

## Relationships among parents: on-line advices

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**Summary.** A person orients her engagement in weak and flexible bonds. These bonds are made of relationships in which people become easily interchangeable elements; in this context dynamism represents a dominant factor. Families, too, are subject to this type of interpersonal exchange, in this way their relationships with the outside world no longer represent, as in the past, a safe resource. The use of new forms of communication tends on the one hand to isolate individuals and on the other to become an easy resource to draw information from or to create virtual social nets with. The participation to thematic forums, the reading of websites and blogs creates a new way of being in relationship and of orienting one's own behavior. The proposed research poses as an explorative inquiry on the narrative repertoires used by parents who, disoriented, ask the virtual community for advice.

**Keywords:** parents, internet, interpersonal relationships, communication

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### Introduction

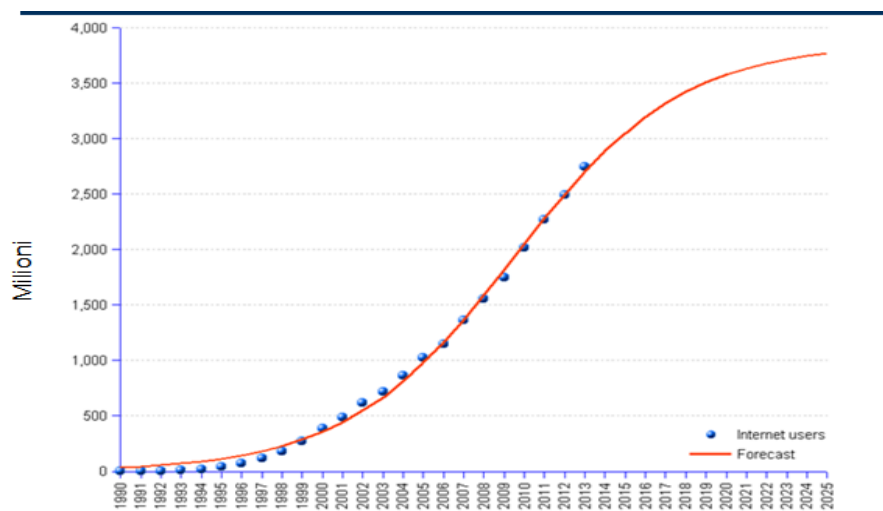
The plurality with which the concept of family is declined, in the contemporary context, does not seem to find correspondence with the interpretative schemes of the past anymore, leading the scholars to review the narrative repertoires defining this institution and to speak more and

more frequently of families. A plural definition which wants to include all the different shades of relationship; the family becomes in this way a private dimension which not always finds correspondence with the juridical nomenclature. The restructuring of that concept does not seem to undermine the institutional identity, but seems to include and give reason to the multiple forms with which people become united and live together. Being acknowledged by others becomes a nodal element for people; this aspect is expressed both in everyday relationships and on the internet. Blogs and thematic forums are often structured on the base of this need. "The problem of web friendship, not differently from the relationships of everyday life, concerns therefore the goal of the relationship and the quality of the conversation, which realizes in the communicative exchange" (Gili, 2010, p.89). Families, too, are subjects to this dynamic and therefore, sometimes, they fall back on virtual relationships to find a support to their requests without feeling judged. Relationships represent the foundation element on which individuals build their identity and the world they live in. The relational web which a subject builds since his childhood to adult life channels his mental constructions and the heuristics with which to anticipate events and to put behaviors into action. In order to understand social systems, it is necessary to study the relationships which are acted inside a community and their process of transformation. The dynamism of the relationships and their structure creates environments more or less favorable to the development of a change process and of welfare. Telling and listening narrations of our self and of the others allows us to build an argumentative matrix which is progressively molded and revised. Through the narration, the individual attributes a meaning to his feeling and to his being; an activity which does not happens only 'ex-post' (Siciliani, 1988), but which also creates new contexts by means of the expression of fantasies, dreams, expectations.

