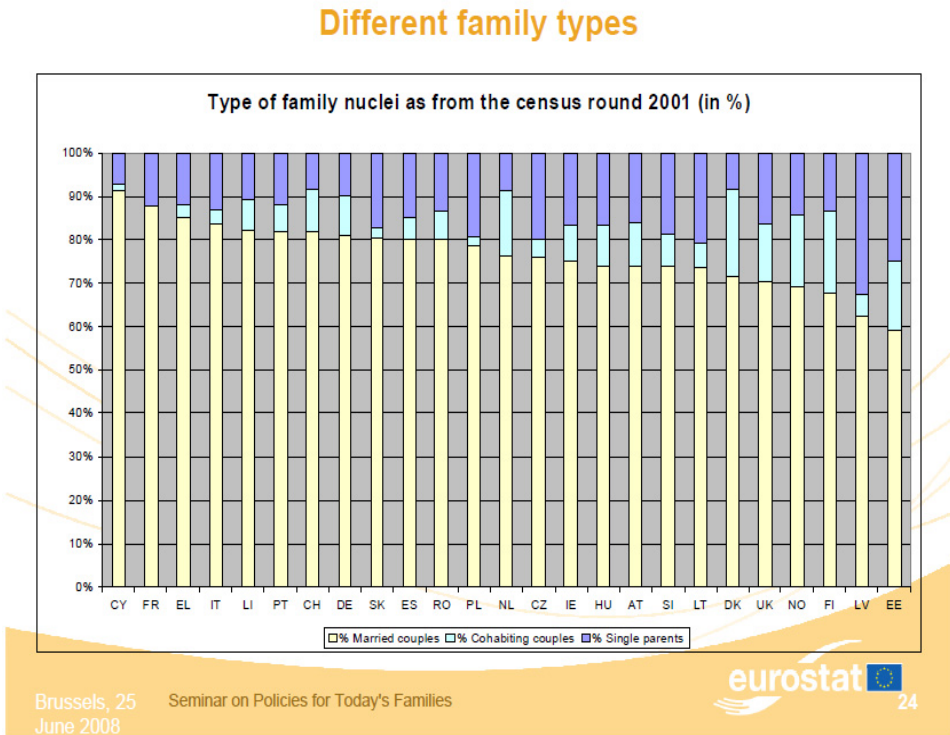
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<sup>26</sup> According to Giddens (1991) young women are the principle actors in this change. They prefer to speak of “relationship” when referring to that special, close and lasting sentimental tie with another subject.

<sup>27</sup> There is nonetheless another trend running in the opposite direction to that of so-called privatisation, namely the “publicisation” of the family, to be understood as the increase in the intervention of the state in the field of regulating family choices, as in the case of relations between parents and children (for example, when a court decides upon the custody of children in the course of a separation). Alongside the negotiation of relations within the couple there is an institutionalisation of the relations with the children, legal consequences of the fact that today the flexibility and instability that characterise the family tend to extend from the relationship between the partners in the couple to that between the parents and the children (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 1995; De Singly, 2009).



**Chart 1. Different Family Types**



**Source: Eurostat, 2001**

Chart 1 shows the distribution in a range of European countries of the various forms of the family: married couples, cohabiting couples and single-parent families. Focusing in particular on the distribution of married couples in the countries that make up the European Union, it is possible to identify at least three distinct groups. Firstly, those in which the frequency of marriage remains high (80% or more of all family units): Cyprus, France, Greece and Italy. Secondly, those in which married couples constitute around 80% of the total number of family units: Liechtenstein, Portugal, Germany, Slovakia, Spain and Romania. And finally, those in which marriage is less common (less than 80% of all family units): Poland, Holland, the Czech Republic, Ireland, Hungary, Austria, Slovenia, Lithuania, Denmark, the United Kingdom, Norway, Finland, Latvia and Estonia.

