

## FORMATION OF PARENTAL IDENTITY IN POSTMODERN SOCIETIES<sup>1</sup>

## LA FORMAZIONE DELL'IDENTITÀ GENITORIALE NELLE SOCIETÀ POST-MODERNE<sup>2</sup>

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### Abstract

The article covers the problem of the reconfiguration of parental roles and responsibilities, which has been at the centre of the contemporary cultural debate for years. Due to the cultural instances, fluidity, and complexity that characterise postmodern society as a whole, we are witnessing a period of redefinition in which the roles of family members are through a significant phase of transformation. These changes highlight special educational exigencies that are mostly linked to the changing parenting styles and the extraordinary educational needs of both children and parents. The pedagogical in-depth study focuses on the interpretative categories of the new forms of parenthood and of being a family, as well as the indicators of a renewal of the educational relationship. On the educational level, the focus is on the development of the parent's critical-reflexive capacities, which are required for a problematic engagement with the experience of parenthood.

L'articolo affronta il tema della riconfigurazione dei ruoli e delle funzioni genitoriali che da diversi anni alimenta il dibattito culturale contemporaneo. In particolare, in epoca contemporanea, assistiamo ad un momento di ridefinizione nel quale i ruoli del familiare sono più che mai coinvolti in una fase importante di trasformazione a partire dalle istanze culturali, dalla fluidità e dalla complessità che caratterizzano la società post-moderna nel suo complesso. Tali cambiamenti evidenziano specifiche criticità educative riconducibili in primo luogo alle nuove modalità di esercizio della genitorialità e ad inediti bisogni educativi, riferibili sia ai figli sia ai genitori. L'approfondimento pedagogico riguarda le categorie interpretative delle nuove forme della genitorialità e dell'essere famiglia e gli indicatori di un rinnovamento del rapporto educativo; mentre sul piano formativo l'attenzione ricade sulla costruzione delle capacità critico-riflessive del genitore necessarie ad affrontare in maniera problematica l'esperienza della genitorialità.

**Keywords:** postmodern parenting; educational crisis; family educational relationships; reflective training.

**Parole-chiave:** genitorialità postmoderna; crisi educativa; relazioni educative familiari; formazione riflessiva.

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<sup>1</sup> Although the article was written collaboratively, the first and fourth paragraphs are assigned to Francesco Lo Presti and the second and third to Alessandra Priore.

<sup>2</sup> L'articolo, pur se concertato insieme dagli autori, è da attribuire come segue: il primo e il quarto paragrafo a Francesco Lo Presti e il secondo e il terzo ad Alessandra Priore.

## **Between biology and culture, the evolution of the family forms**

The idea of the family and, in particular, the definition and reinterpretation of parental roles, has been a highly relevant topic in the contemporary cultural debate for a number of years. The human sciences examine it from a variety of perspectives. Cultural anthropology, sociology, social psychology, as well as pedagogy itself and the sciences of education, are engaged, from different disciplinary perspectives, in the study and understanding of the complex transformative processes that, within the broader horizon of contemporary society, continually intervene in redefining the roles, functions, and prerogatives of the family's social context. Particularly, current pedagogical research on the family focuses on identifying alternative kinds of educational thinkability, beginning with the educational potential associated with the new family scenarios. This question is therefore a fundamental emblematic juncture in the definition of social and cultural evolution, a terrain of encounter and much more often of clash in which scientific perspectives are overlaid by different ideological positions confronted on the level of cultural and political dialectics, where the fundamental game of defining a state of the art on the subject, but also of the needs, discomforts, rights, and duties of the individual is played out. In the end, science is neither neutral nor free of partisan ideological influences (de Mennato, 1999); therefore, it is essential, especially when discussing the family, to examine the perspectives we bring to it and the possible conditionings that may result from it (Formenti, 2013).

The delimitation of the category 'family' continues to represent, in this sense, a definition underlying the organisation of society itself: the family is in fact a micro-society, the site of a web of exchanges that ensures the survival of social groups (Lévi-Strauss, 1947); from the shape of the family derives, in other words, the shape of society itself, but above all, those fundamental functions that enshrine its role as the primary educational institution, which reproduces and reworks the cultural horizons and growth of human communities through the exercise of the formative power it imprints on the inhabitants.

