THE
ITALIAN
AMERICAN
FAMILY

Lydio F. Tomasi

Center for Migration Studies
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The Southern Italian Family’s Process of Adjustment to an Urban America

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Center for Migration Studies
New York
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THE ITALIAN AMERICAN FAMILY
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THE TRANSPPLANTED FAMILY IN CONTEMPORARY RESEARCH ON AMERICAN SOCIETY

Since World War II, in all parts of the world most social systems have been moving quickly or slowly, toward some form of the conjugal family system and also toward industrialization. Many social scientists argue that the conjugal family system, with its standards of ascription, particularism and diffuseness, ideally is not permitted to interfere with the demands of industrialization, whose standards are achievement-based and universalistic. The concomitant emergence of the conjugal family and industrialization could suggest that all change and all causal relations flow from one single, global factor, such as industrialism, and that such modern phenomena as migration, urbanization and acculturation must necessarily weaken or destroy the system of closely knit kinship bonds outside the nuclear family which characterizes most of the "folk" societies. "Modified extended family" theories, however, show that there is both a need and a capacity for extended families to exist in modern society, and that geographical mobility does not necessarily result in a lessening of ideological or emotional commitment to kin.

In looking for how and why massive socioeconomic changes hinder or help to outweigh the resistance of family systems, the southern Italian migratory experience seems almost an ideal case. In fact, most of the many millions of immigrants who came to the United States from Italy were southern Italian peasants. However, they did not generally enter farming occupations in America. Rather, they clustered primarily in the industrial centers of the North: New York, Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago, Baltimore, Detroit. The study of the Italian family undergoing the acculturation process in the United States is an ideal area in which to examine the interrelationships among cultural, social and psychological events. Previous researchers have focused on only two of these dimensions at a time, studying individuals against a family background in which the dynamic principles are never clearly specified. One has to observe the full range of cultural, social, psychological and biological variables—the individual within the family as the small primary group within the larger social system with its system of values in a particular geographical setting—which are involved in the events of family life and the adaptation of the individual family member.

The main purpose of this paper is to delimit the contemporary controversy on the nature of the southern Italian family system, which has a special significance of the renewed interest in the persistence of ethnic identity in the face of strong forces for change. Teachers, social workers or guidance counselors must understand the conflict which ensues from the fact that the American school encourages the southern European student to pursue personal goals rather than those his family has laid down for him.

The family field must move from traditional sociological theory toward theoretical models which reflect more closely the enormous complexity of the subject matter. James Walters and Nick Stinnett, reviewing a decade of research, conclude: "It is interesting that theory upon which our research is based concerning parent-child relationships frequently ignores changes in roles among social classes and among ethnic groups over a period of time. That parents have a differential impact among various ethnic groups, and that this impact is different at various stages of the family life cycle, is not always carefully delineated." Carl Fred B. Broderick echoes that conclusion: "One of the distinguishing features of family theoretical development in this decade is the extent to which . . . new conceptual frameworks are beginning to grow out of the work done among different racial and ethnic groups within U.S. society."
Actually, observed John Spiegel, there is no such thing as a single family type which can be said to be representative of all America.9

The social context of immigration is more diffuse and cannot be as clearly explicated as the historical and political contexts, but it is nonetheless real and important. Immigration was not an indiscriminate coming of unsocialized people without a past history. Immigrants were not just numbers. The United States got a good deal more out of immigration than just people. It acquired an immigrant culture, which is a distinctive quality now recognized as ethnic pluralism. One of the major goals of recent American immigration policy as enunciated in Congress is family reunification. The family reunion goal was a primary purpose of the 1965 amendments to the Immigration and Nationality Act. The exclusion of certain members of the immediate family from any ceilings and the assignment of 74 percent of available visas to preference categories reserved for family members underlines the family reunification goal. In 1970, 24,397 Italian immigrants came to the United States. Southern Italian immigration is family-based whereas, for instance, the Irish pattern of immigration shows that single young men and women usually make up the bulk of emigrants. A study of County Clare, Ireland, demonstrates that after the practice of dividing family holdings among children ceased in about 1852, it became necessary for children to leave the family homestead and seek their livelihoods elsewhere.10 Southern Italians, however, did not leave their homeland because the traditional family system was realigning itself.

In, A Family Business, the Iannis argue that it is the bonds of kinship—not crime or some network of conspiracy—which tie Italian American crime families together and to one another.11 “Because of the intensity of the Italian family structure,” wrote Robert Critchon, the author of The Secret of Santa Vittoria, “the acute loneliness of the removal that often leads to unhappiness, restlessness, self-doubt—but also creativity—is not too common as yet in Italian American culture.” To the question asked by Mario Puzo: “Why have writers of Italian descent made hardly any impact on the American public?” social historians answer that a basic difficulty has been attitudes of the immigrant parents toward education.12 In his study, “The Social Background of the Italo-American School Child,” Leonard Covello observed that “during the three decades or more that the Italian immigrant has been established in our large urban centers, in immigrant communities in which he tried to create a replica of the social milieu of his homeland, there has gone on a process of cultural transition, the nature and the extent of which have only been superficially appraised.”13 His main conclusion is that “the family pattern, that is its social basis, is for all practical purposes one of the main sources of maladjustment in the American milieu.”14

American interpretations of immigrant adjustment have commonly failed to respect the unique cultural attributes of the many and varied ethnic groups which settled in the United States. Although the Italians endured almost all of the hardships experienced by today’s urban poor, they did not—despite the additional difficulty of having to adjust for the first time to an urban-industrial society—develop significant family disorganization.15

If the southern Italian family was not “disrupted” by immigration and settlement in an urban society, in what way did it change and in what way did it influence the first, second and third generations of Italian Americans?

