Family Associations as Social Capital for Families and Society

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Abstract. *At a time of renewed interest in the family, family associations are attracting increasing attention. This is due to a growing awareness that fraying social bonds and the general crisis of the welfare system are related to lack of support for the family and its code of solidarity.*
This article explores a number of issues, starting with the question of the identity of a family association, both in theory, within the framework of relational sociology and international literature, and in practice, in light of the international federations of family associations' membership criteria. Finally, family associations will be described according with the concept of social capital, to show that when families form associations with other families they become an irreplaceable resource for society.
Keywords: *Family Association, Social Capital, Third Sector, Relational Sociology.*

Introduction

Families form associations out of an urge to share their problems and together find solutions to their needs. This can be visualised as a pyramid (Donati & Rossi, 1995) going from minimum to maximum openness, that is, tending towards universalism.
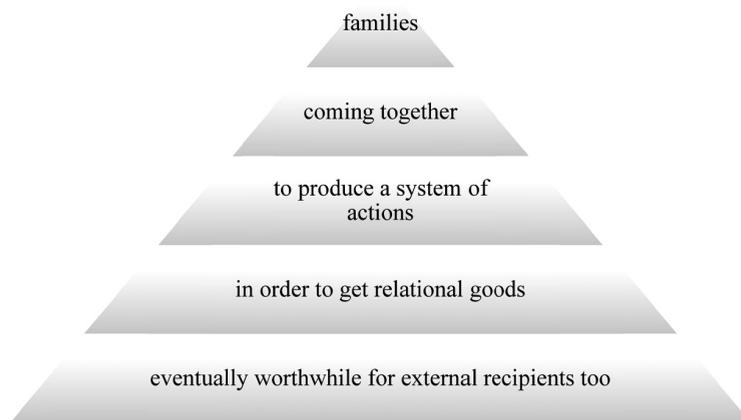
*Fig. 1. **A family association's expanding process (source: Donati & Rossi, 1995)***

A gradual expanding process, thus, takes individual families to form a network, leading to the impact of their joint action on external recipients.

More specifically,

– family associations consist of families rather than individuals;
– families are not only recipients but also actors, i.e., providers and consumers at the same time (prosumers);
– goods and services are produced together, through relationships.

In other words, family associations produce relational goods.

This is the definition and essence of family associations, and on its basis this article will try to answer two main questions: 1) how many ways of being a family association exist and what are they? 2) in what sense can family associations be an irreplaceable resource for society? To answer the first question, the issue of the identity of a family association will be explored, both in theory, within the framework of relational sociology and international literature, and in practice, considering the international federations of family associations' membership criteria. To respond to the second question, family associations will be described according with the concept of social capital.

Family Associations: An Emerging Social Subject

In the past decade, both the scientific community and policy makers have observed with growing interest the active role played by families in civic society when they form associations to plan and carry out interventions aimed at easing their daily tasks and any additional ones demanded by situations of hardship. Attention towards the family and its style of action has grown together with the conviction that the welfare system crisis and the weakening of social bonds largely depend on lack of support and promotion of family relationships, kinship networks and their solidarity code (Donati, 2012). It is therefore important to understand the nature of this otherwise elusive phenomenon. To start with, two major effects of it can be identified: one regards family relationships, the other society in its complex.

Family associations document the family's capacity to express its generativity not only within (i.e., biologically) but also in the wider community, by producing *goods* in accordance with a specific code of action.

From a different viewpoint, family associations demonstrate the existence of a civic vitality urging towards a subsidiary type of welfare, where people's needs can be met not just by public (and standardised) interventions but also through the autonomous mobilisation of primary networks that produce associational bonds with different degrees of formalisation. Because of these characteristics, family associations are a distinctive and emergent phenomenon in the Italian human services sector (Boccacin & Carrà, 2012).

Thus, just as an individualistic trend (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1990; 2001; Giddens, 1992) is driving family relationships towards configurations characterised by loose boundaries and purely affective/communicative codes (Widmer & Jallinoja, 2008), family associations have emerged as a counter-trend to demonstrate the vitality of the family and contribute to spreading a style of action based on solidarity, and producing services as well as promoting initiatives and family rights.

To explain how all this is made possible, it is necessary to go back to the essence of the family relationship (Rossi & Carrà, 2016) as a crossroad between an individual and society, or between an individual and inter-subjective rights that the family is continually called to mediate. It could be said that the family keeps sifting through a variety of welfare provisions (work, housing, tax, social policies) to adjust and match them to its daily needs.