The language becomes both the reading key of the narration and the tool needed to create a new social context. It is by means of the narration of the self and of the world that the subject conquers a space in the world, a role which is legitimated by others. It is not important that the telling be true or a clear description of facts, but that it represent the mental maps of the individual and therefore allow us to understand inside what frames the world is structured. "People, active living beings using rules and other normative restrictions in building together their own social relationships and the episodes, where the rules themselves realize in the action" (Harré & Gillet, 1996, p.25). An action useful to mark the path of people leaving a trace which could be retraced and re-elaborated. "By now everyone of us has at disposal a potentially unlimited space to tell of

himself and of what belongs to him, sharing all this with whoever is interested and beyond every previous limit. One knot, one person: his perspective, his thoughts, his vision of the world, his hobbies, his job, his studies, all stratified in time to form an intellectual autobiography available for whoever is interested in reciprocal knowledge and confrontation” (Maistrello, 2007, pp.20-21). A space structuralizing more and more, in the privacy of one’s own houses or one’s own smartphones, the use of internet and the possibility of being, even only for a moment, citizens of the world has become a common practice (see picture 1).

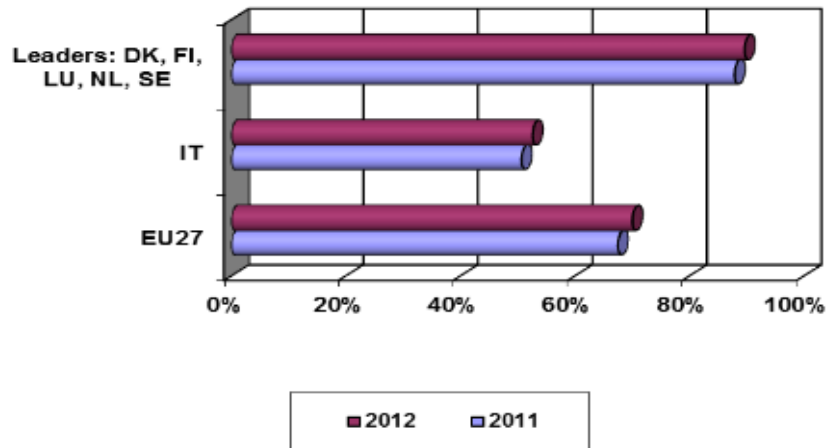
PICTURE 1  
Longitudinal survey of internet connections



Fonte: ITU, 2014

Even though Italy is still a country showing less familiarity with internet than other European states (see picture 2), its use is growing with time creating new ways of communicating.

PICTURE 2  
Regular internet User



## Methodology

The goal of this preliminary inquiry is to inspect the “assistance” which mothers, women who have recently given birth, and pregnant women share about the care of their born or yet unborn babies, and the participation of the fathers to discussions. In the light of what has been expressed in the introduction, we have carried out an explorative research, with the help of the web, to inquire which are the narrative repertoires inherent to parenting and specifically which are the reflections of parents about early childhood. The dataset analyzed is constituted by mothers’ and fathers’ POSTs and comments present in some forums. Such a body has been analyzed by means of the SPADt qualitative-quantitative software (Lebart L., Salem A., 1988). With that tool we carried out the analysis of the most frequent words used by mothers and fathers and we have found the substantial differences between the terms used by the enquired population according to gender variables. Finally, we performed the factorial analysis which allowed us to contemplate the meaning archipelagos coming up from the narrations of the parents.