The general decrease in the frequency of marriage, which has passed, in respect of the Europe of 27, from 6.8% per 1,000 inhabitants per annum in 1980 to 4.9% in 2005<sup>28</sup> (De Singly, 2005 and 2009), does not constitute a rejection of the life of the couple in itself but rather simply marks the passage from an official form of union to a more informal one, which finds its immediate expression in cohabitation.

Adopting a long-term perspective, the trend towards a reduction in the number of marriages in Europe might be summed up as follows: while in 1960 there were 4.9 marriages per thousand inhabitants per annum and in 2001 4.6, in 2006 there were 4.1 marriages per thousand inhabitants per annum.<sup>29</sup>

Comparing the rates of marriage and divorce over the period from 1996 to 2006, it is possible to note an overall decrease in the former and an increase in the latter, even though it is not always easy to identify common trends among the various countries. Nonetheless, countries like Italy, Luxembourg, Austria, Portugal and Liechtenstein, for example, show a significant fall in the frequency of marriage (-0.8% or more), while countries like Ireland, Spain, Cyprus, Poland, Portugal and Liechtenstein are amongst the countries in which the frequency of divorce has grown the most (+0.8% or more). An indication of the overall trend can be seen in the fact that the relationship between the rate of marriage and divorce is inversely proportional in only two countries (Liechtenstein and Portugal).

In Mediterranean Europe Italy is a highly representative case. Although marriage continues to constitute by far the most common form of union, in the decade between 1995 and 2005 it became significantly less popular, and this was accompanied by an increase in separations and divorces. While there were 158 separations and 80 divorces for every 1,000 marriages in 1995, in 2005 the figures were respectively 272 and 151, for an overall total of 82,291 separations and 47,036 divorces (ISTAT, 2005). As in other areas so too in respect of marital breakdown Italy is characterised by a marked geographical divide, with a higher level of divorces in the centre and the north of the country, closer to the normal European levels, and a lower level in the south.

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<sup>28</sup> Source of data: Eurostat, 1980-2006.

<sup>29</sup> Source of data: Eurostat Pocketbook, 2009.

