The Postmodern Family Narrated by the Young*

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Summary. The fragmentation and individualisation that pervaded the evolutionary process of society in the course of the past century have led to a reality which appears enormously discontinuous and complex today. As in the case of many other contemporary aspects of society, it has been debated whether or not the family, too, has been facing a crisis period in the institution itself. The present study has therefore chosen to conduct research from the point of view of a group of university students so as to link up the different theoretical concepts to everyday experience. The purpose of the study was, in particular, to cause the sense models pertaining to the family sphere in today's society to emerge, so as to understand how and in what way this concept has been transformed and the future prospects according to which it may be conceived and, consequently, must be studied. What results from the findings confirms the importance of this institution despite the fact that it has been wholly redefined: the rights of individuals emerge, along with new modalities of being and becoming families and parents. At the same time, however, the findings reveal the difficulty individuals encounter in defining their identities in a context in which more "traditional" elements coexist with "modern" ones, in an ambiguous connexion that impedes a clear outlook for the future.

Key words: : post-modernity; contemporaneity; sense model

Introduction

The accepted meaning of the term "postmodern" is ambivalent; there is, in fact, lack of agreement as to whether "postmodernity" indicates "late modernity" or, rather, a period that does not represent the end of modern ideals but a radicalisation of the same. If the concept of "modern" (from the low Latin modernus, derived from the adverb modo meaning «now, recently») was conceived to indicate the contemporary era, "post-modern" was created to indicate the development that what is modern has been undergoing towards progressively increasing complexity: «postmodernism is the last ideology adopted by modernism» (Mongardini, 1996).

In spite of the innate difficulty in reflecting on the contemporary period, it is possible to outline several general features in an attempt to delineate present-day complexity. Among the different perspectives advanced on this subject by various authors, Giddens' point of view (1994) appears to be the most provocative and alternative, due to its concept of continuity in the evolution of events, without having to delineate the end of one period and the beginning of another. The author develops his thesis by opposing the notion of "postmodernity," asserting that of "radicalised modernity": «the difficulty in defining a new form of society in the negative alone (denoted by the very term "postmodern") is therefore reversed in the possibility of experimenting to the extreme the heuristic capacity of the old definition» (Giddens, 1994, p. 10). The scholar furthermore deals with the aspect of a family which, in a certain sense, is reproducing the transformations which progress and globalisation have implemented in contemporary society. The institution of the family is seen as a "shell institution," which comprises within itself something different from the "traditional" family. The diversity is determined by its actors, by the concept of roles, by the patterns underpinning the way a family is formed and how relationships are conceived within it (Giddens, 1997; 2000).

1. The transformations of family life in postmodernity

The scientific and technological development of the modern age has considerably transformed people's everyday life with regard to their duties and the temporal organisation of the same: attention has increasingly been paid to the interests and rights of the individual, resulting in a shift of his or her sphere of fulfilment towards a world that is outside the reality of the family. The original meaning of the household, seen as an economic and productive unit, is thus transformed into a mere place of consumption. This passage is

summarised by Tessarolo (1993) when he describes the difference between society and community: while the community offers a supra-individual interpretation and a collective direction, society rejects the notion of a single guiding principle in favour of individual concepts of the world. This is what happened in the modern era, and the passage to postmodernity has rendered these changes concrete: the innovations in the legislative field in the wake of movements and protests represent the publicisation (and consequently the normatisation of aspects already present in the everyday reality of the citizens.

The changes in society have necessarily influenced the private sphere as well, because the way of conceiving and relating to the other sex has also changed. The transformations inside sentimental relationships must be traced to the rise of the 18th-century model of romantic love, according to which «the ideals of romantic love, instead, stemmed directly from the emerging ties between freedom and self-fulfilment» (Giddens, 1997, p. 50). In this new notion, both individuals play an active role, for which the woman, too, appears independent and oriented toward the conquest of a man. In romantic love the importance of marriage as the founding element of the family persists: it does not signify the man's proprietary right over the woman or a union the single aim of which is to preserve an estate by means of dynastic continuation, but consists rather in a mutual commitment to living a shared life.

