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Family today: individuality and public policies

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Abstract

The analyses of family changes have mainly focused on the general principles that cause these changes. It is in fact possible to distinguish some common patterns, based on the new roles of women, the modification in the relationships between men and women and in intergenerational relationships, the fragility of conjugal bonds, the increasing situations of dependence, the redefinition of childhood and of their value, etc. All this has an impact on the situation of children.
In my contribution, I will highlight the diverse ways in which these changes take shape, the different rhythms in which they are introduced and their complexity. Social inequalities on the one hand and multiculturalism on the other compel us to reject homogenised views and to introduce the axis of inequality and diversity in the analysis., As an example, adoptions and foster care have a Janus-faced nature and can be seen from the perspective of those who adopt or of those who have to separate from their children, and each of these visions express different social and familial circumstances. Focusing on inequalities, I would like to draw attention to adverse situations, above all those related to children (e.g. vulnerable, in a context of social risk, with illnesses or disabilities, poor, ill-treated) and the role of the family and public policies aiming to solve them.

Keywords: family diversity, informal relationships, divorce, adoption, fosterage, network kinship, homoparental families

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Family today: individuality and public policies

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This paper was presented as a keynote speech in the "Family Change" session at the Conference 'How can the well-being of children's society be ameliorated? Convergence and divergence patterns from a European perspective"; Final Conference of the EU project on 'The well-being of children: the impact of changing family forms, working conditions of parents, social policy and legislative measures" financed under the 6th Framework Programme, Barcelona, 8th-10th February 2007

The contemporary family in the Western world is the result of a series of changes to demographics and to society that have influenced the construction of a new family, which is now more egalitarian, with fewer children, with more diverse forms of living together and freer of customs than in the past. A reduction in mortality, in particular infant and maternal mortality, began to occur in Europe in the mid-18th century and was followed by changes in the birth rate, which began to fall. A key feature of the last few decades of the 20th century has been a profound change in the relations between the sexes and a redefining of the role played by age. Both phenomena have radically affected the formation of couples and the role of children in families. We should also bear in mind the value of individuality, as well as the public policies developed by welfare states.

In the last few decades, family has experienced a true revolution: a decline in marriage and an increase in informal relationships, fragile marital relations, the development of single parent and step families, and new homoparental families. The family of 2007 is quite different from the one that existed in Spain just forty years ago. In countries such as France, Germany or Sweden such changes began earlier, sustained by a context of democratic freedoms and welfare states that promoted social and family policies. I will focus on the analysis of the contemporary family, with regard to the significance that the value of individuality and public policies have within it.[1]

[1] The principal statistical sources used are the Statistical Institute of Catalonia (www.idescat.net) for the data that refers to Catalonia and Spain, and Eurostat (www.epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu) for the data that refers to European Union countries. Other sources are quoted specifically.

1. Marriage is in decline, but living as a couple is not

Marriage is no longer a prerequisite to start living with a partner, hence the decline in the number of marriages and also the later age at which people marry, since some couples marry after years of living together, while others never formalise their relationship. In fact, in the last few decades the number of marriages has declined. In 1970 there were 42,000 weddings in Catalonia, yet in 1983 there were only 24,000; the following year, the figure started to rise and has remained stable at around 30,000 since 1995, given that the 31,141 weddings celebrated in 2005 included 277 weddings between people of the same sex, which could not be celebrated in previous years. In France, the downward trend has been more marked, since between 1970 and 2005 the number of marriages has fallen by 30%. This does not imply a rejection of marriage, but a change in its significance, since the decision to get married or not is a matter of personal conscience.

When couples marry, they increasingly do so at a later age. In the last thirty years, the mean age at first marriage in Catalonia has increased by seven years in the case of men and by six in the case of women. Thus, in 1975 the mean age for men at marriage was 24 and for women 23.6; in 2005 the mean age increased to 31.6 for men and 29.8 for women, somewhat higher than in France (30.9 and 28.8 respectively) and Germany (30.6 and 28.1). The highest ages are in Sweden: 32.9 for men and 30.5 for women.

Couples increasingly choose informal relationships as a means of living together. In France, this is the most commonplace method of beginning life as a couple: now nine in ten, compared to just one in six in 1970. In Catalonia the number of unmarried couples (8.5% of the total in 1996) is below that of most European countries, except for those of Mediterranean Europe, where there are fewer informal relationships. In spite of this, there is generalised acceptance of the phenomenon and informal relationships predominate among young people, for whom it is clearly the first choice when forming a relationship. It is also the most common form of relationship among those who have experienced a marital break-up. Informal relationships do away with the wedding ceremony as an established tradition. Individuality and romance have greater

significance when forming the relationship, as does equality between the sexes. For this reason, when two people living together decide to marry, most opt for registry weddings, which represents a third way between the informal relationship and the religious marriage (Domingo, 2006). It is significant that in 2004 registry weddings exceeded religious ones for the first time in Catalonia, totalling 54% of all weddings.

