Family Systems in the Era of COVID-19:from openness to quarantine

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic imposes lockdown policies all over the world. Hence, family system members face the traumatic experience of living together all the time. This evidence evokes the hidden family's frailty and operates as a litmus test of family life. The paper discusses some relational scenarios about this transient deprivation of the social context. Their cumulative effects are considered guiding the family to cope with the quarantine and it is argued that some changes of the family's daily life patterns, caused by the pandemic, will remain unchanged in the future.

KEYWORDS
COVID-19, family system, otherness, resilience, ritual

THE TRAUMATIC FAMILY LIFE

Catch, a 2017 short educational film, produced in the UK and sponsored by the Royal College of Pathologists, depict some striking effects of a pandemic on family lives (Sansom, 2017; http://www.catchshortfilm.com/). In a fictitious future, plagued by antibiotic resistance, a father, Tom, and his youthful daughter, Amy, are quarantined in their home during a deadly pandemic. Tom's wife and young son, affected by the disease, were taken away by the authorities and is unknown if they are still alive. When Amy gets ill, Tom faces a cruel dilemma: abandoning her to the authorities or risking his own life. His fatherhood feelings will affect his choice.

Three years later, this film becomes shockingly topical. Nearly half of the world population is confined to home quarantine to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic while tens of thousands of people die. Every day in many hospitals, worldwide, health workers must choose who can survive and who must be abandoned to the lethal disease. Millions of families, locked at home, experience a traumatic daily life while facing a forced coexistence never lived before (Papero, 2017; Horesh & Brown, 2018; Brooks et al., 2020). Behavior analysts already wonder how to help families during this contingency (Szabo, 2020; PTSD: National Center for PTSD, 2020). Meanwhile, is time to enhance a systemic approach to illnesses and increase the availability of family online therapies to investigate what is occurring inside their home and how to take care of them. Thus, I believe that pandemic quarantine is a challenge and an opportunity for family systems therapy. It pushes families to reconsider some aspects of their relationships and therapists to face new problems in a virtual clinical context (Borcsa & Pomini, 2017; Manfrida et al., 2017).

LOCKING THE FAMILY SYSTEMS

Systemic family therapists usually consider the family as an open system. According to this assumption, the family keeps mutual exchanges with its sociocultural reference environment throughout its life cycle and its evolving resources are firmly linked to human macrosystems. Family relationships change together with the family's social relationships and the nuclear family is in daily contact with the kinship through a broader social network built up of several hundred individuals. Therefore, a recursive loop binds both the family and the social system, so that their changes are interlocked with one another.

Which happens, on the contrary, if this joint relation is broken? What occurs if the family system is forced into a transient segregation that isolates it from the world? What happens to family members at home, each of them stripped of social interactions and tied only to family relationships?

In the following paragraphs, I suggest some hypotheses, about what is going on in the western family due to the lockdown policies stemming from the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. They are described as antithetic pathways of the family system processes.

SAMENESS VS. OTHERNESS

Gabb (2011) reminds us that *otherness* is a basic feature of a family intimate experience. During the pandemic, social isolation at home becomes a litmus test of family cohesion. Strong relationships may be strengthened while the weak ones deteriorate. Actually, the social context acts as a protective buffer of family tensions. It allows household members to cope with interpersonal pressures through their social relationships. The network of friends, acquaintances, and work partners can solve or reshape the troubles and the negative feelings that emerge in the family. In this sense, the subject's psychological health relies on the chance of moving between family relationships and social ones. Now, if the family misses the social context, its internal distress can develop as there is no "*clearinghouse*" for each one. Shut-in at home, this closed family system is likely to implode, if its frail and conflicting affective bonds are overwhelmed by the sad loss of all former social contacts. The increase of family violence is a key signal of these dynamics (Chandal et al., 2020).

Alternatively, other families improve their ties during a phase of social isolation. Each family member takes advantage of spending the daytime just with relatives. The daily dialogue, while sharing domestic space or engaging in household chores, becomes an extraordinary opportunity to rediscover the value of family ties, previously neglected.

RESILIENCE VS.WEAKNESS

In the Era of COVID-19 systemic therapists should emphasize the family resilience construct (Walsh, 2015). According to Simon (2005), "*Family resilience can be defined as the ability of a family to respond positively to an adverse situation and emerge from the situation feeling strengthened, more resourceful, and more confident than its prior state*". The quarantine caused by the COVID-19 pandemic tests the family's resilience resources. As a unit, it must cope with the distress resulting from the loss of its reference network, the mourning on the death of people

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who were in close relationship with each of the family members, the financial difficulties, and, finally, the inner tensions related to the sharing domestic spaces. This epochal crisis puts a strain on the family's resilience and uncovers its hidden breaks. Only problem-sharing strategies and pursuing cooperative solutions allow families to withstand the impact of a traumatic event never experienced in the last hundred years.

On the contrary, fragile family systems are exposed to the two-fold risk of withdrawing from the emotional bonds or even rejecting them.

AUTONOMY VS.INTIMACY

At home, for all the time, the family shares the domestic arena to improve emotional bonds and the quality of interpersonal communication and, at one time, to guarantee everyone their autonomy and privacy. Mutual closeness is strengthened, individual differences emerge more clearly, subjective boundaries in the family system are underlined. Household members are stimulated to question the meanings they give to family relationships as compared to friendship or professional relationships.

It can be assumed that intimacy is tested by forced cohabitation and everyone at home discerns the family practices (Morgan, 2011) from intimacy as each family practice: "tends to produce intimacy, but is not a sufficient condition" (Jamieson, 2011).

ROUTINES VS. RITUALS

Rituals are an essential aspect of the family's relational patterns as they strengthen the relationships as an implicit warp and weft of shared meanings. On the contrary, the daily routines risk loosening emotional ties.

Throughout the quarantine, the family struggles between daily routines and rituals rooted in its life cycle (Fiese et al.,2002). Quarantine causes people to indulge in routine behaviors due to the deprivation of complex environmental stimuli. These routines become even more binding the more often they are shared among family members. If the family gets enmeshed in daily routines, neglecting the rituals, then the experience of the quarantine can undermine the cohesion of the family system. Trapped in daily routines, the family loses the values and meanings of a shared life.

To conclude, the cumulative effects of the interpersonal processes here described can be considered guiding the family to cope with the quarantine. It is intriguing, but untimely to predict what will occur after the lockdown ends. Nonetheless, it can be assumed that some transformations of the family's daily life patterns caused by the pandemic will remain unchanged in the future time.

This journal issue includes two papers about the consequences of the pandemic on family life and family therapy. Vallario (2020), discusses the topic of temporarily transferring the psychotherapy sessions from an offline to an online setting. He emphasizes the factors that seem to more favorably lead patients to swallow such a change or, conversely, hinder the online therapeutic processes.

Gritti et al. (2020), consider the psychological and psychopathological sequelae of quarantine during the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors point out that lockdown is likely to produce short- and long-term psychological symptoms, more

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severe in children and adolescents. They should receive support from a child psychiatrist and/or psychologist by telephone or telemedicine sessions.

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