Individualistic desires have further renovated social relations during the passage to postmodernity. Progress, especially through the mass media, has allowed private facts to reach a far greater degree of public interest than in the past, and this has permitted a much more widespread debate on several themes, with particular regard to the family sphere. The freedom to divorce, the freedom not to have children, and the right of children to be cared for and protected, regardless of the relationship between the adults who look after them, are only a few of the topics that have given rise to a new concept of the family. The latter finds its sense and meaning in the couple, «a couple which, once formed, has its own exclusive history, its own biography based on emotional communication or intimacy.» (Giddens, 2000, p. 76).

In contemporary life, personal and sentimental relationships have become much more intense (being as communicative, physical syntony with one's partner is sought after), but are also subject to expiration. Giddens (1997) coined the concept of "convergent love": a relationship in which the partners are on the same level in terms of power and affective exchange. It is the closest form to a pure relationship (an ideal, the relation of perfect syntony and balance), defined as "convergent" because it remains as long as the interests of the partners converge or, in any case, as long as both of them want the relationship to continue. The "perfection" of this relationship is given by its temporal limitedness. This statement does not mean that the lifelong

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relationship is becoming less and less frequent, but that the approach to an affective relationship has changed: individual and sexual freedom enable a relationship to be fully experienced even in its most intimate aspects without necessarily involving marriage, and to be set up with no external impositions commanding that the partners should remain together for the rest of their lives, but simply according to the willingness of the subjects to maintain the commitment.

What's more, the relation referred to by the different members of the family has changed. Nowadays all of the members are equally important: even if a subjectivistic primacy remains, there is an awakening to a new concept of the family as a complex nucleus, representing a single unit of reference. The internal dynamics of the family are reacquiring importance, principally in the expression of affective relations. This fact has also been pointed out by CENSIS (Centre for Social Investment Studies) which, in a survey published in 2012, refers to the family, the quality of life and the values of morality and respect for others, concluding that «It is a latent demand for passage to the primacy of the relationship, the social nexus that leaves an indelible mark in people» (2012, p. 11). In view of all this, it is interesting to take a look at how family reality is perceived by ordinary people. This operation can help us to connect the different theories to the everyday life of individuals and to gauge the distance that has sprung up between the culture of society and that of the family subsystem, involving contradictions and inadequacies (Tessarolo, 2005). Empirical research, like that reported by Zamperini (2009), conducted in 2001, has, in fact, shown that in everyday reality the new forms of liaisons have already acquired a dignity of their own and, contrary to the institutional position, have already been recognised as belonging to social normality.

2. How a group of university students sees the family

The present study arose from an interest in investigating the reality of the family as effectively conceived by a group of young adults. The passage to postmodernity has entailed numerous innovations in society and in the legislative norms that regulate it, for which the question posed is how much these transformations have revolutionised the concept of relations in the family and with relatives among young people today. It must be stressed that the aim of the present work is that of a "scientific curiosity", with no pretense to any generalisation of its findings. The sample group was comprised of 102 university students who had attended a course in which a number of themes related to postmodernity and the family were addressed and on which the students had successively written a paper. The study focused on the texts produced, analysing them through the observation of

the specificity in the use of terms referring to the construct of the family made by males and females. The SPAD computer programme *(Système Portable pour l'Analyse des Données)* was then employed to assess the SPAD lexical correspondences in order to identify the sense models occurring in the textual *corpus*. The software effected an analysis of lexical correspondence (ALC), the aim of which «is to produce sense models with which to read the textual material, attempting to preserve the particularity of the *corpus* and its wealth» (Orrù, Barbanera, 2007-2008, p. 8). From a methodological point of view, ALC detects the co-occurrences (or the presence of the words appearing in the same text) and then, starting from certain variables, it is possible to identify the linear combinations that may express the original information most economically. The SPAD software, in particular, generates graphical representations illustrating the narrative models present in the text.

2.1 Description of the group and data collection

The papers collected were produced by university students attending the course on "Cultural and Communicative Processes" during the academic year 2010-2011 (University of Padua). At the close of the lessons, they were asked to write a paper containing their personal reflections on the topics dealt with during the course, a composition in which the students were free to explore even a single aspect of those addressed in the course and considered useful for the final exam. It was felt that the fact that the students had tackled the different themes of postmodernity and the diverse aspects that characterise the contemporary family during the course would enable them to reflect much more deeply on these themes. A total of 102 papers were collected (28 males and 74 females).