The social experience of the family has the ability to considerably shape individuals, producing a unique and irreplicable version of them as a result of the relationship between the cultural *representation of social contexts and the satisfaction of psychological needs of growth*; it constitutes the fundamental social group in each individual's experience, where the fundamental interpersonal interactions and ties that play a significant role in the formation process are established. The family, interpreted as the original educational context and the first existential reality (Bellingreri, 2014), through its educational relations, comprised of communications, interactions, emotions, and experiences, contributes to the formation of human shape and becomes the premier site for the development of human capital.

The composition of the family is not, however, a purely natural fact, despite the fact that some naturalistic and strongly ideologized positions, prevalent in the contemporary debate, superimpose on the biological nature of family roles (father, mother, children, etc.) incontestable and inalienable cultural forms and functions, according to a traditional viewpoint. The generation of children is a natural given, whereas the interpretation of parental roles and functions is a cultural given. The only exclusively natural fact is sexual reproduction, but the terms and manner in which this event is translated into systems of relationships and forms of social organisation are cultural facts. In this sense, if we observe the family from the point of view of its educational potential, we can affirm that education itself is "generation", not in the biological sense of course, but in the perspective of the humanisation of what is "born" from it and mediated through affective bonds comes to intertwine and grow.

In this sense, cultural interpretations transcend nature, because culture transcends nature itself in the forms of thinking it creates, which orient life and *shape the mind* (Bruner, 2000), beginning with the meanings they designate; whereby we mistakenly consider *natural* what is actually *conventional*, forgetting that convention is the result of an agreement of use against the backdrop of a shared meaning. This prevents us from “tracing” the origin of the meaning itself and, therefore, its connotation as a construct, which is a *product of culture* and not a *natural fact*, in its constant re-actualization in everyday life. The family can therefore express itself in a variety of ways, establishing a cultural representation; it has undergone and continues to undergo transformation over time, just as the roles given to it undergo metamorphosis.

Numerous forms and models of the family have been formed, evolved, and developed within the human experience, as a result of different ethnic and cultural contexts and eras of Western culture. In certain African regions, such as Kenya, the family assumes the structure of a micro-community, in which, for instance, the maternal role is extended and interchangeable between the birth mothers and their sisters; the latter, whom we would call aunts, are instead referred to in the local language as “young mother” or “old mother”, indicating the *horizontal* function of this role. In Malinowsky's famed anthropological studies of the Trobriand Islands, a *transversal* family structure emerges, in which the maternal uncle plays the normative and formative role that is attributed to the father in the traditional model of the western family, while the biological father plays a playful and affective proximity role, which can be summarised as the functions of a sort of “brotherly friend”. In Western culture, the transition from the patriarchal family, typical of traditional societies, to the nuclear family, typical of modernity, to the plural forms of post-modernity, commonly known as 'new families,' demonstrates the continuous evolution of this fundamental educational institution.

Consequently, the family, despite being a universal aspect of the human experience in terms of its fundamental function of connecting generations, incorporating and reworking a model of society (Donati, 2006), is realised in a variety of forms and structures. No society can exist without the family, which is the essential relational structure for cultural reproduction and evolution (Donati, 2013); "it is a form of life that for centuries has been able to constantly reinvent itself, surviving migrations, wars, cultural upheavals, political and religious events, acquiring new structures, yet re-proposing themes and relationships, desires and ancient pacts" (Formenti, 2012, p. XVI). In every time and place, the family is shaped by ideological, historical, socioeconomic, and cultural circumstances.

As a result of the cultural instances, fluidity, and complexity that characterise postmodern society as a whole, we are witnessing a moment of redefinition in which the roles of the family member are more involved than ever in a significant phase of transformation. The terms “single-parent families”, “reconstructed or extended families”, “de facto families”, and “rainbow families” (families formed by same-sex couples with children) indicate a condition of continuous metamorphosis and expansion of the family concept, which inevitably places conventionally established models in crisis.

The transformations that have involved the family and substantially altered its *scripts*, highlight specific educational criticalities attributable primarily to the new ways of exercising parenthood and to new educational needs, referring to both children and parents; pedagogical in-depth study focuses on the interpretative categories of the new forms of parenting and being a family, and on the indicators of a renewal of the educational relationship (Priore, 2018).