Among young people, a model which Domingo (2006) calls *living apart together* has become widespread and involves living in the parental home in spite of having a partner, with whom they have sexual relations and live together at certain times, such as weekends, holidays, or certain days during the week. This is not a traditional courtship but a variation of living together, a transitional phase prior to completing education and fulfilling professional expectations. A variation on this model involves couples who do not live together, often the result of a new relationship following a divorce or living alone, and who prefer to maintain their own personal space with regard to their partner, or who opt for relationships within a network, or liquid love as Bauman (2005) calls it, with little mutual commitment and to avoid becoming stable couples.

The decline in marriage has been accompanied by a redefining of the couple relationship: how it is established, who it is made up of and what they do. It is an expression of the importance of individuality, of the notion of equality between men and women, and of the triumph of romance as the basis of living together, over institutionalisation as a prerequisite. However, marriage remains a strong symbol and appeals to mixed couples, those made up of people of different nationalities. It is also widespread among low-income sectors, since it grants more security to the most vulnerable members of the couple.

2. Partner relationships are fragile

Instability in relationships is growing, in both marital and unmarried couples. Théry (1998) points out that such instability does not owe itself to the “irresponsible nature” of contemporary couples, but to a dual phenomenon: to the reduced stigmatisation of divorce, which leads to the break-up of many unhappy relationships

that would have survived years ago when the basic value was that of an unbreakable marriage, and increased demands placed on the partner and his/her behaviour, which involves the rejection of situations that previously would have been considered misfortunes (alcoholism, domestic violence, etc.).

In France there are now 42 divorces per 100 marriages, when in1970 there were just 12. It is calculated that 15% of marriages formed in 1990 broke up after five years and 30% after ten. Since in Spain it is necessary to go through legal separation before filing for divorce, the calculations are difficult to make. Houle, Solsona & Treviño (2006) calculate that in 1995 the percentage of break-ups in Spain was 22%. In fact Spain is among the group of European countries with the lowest rate of marriage break-ups, although higher than in Portugal (16%), Greece (15%) and Italy (8%). Catalonia, with a break-up rate of 28%, has levels comparable to those of Germany or Holland, where the figure is 32%. The highest percentages are those of Sweden (54%) and the United Kingdom (46%).[2]

There has been much discussion about whether divorce weakens the relationship between the children and the parent who does not live with them, usually the father. Debates on whether shared custody should be the norm are based on this idea. However, the level of affection and the paternal or maternal bond do not mechanically depend on the frequency of the relationship. Fragility is more likely to be the result of unsolved disputes between the divorced couple being projected towards the children, or because one of the parents does not understand his/her obligations.

What can be said with some certainty is that the break-up will make the individual lives of the adults fragile, and this will have an impact on the children. The instability of the break-up may be aggravated by added difficulties related to employment or health, or of an emotional nature. If either of the partners is financially vulnerable (and this occurs more frequently among women), the break-up will become more fragile, since it will automatically create hardship: it will be necessary to maintain two households, organise working and family life with fewer resources and organise the

[2] The Eurostat statistics do not calculate the proportion of divorces with regard to marriages, but to the population: divorces per 1000 people. In 2005 the highest rates for the EU-15 corresponded to Germany (2.7) and the United Kingdom (2.6). The lowest were for Ireland (0.8), Italy (0.8), Spain (1.1) and Greece (1.2)

movement of the children between the two households. This explains the precarious nature of many single parent families. And it also explains why some fathers encounter major difficulties in exercising their role and in attending to the needs of their children, and the fact they do not live with them ends up generating a lack of involvement in fulfilling material obligations and visits and this weakens the relationship.

The value of individuality and equality, together with the financial independence of women make the contradictions between such principles and the dynamics of domestic life more visible than in the past, and are a formidable stress factor. What is more, the tensions in living together are increased by the pressure suffered by both partners in view of the difficulty in balancing working and family life, which most countries hypocritically consider is only a woman's problem.

3. Female employment is a motor for childbirth

The widespread access of women to the employment market has had an impact on identity and citizenship, since it not only offers financial independence, but also individual rights, such as access to social protection for themselves and not through their husbands. Furthermore, this diminishes the presence of women in the household, making it necessary to restructure their organisation, and, above all, modify family time schedules, especially at the moment they have children. This phenomenon, which first occurred in Europe during the 1960s, took place a decade later in Spain, owing to the oppression of the Franco dictatorship, which discriminated particularly against women. All of these factors condition today's family, which is not only different in structure and in forms of living together, but also in its family cycles and tempos.

Today's families are formed later, with mothers having their first child at an average age of 30 and having a maximum of one or two children. However, the desire to have children is very strong. Denmark, Holland, Sweden, France and Ireland are countries in which the average age of mothers is among the highest, since mothers from these countries have their first child when they are over 30. With an average age of 30.8, the figure for Spain is higher than all of these countries and the figure is the same for Catalonia; in 1975, the average age for having the first child was 28.3. This later

maternity age is matched by a reduction in the number of children. In fact, demographers have broadly demonstrated a correlation between the later maternity age and the fall in fertility rates. In reality, women suffer great pressure as a result of the accumulation of activities, discrimination at work and domestic responsibilities. Instability in the employment market conditions the decision to have children, by delaying or even inhibiting it.