## Results

The proposed inquiry represents an explorative study aiming to survey the relational style with which mothers and fathers compare on the

theme of parenting and of children care. The change of the social matrices has also modified significantly the modalities of relation among individuals and their net of comparison and social support. There is, indeed, an agreement among scholars in considering parenting as a passage moment on the biographical path of individuals. At the conception moment and even more at the birth, people assume a role, they become mothers and fathers. This is a passage moment in the lifecycle redefining the assets of the family and of one's own personal identity. Parents are assigned new tasks, the child care and his growth force the family system to have a greater stability (Errante, Garro, & De Vita, 2006). The triadic relationship leads the couple to assume a not only a new role, but also to quit the idealization which accompanied parents for nine months and to confront themselves with a new physical and emotional reality. The couple relationship also suffers a restructuration and not always the neo-parents have a net of support able to sustain their moments of uncertainty. The increase of the mean age at which one reaches parenting, the frequent distance from the original family nucleus, the career's engagements and the scarce sharing of this experience with a communitarian group leads the future parents to search for information and for a support net in a virtual context. "[...] the complexity and the articulation of the new families cannot be contained in the restricted repertoire of the stories buildable on the plot of the nuclear family. The triadic and tri-generational form stories, built around the nuclear family, are indeed insufficient to describe processes in which the tri-generational line forks in more than two directions and in which the characters of triad are always at the same time implied in another one" (Fruggeri, 2001, p.19). The new role of parent cannot always find adherence with the social experimentations happened in the past. The identity bound to the new role is becoming personal and social dimension, the individual needs a social group acknowledging him in his new role and making him, at the eyes of the world, visible because of this new identity. "The interpersonal behavior of the family members is not a simple response to what others do, but a function of the meanings attributed in autonomy to such actions" (Fruggeri, 1997, p.71). Each component of the family attributes a meaning to events and carries on actions which necessarily will influence the entire system, both confirming and perturbing it. The symbolic universe built is consolidated in the family itself, but it needs its own external legitimation. It is a matter of a sort of acknowledgment of the role and of one's own identity expressed in the family (Donati & Di Nicola, 1989), but which need an external observing "you" to be legitimated in their own social role. The weak social net sustaining the new parents and the tendency of the couple towards social

isolation because of the new engagements often lead the couple to implement self-help strategies. Mothers and fathers tend to compare themselves with specialists, other parents or friends, but the questions and the doubts are many and it is so that internet, and in particular thematic forums, become the main sources of knowledge. In this way a true and real community of parents is formed which dialogues and generates a knowledge which tries to support parents in their doubts, perplexities and fears. A community assuming not only the pink color of the women, but which in time has seen the more and more active and constant participation of the fathers. Men which in time change the stereotype of the father delegating the educational and child-care function to the women. Men co-participate more and more to the family ménage and in particular they concentrate on having an active and equal role in the handling of the children. For this reason we considered interesting observing what the narrative matrices expressed by fathers and mothers are and record what the main traits indicating a relevant social change in parenting are. In order to do that we observed 61 questions asked in fathers' Italian forums and shared only by men, and 59 questions asked by mothers in forums in which only women participate actively. Moreover, we reported and analyzed the answers to the questions presented and observed the 95433 visits to these questions. The reported visits are in particular: 74478 in sites handled by fathers and 20955 in sites handled by women. The gender difference in active participation, meant as engagement in researching information by means of this particular channel and documenting on specific themes linked to children handling, is remarkable.

The forums analyzed are:

«Nostro figlio», «forum al maschile», «padre consapevole», «forum al femminile» and the observation dates are between June 2010 and May 2014.

It appears interesting to note that among the 59 questions asked by mothers or mothers-to-be, 28 have not received any visit, while all the fathers' questions have had at least 55 visits. In particular the theme which received the least number of visits in the fathers' forums concerns the theme «problems with the ex».

Concerning fathers' forums the highest number of visits was for the question titled «divorced father in trouble» with 12332 visits, while for the mothers it was the question titled «the weaning» with 1450 visits. Establishing an online relationship, even only by means of the consultation of forums and blogs, seems to suggest that the relational net of the couples becoming parents is ineffective in answering their questions. “The affirmation of these relationships is obviously not a simple ‘effect’ of the

technologies, but responds to a widespread social need linked to deep structural and cultural processes such as the growing importance of the elective communities on those ascribed and the individualization and democratization process of society which these new communicative technologies accompany, promote and to which they confer a determined form” (Gili, 2010, p.90).

