

From a Family undergoing Profound Changes to the New Role of Grandparents and Older Adults

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Abstract

This study seeks to elucidate some of the fundamental structural elements that have shaped the traditional family. It then highlights how the presence of elements that increasingly disrupt factors of continuity and stability gives rise to a family characterized by precariousness.

Against the backdrop of this precarious family structure, the study examines the new roles older adults are assuming to—in some way—offset this instability with elements of stability, support, and emotional backing.

Keywords: Family; Older people; Changes; Relationships

Introduction

This paper explores some of the consequences of the transition of the nuclear family (whilst acknowledging the wide range of criticisms levelled at this concept) from classical modernity to what we might term the extended or redefined family in the contemporary era [1].

It is important to note that the transformations of the family form part of a process of demographic transition, individualization and the transformation of relations of production, which also includes changes in gender construction leading to women's growing participation in the labour market and profound shifts in roles and relationships. It is also necessary to highlight the range of changes in sexual behaviour, new reproductive technologies and the decline in the population replacement rate [2].

Structural elements that constitute the family

According to Giddens, a fundamental element that constituted—or continues to constitute—the family relates to the consolidation of experiences of security, which enables people to trust themselves and their environment [3].

This trust is linked to the experience of supportive parents who are capable of caring for and protecting their children. This also encompasses the social dimension. If a child learns to trust their parents, it is because the parents, in turn, trust their environment,

and vice versa. It is, therefore, a structure of continuity between the family, the social sphere and the subjective – all of which are intimately interrelated – through which a framework of trust, experiences of security and reassurance is established [4].

This unique interplay is both an achievement and an expression of modernity, one of whose key aspects is the quality and nature of care that responds to the child's individual needs. Such care simultaneously expresses certain cultural values and codes that are reproduced and cherished [3].

Therefore, a prerequisite for basic trust is that there must be a sense of integration between parents and the social sphere, or, to put it another way, between parents and the 'adult' within the parents. The transmission of certain models of fatherhood and motherhood reflects firm and solid understandings of what it means to be an adult within a society that recognizes the place of adults. Parents who foster 'basic trust' are parents who take pride in their role as such [5].

Hence the need to consider those social structures that dignified the parents' adult identity, in order to make such a feeling possible. One of these, which is fundamental, is the ability to secure adult employment. Being an adult, working and being integrated into society form a self-reinforcing triad [6].

Within this dimension of pride, the back-and-forth between home and work is passed on, along with a precise upbringing and the reinforced assurance that society supports adulthood, just as adulthood supports childhood. In other words, children are not raised solely out of narcissism, but also because it is believed that some of what is passed on to them as a social legacy will serve them in their lives and their future [7,8].

The family becomes an aspect of the narcissistic contract, capable of anticipating and cathecting a possible future, conferring a sense of cohesion and unity within a primary unit in which the family's core structure serves as a model of psychosomatic and social integration [9].

From this perspective, what prevails in the family bond are real experiences through which the child comes to master family upbringing as a version of expert systems [10].

At the same time, a fundamental homology is established between the home—a closed space—and subjectivity—also a closed space. The coming and going, the leaving and entering, the receiving and transforming, add complexity to the psyche, whilst at the same time giving meaning to family dynamics. It is no coincidence that Winnicott [11] identifies the ability to be alone as an indicator of mental health, revealing the core of psychological development—reliability—grounded in trust in the caregiver's return.

The nuclear family, then, was more than a simple division of roles between father, mother and children. It involved a specific interplay of spaces and times, underpinning specific types of subjectivity. The 'expert' caregiver is not merely the one who provided care, but also the one who guaranteed the conditions for the child's survival. This demonstrates that there is nothing but integration between home, society and subjectivity, and furthermore that, in the face of the caregiver's absence, hope for their return can be maintained (that is, that their return is predictable) [3].

This sense of hope is fundamental and inseparable from basic trust, which is associated with a capacity for mentalization or reflective function—denoting an understanding of one's own behaviour and that of others in terms of mental and social states. Secure attachment reflects parents' ability to observe children's minds and facilitates children's general understanding of the mental, the world and society [12,13].