2.2 Analysis and data interpretation

A first analysis of the material available regarded the study of the specific words, or the evaluation of the significativity of each term through subdivision by gender. This significativity is obtained by means of the statistic Chi Square (χ^2) and identifies terms below a probability of .05 as those statistically used typically by the subjects. The programme then enabled two tables to be compiled, reporting the specific words adopted by males and females (Tables 1 and 2). In these tables, the words "internal frequency" indicate the frequency of a particular item within a specific group, while "global frequency" shows the overall frequency of that item within the whole of the material, with no distinction as to group. From the

terms relating to the family area used by the males (Tab. 1), there seems to emerge a closeness to their family of origin and forebears; among the females, instead, the focus of attention appears to be their more intimate, present relationships. The most frequent terms in the two groups similarly evidence a more general difference in the concept of the family, more extended among the former and more nuclear among the latter. The girls (Tab. 2) furthermore show a notable frequency in the use of the term "woman" which, besides being more frequent than an opposite concept such as "male", also surpasses the frequency of the term "couple."

Table n. 1 – Specific items in the male group.

Characteristic words or segments	Internal frequency	Global frequency	Probability	Characteristic words or segments	Internal frequency	Global frequency	Probability
Film	31	40	0.000	I think	19	32	0.000
Aunt	12	12	0.000	Seen	37	79	0.000
Workers	15	18	0.000	Policies	38	82	0.000
Citizens	15	18	0.000	Convinced	8	9	0.000
Ritual	15	18	0.000	Engels	8	9	0.000
Level	63	139	0.000	Members	61	148	0.000
Everyone	119	313	0.000	**Grandmother**	10	13	0.000
Citizen	12	16	0.000	Goals	6	6	0.000

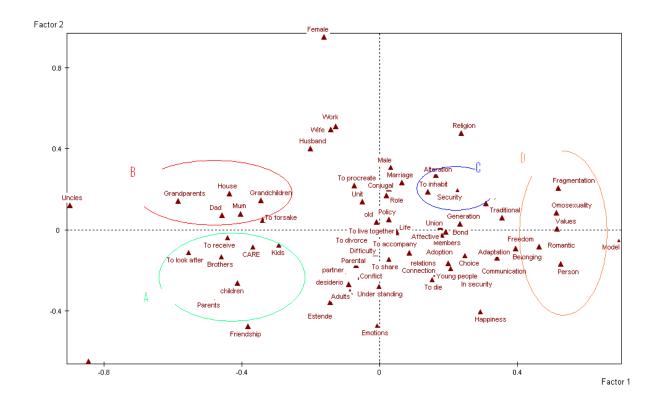| Characteristic words or segments	Internal frequency	Global frequency	Probability	Characteristic words or segments	Internal frequency	Global frequency	Probability
Great-grandfather	7	7	0.000	Clan	6	6	0.000
Advances	7	7	0.0000	Politics	27	55	0.001

Table n. 2 – Specific items in the female group.

Characteristic words or segments	Internal frequency	Global frequency	Probability	Characteristic words or segments	Internal frequency	Global frequency	Probability
Only	51	55	0.000	**Male**	37	40	0.002
Instability	31	32	0.000	Relations	132	160	0.002
Couple	261	324	0.000	Human	40	44	0.003
Child	352	444	0.001	Plurality	44	49	0.003
Relationship	241	300	0.001	Drinks	18	18	0.003
Woman	311	393	0.001	Transformations	56	64	0.003
Civilisation	20	20	0.002	Conscience	24	25	0.003
Sixty	20	20	0.002	Half	29	31	0.004
Consumer goods	20	20	0.002	Reduction	29	31	0.004

The normalization of the text was successively carried out, effecting a cut-off threshold of the *corpus* on the basis of the highest frequency. This operation preceded the consolidation into more general conceptual

categories, defined as Equivalences (or categories inside which similar terms are inserted). The consolidation criterion adopted was of a "semantic" nature, obtained by selecting the terms that were related to the fields of the family, family relations, and pertaining to postmodernity. Finally, the 73 most frequent lexemes were selected and the analysis was completed by proceeding to calculate the lexical correspondences (Graph 1).

