

Future Scenarios and Support Interventions for the Family: Involving Experts' Participation through a Mixed-Method Research Study

Scenari Futuri e Interventi a Supporto della Famiglia: un Approccio basato sugli esperti

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Abstract A recent Delphi survey on possible scenarios that will involve the family in the next ten years saw the emergence of some situations judged by experts as particularly relevant. Specifically, these emerging situations are the growing conditioning of women when organizing their family life because of professional commitments, the increasing tendency of young adults to live with their parents and the intensity of solidarity networks between generations. On the basis of some focus groups, eight possible intervention proposals have been identified to deal with any difficulties related to the emerging scenario and, in particular, to support families. In order to rank the proposals according to their efficacy and feasibility, the multi-criteria decision-making technique Analytic Hierarchy Process has been applied.

Abstract *Una recente indagine Delphi sui possibili scenari che interesseranno la famiglia nei prossimi dieci anni ha permesso di evidenziare alcune situazioni, che secondo gli esperti, acquisiranno particolare rilevanza che riguardano il crescente condizionamento per la donna nell'organizzazione della vita familiare a causa degli impegni professionali, la crescente tendenza dei giovani a permanere in famiglia anche quando trovano lavoro e l'intensità delle reti di solidarietà tra generazioni. Sulla base di alcuni focus group, sono state individuate otto proposte di intervento con l'obiettivo di fronteggiare eventuali difficoltà correlate allo scenario ipotizzato e in particolare per sostenere la donna e la famiglia. Infine, con l'obiettivo di creare una classifica di queste proposte è stata applicata la tecnica decisionale multi-criterio detta Analytic Hierarchy Process.*

Key words: family studies, future studies, Delphi, scenario research methodology, AHP

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1 Introduction

The political, social, economic and cultural events affecting our present situation, both nationally and internationally at a macro level will affect, at a micro level, family dynamics and the day-to-day relationships between family members, but how these and other events will influence the intra-family evolution has still to be deciphered. Through the construction of plausible future scenarios, one of the aims of this work is to provide answers to the question: "What will happen to the family in the next 10 years?" The participative process for the definition of the scenarios does not involve predictions for the future, because this is practically impossible with this type of time horizon. Rather, on the one hand, the reasoning concerning the future helps us to understand how we live/think today and, on the other hand, it offers the opportunity to discuss possible policy actions that would be necessary if negative situations are to be prevented and/or to facilitate widely desirable outcomes (FAMILYPLATFORM, 2011; OECD, 2011). Therefore, we are speaking of explorative scenarios that contrast with normative scenarios (Kosow and Gaßner, 2008). In the first case, the goal is to explore the future consequences of possible decisions and actions that could be taken today. We must ask ourselves: "What will happen in the future if today we do or do not do something? What could tomorrow's family be like if we take certain actions today?" Contrastingly, in the case of normative scenarios, a desirable future is depicted as if it were a goal to be achieved, and questions such as "How do we want our future to be? How can we get there?" arise (Gordon and Glenn, 2018). The usefulness of the scenarios lies in the possibility of understanding how the future depends on our actions today and in forcing the debate on the key factors and dynamics of a system. In this way, decision-makers can abandon an action already initiated, correct it, or take new actions.

2 Methods

Over the past three years, a study called "Tomorrow in the Family" has been conducted in the Veneto region—one of the richest and best organized regions in Europe. Several focus groups were conducted with the aim of identifying some areas of interest for the present and the future of the family. A Delphi survey was conducted with a panel of 32 experts, asked to answer a questionnaire containing 41 items divided into seven sections: Parents; Spouses; Extended Family; Children; Housing; Family Models; Policy and Services; Communication; and Solidarity. Each item is a brief statement aimed at describing a specific phenomenon, relating to one of the seven themes under consideration (Di Giulio, Fent, Philipov, Vobecká and Winkler-Dworak, 2013; Bolzan, 2018).

In order to investigate the future development of each item, the experts were asked to provide two assessments using an ordinal scale of 0-100, the first concerning Evolution, that is the spread of the phenomenon indicated in the item, the second regarding Relevance, or its importance. Both evaluations were provided considering the situation hypothesised in 10 years compared to the current time. Scores lower than, close to, or above 50 indicate reduction, substantial immutability, and expansion respectively. The two dimensions, if considered jointly, are intended to represent the future visibility of the phenomenon itself. The survey was carried out in four successive stages, the first through a face-to-face interview and the subsequent ones with a CAWI (Computer Assisted Web Interview) survey method based on the self-administered computerized questionnaire. The 32 experts selected to participate in the Delphi survey are stakeholders, professionals in the sectors of services or production of

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family goods, officials, public managers, and scholars who, by culture and professional position, are knowledgeable about family dynamics¹.