**Table 7. Marriage and Divorce indicators**

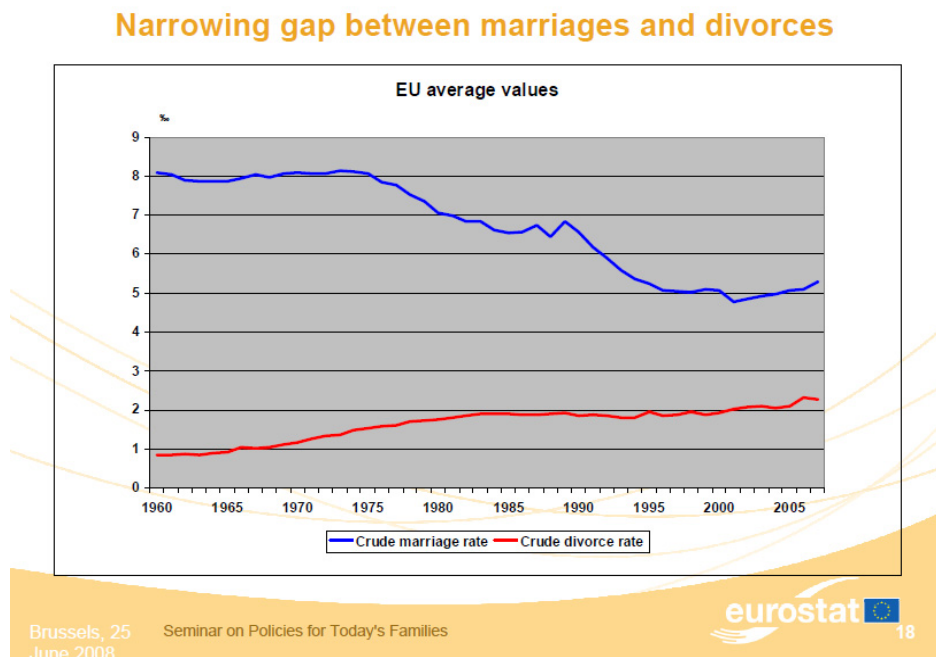
	Marriages (% □ population)			Divorces (% □ population)		
	1996	2001	2006	1996	2001	2006
EU-27 (1)	5.2	4.9	4.9	1.8	1.9	2.0
Euro area (2)	5.0	5.0	4.4	1.6	1.8	1.9
BE	5.0	4.1	4.3	2.8	2.8	2.8
BG	4.4	4.0	4.3	1.2	1.3	1.9
CZ	5.1	5.2	5.2	3.2	3.2	3.1
DK	6.8	6.8	6.7	2.4	2.7	2.6
DE	5.2	4.7	4.5	2.1	2.4	2.3
EE	3.9	4.1	5.2	4.0	3.2	2.8
IE	4.5	5.0	5.1	0.0	0.7	0.8
EL	4.2	5.2	5.2	0.9	1.1	1.3
ES	4.9	5.1	4.6	0.8	1.0	1.7
FR	4.8	4.8	4.3	2.0	2.9	2.2
IT	4.9	4.6	4.1	0.6	0.7	0.8
CY	8.7	15.1	6.8	1.1	1.7	2.3
LV	3.9	3.9	6.4	2.5	2.4	3.2
LT	5.7	4.5	6.3	3.1	3.2	3.3
LU	5.1	4.5	4.2	2.0	2.3	2.5
HU	4.8	4.3	4.4	2.2	2.4	2.5
MT	6.4	5.6	6.3	-	-	-
NL	5.5	5.0	4.4	2.2	2.3	2.9
AT	5.3	4.3	4.5	2.3	2.6	2.5
PL	5.3	5.1	5.9	1.0	1.2	1.9
PT	6.3	5.7	4.5	1.3	1.8	2.3
RO	6.8	5.9	6.8	1.6	1.4	1.5
SI	3.8	3.5	3.2	1.5	1.1	1.2
SK	5.1	4.4	4.8	1.7	1.8	2.4
FI	4.8	4.8	5.4	2.7	2.6	2.5
SE	3.8	4.0	5.0	2.4	2.4	2.2
UK	5.4	4.8	5.2	3.0	2.7	2.6
HR	5.4	5.0	5.0	0.8	1.1	1.1
MK	7.1	-	7.3	0.4	0.7	0.7
TR	-	-	8.9	-	-	1.3
IS	5.0	5.2	5.5	2.0	1.9	1.6
LI	14.2	6.0	4.3	1.4	2.5	2.3
NO	5.3	5.1	4.7	2.3	2.3	2.3
CH	5.8	5.0	5.3	2.3	2.2	2.8

Source: Eurostat *Eurostat Pocketbook*, 2009

In fact, in the Mediterranean area generally couples are less inclined to definitively dissolve their marital tie, even though in the last few years here too there has been a growth in the rate

of divorce. Clearly, in Italy too the greater frequency with which couples decide to separate and divorce gives rise to forms of family life that are more articulated and complex than was the case a few decades ago.

**Chart 2. Narrowing gap between marriages and divorces in Europe, 1960-2005**



**Source: Eurostat 2001**

Quite apart from the particular differences between the various countries or areas of Europe, Chart 2 reveals in a stark manner the constant increase in the number of divorces and the constant decrease, above all from the 80's on, in the number of marriages.

### ***Breaking conjugal ties***

Divorce, in particular, has been assuming greater and greater importance in Europe, especially starting from the Sixties. The increase in the number of divorces, more and more frequently as the outcome of initiatives taken by women, has been evident for some time in Europe, even though in the Mediterranean area the phenomenon is less marked.