For this reason countries that have implemented provisions and support services for families through public responsibility and policies that favour the entry of women into employment with quality parameters have succeeded in reversing this downward trend in the birth rate. Based on this we could say that female employment is not an impediment to childbirth as is often claimed, even up to the point of becoming a cliché, but a motor for childbirth. France, for example, which has recovered dynamic fertility, reaching a rate of 2.0 in 2006, also has high levels of female participation in the employment market: over 80% of the 25 to 49 age group (the total female employment rate is close to 60%). It is significant that countries that share the highest fertility rates in Europe with France, such as Iceland (2.04), Norway (1.84), the United Kingdom (1.80), Finland (1.80), Sweden (1.77) and Holland (1.73) have female employment rates of over 60%. And in the countries with the lowest birth rates, such as Greece (1.28), Italy (1.34), Spain (1.34) and Poland (1.24), less than 50% of women at the working age participate in the employment market. It is worth noting that adherence to the Catholic faith of the latter countries has not impeded the reduction in the birth rate. Precarious and unstable employment, along with weak social policies, are factors that have a much greater impact.

The family of today is a post-patriarchal family and this is the result of a process that is still not complete. Factors that have contributed to this include demographic changes (a fall in the birth rate and birth control), economic factors (an increase in the female employment rate), educational factors (an increase in the level of education) and social factors (participation in social movements in favour of freedom and equality). The discourses on the partner and parental roles have changed because the division of labour has changed (Brullet, 2007).

In fact, the entry of married women into the workplace has had a major impact. The process can be summarised as the transition from “working daughters” to “working mothers” (Comas d’Argemir, 1995). The industrialisation and intensification of city life shaped what today we call the “traditional family”, with a clear physical and conceptual separation between work and home locations, and the allocation of men and women to each one respectively. Women used to work when they were young and single and used to look after the home once married. The figure of housewife also spread among working class families when better working conditions resulted in higher salaries: the woman’s earnings were done away with and since they had started working at an early age they also relied on their social security contributions. Nowadays this model of family is a rarity and practically inexistent. A single salary is not sufficient to enjoy a high standard of living with high levels of consumption, while young people do not contribute but spend, since the time spent in education is longer and they enter employment much later. The participation of married women in the workplace is not only the result of the values of equality and a desire for independence, but also these new structural factors. In any case, work gives women greater independence and the capacity to take decisions with respect to their lives; partner relationships are becoming more horizontal, more negotiated, more egalitarian, and also more fragile; men have lost some of their authority and as a consequence their role in the family is less clear (Flaquer, 1998). Women who have altered the course of their lives have also modified the organisation of domestic affairs and the relationships with their partners. Women are the motor and protagonists of many of the changes in today’s family.

4. Desired children: overprotected, supervised

A few years ago marriage was a prerequisite for having children; this is no longer the case. In Catalonia, 28.1% of children born in 2004 were delivered to mothers who had opted for an informal relationship; in 1970 only 2.2% were. What was once a scandal, and contrary to existing social norms, is now quite commonplace. And even more so in northern Europe. In 2005 in Norway 51.75% of children were born outside marriage, while the figures for Sweden and Iceland were 55.45% and 65.82% respectively. France is closest to this group, with 48.41%, followed by Denmark (45.68%) and the United Kingdom (42.85%). The figures for Portugal and Holland

exceed 30%, whereas Spain and Germany have percentages of 26.80% and 29.18% respectively. By contrast, in Italy 82.7% of children are born in wedlock and in Greece 95%. Whatever the legal situation of the couple, having children converts them into a family. Thus, it is not marriage that creates the family, but children and they are procreated independently, because their parents have so decided. The value of choice is much more significant than the value of institutionalisation.

An accepted value, even a condition, for having children today, is that they are wanted. This is a relatively new attitude in history, since in the first instance it is associated with the decline in infant and maternal mortality that caused a fall in the birth rate, and has established itself with efficient methods of contraception that allow the birth rate to be controlled. Sexual activity and reproduction have definitively become dissociated. And parents are no longer willing to have children that are the result of sexual chance or divine intervention. They choose how many they want to have and when. And women play a key role in this since, thanks to efficient methods of contraception, they are able to decide, and they do. Here the moral views of the Church count for little, as do the recommendations of politicians, parents or husbands, with whom, in all cases, agreement is reached. Control over one's body, demanded from a feminist perspective, is one of the symbols of individuality and is associated with a new concept of childbirth and children.