In general, the effectiveness of these policies can only be assessed if the family's filtering action can withstand their impact: this competency entitles the family to a *societal citizenship* (a concept formulated by Donati), "in that it [i.e., the family] is a solidaristic fact rather than just the sum of its individual members' rights-duties" (Donati, 1993, p. 9[1]): the result of this joint action is a type of wellbeing based not on the satisfaction of individual expectations but on the capacity to lead them to an optimal equilibrium through the active participation of all members, who see the family relationship as an end in itself rather than a means to their own self-fulfilment.

The individualisation processes typical of the present age, however, hinder the family's mediating function: cultural fragmentation, in fact, means that the rights of individual family members overshadow those of the relationship as a whole.

The family's specific competency is highlighted in situations where families appear to be prosocially oriented, in whatever form or degree: for example, by giving rise to the voluntary action of one or more of their members; or else, connecting with other families' prosocialities to form family associations. The objective of generating family wellbeing is, in this case, pursued through a joint, prosocial action by a number of families intending to increase their chances to achieve the set goal. These family associations are the maximum expression of the family's prosociality: individual associations are committed to respond to the needs of each member family and indirectly help increase the community's wellbeing; they can also open up to a more explicit action aimed at promoting family citizenship.

It is important to distinguish the role of family associations from the prosocial action carried out by third-sector subjects. Voluntary organisations, prosocial associations and social cooperatives sometimes tend to assume a substitutive role towards the beneficiaries of their interventions and towards family relationships: a solidaristic code of action and the capacity to offer personalised support do not *per se* entail the promotion of the active role of individuals and families.

The emergence of unions of different families wanting to actively and autonomously meet their needs can help bring about an authentic form of subsidiarity when these organisations are acknowledged as playing a protagonist role in the social policies area.

2. A Question of Identity

To identify the characteristics of family associations and define their distinguishing criteria is essential for the future of this phenomenon, including its possibility to play an increasingly central role in the construction of welfare (Donati & Rossi, 1995).

Within third-sector organizations, family associations are perhaps the only subjects whose identity issue is both essential and ambiguous. The associations defining themselves as *family* may refer to different facts: that their members are families rather than individuals; that they use

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[1]   See also Gattamorta (2016).

a family-based and personalised operating style rather than an impersonal, standardised one; that the recipients of their actions are families rather than individuals. In Italy, where this phenomenon is particularly widespread, some local projects aimed at helping families can be promoted and financed only if managed by family associations; it is essential, in such cases, to identify the requirements to be met by an organisation that seeks recognition as a family association.

Relational sociology (Donati, 1991; 2013; 2014a; 2014b; Donati & Archer, 2015) has indeed devised a number of interconnecting categories, comprehensive of the different aspects covered by the term *family*, thus highlighting a variety of associations emerging from their intersections, all of which can in some ways be qualified as *family* (Donati & Rossi, 1995). Besides, relational sociology views the family associations phenomenon as intrinsically bound with the generation and regeneration of social capital, both family-specific and generalised (Rossi, 2007; Carrà, 2006; 2009).

In dealing with the question of identity, an analysis of the relevant international literature will be carried out to start with. Then, family associations will be examined in light of relational sociology; that is, this phenomenon will be regarded as a social relationship with its specific identity emerging from the union of two basic features, one structural and one referential. Lastly, an international map of the associations will be drawn and membership requirements examined, wherever possible.

2.1. Literature and Research

So far, the issue of family associations has attracted little attention from social scientists. Among the rare examples of literature in this field, two European works emerge, both carried out for the European Commission (Kiely, 1994; Martin, 1997), while single-country studies have been conducted in Belgium (Lory, 1978), Portugal (Amaro, 1994), the United Kingdom (Bernardes, 1995), Germany (Gerzer-Sass & Erler, 1997), and Spain (Ayuso Sánchez, 2007). As regards Italy, the first national data collection made in 1993 (Donati & Rossi, 1995) was followed by two qualitative surveys in 1998-99 (Carrà, 1998; Rossi & Maccarini, 1999), a study in a North-Western region, Lombardy, in 2001 (Carrà, 2003) which was broadened in 2004, a second Italian survey in 2001-2002 (Di Nicola & Landuzzi, 2004), and a research project in a North-Eastern region, Veneto, in 2005 (Carrà 2005).

