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Families Are Changing: What About the Policies? Between Good Intentions and Good Practices

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The pandemic crisis has, on the one hand exacerbated the fragility of many Italian families, but on the other hand it has also reconfirmed the remarkable resilience of family relationships, with families having once again shown that they know how to react to the strong and rapid changes caused by the emergency, with an equally strong and rapid response capacity.

As is well known, one of the pillars on which the Italian welfare system is based is family welfare, i.e. the set of caregiving and mutual support practices implemented within family relationships that make it possible to compensate for the shortcomings of public welfare in terms of both cash and in-kind support. Actually, the “familist” model, beyond the “amoral” face painted by Banfield, represents an indispensable resource for Italian welfare: families have been forced to find (and most times they have succeeded) compensatory mediations to the often dissimilar and contradictory requests that the institutions have made to the various categories of citizens.

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Families have therefore had to, and been able to, transform their hard-won equilibrium, in order to respond to the different measures implemented by the government. On the other hand, policies have generally been articulated in a sectoral way, in watertight compartments, unaware of the network of family relationships on which they were going to impact. However, increasingly and ever more rapidly, cultures, forms, structures, needs of families have changed in recent decades, requiring answers that are not generalized and standardized, but able to adapt flexibly to heterogeneous and constantly-evolving situations. This process has undoubtedly generated reflection and debate both in the institutional world and in that of associations and the third sector. But these reflections have often only been translated into good intentions, sometimes into valid experimentations, which have rarely been able to be transformed into structural responses.

In 2021 the Social Policy Section of the AIS took up the challenge of not letting slip once again the opportunity for policymakers and practitioners to confront the reality of families, in order to develop new models of welfare and intervention, but above all to move from intentions to practices. The result was a Conference in which theoretical reflection, empirical research and field experience were intertwined, offering numerous ideas on issues of great relevance today for those who study the link between family changes and policymaking.

The special issue collects some of the contributions to the conference. In particular, the first part presents three items of research on families at the time of Covid, focusing on the impact of government measures, the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on families and social services, on post-pandemic family well-being.

The authors Moscatelli, Carrà and Ferrari focus on these aspects, providing the reader with a study devoted to the consequences on family welfare of the measures implemented by the Italian Government in response to the emergency provoked by the COVID-19 pandemic. In the wake of the results of a longitudinal research on families during the COVID-19 pandemic, the authors offer an interesting contribution regarding the potential of families as agents of social change, stressing, however, how this potential may be fully expressed within a welfare system that supports this function of families, rather than providing them (taking for granted their willingness to act) with the answers to their social needs.

The crucial theme of family relations with services is dealt with by Gui and Sanfelici, who present a critical reflection on the capacity and possibility of services, in the two-year Covid period, to reorganise the institutional and professional response to family needs. Starting from a study that explored the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on families and social services, these authors

develop their analysis in two directions: the first, analyzing the transformation of family needs, the second collecting practices activated by social services to respond to emerging issues. From their analysis there emerges the dynamic interplay of individual characteristics, family networks, and measures deployed by policies and social services to cope with the crisis. In the face of an exacerbation of social needs and the simultaneous contraction of the welfare system's possibilities of responding, the decisive resource that emerges from the research is the ability of professionals to activate more flexible and creative practices; consequently, the authors' proposal to enhance innovations and turn them into new routines of social work practices, to orient the renewal of welfare models and social interventions.

Whereas Gui and Sanfelici dealt with the family-services dyad in greater depth, Gucciardo and Siino's article offers the reader the opportunity to reflect on the family, with the aim of offering a tool for understanding the changes occurring in family dynamics in the post-Covid era.

The point of observation regarding family changes is the perception of wellbeing, focusing on the centrality of family relationships in engendering individual well-being. During the pandemic, and especially in conditions of total lockdown, rhythms, times, spaces, roles and relationships within the family have been redefined. On the one hand, the family has shown strong capacities for adaptation and resilience, while on the other, new needs have emerged, highlighted by the accentuation of risk factors and inequalities that already also existed within the domestic sphere. By applying the rhythmanalysis approach, the authors offer the reader a reflection on the changing nature of the rhythms of family life and a tool for understanding the changes taking place in family dynamics in the post-Covid era.

Supporting and caring family relationships are explored by Bramanti and Nanetti with regard to a specific moment in the life cycle, that of transition to old age. By analysing five real-life stories through dyadic interviews between elderly women and their respective reference person, the authors seek to stimulate discussion on the protective and empowerment factors arising from family relationships, and on the risk factors, hindering this transition.