The reduction in infant and maternal mortality has marked a turning point wherever it has occurred. The anguish over the real dangers that threaten babies and their mothers has disappeared, and pregnancy and childbirth now represent a promise of life and hope, and something remote from death, which nowadays is related almost entirely to old age. Yonnet (2006) considers that this demographic phenomenon has been essential to the emergence of modern individuals. They no longer have several children and a totally new type of family has emerged, he says. Methods of contraception (in particular the pill) mean that women are no longer at the mercy of reproduction. This does not mean that parents have lost interest in having children, quite the opposite: the greater the value attached to children (financial, educational, emotional), the fewer are procreated. Desired children are the expression of a new value, individuality, and of a new family, sustained by romantic love and by new relationships between the sexes.

Children are desired, chosen, carefully programmed and fewer are born. They are a treasure: they are unique even if they have brothers and sisters and the emotional investment of the parents is considerable. They have become so important that they are now the focus of family life, and the family's rhythm of life, consumption patterns, holidays and nutrition is organised around them. Furthermore, children soon become independent in day to day life, offer their opinions, choose their clothes, games or the decoration of their rooms and also participate in decisions that affect the family as a whole. Children rule in the family, or at least their parents offer little resistance to their demands. The views and desires of children have a major significance in decisions. There are many fathers and mothers who cannot say no. And in such cases there is no middle ground: there are people who, having had the experience of an authoritarian father and not wishing to replicate this model, become so permissive afterwards that they make it difficult for their children to have clear points of reference and rules. And it is common to delegate such rules to the school. Or even television. The *Super Nanny* phenomenon is not merely anecdotal. Broadcast in several countries, this television programme shows parents who are disorientated and lack educational approaches, and children who reject their authority. Then the "supernanny" appears to sort things out, energetically offering her advice and encouragement and clear guidelines in order for the children and parents to act correctly. The families are real, and have turned to the programme, partly to solve their real problem and partly to become the stars of a television programme. It is the staging of the parental crisis, expressed in the format of television, a medium with a major influence on the shaping of public opinion.

There is no doubt that the family has become more democratic, but the power of children is only superficial: adults have the legal, financial and even affective power, and impose their law, overprotecting the children, guiding their decisions, supervising their movements, enclosing them in a cage of permissiveness. It is a fact nowadays that children are overprotected, and increasingly take longer to gain the independence necessary to become adults. Paradoxically, society is organised so that children develop their individualism early on, yet increasingly take longer to enter the world of responsibility. Furthermore, emancipation requires rupture, confrontation, experimenting and experiencing an adventure as a personal experience and this is constantly prevented by parents or only performed under their supervision. Children

can no longer play in the street or walk round the town, like they used to. It is difficult for them to escape the gaze of adults, even in their so-called free time, which is always packed with activities. And this also occurs at specific locations, performances or events for children, since many of these can only be enjoyed in the company of adults, as is the case with the new forms of tourism and cultural consumption, such as theme parks.

Young people find it difficult to break the invisible chains of overprotection, since the supervision and control of the parents is exercised in a pacific, affectionate and persuasive manner. Children and adolescents have been left without responsibilities, and find it difficult to develop affection and feelings, to value things, even people, since everything is obtained with ease, and does not have to be earned, and it is difficult to generate affection. They are left with the "freedom" to alienate themselves in consumption, to seek refuge in television, and also to "live dangerously", expressing their rupture and affirming their identity through channels that concern adults greatly and can even be pathological: anorexia, drug dependency, risky or aggressive behaviour, cruelty towards the weak, and even suicide. And such problems, which are the focus of many of the current debates surrounding young people are, in fact, an expression of the problems that some adults have with freedom… the freedom of their children.

5. Children just like the rest: adoption, foster care, assisted reproduction

In the last few years international adoption has increased considerably. It is calculated that in 2004 alone more than 40,000 children were adopted in the world, and this figure is increasing from year to year. In Spain, for example, in 1997 (the first year for which statistics exist), there were 942 international adoptions, whereas in 2004 there were 5,541. 40% of the total number of children adopted came from China and Russia. Catalonia is the Autonomous Community with the highest percentage of adoptions per 1000 inhabitants, at 0.16, while the figure for Madrid was 0.08. In Sweden it is 0.12, Denmark 0.10, France 0.07 and Italy 0.05. National adoptions, on the other hand, have

stabilised for many years now, and are experiencing a downward trend: in Spain there were 849 in 1997 and 828 in 2004.[3]

For many years adoptions were considered a means of compensating for the absence of children and allowing the continuation of the genealogical series. Since the end of the 70s, this objective has been inverted, considering that it is not the parents' right, but the right of unprotected children to a new family in order to be educated, protected and loved. Thus, the regulations that have developed in this respect do not attempt to verify the qualities of the child to be a worthy child and successor to his or her social parents, but the ability of the adopting parties to be parents. This logic has served as a basis for the development of many of the procedures to evaluate future parents and adoption mechanisms, yet progress needs to be made in evaluating the child's evolution and process of family and social integration.