Recent research shows in particular that the relationship between women's employment and the increase in the frequency of divorce varies according to socio-cultural context. In countries in which there is greater equality between men and women, like the Netherlands and Great Britain, the economic independence of women exerts a positive effect on marital stability, while in countries in which equality is still far from being achieved, like Italy, the increase in the

presence of women in the workforce is accompanied by an increase in instability (Saraceno and Naldini, 2007; Mac Rae, 2003). In other words, higher rates of divorce occur where the presence of women in the workforce is higher, and the majority of the requests for divorce originate from these women. The research also contains another interesting finding: it is not so much women's employment that generates instability in a marriage as the nature of the relationship itself. Woman that work acquire greater contractual power within the marriage, a power that often manifests itself in terms of a greater capacity to negotiate more equal relations and, at times, even to decide to put an end to a tie that is no longer considered sustainable.

The phenomenon of divorce represents the culmination in the process of the dissolution of the marital tie in contemporary society and as such it's worth analyzing it also from a qualitative point of view. A survey of the relevant research reveals that generally there are two approaches to this theme. A number of scholars focus attention on the pre-conditions that lie behind the breakdown of the tie; others, on the other hand, focus on the economic, social and demographic results consequent upon the break-up of couples.

So far as the first consideration is concerned, the growth in the instability of the couple, as has already been discussed, is an important transformation which, starting out from the second half of the Sixties', has impacted upon families in all Western countries<sup>30</sup>. It has had effects of various kinds, both demographic and social. On the one hand, the instability of the couple has led to the multiplication and increase in the forms of the family - for example, the progressive increase in single-parent, reconstituted and single-person families - together with a contraction in their size. On the other hand, the spread in marital instability on a huge scale has had a deep impact as much on society as a whole as on individuals. From the point of view of society these changes have resulted in a reorganisation of welfare systems (above all in respect of policies relating to the reconciliation of work and family and the fight against poverty) so as to deal with increased work loads and situations of economic deprivation which often strike people who separate or divorce (especially mothers with dependent children). On the individual plane the failure of marriage may have consequences of various types – economic consequences (impacting on the tenor of life), psychological and physical consequences (influencing the

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<sup>30</sup> Marital instability has taken form and spread in Western countries in relatively recent times but it is important not to forget that this phenomenon is not new. In the past for example it was determined by high mortality rates and by the spread of epidemics; in contemporary society, by contrast, it is above all separations and divorces as opposed to deaths that put an end to couples.

psycho-physical well-being of individuals) and, last but not least, consequences on relations between parents and children.

Research into the issue of divorce first began to be conducted in the United States, where, from as early as the Seventies, this phenomenon was very widespread, and only later began to be conducted in Europe. This research concentrated particularly on the relationship between cohabitation and divorce and between matrimony and divorce as well as on the general consequences of marital instability. The effects of divorce on children were also taken into consideration. Let us now consider separately the preconditions for or circumstances leading to divorce and its consequences.

- ***The preconditions for divorce***

Regarding the circumstances that lead to divorce, the relationship between cohabitation and the possibility of experiencing a breakdown in a marriage tie have been repeatedly put under the spotlight by researchers. According to a comparative study taking into consideration five European countries, each quite different from the other - Belgium, Germany, Great Britain, Italy and Sweden (Andress, Borgloh, Bröckel, Giesselmann, Hummelsheim, 2006) - theoretically couples who cohabit before marriage should have a lower subsequent risk of divorce since cohabitation before marriage enables people to gather information about the match quality, and only good matches evolve into marriage.

Svarer (2004) confirms this trend also in Denmark. Here too, we find that couples who have cohabited prior to marriage have a lower risk of divorce. Recently released data from the U.N. Economic Commission for Europe's Fertility and Family Surveys indicated close similarities between Denmark and many other countries with respect to the magnitude of premarital cohabitation and the association between premarital cohabitation and a lower risk of divorce. This suggests that the results from the research of Andress *et al*, can be at a certain level generalised. However, a considerable number of papers have come to a complete opposite conclusion (see, for example, Andersson, 2003; Assve, Betti, Mazzuco and Mencarini, 2006).

- ***The consequences of divorce***

A large number of studies, both economic and social, have examined the consequences that divorce can have on men and women<sup>31</sup> .

