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New Families, New Identities:

A Study on the Transformation of the Family in Barcelona

This research is about the process of constructing new family identities in the urban area of Barcelona, within the IPEC's research program. The study has analyzed, from an ethnographic perspective, the rapid social and legislative changes in society and how they have led to new family models. The research mainly studied the context of how new identities had been created and how they redefined the roles, positions and functions of each member of the family.

Es tracta d'una recerca sobre els processos de construcció de noves identitats familiars a l'àrea urbana de Barcelona dins del programa de recerca de l'IPEC. El treball ha analitzat, des d'una perspectiva etnogràfica, els ràpids canvis socials i legislatius en la societat i com han donat lloc a nous models de família. La recerca ha incidit, sobretot, en la perspectiva de com s'han creat les noves identitats i com s'han anat redefinint els rols, posicions i funcions de cadascun dels membres de la família.

An Ethnographic Study on New Family Identities

With the title of this article, a group of researchers from the Institute of Childhood and the Urban World (CIIMU) and the Department of Anthropology of the Universitat de Barcelona conducted a study on the processes of building new family identities in the Barcelona metropolitan area within the IPEC research program, led by the authors of this text. The study analyzed the rapid social and legislative changes in society and how they have given way to new family models from an ethnographic perspective. The main focus of the research was perspective on how the new identities were created and how the roles, positions and functions of each family member have been redefined.

The family has been undergoing profound changes in recent decades. As the place where people's individual and social identities are built, this institution is at the heart of society, and it has been affected by the economic and political changes over these years. The structure of households has changed as a result of declining birth rates, the growth in the elderly population due to increased longevity and the reality of living with fewer people. At the same time these changes are taking place, family relationships, especially intergenerational family relationships, have been strengthened as an essential network of affective relationships and relationships of support and solidarity: the different generations cohabitate more than ever, and it is not at all strange for parents, children and grandchildren to live together. But more important than these changes are the cultural changes the family is undergoing, and this is what this project is about. Within the span of a few years, we have seen the spread of family models that just a decade or two ago were considered unworkable or even contrary to the idea of family. We thus observe a proliferation of couples who reject marriage and establish common-law

partnerships; we are witnessing a rise in divorce and consequently many children live with their separated parents or stepfathers, stepmothers and stepsiblings; we are seeing the recognition of homosexual marriages, and these couples are legally allowed to have children together; we are looking at how adoptions from abroad and conceiving through fertility treatments have become more widespread; and we are looking at the formation of new models of motherhood and fatherhood in single-parent families. The objective of this research is to study the cultural aspects of all of these new family models. How are these new family patterns constructed? What kinship terminology is used to describe them? How do different families experience and perceive different aspects of family life? What are the differences in day-to-day organization, intergenerational relationships, relationships with children and so on for these families?

The objective of this research, then, has been to analyze the cultural aspects of these new families (solitary groups, cohabiting couples, recomposed families, single-parent households, homosexual couples, etc.) Thus the research is based on the perspective of knowledge of the new ways of living in Catalan society, understanding these lifestyles as ways of creating new elements of ethnological heritage.

Methodology

The research followed qualitative methodology, primarily based on in-depth interviews conducted in Barcelona and the surrounding area. As essential features we sought to discover the sociocultural aspects involved in the formation of these family groups, such as:

- Kinship terminology used to refer to different family relationships and the way these relations are conceptualized using these terms (in the case

of spouses of separated parents, for instance).
- Economic organization of the family group. Integration of economy in wider kinship networks. Family economic exchanges.
- Distribution of roles among different members of the family group. Comparison of how these roles are assigned in new family realities and traditional marriage models.
- Ideas surrounding kinship relations of consanguinity, affinity and residence. Analysis of how different family members perceive these relationships.
- Contact between relatives, supportive roles and mutual aid in new family realities.
- Life cycles, mobility and residential proximity among relatives. Social and habitation practices.
- Residential mobility and family networks.
- The impact of these aspects on family organization, housing needs and family policies.