In this way, trust is placed in the child, whilst at the same time conveying the sense of a stable social context, which is essential for things to make sense and appear rational. In this way, the child is expected to gradually take on responsibilities, whilst being able to show curiosity and concern for their surroundings. We might consider that appropriate care techniques ultimately foster capacities that enable the attainment of autonomy, self-confidence and the ability to be alone – that is, psychological, familial and relational traits that will facilitate integration into the process of citizenship with its interplay of rights and obligations, limits and

permissions [7,14,15].

If there is a symbolic father or symbolic mother, it is because they are not mere 'representatives'; they are also social 'delegates' and 'proxies' with full powers on behalf of the group, insofar as they occupy a position of respectable 'adulthood'. This is a structuring action in relation to positions and places, which also involves an exchange for the adult, insofar as there is a subjective and social pleasure in being an adult. The insignia of fatherhood must be provided and 'recognised' by society, insofar as they authorize the father to proclaim himself a fundamental part of the social ideal. Fathers are expected to maintain their status as full and dignified members of society intact [16].

It is worth noting, therefore, that there were elements that were fundamental to the family within the traditional model: home, work, and the capacity to provide protection, shelter and support in the construction of subjectivity. These psychosocial factors constituted a model of stability and homeostasis par excellence, with the home functioning as a restorative 'nest' to which one could always return from the worries and obligations of daily life [17-19].

Processes of change in the contemporary family

When social conditions change and lead to the gradual loss of factors of stability—such as employment, pensions and an adequate wage—situations of precariousness begin to take hold. This situation leads to a general restructuring of identity and relationships and, consequently, to acute family breakdown that reflects the 'impact' of social exclusion. Within the family, this results in the breakdown and confusion of roles, disillusionment with society as a whole, isolation, and a constant sense of threat stemming from the fear of losing one's job. Humiliation becomes an undeniable reality, as does its counterpart: the need for submission [20-22].

The family unit thus harbours destabilizing and overwhelming emotions such as shame, depression, feelings of humiliation in the presence of elders, and a sense of overwhelm and guilt towards their children, creating an insurmountable social and familial debt [23].

In this way, we can assume that the possibility of parents maintaining a dignified and honourable sense of self is destroyed. Unable to care for their children because they have been stripped of their agency as adults, they lose the pride of emotionally supporting their child and – no less importantly – come to suffer the 'impact' of their child's bewilderment, as the child no longer knows 'how' to be proud of their parent [5].

This is an unfortunate situation in which it is now the children who, all too often, become their parents' carers. This care is both material and psychological, leaving the children to bear the brunt of their parents' anxieties, cast into the role of carers through which they attempt to prevent their parents from falling into states of depression or emotional overload. This neglect of the self fosters a culture of atonement and self-sacrifice, whereby the

child comes to function as a sole narcissistic object, neglecting the regulation of self-esteem, the capacity to tolerate anxiety, or the vitality of desire [24-26].

Drawing on Winnicott [27], we can appreciate the importance of having adequate supportive frameworks in place, maintaining a predictable and 'good enough' environment that reinforces a sense of control and recognition. The opposite, by contrast, involves a shift from caring, protective parents to helpless parents subjected to a climate of uncertainty, linked to an unexpected and incomprehensible situation that 'shakes' the stable foundations of what the middle class and society at large once were.

The figure of the father that is taking shape evokes weakness and devastation. He is a father who is not strong, does not believe himself to be strong, nor is he perceived as strong. If he sometimes appears as a 'father-ogre', it is more in the vein of a clown, because in reality he is a father in a truly fluid state [28,29].

He is a father who cannot exercise paternal authority or establish the rules of social coexistence. In this sense, it would be more accurate to say that it is not a case of 'there is no longer any need to act as a father', but rather that certain aspects of fatherhood have become impossible or have been exhausted [30,31].

In this way, the family undergoes substantial changes. It is evident that a weak father fails to provide the foundation for symbolic functioning [32], which implies leaving the individual to fend for themselves and a displacement of temporal linearity, with the breakdown of intergenerational bonds [33].

When the father (or indeed the mother) no longer knows exactly what it means to be a parent, something of the temporal breaks down, with the discontinuous coming to predominate over the continuous, which contributes to the prevalence of a sense of emptiness. This situation points to the absence of a social foundation from which the adult can project, sustain and perpetuate their role as a parent, with the loss of the mediating structures between the individual, the family and society [34-36].