Several decades ago, when divorce rates were beginning to rise, sociologists argued that a marriage is composed of two different marriages, “his” and “her” marriage (Bernard, 1972). It was argued that men and women not only had different perceptions of the way their marriage was organised, but that they would also gain different benefits from it, with the husband benefiting and the wife benefiting less or even being harmed by marriage.

Alongside the distinction between “his” and “her” marriage, a certain number of scholars proposed another analogous distinction, namely between “his” and “her” divorce (Kalmijin and Right-Poortman, 2006). This research is focused on the differences between men and women in the degree to which they initiate a divorce. Following common theoretical work on divorce, Kalmijin and Right-Poortman argued that the risk of divorce depends on the perceived benefits of being outside the marriage (either being unmarried or being married to someone else). When they refer to the term “benefits”, they mean “net benefits”, that is, benefits minus costs. If the difference between the net benefits of marriage and the net benefits of being outside of marriage is negative, a divorce may occur. Obviously it is important to recognise that the people involved may have different perceptions of such benefits.

The determinants that have been considered by these scholars are the following: the wife’s employment, the financial situation of the household, the presence of children and the quality of the match. The analysis (Kalmijin and Right-Poortman, 2006) led to a number of interesting results:

- 1) the effect of wife’s employment is stronger on women’s initiative than on men’s initiative;
- 2) financial problems were found to have stronger effect on a female divorce than on a male or a joint divorce;
- 3) the effects of children tend to be stronger on the odds of a male divorce than on the odds of a female one;
- 4) the results do not lend clear support for the hypothesis that the effect of a poor match quality would primarily affect the joint odds of divorce.

Shortly, “her” divorce occurs more frequently than “his” divorce; the differential effects of the determinants in the study considered suggest that men seem to base their decision to avoid

divorce to a greater extent than women on the social costs of divorce, particularly on the risk of losing contact with their children.

So far as the economic consequences of divorce are concerned, we have dedicated particular attention to studies of a comparative kind, in particular, those which take into consideration countries belonging to various geographic areas of Europe and characterised by distinct welfare systems.

Summarising the various results, it is possible to affirm that the major economic consequences of divorce fall upon women (McKeever and Wolfinger, 2001; Assve, Betti, Mazzucco and Mencarini, 2006). In fact, women experience salary-related discrimination in the labour market and are subject to phenomena of vertical and horizontal segregation which are amplified in situations of divorce or in the case of the death of a partner. These situations, characterised by high levels of risk and precariousness, can even develop into conditions of out-and-out poverty when the woman is required to take responsibility for one or more children, especially if minors.

Today studies on the unwanted consequences and effects provoked by separation and divorce also focus on separation and divorce also focus on men who, while suffering less from an economic point of view, nonetheless seem to suffer other negative effects, such as a deterioration in the quality of their life style, their housing and their general consumption as well as a deterioration in the quality of their relationships with family and friends.

Obviously, a crucial role in regard to the economic and social consequences of divorce is played by the welfare system and the services it offers, which differ from one European country to another (Kalmijn and Rigt-Poortman, 2006; Uunk, 2004).

Special attention needs to be paid to the consequences of divorce on fathers. According to some studies (Harris and Morgans, 1991; Seltzer, 1991; Shapiro and Lambert, 1999) separation/divorce has the effect of inducing fathers to acquire a greater capacity to take care of children and of the household. Set free from the figure of the companion/wife and from the social frameworks that still reflect the Fordist model – in which women tend to be associated with a private realm and men with the public sphere and the labour market – men are free to discover their own capacities in the affective and strictly domestic sphere and to experiment and evaluate it. In this way the experience of divorce can undermine in a positive sense traditional gender roles in the direction of a greater equality between partners.

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<sup>31</sup> As we have already indicated, concern for the economic ramifications of divorce is justified by the pressing need for social and family policies aimed, for example, at the reduction of poverty.