The constant redefinition of ideas, models, and meaning horizons is one of the conditions that define the current era, which, in comparison to traditional and contemporary societies, is characterised by a continuous reworking of roles that affects all segments of society. In this sense, playing a social

role is no longer unambiguously and unequivocally a compass for navigating experience, defining oneself, and navigating one's life (Bauman, 2011). In other words, the experience of life in contemporary Western societies is characterised by complexity, fluidity, and the centrality of change as a defining characteristic of being. Therefore, the fluidity of cultural references that define the perception of the parental role and the absence of a stable model and concept of parenting place the parental function in a precarious position.

The redefinition of roles brought about by sociocultural changes in relationships and functions within a *fluid society* means that parenthood cannot be redefined in an univocal manner; rather, it corresponds to a condition linked to volition, the recognition of one's own function, and the reconstruction of a role within primary relationships. The category of gender undergoes a metamorphosis in which gender membership transforms from a purely biological condition to a conception based on intra-and inter-personal representations of the body.

We are therefore witnessing a fundamental cultural transition of the family, regardless of the political and ideological resistance placed in the sphere of social recognition of these changes and the related legitimization of existence and affirmation of rights. Such resistances, by opposing the recognition of the change taking place and slowing down its legal and cultural legitimization, does not, however, take into account the fact that such human and socio-relational circumstances are *a de facto* reality that inevitably intervenes to modify culture *from below*, just as has always happened with everything pertaining to the important cultural revolutions that, according to their own timeframes, have gone throughout history to modify the evolution and development of human societies. In light of the fact that the implicit recourse to historically determined models, stereotypes, and traditionally internalised social representations corresponds to a deeply ingrained human propensity to cope with experience, it is not through a nostalgic look to the past and a call for the restoration of a traditional family model that this critical juncture can be addressed (Moscovici, 2005). Firstly, because cultural evolution is not a reversible or controllable process, and secondly, because change and the crisis that sometimes accompanies it must be interpreted, understood, positioned, and accompanied, rather than opposed or denied: the uncertainty of the future tends to lead one to seek reassurance in a gaze bent on the past, but one cannot face the evolutionary challenges of culture by looking *backwards*. The decline of a dominant model of inter-family relations and the acceptance of new forms of social aggregation with a caring and educational function, in which the individual assumes the responsibility for the active construction of his parental role are key elements of the educational crisis of the family; in other words, it is necessary to think in terms of a subject who constructs his or her parental being or, more transversally, a "reference adult," i.e. an adult who consciously assumes the burden and responsibility of expressing a role aimed at caring for and educating a child, beginning with self-care and self-recognition. In other words, it is crucial that being a parent correlates with an awareness of the quality and direction of one's own *relational, socio-affective, and educational actions*. The formative task that is proper to the social context of the family, understood as the place of primary socialisation, is not in this sense elusive; this task is to build an environment capable of conveying a relational quality that is as responsive as possible to the socio-affective needs of the children, through the definition of roles and functions consistent with educational-formative purposes that place the subject in the best position to orient himself in the social world.

### **The educational crisis of the parental role**

In the scenario described above, the definition of the family and parenthood cannot rely on repertoires of behaviours and precepts considered valid in reference to a set of stereotypes and

representations enshrined in cultural tradition, as is typically the case, because tradition itself no longer appears to be in relation to reality and therefore does not constitute a valid support in delivering effective solutions to parenthood-related problems. Although the topic of the educational crisis is persistently at the centre of social discourse, it is most frequently addressed by deriving answers from common sense, and the late participation of the pedagogical scientific community in the reflection on the family has not helped. The analysis of the aspects underlying the critical changes that have impacted the modern family includes the generalised confusion of adult figures who express an evident fatigue to grow and make others grow (Cornacchia, Madriz, 2014; Mariani, 2014; Zamengo, 2016) and which, in some cases, can manifest as phenomena of confusing role interchangeability. In fact, the snapshot of the family proposes a change in the configuration and positioning of the members, highlighting a decrease in internal distances and a greater horizontality of relationships. The resulting form is that of a magmatic family, as an agglomeration and a single body (Ammaniti, 2015), with parent and child side-by-side, as a place of profound affection, but also of greater responsibilities and constraints. It is important to note that within this articulated dynamic should also be placed the epochal repositioning of the child, who from the periphery comes to place himself at the centre of the family as a *sacred subject* (Gauchet, 2010), often inducing educational responses oriented toward overprotection.