From the observation of the text we notice that compared to the topic treated people use very different terms to define the theme of discussion. Such datum suggests that there is a high degree of heterogeneity in language to the point that the percentage of distinct words exceeds the 66% (see table 1). The diversity of the language does not address only a greater lexical richness but also the multiplicity of the declinations that the same argument could assume and the tendency to use this space as an element which is not only informative, but of deepening of knowledge.

TABLE 1

Dictionary by argument  
CREATION OF WORDS DICTIONARY

<b>STATE OF THE CREATION OF WORDS DICTIONARY</b>	
TOTAL NUMBER OF ANSWERS	120
TOTAL NUMBER OF WORDS	346
NUMBER OF DISTINCT WORDS	231
PERCENTAGE OF DISTINCT WORDS	66.8%

From the frequencies’ analysis of the dictionary we observe that paternity assumes a relevant role in the discussion and it is soon followed by the word “child” stressing the correspondence between the two concepts. The main interesting themes are linked obviously to the children, specific object of the male and female forums, but also to the fathers and with a weight not at all negligible. The data reported in table 2 indicate that among the more frequent words there is no reference to the mother.

TABLE 2

List of words by counts order

Used words	Counts
father	14
pregnancy	9
child	11
birth	4
baby	4
problems	4
weeks	3
family	3
lack	2
conception	2

Afterwards we investigated the characteristic language expressed by parents on the base of the variable role: mother and father. It has been analyzed the presence of statistically meaningful differences in the description made by males and the females on the base of the variables: argument, questions, answers. This inquiry allows to perform the count of the characteristic words starting from a probabilistic hypothesis of equal distribution of the words in the text. One can therefore calculate the presence of a specific lexeme on the base of the considered variable. The characteristic words are evaluated by means of a test (valuer-test) which measures the difference between percent frequency of a graphical form in a given variable, and the global percent frequency. The level of significance is fixed to 0.05, (words are characteristic if  $p < 0.05$ ), while the valuer-test range is between  $-1.96$  and  $+1.96$ . Analyzing the differences between the characteristic language used by fathers and mothers (table 3) we notice that fathers show greater attention to problems and circumstances counting to the requests and development of the newborn. Moreover, fathers express attention to the development of the couple and to the new evolution of the relationship introducing the term “family”. An affective connotation which expresses as first element of distinction inside the couple. The mother



seems to express an attention oriented more towards herself and her lexical richness allows her to insert emotional dimensions and of the institutional type using the term “wedding”.

TABLE 3  
Fathers’ and mothers’ characteristic language

<b>Case groups: fathers</b>	<b>Case groups: mothers</b>
<b>Characteristic words or segments: fathers</b>	<b>Characteristic words or segments: mothers</b>
Fathers	Pregnancy
Family	Before
Recognition	Post
Stroller	Caesarean
Become	Childbirth
Nursing	Marriage
Difficulty	Children
Son	fall asleep
	Person
	Shop
	Nights
	Nuchal translucency
	Anxiety
	Premature
	Contraceptives
	Appetite
	Youth
	Assisted
	Acting

Compared to the narrative repertoires emerging from the questions which the parents advance in the forums, we observe that there is a greater homogeneity in the language used. In particular, it can be observed that the percentage of words with frequency 1, in this case, falls to the 22.1% (see tab. 4).

TABLE 4  
Creation of words dictionary in reference to the questions asked by both parents

<b>STATE OF THE CREATION OF WORDS DICTIONARY</b>	
TOTAL NUMBER OF ANSWERS	120
TOTAL NUMBER OF WORDS	16281
NUMBER OF DISTINCT WORDS	3604
PERCENTAGE OF DISTINCT WORDS	22.1

From the analysis of the dictionary it emerges (table 5) that also in this case the terms which appear more frequently are ‘child’ and ‘father’, moreover the list prosecutes firstly using terms referring to familiar roles and spaces, e.g. ‘home’, ‘wife’, and afterwards it emerges that the theme provoking the most interest is linked to pregnancy and to its multiple shades and changes bound to the temporal dimension specifically to weeks and months.