The linking thread in the relationships within families and between families and services can be found in the next two articles with reference to two specific cases: one on families with 0-3 children and one with non-self-sufficient elderly people.

As regards the first, Trapanese and Del Forno present an analysis of 0-3-year services in the territorial context of the municipality of Salerno, retracing the phases of the pre-, during and post-lockdown periods, suggesting a path to understanding over time, which relational dynamics have developed from the local network, to meet the needs of children and their parents, and what changes

have been made to the services. Here, too, the relationship between families and services is played out along a line between delegation and participatory processes; starting from their research, the authors argue, that it will only be feasible to create the “conditions of possibility” to increase citizens’ confidence and the effectiveness of services, by initiating co-planning and co-implementation which respond better to the needs of families. In accordance with previous work, it emerges once again that the challenge of a territorial relaunch, posed by the post-pandemic phase, can be achieved only through more widely-shared responsibilities.

As regards the second issue, the one regarding families with non-self-sufficient elderly people, Macchioni and Prandini present research about the consequences on Residential Care Facilities and nursing homes for the fragile and/or non-self-sufficient elderly, between the first COVID-19 case in Italy (21/02/2020) and the end of the lock-down (04/05/2020). From the results of their research, and from the evaluation of the answers proposed, there emerges a proposal for the implementation of a new service profession called care manager. The line of thinking with which the authors provide the reader, allows one to confirm, above and beyond the local situations being investigated, the centrality of the relationship between families and services and the importance, in times of emergency, of experimentation and innovation in providing fresh solutions to both new and pre-existing needs.

The latest contributions, on the other hand, take into consideration the relationship between families and services from the point of view of migrant families or those with a migratory background. In their article, Di Rosa and Allegri, take a critical look at the drastic reduction in political attention paid to the social, civil and economic integration of migrants and, in particular, migrant families, the whole linked to the direction taken by migration policies, which have had serious effects, in terms of social inclusion, exacerbating the fragility of migrant families. The services that should have taken this component of Italian society into account, remodelling interventions and integration practices, not only focusing on the vulnerable and marginalized migrant families, have not been able to ensure adequate attention to the collective dimension, and have often been deficient in integrating the ordinary provision with strategies and resources able to transform the immigrant population from simple consumers to active, responsible protagonists. During the Covid period, this has increased vulnerability. Recovering and supporting the active role of families with a migrant background, whilst focusing on the community dimension and promoting civic participation, are proposed as a revitalisation strategy for integration processes, in which dialogue between the family, the network of relationships and social and socio-medical services plays a fundamental role.

Last, but not least, the repercussions and impacts that COVID-19 has had on foreign families and the transformations of their relationships in the settlement context linked to the pandemic experience, are at the centre of the ideas of Tumminelli, who develops his analysis regarding the specific situation in Sicily with a focus on the city of Palermo, observing whether, and in what measure, the interventions proposed by the government to support families to deal with COVID-19, have taken foreign families into account. The relationship with the context is interwoven, by the author, with the reconstruction of the complexity of the actual definition of the migrant family, highlighting how migrant families represent vulnerable actors, subjected to the risk of extreme marginality, owing to the dynamic interaction between structural dimensions, cultural aspects and subjective choices characterising their condition.

These studies converge in showing that while, on the one hand, the pandemic-crisis has led to policies in the broadest sense (including the level of services and intervention), on the other hand, the fact remains that family relationships still represent, in the everyday life of people, the litmus test that proves the effectiveness of policies and practice. Homeworking, DAD, the *#Istayhome* mantra are practices that in most cases have entailed convergence in a place, which was not just a physical place, the home, but a space for relationships, the family. It is family relationships that have decreed the success or failure of policy choices made to counter the pandemic: if family relationships were strong enough (resilient) to include what was previously outside (work, school ...), the measure worked, if they did not have the capacity, the measure did not work for them nor for the whole of society. However, perhaps it is not clear to policymakers that this process of including within the family dynamics of what family members experience in the outside world, has always occurred, regardless of the lockdown: the mediation between spheres that are not thought of as connected (work, school...) and which give each other autonomous rules, has always been the daily bread of families. COVID-19, or rather the resulting scenario, have essentially only brought to light the hidden work carried out by Italian families.