Graph n. 1 – Equivalence procedure output

The arrangement of the terms inside the graph reflects the closeness evidenced among the items in the textual *corpus* and these consolidation clusters express the sense models. The axes of the graph represent the areas of meaning among which the concepts are distributed. These areas are defined as latent factors and by interpreting them it is possible to understand the conceptual distribution in the graph and attribute sense models to the material. In Graph 1, axis X, relating to Factor 1, represents the Relationship area of meaning, distributed with family relations on one

side and the absence of relationships and fragmentation on the other. The Y axis, relating to Factor 2, represents the Value area of meaning through the sphere of affective values and that of practical values. The areas that are most interesting and highly significant turn out to be the intermediate ones, equidistant from both factors.

The first cluster, denominated A, assembles elements that represent the most intimate and direct relationships among relatives (parents, children, grandparents, siblings). Reviewing the texts, the nearness of these concepts may be explained with a contemporary situation of the family sphere characterised by contradictory, contrasting elements. Cluster B is formed by the terms "grandparents", "home", and "grandchildren," almost as if to highlight the role of the family of origin inside a new concept of family. This points out how, very often, grandparents are seen as important figures in the support of families in which the children are small, but this support is often of a material nature, consisting of help with the housework and looking after the grandchildren. Among the most representative phrases in this cluster may be found:

…not everyone, in fact, is lucky enough to be able
to count on the reliable, gratuitous help of grandparents.

...in a society of only children, grandparents are employed in childcare tasks,
but are not considered authoritative points of reference at educational level.

The grandparent category is further from the concept of "home" than the concepts of mother and father: it is presumed that the place of dwelling, in reality, is often used as a synonym for the affective relationships between parents and children. If, on the one hand, both parents are recognised as being involved in the care of their children, on the other hand, it is clear that these obligations are heavily influenced by the adults' job commitments. This theme emerges significantly in the students' writing:

...who takes care of the children? These problems do not exist in a family if the
man and the woman do not have the same opportunities on the job market.

...today the man, too, adapts off and on to dealing with household chores and
the children.

The subjects involved are young adults, who have therefore not yet distanced themselves from the condition of children under the protection of their parents, but who are at the same time projected towards an independent adult life. Young people are aware of the changes in the

organisation of everyday life in contemporary society, of the changes in family roles, but their viewpoint is still influenced by their position as children.

The reflections on the family sphere are present in cluster C as well, which collects the terms "inhabit", "delay" and "security" which belong to the theme of the independence deriving from living away from their parents' home, a fact that is perceived as a necessity but which cannot be accomplished due to a delay in reaching economic independence, as confirmed in the following expressions:

…Affective insecurity, financial insecurity, not having a home […] have led to more and more women not being able to have children even if they want to.
…the element of postmodern society that has permeated the family sphere most is, in my opinion, insecurity.

These students realize that the priority accorded to formative and workplace requirements necessarily implies postponing the formation of a family, but what they fear most is not being able to reach the degree of security that would justify such a delay. The concept of delay, in particular, is associated with all of the spheres of adult life and the students seem to associate this fact with external causes, such as society, the economic system or national policies.

The agreement of these people with the "philosophy of modern life," therefore more individualistic, with its more "fluid" and flexible relationships, may be seen in the last cluster (D), identified by the terms "person", "romantic", and "freedom". These elements refer to favourable concepts, romantic love and freedom of choice, which can nowadays be put into practice and which are expressed in comments such as these:
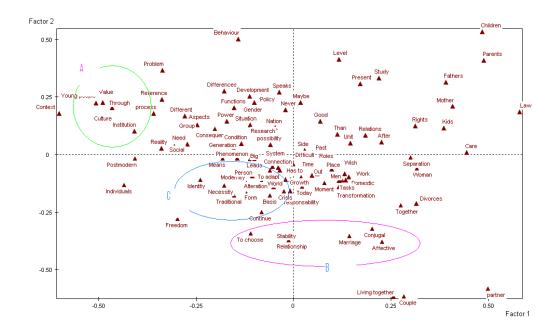
…an out and out new value system has come into being, different from the past, which has as its focal point the individual and which corresponds to principles such as autonomy, individual responsibility, and freedom of the individual.

…freer from social constrictions and stereotypes, the independent choices of the actors involved also reformulate the concepts of sexual orientation and 'biological' family.