TABLE 5

List of words by counts order

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**Based on the questions asked by the mothers and the fathers**

Used words	Counts
Child	56
Home	37
Wife	27
Girl	26
Time	26
Things	25
Father	46
Baby	23
Pregnancy	21
Week	20

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For what concerns the difference in the narrative repertoire and in the imaginary of the two parents, one notices that in this case too there are differences between the characteristic language used by the fathers and by the mothers. It results interesting to notice that compared to the generic argument the richness of specific terms becomes a peculiarity representing more the fathers (table 6).

TABLE 6  
Specificity of language in respect to the questions

Cases Group: Father	Cases Group: Mother
Characteristic words or segments	Characteristic words or segments
wife	cycle
father	girls
girl	seen
child	speech therapist
ex	fish
pudding	mommies
need	pregnancy
life	good
time	husband
mammo	test
fever	
she mate	
boy	
mother	

From these last data we can observe how fathers introduce the concept of «mammo» (expression indicating that the man practices the role of mother). A father who relating with his own children subsumes also the dimension stereotypically bound to the woman and to her taking care physically and emotionally of the children. Also in this case the father seems to pay more attention to the relational dimension and to the couple, indeed he speaks in a specific way using terms like “wife, father, child”. For the mothers the interest, on the contrary, concentrates on the pregnancy, on the tests for the cycle, interests strictly linked with female

body.

Lastly, from the analysis of the dictionary of the answers one notices that the vocabulary used is fairly homogeneous to the point that the percentage of words used only once is 17.3% (tab. 7).

TABLE 7

Creation of words dictionary

<b>STATE OF THE CREATION OF WORDS DICTIONARY</b>	
TOTAL NUMBER OF ANSWERS	120
TOTAL NUMBER OF WORDS	35441
NUMBER OF DISTINCT WORDS	6114
PERCENTAGE OF DISTINCT WORDS	17.3

Observing with greater attention we notice, from the frequency analysis of the terms most used to produce answers (table 8), that in the first 10 words reported in order of greatest frequency one can trace all the essential traits of the experience of parenting. The essential traits of the primary roles and of the experience that leads to parenting are directly expressed; we find, indeed, 'mother', 'father', 'child', 'home' and the word 'pregnancy', the moment in life in which are located both parents and which they experience in their everyday life.

This is about an innovation for the couple which is going to change the asset and the roles of the family members, focusing especially on the dimension of change and a greater extraneousness to the emotional dimensions compared to when the parents themselves ask for information, advice and support.

TABLE 8  
List of words by counts order in the answers

Used words	Counts
child	80
years	71
months	69
before	68
things	65
baby	58
time	56
home	44
pregnancy	41
father	40

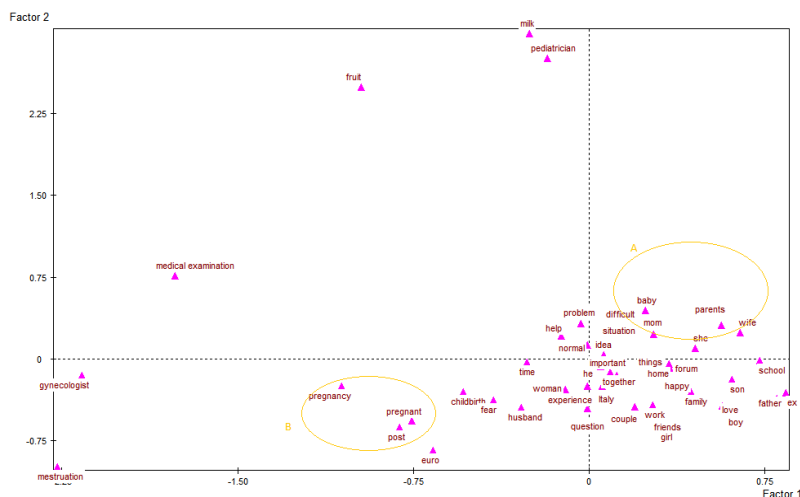
Analyzing also in this case the differences between the characteristic language used by the fathers and by the mothers in answering to the questions we notice that (table 9) the males use a greater diversity of thematic areas and they introduce in this specific sector the dimension 'job and profession' in addition to the relational dimension by means of the roles expressed in the family. A specificity which distinguishes them from the future mothers who seem to be more occupied with mentalizing their experience of maternity and in particular of pregnancy.