In 1997 and in two later publications (Martin & Hassenteuffel, 2000; Martin, 2000), French sociologist Martin focused on the role of family associations in defining social policies in some European countries by analysing the associations' representativeness of family interests and the type of relationships they entertain with social macro-actors. Such relationships seemed heavily affected by the different historical and cultural backgrounds of the various countries, as well as the diverse forms of State welfare adopted throughout the years. Martin visualised the family association models adopted in the main European countries as differently placed along two sides of a triangle, at a varying distance from the State, the Market and the Civil Society (Fig. 2): the closer to the *State,* the stronger is the associations' institutional character; the closer to *Civil Society*, the more obvious is their grassroots origin, expressing the families' actual needs; the closer to the *Market*, the greater is their tendency to abide by market principles and produce services rather than interacting with policy makers.
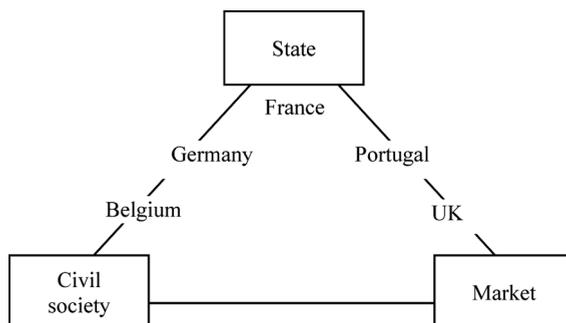
State

France

Germany   Portugal

Belgium   UK

Civil society   Market

*Fig. 2. **Family associations and social actors (source: Martin, 1997)***

However, the usefulness of this model for outlining the features of family associations is unconvincing. On closer inspection, in fact, the placement of each country within the triangle appears rather contrived, as such a complex phenomenon cannot be described just by analogy with other social actors. The model measures the family associations' bargaining and corporative power in relation to the State. Martin assimilates them to *interest groups*: in this sense, the organisations that carry out services for the families yet have no political agenda are considered mercantile. Martin's interpretation is strongly influenced by his French background[2]; however, it has the merit of highlighting the multifariousness of an otherwise obscure phenomenon.

While Martin was still carrying out his research, the results of the first Italian data collection were being analysed: here, the outlook on family associations was quite different. This difference, however, will be detailed later. Right now, it must be pointed out that Ayuso Sánchez (2007), the author of the Spanish study (the last to be carried out in a European country), stressed that Italian research – namely, done Donati and Rossi in their 1995 work – had provided the most accurate definition of this phenomenon through a formulation that regards the associations' political role as secondary. He proposes a narrow definition including three interconnected aspects:

- the association must be formally constituted and stable in time, resulting from its participants' joint action rather than aiming at certain advantages, with a formal and an informal character, its own identity, shared interests and values;
- it must be formed by families rather than individuals or institutions;
- it must directly and explicitly pursue family goals, whether they concern its member families or families as social subjects.

In actual life, such aspects are articulated in a variety of ways, also because this phenomenon is regulated by specific legal provisions in very few countries, of which Ayuso Sánchez mentions France (*Family Code*, Decree no. 56-149/1956, reformed in 1975), Portugal (*Law on the Rights and Duties of the Associations Representing Families,* 1997) and the Italian region of Lombardy (Law 23/99 *Regional Policies for the Family*). In the absence of any binding juridical references, the title of *family association* remains an eminently subjective right pertaining to any individual organisation that regards itself as a *family* for any reason whatsoever.

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[2]   In France, the State introduced a national association of families (UNAF) uniformly distributed throughout the Country.

Likewise, scholars from different countries have adopted definitions that reflect their national situation. As early as 1978, Lory noticed the remarkable vitality of family associations in Belgium, where the civil society is extremely active, with the family playing a leading role; in this context, his definition of a family association is quite specific and based on the families' joint purpose to: a) defend their interests, and b) carry out interventions to respond to the needs they could not meet on their own. Chester (1994), who refers to the UK, considers "family" those voluntary organisations whose mission is directly or indirectly addressed to the family, in a context where the latter has little public recognition as such. This opinion is shared by Bernardes (1995), who, in the mid-1990s, detected the presence of numerous small organisations focused on specific aspects of family life in the UK, yet scarcely inclined to see, beyond individual needs, the family as a whole to be defended at a social as well as a political level: thus, family associations remain a minority phenomenon in the UK (Bernardes, 1997). With respect to the different meanings of the adjective *family* as referred to their associative mission, Martin and Hassenteuffel (2000) detect three different types of family associations in Europe:

- associations defending the interests of the family in general: they can be confessional or non-confessional, conservative or progressive;
- associations defending the interests of a certain type of family (single-parent families);
- associations defending the interests of individual family members (disabled, frail elderly, etc.)