A major source for the research was 73 interviews that were conducted. Interviewees were chosen based on the differentiation criteria of different family types. The interviews were aimed more at analyzing different family types than studying a representative sample of families. This made it possible to go beyond objective data to describe the complexity of family relationships and forms of residence in detail. We sought to collect qualitative information about forms of residence and kinship relations for each form of residence to be studied in order to understand what makes up family relationships, how they function and what the underlying cultural models are.

All of the interviews were recorded and transcribed and later analyzed using the NVivo qualitative data analysis software. The interviews were based on a questionnaire designed for the research.

It was used more as a guide for topics to discuss than as a list of closed questions to facilitate planning and developing the interviews. Accordingly, the inclusion, ordering and way of formulating the questions depended in each case on the researcher's criteria based on the conditions of the interview and the characteristics of the interviewee as well as on the information available beforehand or from responses given in other sections.

Given the nature of the subject being studied, ethical aspects were key and scrupulously taken into account. All interviews were conducted with guarantees of anonymity and confidentiality, so assumed names have been used with all quotes and no details that would allow the person interviewed to be identified are provided. In the same vein, the transcriptions also leave out any details that would make identification possible.

To learn about the legal aspects of divorce and different agreements in connection with economic aspects, custody and so on, 105 sentences of divorce cases were analyzed, providing supplementary information to the interviews. The information was collected on cards containing the qualitative information pertaining to specific divorce cases and the legal discourses used. We did not try to make a quantitative analysis of the sentences but to cull the information that could be called *ethnographic*.

Lastly, news regarding new families (legal aspects, specific cases, claims, public debates and so on) was systematically mined from a number of newspapers. This compiled information enabled us to have a knowledge base of the different subjects our work is involved with to contrast the information gleaned from the interviews and have a complementary perspective.

The Why of Changing Families

When we presented this research to an audience of family researchers at a conference held at the University of Münster in January 2012, the question most frequently asked was why Spain, a Mediterranean country with a Catholic tradition, had adopted such liberal laws concerning the family in different areas like divorce, homosexual marriage, assisted reproduction and adoptions. From the European perspective, it is still surprising that we have become one of the most advanced countries in terms of family law and that the family has changed so quickly. What happened? What caused these rapid social and legislative changes? More recomposed families, more common-law partnerships, more same-sex marriages and families, a large number of international adoptions and a dramatic increase in children born from assisted reproduction have changed the family landscape. New values and symbols have changed family relationships.

Responding to and explaining these issues is not simple. We begin with an ethnographic vignette in an assisted reproduction clinic in Barcelona as Giulia Zanini presented it in her doctoral thesis on transnational reproduction (Zanini, 2012). An Italian couple who traveled to Barcelona to have an IVF treatment using donor gametes felt aggrieved and unhappy at having to go to another country to receive a treatment they believe should be offered in Italy. "It pains us to think of our country," they said. They found "the idea that you have to travel abroad to do something normal" very distressing. They feel unhappy with their country because although it seems so similar to Spain culturally, one country has very restrictive laws on assisted reproduction while the other has very liberal legislation. Being so similar, they do not understand why there are different regulations for donating gametes. "What is even more troubling," said

the woman, "is having to go to a similar country. We have the Vatican, yes, but this is also a country with a Catholic tradition, a Mediterranean country, and here they can do it. Why can't we do the same? It is very disagreeable."

In a way, our research aims to answer the Italian couple's questions. The family has gone from an institutionalized family held to be the foundation of social structure to a type of family created by networks of intimate relationships between people. Individual relationships and the intimate relationships that make them up are the context where the diversity and plurality of families takes place.