Thus, the contemporary family is regarded as emerging from an incipient social change [37,38], making it impossible to deny the consolidation of a variety of new family structures in industrialised societies through different and new forms of relationship [39]. One of its defining characteristics is a marked decline in the fertility rate, but also a postponement of motherhood, driven by opportunities in the labour market that women did not previously have [39-42].

As we shall see shortly, in these situations it is possible to observe that grandmothers act as surrogate mothers. They take on a clear maternal role, rather than that of a grandmother. Thus, in this case, we are not witnessing a generational transition but rather a generational freeze.

It can also be noted that complex and rapid political, economic and social transformations coincide with significant changes in

family life and family relationships [43,44]. We are increasingly using the terms 'stepfamily' and 'collected family'. Some of these changes mean that interaction between parents and children tends to decline significantly following divorce. Thus, some research (in Europe and North America) indicates that an increasing number of adolescents are losing contact with their father, with the mother's role becoming predominant [39].

1.1. The new roles of older adults

Various studies point out that new trends are thus emerging regarding what is considered a 'family' and the roles expected of so-called 'family members' [45-47]. The 'a priori' assumptions that the nuclear family or the family in general is equivalent to a 'home' or to pre-established residential spaces are currently being re-examined [48]. It is also necessary to investigate what is considered to be significant family members within these new configurations (stepfamilies), broadening the scope of the study beyond marital or filial relationships [49,50].

In light of these new realities, it is evident that whilst some young people and adolescents maintain strong ties with their parents following a divorce, in the majority of other cases the relationship with at least one parent is weakened, whilst the relationship with grandparents is strengthened [51].

These different types of family relationships are associated with high or low density of connections between family members, and with varying levels of autonomy amongst them [48]. Thus, contrary to the hypothesis of nuclear family isolation (Parsons, 1949), various studies indicate that different relatives maintain emotional and attachment-based relationships and keep in regular contact, experiencing various forms of mutual support [52-54].

Of particular interest to us in this study is the concept of the 'Beanpole' as a family structure whose members span several generations, but with few members in each generation [55]. These configurations demonstrate strong intergenerational connections [56] that commonly include grandparents, uncles and aunts. Consequently, from the perspective of young people and adolescents, they receive care and attention from a large number of members of interconnected families, comprising primarily previous generations [57].

Bengtson [58] thus suggests that grandparents play an increasingly important role in multigenerational families. The combined effects of increased life expectancy (which means spending a longer lifetime with grandchildren) and declining fertility (fewer grandchildren) may have the side effect of strengthening grandparent-grandchild relationships, as well as leading to grandparents competing for the attention of their few grandchildren [4,59].

Increasingly, adolescents are living and growing up within these new family configurations [37]. All these social, economic

and cultural factors mean that many mothers, following a divorce—whether or not they face financial or emotional difficulties—return to the home of their parents and/or parents-in-law, with the result that grandparents come to provide support not only for their children but also for their grandchildren [60]. These grandparents often act as ‘leaders’ of the family [37]. This reliance on grandparents for support is also evident even when they do not live permanently with the family [61].

Moragas (1997) highlights that increased longevity facilitates a longer period of coexistence between grandparents and their grandchildren. Harper suggests that this increase in longevity may be linked to the emergence of roles that foster closer relationships between them [39]. The role of older people is changing, shifting from that of a passive person in need of care and protection to that of an active member of the family, providing care and protection [61].

These social and family changes imply a profound shift in the roles of grandfathers and grandmothers [62,63]. Nevertheless, the grandparent–grandchild relationship has not received the attention it deserves, with a prevailing tendency to cast grandparents in roles of altruism and self-sacrifice (Silverstein 2006, in: [40]). It should be borne in mind that grandparents who take on roles involving extensive caregiving often do so at the expense of their own material, physical and mental wellbeing (Minkler et al., 1997) (Kelley, 1993).

The fact is that an increasing number of adolescents are being brought up by their grandparents (Ehrle and Day, 1994), which is regarded as essential for their development (Acnes, 1987). Rizzini thus points out that, across the generations, children find in their mothers and grandmothers the most stable presence in their lives [43]. Neugarten and Weinstein [64] note that grandparents sometimes act as surrogate parents, and according to Bartram, Kirkpatrick and Prebis (1995), data from the US indicate that grandparents are increasingly taking on the full responsibility for the care of their grandchildren. All these factors imply a substantial change in the role and status of grandparents [63].

