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Co-parental couples and new families: A study of the primary triad

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Abstract

Starting from current areas of research in the field of developmental theories, the aim of this work is to analyse parent-child interactions within a primary triad and to consider co-parenting couple and their children as an interactive matrix. In particular, parent-child relationship could be observed through new developmental units of observation and coding systems in the multiple scenarios of new families. The deepening of this study may promote an effective connection between research and educational support as well as clinical work with families and parental couples.

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1. Introduction

The aim of this article is to examine couples and family dynamics, going beyond dyadic observational units (e.g.: mother-child or father-child dyads). In particular, the focus is on the primary triad - formed by two parental partners and their child - and from this perspective the issue of whether it is possible to identify new procedures for evaluating and supporting parental couples as well as current familiar figures.

The observation of parent-child relationships and the outcomes of their developmental paths were, in fact, mainly focused on mother-child or father-child dyads and on the “monotropy” concept: children are genetically programmed to form attachment bonds to a single caregiver and to refer to an innate and unique orientation to the primary attachment figure (Bowlby, 1969).

Without meaning to diminish the importance of Bowlby’s framework, the triadic unit is instead conceived as an

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interactive matrix that does not overlap with the dyadic experience and provides a better understanding of the reciprocal self-regulation process during parent-child interactions (Mc Hale, 2007).

This matrix scheme is also at the base of the coparenting issue, such as the ability of both caregivers to coordinate the exercise of their co-parental function. It may be moreover extended to the study of significant trends and changes which have characterised the new living together and then to the clinical work with couples and families (Salerno, 2010).

2. Toward the “intersubjective triangulation” perspective

A current area of research in the field of developmental theories is going beyond the concept of monotropy (Bowlby, 1969) and pays close attention to the emotional ties that the child builds with multiple reference figures (i.e. the other parent, grandparents, educators; Cassidy & Shaver, 1999). In particular, this area explores the passage from the observation of the mother-child dyad to the father-mother-child triad and underscores that infants are more often in multipartite contexts than they are dyadic ones (Schaffer, 1984; Dunn, 1991; Trevarthen, 1993; Belsky, Putnam & Crnic, 1996; McHale, 1997). This finding highlights a child’s predisposition to handle more than one primary relationship and represents the ability to create in his/her mind an idea of the network of relationships to which he/she is bound by.

Moreover, several theorists (Emde, 1990; the Lausanne group coordinated by Elisabeth Fivaz-Depeursinge and Antoniette Corboz-Warney, 1999; Mitchell, 2002; Favez et al., 2006) provide new evidence about a collective and primary form of early intersubjectivity, conceived as the child’s capacity to share in others’ feelings and mind-states. The innovation of these studies lies in the introduction of the “triangularity” concept as well as “intersubjective triangulation” one. Within this perspective, the study of the family is not possible only through its dyadic components but starting from a triadic unit where child’s socialization experiences are fundamentally affected by how adults work and coordinate together in the relationship with their sons (Mc Hale, Fivaz-Depeursinge, 1999). In all families, children are in fact raised by more than one adult caregiver and the family establishes a signature co-parenting relationship.

Co-parenting is therefore conceived as a parents reciprocal regulation, related to the growing child’s needs. McHale’s current research (McHale, 2007), in particular, demonstrates the central role of the family alliance between parents in the development and adaptation of the child: an alliance is defined as productive when partners are able to communicate regularly on issues and decisions that affect the child and to support each other on parenting efforts and the family alliance is the capacity of the mother-father-child triad to be engaged in the interaction while coordinating their actions and signals and working together as a team toward a common goal showing pleasure and flexibility, seeing things from the child’s point of view.

Fivaz-Depeursinge and colleagues have also discovered that babies (already at 3-4 months postpartum) may possess clear capacities for coordinating their attention and affects between two partners simultaneously as an emergent “triangular capacity”. The primary triangle (from which the *Lausanne Trilogue Play*, LTP) is based on a triangular coordination that takes into account the ability of the parental couple to co-regulate their interactions. The triangular coordination is an important variable compared to both developmental theory and clinical work with families. From a triadic background, partners’ ability to communicate with each other as well as to co-regulate their interactions through their own emotional experiences is emphasised. The intersubjective triangulation allows us to analyse the main strategies of the child connected to the different types of parental response: “it is above all the intersubjective communion level, established by parents’ responses, to differentiate these different types of triangulation” (Mitchell, 2002, p. 121).

Co-parents can provide similar or very different interpersonal experiences for babies, support one another’s parenting efforts, or interfere with them. The parenting adults can each provide substantive and recurring engagement for babies or collude to shunt most effort to one parent to the exclusion of the other. It is such patterns of support, cooperation, coordination, opposition, and detachment in the family’s coparenting relationship that coalesce and collectively come to define co-parental solidarity in the family. Such patterns are firmly established by 3 months postpartum, show remarkable stability across developmental time, and, most importantly, ultimately come to have an imprint on toddlers’ and young children’s social and emotional development (McHale, 2007).