Again, the above associations are viewed as mere interest groups, while the adjective *family* – as explained later – contains other, just as relevant, nuances. For example, family self-help organisations, the object of a wide German survey (Gerzer-Sass & Erler, 1999), could hardly emerge to the attention of European scholars, as their action involves no advocacy but is focused on the self-production of services for their members.

2.2. Relational Sociology and Family Associations

The above excursus on international literature and research has highlighted a difficulty in conceptualising a many-faceted phenomenon that takes different forms in different contexts, especially in relation to the role of the family within society. Nevertheless, several national and European associations have been formed, and local legislation in Italy has instituted special registers and financed projects by non-profit organisations configured as families' self-organisations – all this makes the identification of family associations a practical, rather than a theoretical, issue.

Now, what are the criteria for an association to join an overarching federation? What requirements are necessary to obtain financing for interventions that could be labelled as *family*?

Evidently, the identity of family associations emerges from a complex set of interrelated components and characteristics. In fact, the approach of relational sociology (Donati & Archer, 2015), with its *structural*, *referential* and *generative* semantics, offers an ideal framework to define this phenomenon.

The first definition, devised for Italy's 1993 data collection (Donati & Rossi, 1995), was based on two crucial, intersecting aspects: the *relationship of members with the need* to which the association responds (as members can be stakeholders, non-stakeholders, or a combination of the two); the *associative action* (to help the families in question, have more general aims or be

a combination of specific family goals and general social targets). On the basis of the above two features, a matrix was constructed (Fig. 3) where *family* has a general connotation (cell I) to then become increasingly specific (cell A). There are seven other combinations (indicated by different shades of grey in cells B, C, D, E, F, G, H), where aspects of family association in a broad sense are joined with aspects of family association in the strict sense.

	Family-based actions	Family-based and broad-based actions	Broad-based action
Stakeholder members	A	B	C
Stakeholder and non-stakeholder members	D	E	F
Non-stakeholder members	G	H	I

Fig. 3. ***The types of family associations (Donati & Rossi, 1995)***

These two aspects correspond to, respectively, *structural* (members' links with the association) and *referential* (culture influencing the action) semantics.

Post-1995 researches on family associations, as well as their actual evolution, demand a specially made Cartesian coordinate system. A new, more complex matrix could be constructed by resorting to – once again – relational sociology, with the *structural* and *referential* sematics as two axes whose poles coincide with the four dimensions of Parsons' AGIL scheme (1951). It is therefore possible to distinguish at least four dimensions, with family associations arranged along a continuum, as the *structural* and *referential* axes join the respective poles of the AGIL scheme (Gili, 2016; Guizzardi, 2016; Prandini, 2016):

1) *membership* (*religo*)
▪ the *presence of families* – members can be either individuals or families (A);
▪ the *members' relationship to the need the association responds to* – members can either provide outside support to an organisation dealing with problems they do not share, or be more directly involved as stakeholders (I);
2) *culture influencing the action* (*refero*)
▪ the *associative mission* – this can either have very general aims with implicitly positive effects on the families, or be explicitly addressed to the families (G);
▪ *intervention styles* – associations can respond to needs according with a charitable-disabling code or else adopt empowerment strategies that actively involve the families in need (L).

Each of these four dimensions come in different forms, and are to be distinguished as three categories:

(A)*families as members*: 1) individuals only; 2) families only; 3) individuals and families;
(I) *members' relationship to need*: 1) non-stakeholders; 2) stakeholders; 3) both;
(G)*associative mission*: 1) to individuals; 2) to families; 3) to both individuals and families;
(L)*intervention style*: 1) disabling approach; 2) empowerment; 3) a mixture of both.