TABLE 9  
Characteristic language compared to the answers given by fathers versus mothers

<b>Cases Group: dad</b>	<b>Case Group: mom</b>
<b>Characteristic words or segments</b>	<b>Characteristic words or segments</b>
Wife	cycle
Father	Test
Lawyer	pregnant
Child	fruit
Girl	gynecologist
Mother	caesarean
Job	cradle
Boy	
Wishes	
Ex	

From the analysis of the lexical correspondences no elements emerge which polarize the treated theme clearly delineating the borders. From the data one observes that the factor 1 is expressed as the social dimension of role, while factor 2 is more linked to the institutional figures involved in the pregnancy and in the formation of the children (graph 1).

GRAPH 1  
Analysis of lexical correspondences



Finally, observing the elements present in the graph one can notice that the most frequently used terms are organized mainly at the intersection of the axes and in the whole graph two clusters can be recognized. Cluster A represents the strong bond between the female dimension and parenting, and cluster B is linked to pregnancy. From the analysis of the data it has been noticed first of all a gender difference in the fruition of the web. This gender difference is visible in the accesses to the websites, i.e. it is common to find exclusively motherly and fatherly forums. Also in this case, parenting is expressed by mean of a gender sharing: males with males and females with females. Also the frequency of online women's interventions is definitely greater than males' ones, but such data, though, must be considered in relative manner, because it often happens that a male does not write anything but intends to be a user of information, a subject who gathers information and tries to understand the changes taking place in the family.

From the results, one can notice how parenting is no longer understood as an exclusively female peculiarity, but as a social and institutional dimension which is radically changing its representative and identitary borders. The role of fathers is more a more present and relevant not only among the domestic walls, but also in public contexts. The number



of visits to thematic forums and the themes discussed by males are elements which clearly address the cultural change involving the gender and the family representation.

## Conclusions

The evolution of the family asset and the different modalities of perceiving family represent a social process which sees multiply the declination of the concept of family and reduce its members and the relationships among themselves (Donati, 2001; Donati & Di Nicola, 1989; Rossi 1995). In western countries becoming parents is changing into a programmed activity. The conciliation of one's own professional path and the lack of human and institutional resources, complicates an aspect which should be natural biologically. The perception of loneliness and of self-referentiality become, in this context, latent and common factors. Resorting to the web as a tool to give and seek advice allows to maintain a relationship with the other and at the same time to be extraneous to the complexity and emotionalism of one's own interlocutor. The couple tries to tighten its bonds and to find in one's own partner an important resource to maintain one's own welfare. The stereotype of the fathers who are uninterested and little involved in everyday life is slightly diminishing, leaving space to a dimension more linked to the relationship with one's own life mate and to the desire of being able to take care of one's own child. From the inquiries of our research results that the gender difference is not so much given by the participation or the care of the child, but by the role of support which the couple tries to provide mutually. It is interesting how these results also contradict the stereotype of the man less careful to the relational and emotional dimensions. The data emerged express that men manifest attention and care towards the family and this is not only economically, aspect never appearing in the repertoires, but mainly relational.

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