The critical nature of postmodern parenting is expressed through the relationality and triangularity dimensions and must be analysed from a broader, situational, and all-encompassing perspective than in the past (Bornstein, 2002). Today, parental behaviour is viewed as a product of the characteristics of the parent, the child, and the environment, as well as the result of a history of reciprocal interactions and transformations resulting from a multi-transactional process. The triangularity of family relationships can be viewed from two different vantage points: on the one hand, the cooperation and educational coherence between the parents, and on the other hand, the recognition of the child's style and related experience, which return to the parents as reactions, demands, and needs.

According to Iori (2002), the complexity of the parental role can be traced to the three different types of projects it raises; the parent is, in fact, engaged in his or her personal project as a parent, the project of the couple, and the project for and with the child. The practise of parenting is a phenomenon that is perpetually unfinished and open-ended due to the fact that these projects, which cannot be attributed to specific and well-defined models, are characterised by change and ongoing construction. Parenting can therefore be characterised as a function-problem, and the experience of parenthood can be viewed as a construction nourished by a body of knowledge in the process of formation. Unquestionably, the relational plots and inter-subjective models that form the basis of bonds between parents and children are rooted in the transmission of educational models, beliefs, and family representations. In fact, within the context of studies on family transgenerationality (Kas, Faimberg, Enriquez, Baranes, 1993), the individual is viewed as an inter-subject in a chain from which he or she derives and inherits dreams, desires, renunciations, relationships, and educational cultures, which become interiorized models.

Being a parent nowadays is a continuous search for a role, a continuous reinvention and testing of oneself that, despite causing a subterranean sense of unease, inadequacy, and bewilderment, reveals itself as a potential route for expressing concrete educational prerogatives. In the absence of a role and a predetermined script, the social actor can create his own script, a version of himself that draws purposes and functions in a constant search for meanings that give his experience significance. The non-expression of a defined role, sanctioned by a stable cultural horizon, necessitates *critical* and *systematic* self-questioning, *taking risks* in the exercise of choice and doubt, contemplating the

possibility of error, understanding how to accept the weight of consequences, and continuously questioning oneself.

Parenthood must necessarily reconstruct its own role within the educational system, in a network and knowledge circulation perspective in which a sense is reconstructed around the purpose of the parental function; a function that, even if it appears empty in the horizon of identity uncertainty, can be reconstituted in relation to the educational and, therefore, cognitive, social, affective, and emotional needs of children; needs that are at the core of an identity development. The construction of meaning and trust derives from the *systems of relationships*; family relationships that are consciously and critically acted upon can guarantee this construction; they represent the fundamental sphere on which the educational role of parenthood must reorganise itself, avoiding the communicative void that, in the post-modernity animated by neoliberal ideology, has increasingly tied the family nucleus to an *asocial* trait.

In addition to the crumbling of established family models, another critical juncture in the exercise of parental function is the emergence of what Byung-Chul Han refers to as a kind of *ideology of individual happiness*, which rampantly directs human efforts towards the convulsive pursuit of a private and personal well-being that divides the subject socio-affectively and produces a *depoliticisation and desolation* of the subject. This "makes everyone busy only with themselves, with their own psyche, instead of critically investigating social issues. [At this point,] the conditions that need to be improved are not social but psychological. The impulse towards an optimisation of the soul, which actually forces an adaptation to the relations of domination, veils social malpractices" (Byung-Chul Han, 2020, p. 17). In what Byung-Chul calls a "palliative society," the *"device of emergent happiness"* pushes people toward a "spasmodic pursuit of well-being" that silently and pervasively causes social fractures. This leads to "ego-fatigue," which makes people feel alone and unable to find themselves in a "We" (Idem, p. 19). This degenerative aspect of contemporary culture forces individuals to live their daily lives as a *survival exercise* (Lash, 2004). The disintegration of fundamental social relations produces a drift in the sense of belonging that translates, in individual life, into phenomena of *existential disorientation* that primarily affect the new generations, who, in need of a *future*, "are waiting for something or someone to ferry them, because the sea they are crossing is dangerous, even if its appearance is dreamy" (Galimberti, 2007, p. 55). However, something or someone that is incapable of acting except through caring or restorative styles of the welfare, compensatory, and hyper-protective types leaves the subject undergoing training of the capacity to mature his own autonomy, leaving him in a limbo of disorganic and socio-affectively incoherent experiences that do not permit him to confront the evolutionary challenges posed by concrete reality, generating fronts of frustration and isolation. These characteristics of modern society place the individual and the training contexts aimed at the cultural development of the younger generations, including the family, in a state of deep unease in the construction and management of the life and training project. In such a congeries, the processes of self- and identity-formation become the critical juncture and also invest the figure of the parent and its educational orientations, placing them in a perpetual thematization phase. In fact, if we examine how the traditional model of the family has changed, we find that the lack of self-denial and sacrifice that characterised the parent of yesteryear has been replaced by the adult parent's need for personal fulfilment. In other words, the subjective aspect of parenthood that incorporates a woman and a man with a personal identity project in the mother and father predominates to a greater extent (Cunti, 2013). The pedagogical question focuses on the effects of these changes on the educational care of children, and the scientific interest in the family is motivated by the educational role it plays in ensuring the well-being of future generations. Through the disintegration of fundamental social relationships, the postmodern horizon's upheavals impact the lives of individuals. Possibility of constructing a personal history, belonging to