These factors suggest that a fundamental relationship is being forged between grandparents and their grandchildren [65], and it can be argued that the number of grandparents taking primary responsibility for their grandchildren’s upbringing has increased due to demographic, social, economic and political changes [66]. At the same time, it is important to bear in mind that care provided by grandparents is, in some cases, an alternative to the institutionalisation of young people in conflict with the law [44].

Today’s grandparents (not all, but many) do not wish to be grandparents or elderly people in accordance with inherited models. They do not pass on these models because they do not wish to reproduce them in themselves. There is a halt to intergenerational transmission, a phenomenon probably unprecedented in the history of mentalities and cultures [67].

At the same time, these adolescents seem to be engaging with their grandparents in a way that is usually reserved for the bond with their parents. This is what Winnicott [11] termed ‘generational confrontation’. It is a situation of intense, asymmetrical yet respectful confrontation—without resorting to violence—between the adolescent and their parents, designed to facilitate growth and the experience of autonomy.

From Winnicott’s perspective, only parents who are alive and self-assured can manage to endure and sustain this bond with their children. However, as already indicated, various social, cultural and economic circumstances make it impossible—either temporarily or permanently—for parents to feel self-assured, to see themselves as representatives of their culture or as full members of society. At this point of bitterness, weakness or helplessness, they are no longer able to withstand confrontation with their children. Such confrontation is often played out with the grandparents instead.

From this perspective, one might consider that this type of relationship between grandparents and adolescent grandchildren is therefore doubly confrontational and places both parties in a subjective position of searching. The grandchildren confront their grandparents (generational confrontation) and the grandparents confront their own parents (transgenerational confrontation). It is an interesting point of convergence which, however, warrants more in-depth and specific analysis.

The socio-demographic data thus point to a permanent and structural situation within current family changes [68,69]: grandparents have become key players in the upbringing and care of their grandchildren, as well as within the wider social context. Little is yet known about the impact of the upbringing provided by grandparents to their grandchildren, and even less is known when these grandchildren reach adolescence and regarding the quality of the bond between them, compared with other family ties and other adults responsible for their upbringing [70].

Public policies on social welfare and mental health must take these new realities into account and provide specific programmes to support the roles that grandparents are adopting or re-adopting, following a long period during which they were sidelined from the roles of caring for and protecting the youngest members of the family.

Conclusion

There are undoubtedly two new phenomena. One is that an increasing number of young people are likely to have (and may or may not enjoy the company of) all four of their grandparents alive and in good physical and mental health. This goes hand in hand with the fact that an increasing number of young people have only one sibling or none at all. In other words, a phenomenon that could be classified as part of the demographic transition is: having many grandparents and few or no siblings. A grandchild-child

today faces family changes or often absent parents but has the opportunity to receive more attention from their grandparents.

There appears to be a sibling-like dynamic viewed from two different perspectives. One is that grandparents are likely to 'compete' with one another for the attention of this only grandchild. The other is that, beyond the increase in life expectancy, it is also possible to suggest that the conception of the grandparent as a transmitter of affection or authority has changed. This grandfather no longer merely 'conveys'; he also seeks out new ways of living with his grandchild, exploring new aspects of life [71].

There is an effect of symmetrisation and a similar or equal starting point when it comes to exploring life. Grandchildren explore how to become adults; grandparents explore how to move beyond, to leave behind, that model of old age that has been passed down to them through the generations. Both are seeking something, and in that sense there is a partnership of shared growth and change. In this sense, there are no multi-generational families, but rather an intersection of generational relationships [72-75].

This point relates to the 'precarisation' of the family arising from current social processes, which not only weaken the roles of father and mother as representatives of the family unit, but also decisively reconfigure bonds, roles, capacities for negotiation and exchange, and, ultimately, even call into question the very concept of 'family'.

The term 'intersection of generational relationships' likely enables us to critically re-evaluate the place of the family today, whilst also allowing us to begin questioning whether, in light of the relational, social and economic changes highlighted, we can continue to speak of 'parents', 'children', 'grandparents' and 'grandchildren' in the traditional sense—as they were traditionally understood.

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