The Delphi method serves to differentiate the proposed items and, in some way, to classify them according to their different degree of consensus achieved. On the one hand, there will be items with a full convergence of opinion, on which the experts agree on their future relevance and/or evolution. On the other hand, there will be items with little consensus, which will therefore require further study and analysis, given that the experts do not agree when estimating their relevance and future evolution.

Furthermore, the Delphi survey has made it possible to identify those phenomena that, according to the experts, will be characterized in the future by an important increase in relevance and a medium-high increase in terms of evolution. In practice, by selecting those items on which the experts have had a convergence of opinion regarding their high future evolution, we have the basis of an explorative scenario, because using a future perspective, the key factors and the main dynamics of the "family of tomorrow" emerge. To complete the exploratory scenario, it is necessary to define the possible policy actions to be taken today. Indeed, a mere description of plausible futures does not in itself constitute a scenario, because it must also contain the key decisions that may or may not lead to a possible change in the future (Gordon and Glenn, 2018). For this purpose, a further panel of experts (15) was asked to discuss a scenario characterized by different levels of relevance and evolution that emerged identifying, through concrete examples from their experience, the factors supporting the well-being of family members, in particular as will be indicated below, of the woman, the factors that put her at risk and the factors adverse to her well-being.

The scenario-based research methodology is frequently used in the context of interdisciplinary studies, also known as future studies. A definition shared by some scholars, and applied here, considers the use of scenarios as a 'research tool' that is able to support stakeholders in discussing the relationships between variables, the data that emerges and any indicators and that connects the present to the future, keeping in mind current policies and those that would be necessary for the future (Morgan, 1983; Ramirez et al., 2015). This method has the advantage of reducing any bias inherent in stakeholders from different disciplines, placing the emphasis on social problems and the need to suggest solutions in the public interest (Öborn et al., 2013).

Finally, with the aim of creating a ranking of the factors supporting the family members' well-being and building a priority list of interventions, the identified proposals were subjected to expert evaluation using the Analytic Hierarchy Process (AHP) method.

The Analytic Hierarchy Process is an effective tool for dealing with complex decision-making, and it has been applied in a wide variety of settings. Usually, decision-makers involved in this process are characterized by a personal background and experience pertinent to the problem to be solved. In the AHP, a set of evaluation criteria and a set of alternative options, among which is the best decision to be made, are arranged in a hierarchical structure. First of all, the AHP generates a weight for each evaluation criteria, according to the experts' pairwise comparisons of the criteria. Next, for a fixed criterion, each pair of alternatives is compared and a score is assigned to each of them. Finally, the AHP combines the criteria

¹ More in detail: 10 representatives of the institutions (a Major, some municipality leaders, an alderman, a manager of the Social Department of the Veneto Region, two ULSS managers, a Judge of the Family, a President of the Family Section of a Court, a President of the Juvenile Court); 3 exponents of the school: an headmaster, an education superintendent, a teacher; 9 Representatives of associations/unions: CGIL, CISL, Confcommercio, Confesercenti, National Consumer Union, Coldiretti, Adiconsum; 3 representatives of the volunteering; 7 Professors (sociologists, statisticians, educators, political scientists, demographers).

Mario Bolzan, Simone Di Zio, Manuela Scioni and Morena Tartari weights and the alternatives' scores, thus determining a global score for each alternative. Criteria and alternatives are compared in a pairwise way using a scale of absolute numbers known as the Saaty scale, which has been shown to capture individual preferences with respect to quantitative and qualitative attributes (Saaty, 1980). Overall, more than 60 experts will be involved, a relatively large number for this kind of decision tool.