a family and a place are fundamental conditions for the development of a self-concept capable of deciphering experience, as it is within these contexts and conditions that the self internalises systems of worldview. Children's needs for social maturation are not being met due to scepticism and disillusionment caused by conditions of instability and fluidity, on the one hand, and exaggerated individualism in pursuit of well-being, on the other, which increase the drive towards fragility, permissiveness, and disengagement in the parental role. This has permeated primary education contexts, depriving them of their fundamental role, which is to support subjects in the construction of self through socialisation and affectivity, for the internalisation of cultural tools necessary for the construction of meaning and confidence in the future, which is the foundation of the capacity to manage change. The educational system's crisis is no longer the exception, but the norm in our society (Benasayag, Schmidt, 2004). Therefore, the subject undergoing training, conducting his or her experience in a systematic absence of the socio-formative conditions that constitute a necessary guide to realise a stable self- and world-perception, perceives himself or herself as being thrown into "time entrusted to a randomness without direction and orientation" (Galimberti, 2007, p. 27). This inadequacy of social contexts of formation in carrying out their primary functions therefore affects the construction of subjects, the definition of the modalities by which they will interpret the world, the perception of self, and identity. This implies that identity is the central core upon which insecurity, frustration, and isolation leave their mark, depriving the subject of the sense of permanence and continuity upon which the future is based and, consequently, the margins of conception and realisation of a life project. "The psyche is healthy when it is open to the future (unlike the depressed psyche, which is all collected in the past, and the manic psyche, which is all focused on the present); when the future closes its doors or, if it opens them, only to offer itself as uncertainty, precarity, insecurity, restlessness [...], initiatives are extinguished, hopes appear empty, demotivation grows, and vital energy implodes" (Idem, p. 26).

If traditional societies exercised this prerogative within the contexts that defined them, providing their subjects with maps for understanding themselves and the world based on the certainty of roles and ties as the unifying elements of identity, these maps no longer express any coherence with the territory, which has changed so drastically and so rapidly that the contexts are incapable of drawing new useful maps. In any case, this latter operation does not seem appropriate, as the issue is not the adaptability of maps and models to reality, but rather the abandonment of the notion that it is possible to construct adequate maps of reality, as the latter has definitively revealed its mutability and evasiveness, demonstrating the inefficacy of any representation of it with regard to the attempt to contain it. This necessitates a complete reevaluation of educational options and strategies, as the possibility of constructing a sense of self capable of controlling experience is contingent not only on the internalisation of tools and consolidated categories, but also on the capacity to question these tools and categories, to the point of abandoning them while searching critically for new ones. Teaching how to deal with the new territory will be possible not by handing over old maps, but by teaching how to navigate it even in the absence of defined maps (Lo Presti, 2010), in the absence of a fixed identity (Bauman, 2009).

