

Family in Brazil:

A Resource for The Person and For Society

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Currently, it seems that it is strongly prevalent the idea of living in a particular family has no implications for the social relationship or position that the individual has with the collectivity, having as a consequence the denial of the family's role of mediation between individual and society. It is a corollary of postmodern culture to consider that, by acting outside the family, in the public sphere, the individual's belonging to a family loses relevance. However, everything that happens in family life impacts positive or negatively over the social functioning. The transformations of marriage and family are in line with profound social changes that impact on how adults develop the affection, the significance of the work and the sense of existence. The precarious way work has been structured, involving increasing pressure for a hyper qualification, imposes on close relationships an atmosphere of insecurity and a unequal division of responsibilities within the couple – to not speak of the increasing demands for consumption.

On the other hand, social relations outside the family have changed the timing for people get married. Marriage is postponed and the option for being single becomes more frequent, which interferes with relevant aspects in family life, as for instance, the decision to have children, and when, and methods of family planning.

This general context imposes on conjugal life concerns, frustrations and expectations not understood in a reflective way by spouses, which may partially explain the increased number of divorces. The conflict between two relevant poles in family life - the pole of solidarity (stressing integration) and the pole of individualization

(prioritizing the self-affirmation of the individual) – tends to become more acute. To add complexity to this reality, one can observe the tendency toward choices not guided by rationality, which entails, among its consequences, violence and destruction.

In face of complex social change, the study carried out with Brazilian families suggests that the family finds its own ways of responding to this set of sociocultural pressures, evincing a strong ability to adapt to the changes that these demands entail, resisting and rearranging themselves as primary cell of society, finding ways to reaffirm its identity in the new context. This movement entails a reorganization concerning the ways of living the marital relationship, handling childrearing, dealing with the influences of work on daily life, and evaluating family relations viewed as part of social capital. It is possible as well to identify 'new families' who embrace modern values while engaged in practices of solidarity and sharing of life with the other, which encourages the persistence and stability of marriage itself.

This study aimed at understand the extent to which the family represents a resource for its members and how they perceive their relationship with other social institutions, enhancing social development in a broader sense. As a background, there is the goal to establish nexus and elucidate factors from aspects of family reality that are still insufficiently approached by theoretical studies and public policies. Here, we claim that family needs to be seen in its own dynamics, which involves relationships marked by drama and conflict that manifest themselves as polarities under constant tension.

The empirical study conducted with 383 families residing in two Brazilian capitals – Salvador and São Paulo – reflects this panorama. A quota sample was utilized, according to the sociodemographic profile IBGE (2010) has delineated for the Brazilian population. The research participants were selected taking into consideration they

should come from different family structures and socio-educational levels, ages between 30 and 55 years old. Once collected, the data were forwarded to the technicians of UCSal responsible for gathering, type and analyze the information through the software ' Statistical Package for Social Science ' (SPSS).

Specifically, this study characterized the situation of the family in two capitals from different regions of Brazil, according to family structure, socio-economic and educational level, occupation and religion. This is particularly relevant when one considers the disparities that still mark the Brazilian society.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE (characteristics of the sample)

Most of the informants in the survey were women and indicated as the head of the family, which can reflect the changes concerning the father's role in the family.

The participants of the survey, in general, consider very important to be formally married (50.8), the personal commitment towards the marital bound/relationship (48.8), the importance of generating children for the couple's satisfaction (44.4) which reveals some adherence to a broader transgenerational perspective. The factors that counteract the satisfaction and stability of the marital bound concern the absence of a consistent life project in the long run, like bearing children, which could prevent problems in case of divorce. The tendency to refuse a full commitment to marriage poses obstacles to the construction of a consistent family history. On the other hand, the couple that freely opts by taking care of the stability of the marital bond can be more open to live the beauty of a parenthood fully hosted and lived, the comfort of a reciprocal care, especially when some health problem knocks at door, the happiness of sharing life together, which wins the loneliness and rejoices with the growth of children. The numbers we obtained in the study express the tensions between those polarities.

Participants showed commitment to the contemporary model of marriage in which personal satisfaction with the conjugal relationship is a relevant value (85.8) considering the personal and mutual gratification of spouses as relevant for the stability of the marital bond (50.7%).

Regarding the relationship between parents and children, the highest percentage of couples (62.4%) have between one and two children - a trend which confirms the IBGE data about the decline of fertility indices. This trend, in addition to the more immediate consequence concerning demographic transition (aging population increasing quickly), entails also a lesser participation of young people in the economically active population, which could contribute with the costs with to the care of the elderly. On the other hand, it can be observed that couples (73,0%) consider the education of children as a priority action of the family and wish to convey to children values and moral criteria for behavior, even though the support of educational agencies or public authority is not trustable. The dynamics that guides the parents-children relationship is particularly influenced by the decision to directly pursue a good education or entrust it to other agents – babysitters, teachers and other relatives.

That situation, as a whole, is affected by parents' strategies to coping with the reduction in the time available to daily tasks dedicated to handle the house, childcare and free time in the family context. The work context and its demands increasingly absorb men and women's energy, and, in consequence, they have less time to socialize and a decreased availability to be with their children. This aspect can justify the tendency to consider desirable that one of the spouses devotes himself to the family in the turn opposite to work (46.5). Although 66.4 of respondents claim that when they need to choose between commitments related to family and work, they focus on the family, it seems that the professional career achievement and access to higher levels of consumption

represent goals that, generally, drive people to prioritize work and to reduce other important aspects of the existence, like the joy of sharing family life and the happiness of generate and follow, day by day, the development of their children. Contrary to what some of the current social theories point, respondents understand that family relationships constitute a social and human capital, i.e. consist of relationships in which people show and practice mutual trust and follow rules of cooperation, solidarity and reciprocity. Consistently with this perspective, respondents recognize that can rely on their relatives in cases of urgent needs (72.8%), that there is good degree of internal solidarity (72.1%) and that the education received from parents contributed to find people that are meaningful to their own lives (66.8%). They still identify the ability of the family concerning transmitting values like honesty and respect to the law (92%), trust and acceptance (78.4%) and voluntary help to those in need (80%). The family is the institution most valued by 80% of Brazilians according to a survey of IPEA (2009), which is corroborated by the respondents, who consider that the contemporary family is so able to transmit family values as the family of the past (43) and perceive the family as the social institution better able to contribute to the development of the country (77.5).