In this perspective, the different types of associations (Fig. 4) place the term *family* at various degrees of closeness to a hard core of *families in need*: their interventions use empowerment strategies and are aimed at the whole family.
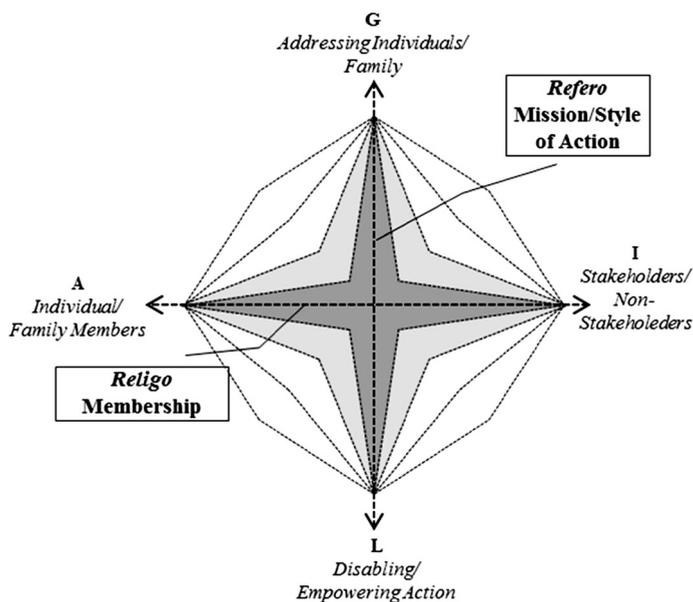

*Fig. 4. **Family associations ID map***

The four intersecting dimensions produce an emerging effect (*generative* semantic), outlining a comprehensive and detailed ID map (Fig. 4; Carrà, 2013), which highlights the huge difference between the associations placed in the outward white section and those defined by the criteria specified in the inner (dark grey) section; research, however, suggests that the whole range must be considered; besides, the lists of Italian and non-Italian members of federated associations show that the qualifier *family* attracts the most diverse third-sector organisations, confirming a growing awareness of the family and its intervention code as a resource to contrast the general crisis affecting welfare systems (Donati, 2015).

In keeping with Lory and Ayuso Sanchez (see above), relational sociology recommends the stricter criteria (dark grey) as a model for family associations. In this way, family associations can *act on family relationships*, to regenerate and strengthen the latter into becoming as self-determined as possible in solving their problems.

The intermediate area shows the presence of associations with an explicit interest in the family. Their members' connection with the needs in question, nevertheless, is more external, and their action often leaves the family in the background: here, members are not necessarily families, but can also be pro-social individuals, who tend to substitute themselves to the families in need rather than provide the families with instruments to help them solve their own problems. This type of strategy has long been the rule with public as well as third-sector subjects: it tends to separate needs from family relationships, with the result that families are not just freed from their burdens but also deprived of their responsibility and capacity for action, not to mention the lack

of flexibility and proximity that these interventions involve. Solidarity too, in fact, runs the risk of locking its recipients in a situation of dependency that stunts personal growth.

The white area in the map highlights a borderline kind of family association, typical of organisations with a history of individual membership, just one external source of support and generalised social aims; these associations are now dealing, more or less obliquely, with major family issues, sometimes even producing family-oriented settings and actions, or just subscribing and supporting advocacy interventions aimed at families and their rights.

Beside the criteria of membership and style of action, a crucial consideration is today's societal role of family associations. The presence of several national second-, third- or even fourth-level associations[3] highlights a widespread need for coordination among different bodies intending to carry out a joint action (though seldom doing so in practice) – a situation also stressed by Italian research. Orientation towards networking can be represented along an internal/external continuum:

- *inward-looking* actions – such as are carried out by self-help associations, to produce wellbeing in families who help themselves and have, indirectly, a positive chain-effect on the community; these actions, nevertheless, run the risk of defending corporate individual interests or specific needs against those of non-members;
- *outward-looking* actions – where the top level coincides with an association of associations – oriented towards producing wellbeing for both the family and society.
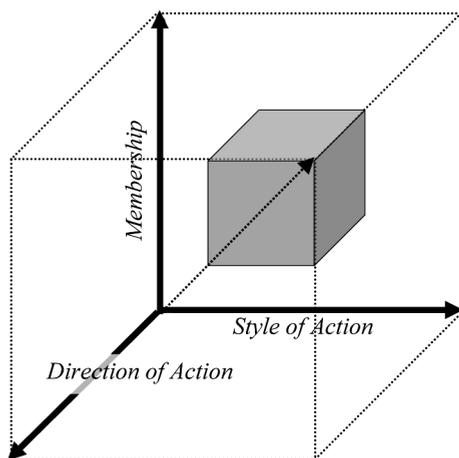

*Fig. 5. **The three-dimensional identity of family associations***

In Fig. 5, the smaller cube contains all the family associations (in the strict sense) able to impact society by generating umbrella organisations or partnerships with other third-sector subjects: the identities of individual families and associations are thus repositioned in a more general framework to represent families in the social arena, beside market and the State; the

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3   Examples would be the Italian ANFFAS and ANFAA, representing, respectively, the families of disabled children and adoptive families (second level), with a number of local organisations (first level); the "Forum delle associazoni familiari" in Italy, or the UNAF in France (third level) and the European COFACE (fourth level).

third sector's mediating function between different issues and codes is enhanced, together with its ability to regenerate social capital (Rossi & Boccacin, 2006; Donati, 2007; 2014c; 2014d) by weaving a network of cooperative bonds that contribute to strengthen social cohesion.