Biological parents are not required to demonstrate their capacity beforehand, because the problems are of a different nature, because a child who has already been abandoned a second failure is a catastrophe. It is not always taken into account that the characteristics of an adopted child's integration are unique (Vilaginés, 2004). Adopting is not merely having a child, it is more complex, because it requires helping the child establish the essential emotional bond with the new parents in order to heal the wounds the child may have suffered previously. It is normal for conflict to exist and that the adopted children will want to discover their origins. And it is not only the child who has to adapt: the parents also have to adapt to the new situation. Hence, more research is required on the social integration of adopted children within their new families.

Adoption permits kinship without a biological bond, substituting the kinship of origin. The new parents replace the previous ones and are socially and emotionally considered as "new parents". Foster care, on the other hand, generates a secondary kinship, without the bond of kinship between the child and his or her carers, since the official kinship of the child remains that of his or her family of origin. In fact, it is the State that has custody, which it can exercise directly through care homes (in Spain, 14,469 children were in this situation in 2004), or foster families (23,949 children), who may be within the child's family circle or outside it. In such cases, the relationships that

[3] Data from the Ministry of Employment and Social Affairs. Key statistics on child protection. 2004

develop are much more complex than the previous ones, since although strong affective ties may be generated, there is always the certainty that those who are acting as parents are not real parents and that foster children are not real children either. And it is very painful and complex for the children to accept that their biological parents are unable to care for them. This is difficult for foster families to cope with, and requires plenty of understanding towards the conflicts and contradictions experienced by such children, and their task is not always helped by the bureaucracy of the state, which has ultimate custody of such children.

Another quite different situation is the one that arises from assisted reproduction. Artificial insemination has made it possible for a woman to conceive with the sperm of a donor, who may or may not be her husband; or she may be implanted with another person's embryo. The conception is not "natural", although the gestation and birth are, and this gives the perception that the final result is natural. In our society kinship has become confused with the biological circumstance of human reproduction, however with the new reproductive techniques the language of blood is replaced with the language of the genetic code, making it possible to differentiate the genetic bond from the social bond (Ribot, 2006). In any case, it is also possible for a woman to have children without having a partner or with one of the same sex, or even do so having passed the frontier of the menopause. This represents a real defiance of nature.

Adoptive families, foster families and those which are the result of assisted reproduction are establishing new methods of kinship that make room for biological kinship without displacing legal, affective and social kinship, making it possible for a child to have various maternal figures, such as the birth mother, the educational mother, or the genetic mother and the real mother, and the same applies to paternal figures, which can also be of a different nature. Step families, single parent families and homoparental families also form part of this dynamic of creating diverse parental figures among the members of the child's environment: these are not mutually exclusive and are shaping a system of plural kinship.

6. Network kinship: step and single parent families

The increase in step and single parent families makes it necessary to observe the family in the full diversity of its composition. We cannot consider it as a closed unit, but as a network that is different for each of its members. And we cannot consider that the family is confined to the household either, with which it was identified for many years, since the nuclear family formed by a married man and woman and their children, which characterised the model of the 50s and inspired Parsonian sociology, belongs to a specific moment in history and constitutes a reference of what a family is, although its existence nowadays is increasingly more exceptional (Théry, 1987, 1998). The step families formed after divorce have given rise to new relations of kinship that are characterised by a process of continuous construction and are reinventing existing family models.

Step families (also known as mixed families) are formed from the constitution of new couples following the divorce of one or both partners. They are very diverse and form interlinked relationships (Roigé, 2006), since the new marital ties do not alter the filiations originating from the former ties that have broken. From the perspective of the children, it is clear that the residential group is not relevant as a unit of analysis, since their parents may belong to different households, and as the result of new marriages groups are formed that do not have ties of kinship yet are interrelated to each other.

Unlike widowhood, the new partner of the father or mother does not take the place of the deceased parent, but is someone who exists and lives somewhere else. In fact, two people coexist in a position akin to that of father or mother (Cadoret, 2000), and the new relationships derived from these processes still do not have cultural or terminological references today. They are not stepfathers, stepmothers, stepbrothers or stepsisters, since nobody calls them that, yet there are no specific terms either, only descriptive ones: the mother's partner, the children of the father's partner… In each case solutions of vocabulary, attitudes, concepts and roles are sought, and in each case the family position of the new members are also reinvented (Roigé, 2006).

Family reorganisation following divorce may respond to a logic of substitution or a logic of coexistence, with many intermediate situations between the two extremes (Le Gall & Martin, 1993). Family recomposition is a process, since it is modified over the passing of time, as new members join or the matrimonial ties of the former spouses

change, in such a way that relationships are constructed on a day to day basis and the position of each member has to be redefined. The common characteristic is plural parentship, since it brings together old and new parents, old and new children and old and new brothers and sisters too, although the type of relationship and treatment between all of these does not have the same intensity. Consequently, the relational dynamics are extraordinarily diverse, since they depend on who has custody of the children of previous marriages, on whether the former spouses maintain a cordial relationship or not, on the system of visits between parents and children, and on whether the parents have new children or not. The residential groups that are formed may have different characteristics at weekends or during holiday periods since they are increased with other children, or because the children have gone away with the other parent, therefore the recomposition of the family is constant and in each situation the specific roles of the members of each group are redefined.