3 Results

The Delphi survey has made it possible to identify items that have the experts' consensus on high values of evolution and relevance and that merit, also with respect to their content, to be the subject of analysis for a reflection regarding possible family support solutions. The three items selected are: (A.4.) "For the mother, the organization of family life will be conditioned by professional commitments"; (G.2.) "The networks of solidarity between generations (elderly, adults, young people) will be intense"; and (B.5.) "Young people will stay with their parents even after they have found a job." The Delphi survey, with respect to the three items considered, provided stability, convergence speed, and consensus level parameters, which all show satisfactory performance. This premise appears important to support the following applications and hypotheses. The conditioning in the organization of family life as a result of a mother's professional life resulted in a significant increase in relevance (Median = 85, Interquartile Range [IR] = 10) and evolution, albeit minor (Median = 70, IR = 15). The phenomenon of the permanence of young people in the family home is also characterized by an important increase in terms of relevance (Median = 80, IR = 20) and a slight increase in terms of evolution (Median = 60, IR = 20). It must be considered that in Italy, the dimension that the phenomenon already assumes today is peculiar: the proportion of "young adults" between 18 and 34 years old, who still live at home with their parents in 2018 (66.1%), is more than 15 percentage points above the average for all 28 EU countries (48.2%) (Eurostat, 2018). Finally, the phenomenon of solidarity networks between generations is characterized by an increase in relevance (Median = 70, IR = 10) and a slight increase in evolution (Median = 60, IR = 5). In summary, the permanence of young people in the family home and the existence of solidarity networks are phenomena that, according to the panel of experts interviewed, will assume greater importance even if their diffusion could remain of the same order of magnitude as today.

Starting from these three key factors, a scenario was hypothesised that factored in the substantial increase in the mother's conditioning when organizing family life because of her professional commitments, a presence similar to today of the solidarity networks between generations, and the permanence of young people in the family home more conspicuous than today. The panel of experts, therefore, identified the following eight intervention proposals to support family members, particularly women, in the context of the hypothesised scenario:

- 1) Facilitate greater autonomy for young children;
- 2) Improve public welfare (e.g. availability of services to the individuals, such as the elderly or children);
- 3) Provide direct financial subsidies to families with children, the elderly, etc.;
- 4) Strengthen the support networks within the family (e.g. grandparents, relatives, etc.);
- 5) Strengthen the support networks outside the family (e.g. peers, friends, etc.);
- 6) Promote a cultural change in family members (father, mother, children) through training to promote awareness of shared responsibilities;
- 7) Improve corporate welfare to support workers with dependent children and elderly family members;

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8) Increase the accessibility and availability of family counselling services for family difficulties of different types (not only psycho-emotional, but also social, economic, etc.).

The application of the AHP to experts at the level of the North East of the country is currently being undertaken, and it is believed to involve at least sixty experts in the three regions. To date, nine experts have participated in the survey. The alternatives were compared according to two different criteria: "Feasibility" and "Efficacy." Regarding the evaluation criteria, experts recognized efficacy as more important (0.626) than feasibility (0.347). Provisional global weights of the intervention proposals to support the considered scenario are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Provisional global weights from AHP (n=9)

<i>Rank</i>	<i>Intervention Proposals</i>	<i>W_{global}</i>
1	Promote a cultural change in family members (father, mother, children) through training to promote awareness of shared responsibilities	0.226
2	Strengthen the support networks outside the family (e.g. peers, friends, etc.)	0.158
3	Improve corporate welfare to support workers with dependent children and elderly family members	0.138
4	Increase the accessibility and availability of family counselling services for family difficulties of different types (not only psycho-emotional, but also social, economic, etc.)	0.117
5	Strengthen the support networks within the family (e.g. grandparents, relatives, etc.)	0.106
6	Provide direct financial subsidies to families with children, the elderly, etc.	0.100
7	Improve public welfare (e.g. availability of services to the individuals, such as the elderly or children)	0.084
8	Facilitate greater autonomy for young children	0.071

4 Discussion

The scenario that emerged from expert evaluations through the first Delphi survey is confirmed by the data. In Italy, female employment (15-64 years) has increased steadily over the past 15 years from 45.5% in 2004 to 49.5% in 2018 (ISTAT, 2018). In Italy, unlike in Northern Europe, the increase in female employment did not lead to a corresponding redistribution of personal responsibilities within couples (ISTAT, 2012), so that much of the family and care work remained in the hands of women. The experts' picture hypothesised for the future corresponds consistently with the trend recorded in recent years in terms of a significant increase in the work commitment of women, including those who have families. Family relationships are already the first source of informal support on which working mothers with young children, the elderly, disabled people and, more generally, those who need support rely. To give a figure, the proportion of children usually entrusted to grandparents is approximately 65% (ISTAT, 2011); grandparents are fundamental within the family support network. Husbands/partners do not seem ready to share household chores. As concerns older children, staying with the family of origin represents an increasingly important

Mario Bolzan, Simone Di Zio, Manuela Scioni and Morena Tartari and visible phenomenon. By the AHP's first application, we note some interesting results: the first factor with a weight of 0.226—quite distinct from the others—is the promotion of a cultural change in family members. In contrast, in final position with a weight of 0.071 is the autonomy of young children.

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