In this sense, it is interesting to explore the European context, where numerous federations have originated. The next few pages contain a list of the main organisations and the reasons why each of them considers itself a *family association*.

2.3. The Family Associations Network

In Europe, there is only one confederation qualifying itself as *family*: The Confederation of Family Organisations in the European Union, or COFACE[4]. Today it consists of 60 bodies belonging to 23 European countries. Surprisingly, however, only half of the organisations listed include the term *family* in their denomination. Surely for the Confederation, which aims to represent the interests of families at the level of the European government, the identity question is relevant: according to its System of Membership[5], "family organisations and non-profit, non-governmental organisations that serve the interests of children and families in a variety of ways and which are committed to the aims and objectives of COFACE in a pluralistic and non-discriminatory way can become Full or Associate members of COFACE. Other types of organisations and institutions can become Supporting members of COFACE".

In relation to Fig. 4, *mission* is the aspect relevant to COFACE, as each and every action by an aspiring member of the Confederation must prove to be oriented towards the family, even when pursuing ends that are only indirectly connected with it. However, in declaring to be "pluralist" ("COFACE recognises all family forms"[6]), the Confederation omits to define what a family is, while affirming its own intention to promote intergenerational solidarity, children's interests and equal opportunities among individuals, family forms and, particularly, between men and women.

Beside COFACE, another European organisation qualifying itself as *family* in the broad sense is FAFCE (Federation of Catholic Family Associations in Europe)[7], which, nevertheless, adds a more restrictive connotation: it federates "Catholic" family associations in order to support family interests at a European level from the viewpoint of the Catholic Church. In fact, its program is pivoted on family identity as founded on the marriage between a man and a woman. Membership criteria are not specified but a cursory glance at the list of its 10 member associations reveals that all their names contain some reference to the family and, often, their Catholic origin. In this case too, the *mission* aspect is crucial, and the concept of family wellbeing becomes more explicit. In fact, much space is dedicated to supporting life and the role of parents as the chief educators of the new generations, two of the family's irreplaceable functions to be protected by facilitating work-family reconciliation and intergenerational solidarity.

A different nature emerges from two other European, yet more specific, family confederations: ELFAC and EPA.

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4   Cf: www.coface-eu.org

5   Cf: http://www.coface-eu.org/en/upload/01_About_COFACE/COFACE-ystem-of-Membership-2014.pdf.

6   Cf:: http://www.coface-eu.org/en/About/Mission-Vision-and-Values/

7   Cf: www.fafce.org

ELFAC (European Large Families Confederation)[8] gathers 21 national associations of large families. Here, *membership* is paramount: the members of confederated associations are families, including needy families with children; the *mission* aspect predominates in terms of action, as this is explicitly addressed to the family.

EPA (European Parents' Association)[9], with 53 organisations operating throughout Italy, is distinctive in that it addresses the family's parental function. Here too, therefore, both *membership* and *mission* are crucial – the latter being shared by all the confederations observed so far. EPA promotes the parents' active participation in all areas relative to education, as well as supporting active citizenship at a European level. Besides, it has instituted a prize to be awarded to the best parents' support and empowerment projects by EPA members and EU Education Ministers. Thus, EPA is fully familial, since it covers all the identity aspects featured in Fig. 5.

Fig. 6 is an attempt to represent the mutual positioning of the different European confederations considered above, with regard to the prominence of family identity. On the basis of the information gathered mainly from the associations' profiles as they appear on their websites, the following layout can be envisaged:
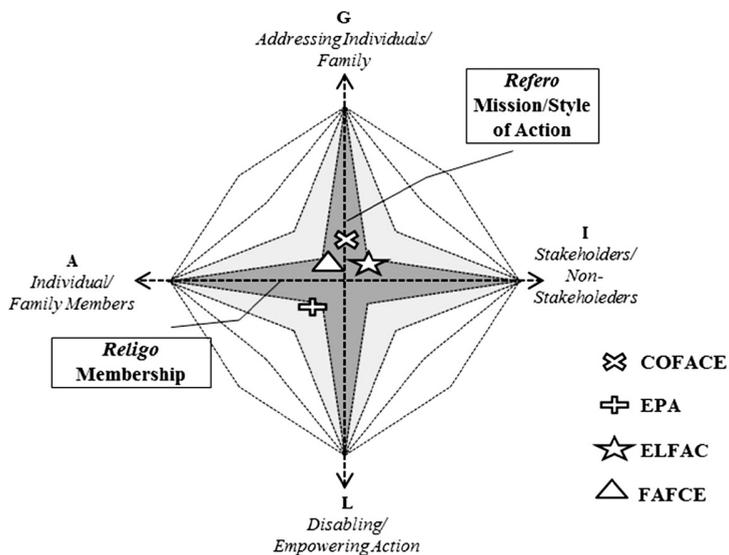