The second processing was carried out on the lexicon in its "pure" form, that is to say by effecting a normalisation of the text that synthesised the terms in a single lexeme, considering only the gender declension and the presence of terms in the singular or plural. This procedure therefore called for the text to be maintained in its most original form and to consider each

term without any aggregation. This operation was then completed by fixing as the parameter of analysis the highest frequency of the terms used, so as to evaluate the correspondence between the terms that achieved the greatest linguistic preference among the subjects. The threshold limit was established by considering only the first 108 most frequent terms (Graph 2).

Graph n. 2. – Threshold reduction procedure output.

In this graph the interpretation of the latent factors assigned the Society area of meaning to axis X (Factor 1), with a confrontation between elements inside and outside the family. The Y axis (Factor 2) was assigned the Relationships area of meaning: "horizontal" on the one side (like the couple relationships) and "vertical" on the other (like the parents-children relationships). The first cluster (A) comprises the terms "culture," "institution," and "processes": the institution to which the terms refer is the family, recognised as being heavily influenced by the changes that take place outside it. Here below are several expressions taken from the material, to better explain this theme:

...the mutations of family structures and sizes are due to the modifications in lifestyles and altered demographic processes.

...a moment of severe value crisis that has challenged the very idea of family, also because of diverse cultural, social and economic processes.

What emerges is a general view of present-day society that also involves the concepts of "young people," "value," and "reference" and is represented as problematic and disoriented. Going back to the texts that the cluster elements come from, the following expressions may be found:

...normalcy, besides losing its meaning in spatiotemporal terms, is also losing its value as the founding element of society, its value as the social 'compass'.

...many times the parents' insecurity causes them to be scarcely efficient as reference points for their children.

This negative viewpoint appears to be the fruit of an awareness of the change that has by now installed itself in modern society, but which, however, lacks a clear-cut definition of its features: the old models are rejected, the previous social organisation and its values, but no new ones are put forward.

The presence of this enduring insecurity is particularly felt in the affective sphere, in which stable, lasting commitments are being made more and more infrequently. The second cluster (B) evidences this theme with the items "stability," "relationship," "marriage," and "marital":

...marriage used to be primarily a way of creating ties and alliances between families; now, instead, it is more a consequence of sentiments, like love and passion, sentiments that are not stable and therefore make the marriage more complicated to manage, more precarious, but also more desired.

...de facto relationships are "experimental unions" that arise as a form of reaction to increasing marital instability.

What seems to emerge is the view of a precarious, unstable reality where the impossibility of defining one's own identity inside society implies the inability to plan one's future and uncertainty as to the choices which require commitment and responsibility, such as the formation of a family. These students evidence how impossible it is to make predictions regarding the future in a present as complex as the contemporary period

("the individual is therefore induced to plan his or her future only in the short term").

Cluster C contains the terms "traditional" and "modernity," "stability" and "transformation," "past" e "present". What emerges is a general pessimistic view of the present condition of society due to the contemporaneous existence of more "traditional" and conventional elements with innovative aspects that follow recent relationship models. Considering the age of the sample, this negative criticism of modern society may plausibly be interpreted as the manifestation of fear for the uncertainty characterising their future.

Conclusions

As with many other aspects of present-day society, the family has come under debate as to whether or not this institution itself was going through a period of "crisis". The findings of the study have led to the ascertainment that what is happening to the family system is a whole made up of much more complex transformations, for which it would be reductive to use the simple definition of "crisis". It would appear, in fact, that the family has been increasingly diminishing both in the number of its members and in objective terms, that is to say, in the number of children in the family and in the terms in which it is perceived, in that reference is chiefly made to the parents-children relationship and not to relationships with other members of the family. Simultaneously, however, the quality of the relations existing among the actors is seen to be very high. The changes that surfaced in the study confirm the observations also reported by Rossi (1990; 2005), according to whom, on the one hand, the changes make the family seem smaller and smaller and increasingly isolated, while on the other hand, new, diversified typologies have emerged that constitute the signs of a complex society.

Starting with the relationship between adults, the students show how equality between the sexes has not yet been totally established in everyday reality, where it is often the woman who must take on the responsibility for the obligations. These young people particularly highlight the quality of the couple relationship, regardless of the type of family that they define. Another theme that the students involved in the study considered very important is separation and the breaking off of an affective relationship. The possibility of not having a bond imposed as definitive allows for a perception of greater freedom. The condition of children whose parents have separated is seen as "normal" and frequent, even if this often involves the rise of certain problems in the parent-child relationship (we refer in particular to the syndrome of parental alienation, often mentioned in the literature). The theme of separation among adults is

dealt with above all with regard to the rights which each actor claims in the matter. We find this element particularly important in the description of the late-modern context, especially in the perspective delineated by Giddens, who sees family relationships as evolving towards an increasingly democratic dimension, one of equality and mutual respect.