Single parent families are an example of the difficulty involved in conceptualising new family models, since its very name is an anomaly: everybody has a father and a mother, even if the break-up of their marriage means that they do not live in the same household. The residential unit breaks because their members are disseminated, and although the parental nucleus no longer exists, the kinship ties endure and the relationship between the parents and the children is able to continue. Thus a network of individuals related by kinship who live in different households is formed.

Single parent nuclei are predominantly made up of single women with their children. They encounter specific problems due to the fact that a single person has to combine family and work related responsibilities. When they are the result of a divorce, they also have to face up to the loss of the earning power that is usually associated with a marital break-up, having to deal with unwanted solitude, emotional instability or the anguish of having to deal with the education of the children on their own. This is why several countries have developed public policies to provide specific support to this type of family. The children may live between two residential groups and consequently their family identity may transcend the traditional concept of the household.

These types of situations are creating a new type of kinship, plural kinship, which is not confined to a single household, but a network and this gives rise to the

creation of diverse identities. This is not an entirely new circumstance, since in part it is possible for us to recognise the way that old relations or large families used to function, which were also characterised by network relationships, and in reality the construction of new family models is based on pre-existing models. This characteristic is also shared by homoparental families, in addition to those that result from adoption and fostering procedures, and given that children are increasingly co-existing in network families, we should consider this diversity of situations and plural kinship as something normal.

7. New homoparental families

The proliferation of family models has reached its culmination in homosexual families, which distance themselves from the characteristic family forms of our culture, especially because the children that form part of them do not live completely or never live with a father and a mother, but with two mothers or two fathers, and there is plenty of debate on the convenience or otherwise of this situation, with strong moral and ideological connotations.

The regulation of homosexual unions or adoptions has generally been accompanied by controversy. This was the case in France with the law on the civil solidarity pact (PACS), passed in 1999, or in Spain with the recent law regulating gay marriages. Since 3 July 2005, the date this law came into force in Spain, there have been 1,269 gay marriages, 914 between men and 355 between women. The Community of Madrid has recorded the largest proportion of marriages between gay men, 21.8%, and Catalonia the largest between gay women, 26.2%.

There are major differences in the legislative treatment of this phenomenon, which are related to the power of the gay movement, the hegemonic system of values, the power of religion or that of the courts. Calvo (2005) identifies four groups according to the scale of such differences: 1) Countries that have not established any type of legislation: Italy, Ireland, Greece, Austria, Luxembourg and most of the countries that have recently joined the EU; 2) Countries that have passed legislation for couples who live together. This is the case with Portugal (2001), France (1999), Catalonia (1998) and

other Spanish Autonomous Communities.[4] They recognise that couples live together and share their lives, whether heterosexual or homosexual, limiting some of the rights offered to married couples. 3) Countries that recognise civil unions between homosexuals, which are equivalent to civil marriages but specifically designed for gay couples. This is the case with Denmark, which passed the first law of this type in 1989, Norway, (1993), Sweden (1994), Germany (2001), Finland (2001) and the United Kingdom (2004). 4) Only three countries recognise gay marriage: Holland (2001), Belgium (2003) and Spain (2005). It can be observed that in all cases the dates are very recent.

In the regulation of homosexual unions the debate on the rights of children and adoption policies emerges. Is adoption a right? Who is the holder of the right, the adopting parents or the adopted children? In Holland and Sweden, adoption by homosexual partners is allowed; in Belgium it is currently being legislated for; in Catalonia it is possible to adopt; in Spain it is not. In fact critics of this measure usually overlook the fact that the law allows individual adoption (which does not exclude gay men or women), it also allows the artificial insemination of gay women, for gay men to have children by biological means, often from previous relationships, so therefore there are children who live in homoparental families.

Beyond the legal and social debates, the fact is that gay men and women are giving rise to the formation of a new type of family that does not consider pre-existing models, whose place will therefore have to be invented among the different family configurations. Having children creates a homoparental family and establishes family relationships. Sometimes, the formation of such partners is not accompanied by the social existence of the same, because they do not wish to make their homosexuality visible. However, the existence of children forces them to experience it in an open way, often accompanied by anxiety and stress faced with possible family rejection, stigma or discrimination. Hence, the difficulty in creating family relations from a homoparental relationship.

[4] In Spain legislation for couples have been passed by Catalonia (1998), Madrid (2001), Valencia (2001), Canary Isles (2003), Aragon (1999), Balearic Isles (2001), Asturias (2002), Extremadura (2003), Andalusia (2002), the Basque Country (2003) and Navarra (2000).