### **Building critical capacities in the parenting process**

As a function of designing training strategies for the management of self in relation to change, reflecting on the crisis of the parental role is an attempt to provide a pedagogical response to this educational emergency and the associated social problems; to do so, it is necessary to refer to the processes that subjects use to organise themselves in time and space, constructing and reconstructing reality (Smorti, 1997, p. 3): "change is only phenomenologically reconstructible through the «acts» that life's encounter demands of the subject" (Demetrio, 1991, pp. 23-24). Consequently, the option

for the development of research and pedagogical intervention itineraries that identify in the ways in which individuals interpret and explain to themselves their own being as "reference adults" the key to understanding the educational processes of identity formation and construction and, at the same time, the object of work for the design of educational strategies aimed at the acquisition of *critical-reflexive capacities for parental responsibility*: "if the subject resides in experience, constructing and inhabiting it as his world, it is also necessary to initiate the movement through which, so to speak, he places himself outside of it as, up until that point, it has been given" (D'Agnesse, 2002, p. 65).

It is essential to implement *parenting education* projects that emphasise the uniqueness of the subject and experience and foster the capacity to critically reflect on oneself in order to construct a conscious perspective about one's parental role, as a construct that can foster the responsibility of parenting (Bertin, Contini, 1983); if a stable and permanent parental model is unavailable, if it is the result of the shifting worldviews we encounter in our experience, then what becomes possible, even in terms of concrete opportunities, is our ability to imagine *one version of parenting* over another. This becomes a prerequisite for assuming a distant position with regard to shared knowledge, in the first instance, and the constructive history of one's parental identity, as a second consequence. And here the strictly pedagogical aspect comes into play, which refers to the need to create pathways of awareness of the role of the reference adult (who may or may not be a biological parent), who must develop the capacity for self-research within that role. This type of formative work is intended to support and accompany parents along a path of responsabilisation (Contini, 2004) that includes as its main stages the internalisation, enrichment, *refinement*, and, finally, the *critique* of the tools for *self-interpretation*. Thus, *being a parent* does not appear to be solely a natural condition or a simple sociocultural requirement; rather, it is the result of assuming an awareness of this role through an ongoing search for its associated meanings. In this view, the formation of the reference adult regarding parenthood involves an exploration of the self in order to comprehend the meaning of one's own intentionality, which is to be investigated not in its explicit, obvious, fully conscious dimensions, but in its obscure folds, which are hidden from consciousness and strongly influenced by stereotypes and cultural affiliations, which unconsciously direct everyone's interpretations and actions. It is a matter of "bringing to light what is sometimes concealed between the folds of experience, stripping it of its apparent obviousness, and subjecting the submerged continent of personal existence to a rigorous and radical analysis" (Bruzzone, 2015, p. 15). In other words, the substance of human agency consists of *ambivalences*, which are typically concealed behind a veil of the unmentionable. A mother who declares that she loves her child unconditionally, for example, may conceal from herself the presence of a possible less clear side of her experience as a mother, in which fears, resentments, a sense of frustration, and uncertainties can be stirred, and which indisputable fuel her actions, which, due to this lack of awareness, do not always correspond to the love declared. It is the hidden region of our feelings that directs our sense of self and behaviour in the world, so we must direct our attention to this region.

The scientific literature on the topic of training and support for parenting is divided along three distinct lines: on the one hand, there are *Parent Education* and *Parent Training* approaches, which are geared toward making parents more capable or acquiring "know-how skills"; in contrast, the *Parenting Awareness* approach aimed to increase awareness in a more general sense (Ailincăi, Weil-Barais, 2013). In contrast, the discourse on practises has shifted in recent decades towards the device of reflexivity, which, as has been amply demonstrated, enables the parent to question the construction, development, and transformation of parental knowledge, which can evolve from implicit and naive to critical and conscious forms. Becoming a reflexive parent is analogous to assuming the *forma mentis* of a "adult who elaborates a thought on his or her role as educator, on the desires and needs that underlie it, and on the constraints and opportunities he or she encounters" (Formenti, 2001, p.