### **Research Gaps**

First of all, there is a notable lack of comparative longitudinal studies on the dissolution of the couple that involve more than three countries (Dewilde, 2003; Uunk, 2004). Secondly, up until now research on divorce has for the most part focused on the economic consequences on ex-partners (in particular, women), especially in regard to the risk of people falling into situations of poverty.

As a consequence, there are still very few comparative qualitative studies dedicated to changes in the relations within and outside the family in situations of marital instability<sup>32</sup>.

### **4<sup>th</sup> Trend. The New Role of Grandparents**

In the rapidly changing conditions of the family today a new role has been assumed by grandfathers and grandmothers, who in the transition phase from adult life to old age are rediscovering and experiencing new biographical trajectories.

In our societies, in which life expectancy is extending and the health conditions of people have significantly improved, the figure of the grandparent is becoming more important for a range of reasons. Not only are grandmothers and grandfathers, as is emerging from research work throughout Europe (UP2YOUTH, 1999; SOCCARE, 2000), becoming a resource for their children and their children's families but they themselves are choosing ever more frequently (health permitting) to become active subjects in their own life, deciding autonomously how to spend their free time (now more abundant) and how to spend their money.

In this new role, which involves a social and cultural re-engagement, grandparents are also capable of undertaking new projects<sup>33</sup>, even though quite clearly it is only when certain economic and cultural conditions are met that it is possible to innovatively reorient the phase

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<sup>32</sup> The majority of the available qualitative studies are conducted by associations that deal with families, young people and children (that is to say they have not been originally carried out in an academic context). They try to understand the experiences lived by different components of the family either during the course of an actual divorce or in a subsequent phase. These studies deal with a wide range of issues: the situation of divorced fathers; the effects of separation and divorce on children, especially minors; the difficulties of single mothers with dependent children; and the condition of poverty in which many divorced fathers and mothers run up against after having definitively broken up with their partner.

<sup>33</sup> In this way it is possible to establish a parallel with the strategies enacted by young people – certainly by those with greater socio-cultural and economic resources who, in the face of a future that is ever less interconnected

of life that opens up around the age of sixty<sup>34</sup> (Friedan, 1994). Grandparents' projects and/or plans often revolve around travel and the possibility of discovering new places and cultures (Pronovost, 1992). In other cases they involve the possibility of taking up again cultural and/or social interests that in previous years it was not possible to cultivate – for example, voluntary or charity work (Verbrugge *et al.*, 1996; Bickel and Lalive d'Épinay, 2001). Finally, in more extreme cases some of these “young oldies” actually decide to construct a new life for themselves, in spite of the presence of their children and grandchildren. In this case, the present becomes the dimension of time to be invented, an extended present open to novelty and to the unexpected, which manifests itself in an authentic biographical restructuring (Facchini and Rampazi, 2009).

These grandparents, committed to a stimulating process of re-engagement, are nonetheless at the same time contaminated by the effects of a social dynamic marked by uncertainty. They are experiencing the destandardising effects of “second modernity” with respect to the definition of the times and modes of the transition to the old age. These are effects which introduce new reasons of uncertainty in their present lives and in the nature of future projections.

As for young people, for those in late adulthood too, certain key events in their biographies undergo a change in significance compared to the past, while others are postponed. Thus new, unknown factors take shape in relation to the type of future contemplated and, at the same time, a larger number of potential present choices is available.

As pointed out by Facchini and Rampazi (2009), these subjects in the final phase of adult life live a further important phase of transition, marked essentially by a quest to bring to a completion their overall life project. While some have the opportunity to plan and to “invent a future”, others, on the other hand, essentially submit to the consequences of so-called “reflected uncertainty”, namely that situation in which the effects of the biographical uncertainty of young people impacts on the life prospects of older people. In this case, old age does not represent so much a phase of potential new planning as a time for waiting in an uncertain social horizon. The first type of process, the commitment to bring to a completion one's overall life project, is founded on the increase in life expectancy. The second type of process relates above all to the prolonged period of transition from youth to adult life of their

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with the present, endeavour to elaborate responses that are capable of neutralizing their fear for the future (Leccardi, 2009a).