Within this perspective, co-parenting, family alliance and the triangular coordination become key concepts.

Parental experience is in relationship to the child but it is also determined by the way a parent experiences the relationship with his/her own co-parental partner and how he/she perceives the relationship between the co-parental partner and the child. For example, when a parent hugs a child he/she will offer a different holding style depending on these experiential factors.

Consequently, the primary triangle concerns more relationships than behaviours. In other words, the development is not perceived as something that just happens only to the child but as something that evolves between mother-father and child. As part of this triangular relational perspective, it is therefore the relationship between parental partners that plays a regulatory function for both the mother-child and father-child relationships: “being oriented toward the presence of the other as co-parental partner is the *conditio sine qua non* of a functional and creative affective triangle” (Salonia, 2012, p. 27).

3. Co-parenting in the new familiar figures

We should wonder how the triadic perspective could help to provide new keys of understanding and operating in educational as well as clinical work with new couples and families.

Specifically, the current panorama of family realities - characterised by the pluralisation phenomenon (Fruggeri, 1997) - shows new assets of the traditional roles division between women and men inside and outside their home environment. The social and cultural changes, in fact, have facilitated both the entry of women into the public world and at the same time pushed men toward the context of domestic walls.

Moreover, these new trends have also made a redefinition of the meaning of becoming parents as well as of the practices of care of offspring. The current cultural attitude is in fact reinforced by a key element that characterises the transition to parenthood: the choice of generating as well as the choice of the non-generating. In the past the transition from married couple to parenthood happened so soon and easily, today some couples avoid procreating at all costs (Salerno, 2010). This kind of couple (Childfree couple; Tanturri & Mencarini, 2004) is characterised by a voluntary decision to not have children.

Another example of these transformative familiar trends, is the Living Apart Together (LAT) couple. This type of couple chooses to maintain two different homes and without necessarily sharing, planning and getting married. In regards of these new familiar models, some questions to how to combine a conjugal relationship with a not generative choice or even parenting without cohabitation are emerging.

For examples, with these couples is not living together more a choice or an obligation? Or is it more induced by a feeling of fear on marital and parental functions? Exploring these experiences could be a way to better understand the dynamics of these new couples. More questions could spring to mind: how to combine parenting without cohabitation or even a conjugal relationship with a “non-generative choice”? How much are these choices free of the past and of painful experiences?

The construct of co-parenting can provide attempts to answer to these questions, moving towards theoretical horizons and family dynamics in which the function of co-parenting could be always contemplated.

According to Salonia (2009), co-parenting reflects the quality of parental partners relationships in terms of the function Personality of the parental Self. This function refers to two registers: “being parents of” (I am the father or the mother of this child) and “being parents with” (I am the father or the mother of this child with this mother/this father). Thinking of a significant correlation between the experience of a parent towards the child and in relation to the other parental partner is important, because a dysfunctional relationship with the parental partner could lead to dysfunction in the relationship with the child. According to this declination, in a parental couple it should be clear how to activate the function Personality of “being parents with”. The work with the function of co-parental Personality of the Self could bring both partners to support each other, in their experience of being parents with one another and when carrying out main clinical work with this type of couple, it is important to talk about the couple’s experience and to use the co-parenting key of interpretation.

The construction of co-parenting could provide attempts to answer, moving towards theoretical horizons and family dynamics in which the function of co-parenting is conceived. For instance, for those couples who are struggling to live together or stalling to procreate or that have experienced suffering and solitude, co-parenting and

parenting alliance could be key in terms of a relational discovery, allowing the door to open to different family-life scenarios.

4. Conclusions

The full implications of coparenting (McHale, 2007) and triadic (Fivaz-Depeursinge & Corboz-Warnery, 1999) theories have yet to fully penetrate the fields of infant and child development. Both research and clinical studies of infants continue in fact to be structured by dyadic (mother-infant) socialization models, principally because infants' earliest socialization and acculturation experiences are largely dyadic in nature.

Moreover, the triangular structure leads to some reflections on new observational units to work with the current ways of living together, characterised by multiple forms and a different level of complexity. Co-parenting between parents becomes fundamental in the developmental task of caring where both parental partners face each other, expressing different styles or alliances, in the co-presence of the maternal and paternal principle.

Co-parenting methods also highlight preventive interventions mainly focused on an earlier identification of risk or disease throughout specific procedures of reception, assessment or support for parental couples. The main point is, of course, which clinical implications might be found and discussed.

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