ABSTRACT

THURSDAY, SEPTEMBER 27, 2014
SESSION V: FAMILY VALUE AS AN INSTITUTION

Sara MAZZUCHELLEI, The Catholic University of the Sacred Heart of Milan, Italy
Miriam PARISE, The Catholic University of the Sacred Heart of Milan, Italy
Giovanna ROSSI, The Catholic University of the Sacred Heart of Milan, Italy

THE IMPORTANCE OF FAMILY AS INSTITUTION. FINDINGS FROM AN ITALIAN SURVEY

Keywords: Family, Marriage, Institution

The concept of institution, one of the main issues in the social sciences, has been developed in a number of anthropological, economic, juridical, political, and sociological institutional theories. There is no overarching theory, however, to explain what institutions are for, how they are formed and why they change. These multiple theories can actually be divided into two groups according to their individualistic or holistic approach. Individualists regard institutions as tools or mechanisms to solve problems of social order and cooperation: they originate in the interplay between agents in the form of projects, or as unforeseen effects of certain types of interactions, such as agreements binding individual behaviour by precluding some choices and some ways of allocating resources, and are modified when proved no longer able to efficiently comply with the tasks for which they were created. Holists also believe that institutions exist in order to respond to the above problems but, once consolidated, they tend to become autonomous and turn into organisms developing on the basis of their own logic, which is then imposed onto individuals. Thus institutions show great resistance to change: this can only take place under particular conditions, and is usually traumatic. Nevertheless, even scholars using the same approach can differ sharply from one another, to the extent that the institutional issue has been defined a “Tower of Babel”. Despite the different approaches and their many contentious aspects, at least two points in the debate on institutions have attracted wide consensus:

1. the modernisation of society coincides with the progressive decline of its institutions;
2. increasingly sharp differentiation processes in modern/contemporary society cause conflict between institutions which, instead of producing integration, contribute to accelerating social disruption.

By using a historical and sociological analysis, relational sociology (Donati 2011) has entered this debate, with the proviso that assessing the extent of the institutional crisis can have different applications according to the institutions considered. This set, the following conclusions have been reached:

1. the mutual distancing of reference values and ensuing norms produces fragmentation on the one hand and new relationships on the other;
2. societies cannot eliminate institutions, not only because social order and cooperation would become impossible or at least difficult and extremely costly but also because human beings could not develop to their full potential and individuality.

Relational sociology, in fact, defines social institutions as social relationships developing structurally, as restraints to action or regular patterns of behaviour: culturally, as cognitive conventions, and as value-related behavioural norms. Thus institutions are the main focal points in social organisation, as they exist in all societies and relate to the universal issues upon which social life is ordered. As to the peculiar institution represented by the family, the need for a comprehensive approach to it is acutely felt in the contemporary, globalised scenario, characterised by heterogeneous cultural models and diverse family forms. Such pluralism stems from two sets of reasons: a growing differentiation in the dimensions that make up the family (inter-gender and inter-generational relationships) and an increasing complexity in the underlying relational networks.

Such pluralism stems from two sets of reasons: a growing differentiation in the dimensions that make up the family (inter-gender and inter-generational relationships) and an increasing complexity in the underlying relational networks.

In the last few years, some major sociology scholars have stressed different aspects of the fact that, with the weakening of a shared value system on which to base one’s life, individuals are forced to rely on themselves in directing their choices: even family bonds lose their reference to tradition and the forms they assume find their sole justification in the individual: self-fulfilment becomes the individual’s primary goal, to which all relationships are instrumental. Thus family bonds are notably weakened, in the conviction that they belong to an obsolete past. This cultural model is the so-called “individualisation”.

Growing numbers of scholars, however, have expressed their scepticism about individualisation as an interpretative criterion. The need for a change of perspective seems justified by empirical longitudinal studies showing the persistence of marriage and the family.

On the basis of these empirical data, some contemporary family sociologists (in particular Smart, Widmer, Jallinoja) have attempted to outline a more thorough and sophisticated way of conceptualising and representing family life, whilst seeking new ways of identifying the multidimensionality of relationships; this has led them to use the concept of relationality as a basis for developing a theoretical approach to counter the dominant individualisation hypothesis.

From this theoretical framework, the research questions we want to address are:

1. Is the family still considered a valid institution by Italians?
2. Is it possible to identify specific elements linked to a strong idea of the family? Which elements?

The research hypotheses prompted by these questions are the following:

1. We expect the (marriage-based) family to be still considered a valid institution by Italians;
2. We can identify specific structural and cultural elements associated with a strong idea of the family.

The data used for this study were derived from a recent quantitative study on “The Family, a Resource for Society” (Donati 2012), a large population-survey on family relationships in Italy. It was a telephone survey by randomly digitizing landline and mobile telephone numbers. All data were collected by trained interviewers through a computer-assisted telephone interviewing system (CATI). The study is based on a sample of 3,527 individuals, of whom 49.6% males and 50.4% females, aged 30 to 55, of an average age of 42, living in highly urbanised areas of Italy and distributed as follows: 46.8% in the North, 19.7% in the Centre and 33.5% in the South.

All the interviewees were in couple relationships: most of the married couples were on their first marriage (58.5%), others were unmarried (24.9%). Most married couples had one (24.8%) or more children (27.3%), or no children at all (11.7%); otherwise they were childless unmarried couples (13.4%). The number of family members was on average under 3 (2.92). Most of the respondents held a higher education diploma (52.2%). They were employed in the private sector (35.0%), self-employed (21.0%), and employed in the public sector (18.0%); there were also some housewives (12.0%).

Participants answered a series of questions tapping the following areas: socio-demographic variables, solidarity and openness to the social context, social capital, trust in institutions, couple relationship, parent-child relationship (if they had children), work-family balance, representation of their social context and of institutions. Depending on the answer given to the question: “Do you think the family is a social institution with public value or just a matter of private choices?”, two groups were created: the people claiming that “the family is just a matter of private choices” (59.1%) vs. those claiming that “the family is a social institution with public value” (39.9%). A cluster analysis has been used in order to highlight the factors discriminating between the two groups.

Preliminary findings showed that the two groups differed in terms of socio-demographic variables. The first group (“the family is just a matter of private choices”) was composed of younger people (aged 30-35), people living in the North-West and in very large cities, cohabiting or separate/divorced people in a new relationships, childless people, people with a medium-low socioeconomic status, and people with a medium-low degree of religiosity. The second group (the family is a social institution with public value) was composed of older people (aged 50-55), people living in the South and in the North-East and in smaller towns, married people with children, people with a medium-high socioeconomic status, people with a high degree of religiosity.

Significant differences between the groups emerged also in other areas. People considering their family a social institution showed high levels of social trust, openness to the social context and solidarity (narrow, broad, generalised). In particular, they reported to be more prepared to help other family members and people outside the family boundaries and to rely on other family members in case of need. They also showed high levels of trust in other important institutions.

Moreover, they reported high levels of couple satisfaction, parental alliance, and parental selfefficacy, and low levels of perceived parental stress. As for the work-family balance, they declared that, when confronted with choices, they had privileged family rather than career. In addition, they seemed relationship-oriented, believing in the importance of finding a good reconciliation between family and work in order to give their children a better upbringing and dedicate time and energy to relationships (with partner/parents-in-law/relatives/other families/associations).

References