The rapid changes experienced by the contemporary family have motivated a number of studies indicating the existence of significant variations in the composition of residential groups and domestic organization. Most of the changes to contemporary families are expressed and measured in demographic indexes that often have a dramatic character such that the "surprises for the demographer" (Roussel, 1989) are what in large part guide study of the modern family. These changes are often interpreted from the perspective of the *crisis* of the family, and at the same time they are presented as an expression of profound changes in traditional notions of the family. But as has been noted by a number of authors (Stacey, 1992; Cadoret, 2002; Heuveline and Timberlake, 2004; Thompson and Amato, 1999; Bestard, 2012), it is important to analyze the changes to the modern family not only from the perspective of changes in marital relationships but also in terms of parent-child relationships. There are new contexts in kinship relationships that give meaning to the changes to the modern family. We understand that our emphasis on kinship relationships, departing from the analytical perspective of social anthropology, has

unique characteristics in comparison to the more usual quantitative studies on residence.

Three factors with distinct historical origins have influenced this trend in family relationships. The new family models have been shaped by some features of modern society.

First is the *freedom of individual choice in forming a couple*. We have moved from family interests to individual sentiment. Marriage choices do not follow the logic of family interests but the individualist logic of feelings. The sentimentalization of matrimonial choice has triumphed in all layers of society. Elective affinities are primarily subjective and based on feelings. This principle of individual freedom has changed the duration of marriage. The right to form a family has become universal and pluralized. Pair relationships are disassociated from parental relationships and recomposed families are part of the experience of many children who do not necessarily keep the same kinship relationships (parents, siblings and so on) throughout the course of their family life. Thus kinship relationships are not determined by ties of consanguinity and it is instead the daily relationship within a recomposed family that creates family ties.

Second is the *principle of gender equality*. Feminist movements highlighted that it was no longer possible to form a family following traditional gender roles, i.e. with the woman devoted to caring for the family and the man devoted to work. This type of relationship ceased to be seen as a private matter and was framed within public political debates. New types of parental relationships not determined by the former roles of men and women had to be invented.

Third is *the centrality of the child in the formation of family relationships*. It

seems contradictory to speak of children as the center of family relationships when the birth rate has fallen sharply and is among the lowest in Europe. It could be said that we are having fewer children and waiting for the right time to have them but investing more in them emotionally. The desire to have children has become individualized and does not follow the parameters of a classic family cycle, an imperative of family structure. The desire for offspring is no longer a natural desire as was the case in the traditional family, where it was something given by the characteristics of the marital relationship itself. The desire for a child had been more of a necessity, whereas in the modern family constellation it is a subjective desire arising from choice, an individualized desire that no longer follows the parameters of a classic family cycle. Single-parent families, single mothers by choice, recomposed families and same-sex families have changed the relationship with having children. Indivisible biological parentage is no longer seen as the only possibility and the functions of mothers and fathers have been replaced by the notion of pluri-parentality. The prevalence of feelings over interest and the intensification of gender equality has been changing and diversifying the landscape of the modern family.

Main Research Findings

It is difficult to summarize the findings of the research on the different subjects analyzed in a few pages. We will therefore discuss three main issues covered in the three main chapters of the research report.

1) *Divorce and family recomposition.* After analyzing the various legal changes that have affected the evolution of divorce, the research focused on family recomposition. Following a divorce, a variety of different family figures are produced. In this context, how do the mother and father fig-

ures change after the divorce? And what influence do other figures of the extended family (stepparents, stepgrandparents and so on) have on the redefinition of parenthood? This chapter presents an ethnographic view of different processes of divorced parents and examines how they translate into different conceptions of parenthood. There are three issues that seem important. Firstly, the process of building a father-child relationship in the absence of a shared residence with the mother means that the idea of the father as a complementary figure to the mother is replaced by a father figure who is often in competition with the mother figure. Secondly, there is the fact that the figure of the father is usually accompanied by other figures that are not considered the parents (stepfather, stepmother) but who are present in the child's life and represent some competition. Thirdly, we must also consider the relationship with grandparents, who also play a key role in redefining fatherhood (Roigé, 2012). The concept of fatherhood as a complementary aspect to motherhood is replaced by a paternal figure who is often presented as competing with the mother figure, although there is rarely absolute equality between the mother and father (Martial, 1997: 30). To understand how the figure of the divorced father has been redefined, we must keep in mind that there are many circumstances that relate to the parents' situation: residential distance, conflictive relationships between former spouses and economic resources (Solsona *et al.*, 2007; Jociles and Villaamil, 2008). And lastly, it is also necessary to analyze the influence of intergenerational relationships in the divorce process. Grandparents often provide indispensable assistance, so their role in redefining fatherhood after divorce is critical.