100); in a broader sense, focusing the parental training process on the principle of reflexivity aims to confront the experience of parenthood in a problematic manner by encouraging the subject to intentionally focus on himself or herself and the child (Cambi, 2010). The objective of reflexive training is for the parent to acquire an educational intentionality and to identify personal keys that can give parenthood meaning (Cunti, 2016). Pourtois (2001, p. 123) refers to these repressed structures as the 'repressed referee'. The process that can support these goals must necessarily pass through the emergence of the implicit, that is, of all those submerged aspects of education, those tacit structures that guide the parental role. In this context, the reflexive stance affords the opportunity to expose, deconstruct, and construct new meanings and perspectives by enacting a reordering of reality based on a process of progressive reworking. If it is true that the main pedagogical error is the belief that there are certain ways to "educate well" and that these can be inherited or the result of a maternal or paternal "instinct," then the main route is the gradual and constant construction of the parent's identity, which alone can lead to personal and coherent ways of interpreting roles and the identification of the most important tasks of education. On the educational side, it is acknowledged that reflexivity has a metacognitive function that facilitates the comprehension and planning of problematic and dialectical relational action. According to Cambi (2010), the principles on which the reflective exercise of the parent's role should be based are as follows:

- the analysis of oneself and one's own concept of parenting
- the recognition of the child's uniqueness as Other-than-self
- the continuous realisation of a problematic and reflexive proxemics
- the adoption of an attitude predisposed to listening and dialogue
- establishing empathic relationships
- activating 'full' communication, for instance through play and storytelling
- managing authority
- co-planning with the child
- conflict resolution
- educating the child's sensitivity and guiding it toward a symbolic dimension.

The parental catalogue that was just described as an example may serve as an outline for a training programme to be implemented with parents; however, to avoid the use of pre-established categories or indicators, the issue revolves around the possibility of being adaptable toward oneself and one's children and embracing change as a practise of parental identity. If the rules of the family game are undetermined, so too are the outcomes of parenting, which are by their very nature always uncertain. As stated by Bettelheim (1987), the 'passability' of a parent can only be determined retroactively.

### **For a critical-reflective parental education**

As a phenomenological science, pedagogy nourishes a hermeneutic perspective engaged in illuminating the shadow zones of human experience and relationships (Iori, Bruzzone, 2015). In this key, the role of the parent involves the ability to know and recognise these hidden zones of consciousness, as well as determining the extent to which they influence the self-determination and intrapersonal and interfamily relationships. Concisely, it is a matter of parental training consistent with the theoretical-practical background of a pedagogical-transformative epistemology, centred on

self-reflective practises, aimed at *revealing* and thereby managing the implicit dimensions of *being - parent*.

In essence, what shapes the parent-child relationship is a critical analysis of the ways in which one interprets and understands oneself and the other, one's own and others' needs, as well as an examination of the mechanisms through which the parenting judgments and convictions emerge. In other words, it is a matter of developing the ability to observe and question critically the series of unconscious dynamics that, in general, render *invisible* the reasons that "lie behind" our ways of being and entering into relationships. Invisibility that, most of the time, renders them harmful and potent, placing us in a state of discomfort and leading us astray. This possibility resides primarily in the capacity to examine oneself throughout the relationship, constantly seeking awareness of why and how guiding interpretations emerge. In other words, the management of interpersonal conflict with children requires the development of a *personal theory of being- parent*. Therefore, the ability to manage oneself within family relationships is closely related to the capacity to create a space for reflection and knowledge on the origins of one's own relational choices, beginning with the identification of a specific educational goal: to cultivate sociality and affectivity through the establishment of a relationship centred on self-disclosure and active listening to the other. The key to this type of education is therefore the *search for the parental self in order to develop an effective educational relationship*. Education understood as intellectual, socio-affective, and cultural formation is based on an emotional and psychological education that originates precisely in *sociality*, and in this sense, the family context represents the fundamental location for the development of those primary relationships whose function is to guarantee, through affective communication, the development of an emotional world that can sustain the complexities of life. In this sense, the family should be understood as a 'relationship-based educational community' in which parenthood is the result of a lifelong learning process (Perillo, 2019). In the absence of a *competent* and effective *relationship*, both parents and children will struggle to develop growth paths based on an ability to decode the self and the world; in primary educational contexts, social and emotional intelligence, which forms essential interpersonal skills, is developed in relation to the quality of relationships. Growing up within a system of family relationships, just as it naturally and tacitly determines the internalisation and use of a verbal language to communicate with others and oneself, also creates a sort of "relational alphabet" that tacitly assumes the role of a system of meaning and access to oneself and the world. The quality of the *relational alphabet* transmitted by parents within the context of family relationships implicitly guides the identity, sociocognitive, and affective formation of their children, as well as their resulting worldview. The majority of what a child learns from his or her parents comes from what they are and do, rather than what they say. A parent, as well as any educator, teaches more and more profoundly from how they act and interact than from what they deliberately try to teach: *the relationship teaches tacitly* (Lo Presti, 2016). Underlying models of relationships and family interaction is a representation of the relationship itself, which holds and conveys a representation of social relations, an idea of affectivity, and a way of living and expressing emotions that serves as an implicit lesson for children. In order to adequately support their children's cognitive and emotional development, parents' role is to understand and manage such processes. In particular, the realisation of a solid concept of relationship and affectivity, consistent with the children's natural desire for love, is the fundamental element of trust that ensures the right relationship between the self and the experience *tout court*. Pursuing such a goal requires the ability to interpret the complex needs of children and to act competently through the critical exercise of one's own *being-in-relation*, in the knowledge that the *quality of the cultural, relational, and socio-affective climate* that characterises the parent-child, or adult-child relationship will decisively guide the construction of meaning that will shape the self, on the intrapsychic and social levels. In actuality, intellectual and cultural education is founded on an emotional and psychological education that, as previously stated, has its origins in sociality. In this sense, the family context is a privileged location for the experimentation and