As far as parent-children relationships are concerned, a number of interesting elements emerge from the students' papers. First of all, a frequently-recurring theme is the lack of attention that adults display towards the world of the very young, because of their frenetic lifestyle and work commitments. This inattention is recompensed, according to the findings, with numerous material attentions. In the texts, in fact, the parental figures appear very apprehensive, desirous of giving the child the best he or she could wish for. This conflicting reality may be connected to the observations made by Di Nicola (2008) when he explains the development of "sentimentalised" relationships, ones that are more and more affectionate, but less and less anchored to an instrumental component: "Affective investments, expectations of fulfilment and reassurance regarding and by means of one's children, are on the rise. […] On the part of the adults, there are growing expectations that their children will never cease to be, precisely, just that: their dependence is a source of stabilisation of the identity of men and women, the symbol of a bond that is deeper and more stable than the bond between the couple.» (Di Nicola 2008, p. 66). This aspect may be connected with another element that is very much present in the students' texts: the progressive delay in reaching complete independence from their parents and leaving the home of their family of origin. This phenomenon is defined by sociologists as the "long" family, a term specifically coined by the National Institute of Statistics to indicate a progressive lengthening of this habitation. This "delay" would appear to be connected with the lack of responsibility and autonomy in which young people grow up today, as their problems and difficulties are solved by the intervention of other members of the family. Sgritta (2002) defines the phenomenon as a "perverse mechanism" in which young people postpone the formation of a family of their own, parents try to care for their children as long as possible, the educational establishment fails to promote the right connexions with the working world, and politics, lastly, fails to adjust the welfare system to the needs of the families.

The findings of the study do not yield any personal reflections regarding the moment in which the students would form a family, or their wish to have or not to have children (possibly due to the terms in which the task was stated). This is a profoundly late-modern aspect, because the formation of a family and the desire to have children is no longer a compulsory aspect to be taken into consideration in planning one's future. As Di Nicola writes, «Parenthood has

been subjectivised, in the dual sense of an extremely private and 'independent' choice» (Di Nicola 2008, p. 51). The passage to a parental identity is no longer considered an obligatory passage in a life perspective, and this is explained both by the fact that long-term projects are no longer made and by that of the crumbling of the "traditional" roles that split up the tasks within the family: the family roles and tasks are no longer representative of the individual figure. The individual is defined in other spheres of life and by means of other typologies of relationships. The findings of the study not only make us think of a particularly narrow conception of the family, founded on direct blood ties and present relationships, but allow a reflection as to how the idea of tradition must have been transformed: an aspect profoundly redefined, with regard both to actions and actors. Traditions may be said to have multiplied and to involve a much smaller number of agents because of the changes existing in the present-day family. The typologies of family structure display diverse patterns; the behavioural norms are not stable, but are defined by the exchanges and negotiations among the subjects; the crumbling of roles is being progressively replaced by more dynamic relationships. All these transformations bring us to see traditions in terms of exchanges with which each subject identifies and re-actualises his or her daily life. In this sense, one's predecessors are considered more important affectively, but are distanced with regard to the determination of the identity of the individual.

From the study there emerges all the complexity and fluidity of the family today, as an institution "undergoing change", perceived in different forms which are undoubtedly complex and varied. The analysis of the words used by the students yields terms such as "individuals," "freedom," "fragmentation," and "parents," highlighting the meanings that are important for the young people: the focus on the rights and duties of the individual, the new modalities of being and becoming a family and parents. A further finding is the fact that no harsh words against the family emerge. The latter is identified as different, conflictual, but experienced as a whole of inexorable, significant relationships. In spite of its having been wholly redefined, it remains the basic institution of society. The family is still acknowledged as the place in which the individual is formed, but according to a new idea of individual for a new idea of society. The transformations on which research was conducted and the relative findings, supported by the literature as well, reveal to us both a complex social reality and the aspects that characterise it through their diversity and their contemporaneousness. This makes it difficult to posit a definition with which the individual can identify, outside the classical scheme of categorisation and as yet devoid of any new points of reference.

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