2) *Families with same-sex parents.* This chapter is about how same-sex parenthood is constructed. Prior to the major legal reforms allowing homosexual marriage that have mainly taken place since 2005, it was very difficult to form a family with same-sex parents, and it was impossible for these families to have the same rights as families with heterosexual parents. With these reforms, it is possible for same-sex couples to be "parents like the others" (Cadoret, 2002). These families share the social changes arising from the plurality of intimate relationships. In the different cases studied, the research has shown that mothering in a female same-sex family is a shared experience wherein the women assume the same responsibility in caring for and raising children, with domestic roles and functions that are agreed upon and not marked by hierarchical gender patterns but by ability, interests and circumstances. There is no specific role that is defined by established cultural assumptions. New forms of affiliations and alliance have to be built. The symbols of nature like blood, genes and pregnancy and childbirth are not enough to create a relationship of parentage. And like in other new families, family identities have to be reinvented.

3) *Assisted reproduction and new reproductive models.* The demographic result of the changes to the moral foundations of the family is low fertility and later childbearing with no connection to marriage; these are the most important aspects of the second demographic transition of Barcelona and its metropolitan area. But if one of the keys to changing families is the separation of sexuality and procreation, assisted reproduction is a good case for study. Through interviews the research analyzed how assisted reproduction builds new discourses and identities in procreation, how assisted reproduction somehow cre-

ates different models of what having a child represents and enables access to mother- and fatherhood not just for people who biologically or genetically are unable to reproduce but for social situations in which the possibility of reproducing was not previously imagined. Single women, lesbian couples who exchange eggs, homosexual fathers who use surrogate mothers in countries where this practice is permitted, women past reproductive age –numerous situations and cases call into question our concepts of reproduction and what mother– and fatherhood mean. Medicalized reproduction also makes us question the ethical and moral limits that can be permitted or disallowed in a society or legislation.

Final Observations

The research mainly emphasized four areas that to our understanding form the foundations of family diversity: redefinition of family values; reinvention of family identities; generational roles in shaping family diversity; and the interrelation between legal, economic, demographic and family changes.

There are new kinship values based on family diversity that specify that there is no unambiguous relationship between procreation, marriage and filiation. The decoupling of biological and social kinship may establish a symbolic order that gives meaning to the plurality of family types we see in our society. In this sense the family is being reinvented culturally, and in the absence of cultural norms about behavior, the restructuring of the family must create new identities –it must even solve practical issues regarding roles in situations where relationships are not clear and invent terms to define these relationships. These new relationships affect not only marital relationships but also intergenerational relationships, contrary to what is often thought. We could even say that the relationships between generations are strengthened vis-à-vis weakened conjugal relationships. But not everything boils down to ideological and cultural changes. The redefinition of families is the result of ideological and legislative changes but also of strategies to adapt to new economic situations.

The evolution of family structures in Spain reveals a dual process. On one hand, the increase in divorce, cohabitation and second marriages leads to the appearance of new family realities that call traditional patterns into question and suggest other ways of understanding the family (similarly to the changes taking place in neighboring countries). On the other hand, we find that some of the characteristics of the Mediterranean family system are highly stable, like the persistence of strong relationships between relatives. The two processes are not contradictory nor do they need to be explained in terms of modernity or tradition. They have to do with the cultural perceptions that underlie our family system, the weakness of public policies to support families and social and economic factors that have an impact on the modern family. ∎

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