Fig. 6. **The identities of European Family Confederations**

- COFACE occupies an intermediate, almost neutral, position regards to the associations it represents (axe A-I), as long as they are "pluralistic", and as long as their main focus is the family, rather than individuals: thus, it has been positioned close to G (*mission* explicitly addressing the family);
- FAFCE's priority, instead, is a Catholic outlook on the family and its promotion according to Catholicism; thus, it has been placed in the area of family associations in the strict

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8   Cf: www.elfac.org

9   Cf: http://euparents.eu/

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sense, with *mission* (G) prevailing over *action* (L), and with a shift towards *membership* (A), even though in this case members are expected to be not just families, but Catholic ones;

▪ Symmetrically positioned in the G-I section, ELFAC is strongly oriented towards the *mission* family (G), but directed by the needs of large families (I);

▪ The opposite section is occupied by EPA, where the specificity of representing parenthood highlights *membership* (A); here, however, the promotion of family interests as their active involvement in education is about *style of intervention* (L), an aspect rarely found in confederations.

3. Family Associations and Social Capital

Although few in number, the studies mentioned above demonstrate that, besides the direct advantages coming to families from being associated, there are some remarkably positive effects on society, which makes this issue a central one today. A deeper insight into the contribution of family associations to revitalising the welfare systems can be gained through the concept of social capital.

Relational sociology defines social capital as a type of relationship that values goods and services through exchanges which, rather than being financial, political, clientelist, or a pure gift, are based on social reciprocity (Donati, 2014c; 2014d). To define reciprocity, it is important to understand the nature of the exchange as an expected and practised gratutitousness that is, first of all, the gift of *trust*; this, in turn, triggers readiness to cooperate and reciprocate. Therefore, *social capital is a social relationship based on trust and inviting reciprocal cooperation*. This said, social capital should not be seen as a resource to draw from or to be activated by individuals bonded to a particular context; rather, it could be called a way of linking bonds and resources through an exchange among persons who trust, and cooperate with, one another. In this sense, the first social capital relationship, where trust, reciprocity and openness to others have their origin, is the family. This makes it extremely useful to refer to social capital when dealing with family associations.

All the aspects, those which the current sociological thought attributes to the concept of social capital, appear strictly connected with the bonds existing within family associations, namely, trust among members, solidarity, the capacity to start networks and the formation of cooperative relationships aimed at a shared good rather than individual interest (Rossi, 2007). Besides, social capital prospers from the ineliminable tension between particularism and solidarity: in fact, it originates from primary bonds which trigger a chain reaction, whereby secondary relationships are initiated on the basis of intentional agreements. Family relationships, generating relational wellbeing, produce *primary social capital*, which multiplies until it reaches *secondary level*, in so far as families direct their trust and solidarity outwards.

By promoting the shifting of social capital from primary to secondary level, family associations provide resources to help the family find its own way of meeting its needs. Thus, family associations empower a specific competency of family relationships, whereby interdependence (of individual and inter-subjective rights, individual and social identities, gender and generational belonging) is continually renewed: this regeneration process triggers the wellbeing of families