However the most important social debate focuses on the fact that the parents are of the same sex and that the children lack the paternal and maternal figures necessary for their education. The essence of this debate is that parentship exercised by people of the same sex breaks with the deeply entrenched conception in our society that the family constitutes the initial and essential environment of sexual complementarity. However, homosexual families have demonstrated that complementarity can be approached in another way, since it can exist among members of the family network or the network of friends who collaborate in the upbringing of such children (Cadoret, 2006). Therefore, it is not that there is a lack of masculine and feminine references, but that these are to be found outside of the walls of the household itself. Perhaps the intensity of the debate could be reduced if it was borne in mind that network kinship is also present among adopted families, foster families, single parent families and step families and that years ago large families also provided different models and references that complemented parental ones. In all these cases it can be seen that the family is not confined to its residential base, but to the interlinked relations between the members of different households. Overlooking this circumstance leads to erroneous conclusions about the family nature that is projected, particularly in the case of homosexual families, since they are the ones that distance themselves the most from the traditional models of reference.

8. Cross-generational ties are getting stronger

Increased life expectancy is having an impact on the new relationships today between the ages. In 2005, the European countries with the highest life expectancy at birth were Spain (83.9 for women and 77.4 for men), Switzerland (83.9 and 78.4), France (83.1 and 76.7), Iceland (82.8 and 78.7), Sweden (82.5 and 77.7) and Norway (82.5 and 77.6). To appreciate this ageing process, we need only consider the case of Catalonia, where in 2004 the men had a life expectancy of 77.4 and the women 84.0; in 1960 it was 67.4 and 72.0 years respectively. Consequently, in just forty-four years, there has been an increase of 10 and 12 years respectively in the life expectancy at birth, which is quite spectacular.[5]

[5] This increase has occurred virtually throughout the world, except in African countries, where famine and AIDS is rampant and life expectancy is falling. The average life expectancy in Africa is 59 years, and

For the first time in history we are moving from a three-generational world to a four-generational one, and one where many people over the age of 85 are unlikely to be able to care for themselves. Therefore, the need for care is increasing, in which families, and the women in particular, play a key role. Cross-generational relationships are also changing, and becoming less hierarchical. What is more, the family function revolves around the children, with a clear transgression of the former lines of authority, with children having a greater influence on decisions and family organisation.

Unlike marital ties, which are more fragile, cross-generational relationships have tended to strengthen in Europe as a whole (Gullestad & Segalen, 1995), having become reduced further than previously but also more consistent. They are further reduced because they are basically centred around the relationships between parents and children, while other kinship ties are only expressed at rituals, such as weddings and funerals. Yet they are intense, even where there is no co-existence, because current means of transport and communication make it possible to maintain contact and affectivity at a distance.

One of the keys to this strengthening is that cross-generational relationships function as a very effective network of resources, which is channelled from the transfer of goods and services to the care of dependent persons. And evidently because this flow is impregnated with love or moral obligation or both things simultaneously; yet it should not be forgotten that such sentiments channel resources, move people and generate the exchange of goods and services (Comas d'Argemir, 1995). Likewise it is impregnated with conflicts, with different ways of seeing things, and with contradictions between obligation and desire.

The support and care that parents provide their children with is maintained throughout life, even if this is much more intense during childhood and adolescence. In the adult phase, this takes the form of financial assistance, accommodation, care in situations of illness, looking after grandchildren and emotional support (Finch, 1989).

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it is forecast that by 2010 this will have fallen to 45. The country with the lowest life expectancy is Zambia, where it is just 37.5 years; the country with the highest is Japan, at 82 years. The differences are striking.

Financial assistance can be important at times like emancipation, situations of need, or extraordinary expenses, and it is commonplace to also offer material assistance through presents. The transfer of assets from parents to children is also a key factor in maintaining the social level or even increasing the social status younger generations. Housing, in particular, plays this role (Segalen, 1995; Mascarell, 2006). Adult care in situations of illness is another of the parents' contributions towards the children, as is looking after grandchildren as part of the organisation of everyday life. In fact, the birth of grandchildren reactivates the relationships between the generations. And finally we should also mention emotional support, which takes the form of advice, recommendations, interest in various members of the household, visits, etc. The social perception that the elderly are costly in social terms, influenced by the proportion of the budget allocated to health and pensions, does not take into account the constant contribution they make in day to day affairs.

The assistance that flows from children to parents is basically centred around care when the elderly are no longer able to care for themselves, and this involves daughters and daughters-in-law in particular. It may also consist of providing financial assistance, accommodation and emotional support. In any case, this is one of the areas in which the notion of reciprocity is significant and in which the tensions between individual autonomy and family matters are expressed, often because of the different perceptions that each generation has in this regard. It is increasingly common for people to plan in advance the system of care they are going to require in old age in order to avoid depending on their children. It is also frequent for the family, and more specifically the women, to be the ones who assume responsibility for this type of care in countries where the welfare state does not cover this type of situation and where receiving home help in the case of dependence, for example, is not a right. In northern European countries more advanced public policies have been developed in this respect, which is also a logical conclusion of individualisation.