development of those primary relationships whose function is to guarantee, through affective communication, the development of an emotional world that can support the complex experience of knowledge and the construction of meaning. Family relationships therefore convey a version of reality that serves as the basis for an individual's development: «emotions, passions, affections, and feelings are not an accessory and useless dimension (or even an obstacle) for the mental faculties, but are constitutive of existence, accompanying and defining our presence in the world, our relationships with others and with ourselves » (Iori, 2009). Without this type of support, children will be «deprived of those emotional tools that are essential for initiating behaviours such as self-awareness, self-control, and empathy, without which they will be able to speak, but not listen, resolve conflicts, or cooperate» (Galimberti, 2007, p. 48). Therefore, adult education systems that can implement parental training courses within a network of social services provided to families must be considered. Parenthood occurs in the natural process of procreation and is expressed in the private and informal dimensions of experience; therefore, we are not accustomed to considering it in terms of competencies. Nonetheless, today more than ever, the experience of parenthood requires an exercise of awareness that cannot be the result of spontaneity, goodwill, or personal aptitude, but can only be the result of structured training courses designed with the goal of maturing certain competencies and creating one's own parental imprint.

Contemporary criticalities represent, in this sense, a starting point from which to measure oneself against the plurality and complexity of experience, in order to recognise the logic of the current knowledge models, to reinvent the paths that construct them, and to accept the progress of change. It is necessary to rethink the family, not as a paradigmatic model, but as an evolving system, necessitating a training programme aimed at increasing the subject's awareness of his or her own role responsibilities. This entails cultivating a course of ideas, an open dialectical frontier capable of deciphering ideologies, influencing, modifying, and toppling the now ineffective traditional arrangements, and experimenting with forms of relationships, codes, emotions, and feelings that evade consolidated knowledge. On the practical side of socio-educational intervention, therefore, it is necessary to question and reform the networks of family services and policies. Therefore, providing real support for the complex experience of becoming and being a parent cannot be reduced to offering counselling in consultancies that emphasise bio-anatomical and technical aspects or preparatory courses animated by psychologisms filled with rhetoric, “good rules,” and stereotypical visions. Such headmasters appear hollow and ineffective, since the parenting experience, today more than ever, as analysed, constitutes an experience that profoundly challenges the sense of one's own identity, triggering ancestral levels of feeling, disturbances, difficulties, and discomforts that stem from one's own deepest experiences and that clash with the failure to achieve cultural stereotypes that are now crystallised and removed from reality. Disturbing experiences, which can make the event of conceiving, of having to care for, raise, and educate a child into extremely critical and occasionally traumatic emotional and psychological drifts. Becoming and being a parent can expose deep wounds, agitate our desires and fears, stoke our frustrations, and reignite our regrets and remorse. Becoming and being a parent creates a crisis that necessitates a significant and structured self-analysis in relation to a culture in flux. On these acquisitions, a parenting education centred on *self-reflection and self-care* is an invocable cultural response and a concrete path forward, as *the birth of a child also implies the birth of a parent*.

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