<sup>34</sup> It is in fact at around this age that people retire and that the load of work within the family – especially for women – is partly reduced (Up2yYouth, 2003).

grandchildren (in some specific cases even of their children). This impacts on the level of *Sicherheit* of the grandparents.

This “reflected uncertainty” can thus take shape in different ways (disengagement and re-engagement can be combined). The lack or loss of work on the part of a son/daughter (or grandchild) can, on the one hand, create uncertainty but, on the other, it can also represent a situation which induces old people to reorganise their life – in the sense of giving first priority to providing help (economic and emotional) to their sons/daughters (re-engagement), especially in the case of parents of children who are by now young adults.

Another constriction may be formed by the obligations that grandmothers/grandfathers find themselves having to fulfil when their children work and are not in a condition to be able to make use of external help in looking after their children. On the other hand, it needs to be underlined that this situation may be perceived and lived by grandmothers and grandfathers as a kind of social re-engagement and not necessarily as a limitation.

In general terms, and more particularly in the context of the formation of new families, it is necessary to stress the role played in the majority of European countries by grandmothers (and grandfathers) as a support in the care of children, for example in the case of sickness or where public services are limited and where the economic resources available are not sufficient to pay for external services (for example, baby-sitters or crèches: the research indicates that grandparents are considered to be especially important in Italy, Slovenia, Bulgaria and Germany).

### **Research Gaps**

Research on the family has begun to dedicate attention to the role of grandfathers and grandmothers only in recent years, when, thanks to a substantial increase in the life expectancy of both sexes, old age took on the characteristics of a fully-fledged life phase, losing its identity as the terminal phase of existence. The crucial role played by grandparents – above all in those countries that, like Italy, do not have a strong welfare system and services dedicated specifically to children<sup>35</sup> - has become of great social importance for the support of families. Thus, it would be very useful to investigate in greater detail the modalities and the forms through which grandparents offer their support (economic support and care) to the family, in particular in the case of dual-earner families, i.e. families in which both partners work (the majority of European

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<sup>35</sup> In Italy it is above all for the 0-3 age bracket that services are inadequate; for the 3-5 age bracket the services are better but they are still not sufficient to cover the needs of families.

families today). It would also be useful to explore to what extent (and with what consequences for the individual members of the nuclear family) the “new influence” of grandfathers and grandmothers within the family has restructured the overall arrangement of family ties.

To sum up, the growing differentiation and pluralisation of social structures, just like the pluralisation of the styles of life of individuals, impacts on the family by way of the passage from a single model of the family – that founded on matrimony – to a plurality of models, many of which derive in some degree from the break-down of a previous marital union (single-parent families, step-families, single person households). The fall in the number of marriages, the increase in the average age at marriage, the increase in the number of cohabiting couples and the growth in the instability of marriage - manifest in the substantial increase in the number of divorces - are some of the processes that, interacting and overlapping, offer an account of the transformations that are currently taking place in the institution of the family. In short, the multiplicity of family models and family relations in Europe may be considered an expression of the cultural pluralism that characterises contemporary society, in which there coexist different ways both of giving meaning to the family and of understanding individual happiness and the life of the couple.

As a consequence of this pluralisation there has also been a transformation in the modalities of passing through the various developmental processes that constitute the course of family life. The final picture that emerges out of these changes is far more intricate, colourful and multi-faceted than the one that prevailed twenty or thirty years ago. This new reality, however, also expands the potential spheres of contradiction (and ambivalence) in family life. And for this reason it is necessary to do further research, oriented towards examining globally in a direct manner the various generations present on the family scene, the interactions they have with each other and the effects of these on the life of young adults, adults and old people – as well as on the family as a whole.

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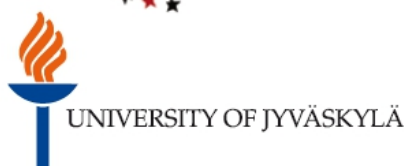
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