and not only individuals. The families that establish links with other families within a family association occupy an intermediate (*mesolevel*) position between family (*microlevel*) and society (*macrolevel*) and hold together the individuals' need to belong and be connected with social institutions; their ability to achieve this goal is proportional to that of operating jointly with other associations. The social capital thus generated becomes a relational common good for the entire society and flows back to the families – which then increase their primary capital – as a right to full social citizenship (Carrà, 2006; Rossi, 2007).
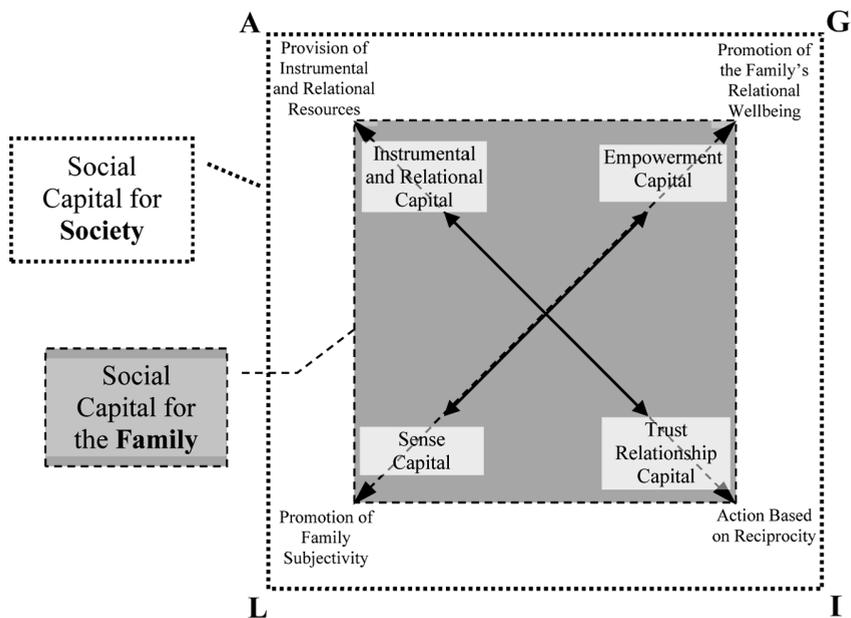

*Fig. 7. **Aspects of the family associations' social capital, according to AGIL, as to family and society (source: Carrà, 2006)***

Family associations, therefore, represent social capital for: a) their member families, b) the community they belong to, and c) society as a whole. According to the internal or external value connoting their social capital, different aspects will emerge (Fig. 7): an *instrumental and relational* aspect constitutes an obvious form of capital for the families (who socialise their problems and can avail themselves of more conspicuous practical resources) and for society (whose wealth increases as goods are autonomously produced in people's vital worlds); the most evident consequences of an associative action are, for families, an *enhanced capacity to respond to their own needs* and, for society, the *production of people's wellbeing through the empowerment of the relationships they exist within*; this is possible because relationships between families are based on a *trust pact* urging them to help one another, and because such a specifically family-based code of action is reflected in society as a series of widespread interventions based on a networking attitude.

Using the terminology introduced some time ago in the debate on this issue (Gittell & Vidal, 1998; Narayan,1999; Putnam, 2000; Donati, 2007), the *bonding* social capital enriches

and strengthens inner bonds, first within the family and then within individual associations; the *bridging* social capital builds bridges between individual bodies, inducing associations to come together in order to circulate more resources and capitalise their respective experiences and competencies; the *linking* social capital is formed when associations realise that creating partnerships with other social subjects can further improve their response to family needs (Halpern, 2005; Rossi & Boccacin, 2006).

It is in this capacity that family associations can contribute to strengthening social bonds, not only because the constitution of social partnerships (Boccacin, 2013; 2014) is paramount in overcoming inequality in codes, resources and power through reciprocal, equal relationships, but also because a family association entering a partnership would automatically shift its perspective towards a *plural, communitarian family welfare,* the only form of welfare to be potentially *family friendly*.

Conclusion

In answering the first question – how many ways of being a family association exist and what are they? – an array of various typologies has been drawn from the relevant pieces of literature. In light of relational sociology, different family association modes can be identified through four intersecting criteria: 1) the presence of families; 2) members' relationship to the need(s) the association responds to; 3) associative mission; 4) intervention styles. Through these criteria, a map can be drawn, with associations placed at varying distances from the core of a family association in the strict sense.

In responding to the second question – in what sense can family associations be an irreplaceable resource for society? – a deeper insight has been gained through the concept of social capital. Therefore, family associations can express the three functions of social capital: through the *bonding* social capital, they bring families to strenghten bonds with one another, within primary and informal social networks; through the *bridging* social capital, family associations come together in order to circulate their respective experiences and competencies, leveraging on specific family values, trust and reciprocity; through the *linking* social capital, family associations become part of plural and subsidiary welfare.

In conclusion, family associations arise from the capability of families to take action aimed towards their own well-being, and disseminate a *family* way of addressing people's needs. In this sense, family associations offer a decisive contribution to the renewal of the welfare system, thus counteracting the culture of welfarism.

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