9. Family, individuality and public policies

Today's family is a consequence of the value of individualism, establishing itself as a refuge for the individual and as a framework *par excellence* of private life. It is

often said that the family is the basic element of society, and that its hierarchies correspond to those of society; however, it has become the basic element of the individual and has ended up restricted to a trace of kinship. The process of individualisation has not led to the death of the family, as has been claimed at various times throughout history. In the 70s, for example, the family was considered an oppressive institution. As Spain came out of the Franco dictatorship, the family was attacked as being a response to the moral rigidity and customs of the previous era; in France these were the years that followed May 1968 and in the United States peace movements were emerging: all of these were contexts that favoured the defence of personal freedoms. Individual rights were being promoted and equality for women was being fought for: their participation in public life involved coming out of the family, the restricted environment to which they had been assigned. However, once these rights were consolidated, the family began to take shape once again, however, in multiple forms, with a great diversity and greater freedom. What in fact occurred was the reformation of the family based on the rights of each member it was made up of (Yonnet, 2006). This is clearly expressed in the case of women, who broke away from patriarchal authority, acquiring personal autonomy and more equality. And also in the case of children, who became the holders of rights, such as the ones recognised by the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of the Child (1989).

On the other hand, the family is a public institution: it is more than what happens in private, since it fulfils vital functions for the individual and social reproduction. The family owes a duty of care to guarantee the material protection and care of its members. It also transmits social inheritance and determines the social position and mobility of its children (Flaquer, 1998). In recent history, part of this function has been assumed by the market and by the state. I would particularly like to stress the role of the state, since public policies, especially social protection policies, have made individualisation possible and have opened up a wide range of opportunities, and this has had an impact on the family. Consequently, the changes in the family are related not only to what has taken place with regard to their composition and internal relationships, but also to its relationship with the institutions that have also contributed to social reproduction.

From this perspective it is easier to understand the survival of the family as an institution and why its presence is virtually universal in all societies. The functions of

protection and social positioning, essential for social reproduction, are broadly exercised by the family and this is still the case where a developed welfare state exists. Such universality of the family does not, of course, affect the identity of its form or content. The family, as a social construction, varies over time and space and shapes very different realities within itself. And it also changes, adapting itself to new social contexts and realities. The changes are often perceived as "crises", because relationships or means of co-existence that seemed to be deeply entrenched alter or disappear; yet for the same reasons, others celebrate such changes, seeing them as signs of modernity. Whatever the perception, it is precisely this ability to change that has made it possible for the family to survive.

The social policies developed by the state have made it possible for individual autonomy to develop. In fact, social policies are those public policies that aim to create the conditions of social equity, and to promote and guarantee the exercise of citizens' rights. They promote individual rights, which make it possible to empower people and to attend to them in situations of adversity. The responsibility of the State for health, education, housing, social services and pensions makes people less dependent on the family to resolve these issues and therefore gives them greater independence and opportunities. Individualism as a value can only be put into practice if there is a protective state that attends to the situations of adversity encountered by people, which balance social differences and promote equal opportunities. In fact, family values are much more present in countries with underdeveloped welfare states: more in southern Europe than in northern European countries, for example. And this not only a cultural factor, as is normally argued, but a structural factor too; public policies, based on the attainment of individual rights, work to the advantage of families and their welfare (Alberdi, 1997). On the contrary, when little public responsibility exists, social problems are resolved on the basis of paternalistic care (in other words, charity) and of the family roles. In this case, households have to take principal responsibility for the provision of welfare to their members, and this occurs in Spain, Greece and Italy, which have the most family-orientated welfare systems in Europe.

The family possesses important care and protection functions, since it supplies its members with material provisions, personal care, accommodation, its upbringing and practical assistance. In the family the physical, psychological and emotional welfare of

persons is provided, something that is basically done by the women. Such care activities require time and certain skills, yet they are not considered to be work because they are carried out in private, and because they are done through affection and moral obligation and because they are considered part of what women do "naturally". For this reason such activities are barely visible, in spite of their economic and social significance, and the public role they play. They give what I have called the "economy of affection" a dual significance: they have an economic value, and this is demonstrated when the provision of care is resolved by the market or the state, and they "reduce" public expenditure (Comas d'Argemir, 1995)

Public policies of social protection have an enormous impact on the organisation of everyday life. For example, they provide women with more opportunity to carry out activities and make these compatible with family work. What is more, the fact that women can have their own resources and their own social spaces helps them gain power in the family environment and negotiate the tasks to be shared with their spouses more favourably. This is a favourable context for the children, since it encourages the parents (and not just the mothers) to become more involved in household tasks and to dedicate more time to the children.

At various moments and stages throughout life, individuals require protection, care, support in situations of adversity and for their needs to be attended to, and it is in the family context where most of these care processes take place. In fact, no state, however well organised or powerful, has managed to replace with its public policies the multiple functions the family carries out in an altruistic and free manner for the welfare of its members. In any case, public policies, and this is why they are so important, make it possible for more opportunities and greater individual autonomy to exist. They do not replace the family, but complement it and this is particularly beneficial to women, who are the ones who have traditionally assumed family responsibilities, particularly those of upbringing, looking after and caring for people, and to children, by increasing opportunities and counteracting situations of poverty and social inequality.

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