THE FAMILY AS THE SOCIAL WORLD OF SOUTHERN ITALIANS

The starting point of the evolution of the southern Italian family is necessarily found in the condition of this social unit in southern Italy prior to and during the mass emigration from 1880 to 1910.

With the southern part of the peninsula (Figure I), wrote Marion I. Newbigin, we come to a world apart, strikingly different from the remainder of Italy.16 It is one of the world’s underdeveloped and overpopulated regions; it suffers from high pressures of population on land resources and low standards of living. But “life in the south exalts the family.”17 The family is the meeting place of the experience of the peasant’s social, economic and affective life. Its members, wrote Giovanni Verga, are “united like the fingers of the hand.”18

The concept of the family subsumes two institutions. The larger and less important of the two refers to the family as a social group—the famiglia—and includes all blood and in-law relatives up to the fourth degree as well as those to whom one is related through godparenthood. The more important of the two units—the nuclear family—has reference to the family of procreation (father, mother, unmarried children), as well as the few godparents contracted during one’s life cycle. An expanded household
would include the members of the family of procreation and some single relatives, while an extended household would refer to two related family members of procreation.

The essential feature of the social system is the nuclear family. The nuclear family is tightly knit and headed by the oldest surviving male, who is generally the father. The nuclear family is “father-dominated but mother-oriented.” The father is the head of the family. No one, not even the eldest son, undertakes an enterprise without first obtaining his father’s blessing as an indication of permission. Despite the strong family feeling, a husband only occasionally shows his affection openly for his wife. When ordinary disagreements arise between them, neither brooks any interference by others. Popular consent gives the father the right to discipline his children and even his wife. “Like a good weapon, she should be cared for properly; like a hat she should be kept straight; like a mule she should be given plenty of work and occasional beatings. Above all, she should be kept in her place as a subordinate, for there is no peace in the house where a woman leads her husband.”

The mother rules the home merely as an interpreter of her husband’s wishes; even when he does not deserve it, she loves and obeys him. She has two other outstanding functions: to select wives for her sons and to hold the family purse. She takes charge both of her husband’s earnings and those of her unmarried children. Each child gives according to his or her ability and is furnished with funds at the proper time according to his or her needs. The daughter’s dowry becomes the joint responsibility of the father and the brothers. The mother buys all the provisions for the home and all the clothing. Regardless of advanced age, the mother does not yield her position to her eldest son’s wife, but the latter does the bulk of the work. The obedience and submission of the daughter-in-law is the price of family accord.

All the sons in a family are regarded as more important social assets than daughters. The primary basis for this seems to be the dowry system, which makes every daughter represent a debt that sooner or later must be paid. The precedence given sons over their sisters in family relationships is also

FIGURE I
THE SOUTHERN PROVINCES OF ITALY AS OF 1915
explained as fitting them for their future positions as husbands and fathers in this strongly patriarchal
group. Boys and girls in schools and public places are carefully kept separate, but their preparation for
marriage is quite different. The appearance of heterosexual interest in males is frankly recognized,
whereas premarital lives of females are marked by careful surveillance and always under their mother's
watchful eye or both would be criticized and lose status. Typically "honor" means "chastity" for girls
and fidelity for married women. The taboos that enforce chastity upon women and especially unmarried
girls set them upon a lofty pedestal above the passions that admittedly sweep the masculine world. The
only physical trait generally thought indispensable in a marriageable girl is slenderness, since "fat
women are sterile." Provided she is chaste, a girl can generally find some kind of husband. Girls who
are not virgins at the time of marriage can be repudiated by their husbands. The matter of virginity is
checked by the mother-in-law and sometimes also by the girl's own mother on the morning following the
consummation of the marriage. Examination of the sheet on the bridal bed is the test. A bride is
looked upon as a field ready for planting and the condition of the field is the chief concern. With such
ideas of seclusion, chaperonage, virginity, fecundity and feminine physique fully sanctioned by society,
a girl has her career well mapped out for her.

The nuclear family is a social group with centrifugal tendencies; at marriage children establish new
households apart from either set of parents. A local proverb advises: "If you wish a happy life, stay away
from your relatives." Sexual considerations and romantic love play little part in the selection of one's
partner in life. The prospective bridegroom is allowed to "see" his "fiancée," without kissing or
touching, only three times between the engagement announcement and the marriage, and never alone.
The bonds of affection that keep man and wife together are thus formed after marriage in the making
and maintaining of a home and family.

Closely associated with each nuclear family are first cousins and godparents of each of the members.
Godparental ties are forged at the time of baptism, confirmation and marriage. The godparent is, ideally,
treated with deference. His or her specific obligation to a godchild is to set a moral example. The
godparent is the only one outside the family circle in whom the child may confide. Although the girl
is very seldom coerced into marrying a man she dislikes, sometimes she succeeds in picking the
candidate, confiding her choice to her godmother who goes to his mother. If the man's mother thinks
well of the match, the girl's parents are then brought into the matter and the size of the dowry is
discussed. With all parties concerned satisfied, the matter is finally settled. The ambition of every mother
is to see her daughters married as the consummation of her mission, before her death. Men assert that
a wife might always be found somewhere. When a couple plans the details of their marriage, they choose
their witnesses with the greatest care, for these two automatically become godparents to their first born.
Although godparenthood refers to ties that are spiritual rather than of blood, often it refers to a
combined relationship, since godparents are frequently the brother and the sister of the baby's parents.
In any case, godparental ties are of great significance. The most exceptional power attributed to
godparenthood is that children inherit personality factors from these spiritual parents, despite the
extent to which such patterns conflict with the children's own conceptions of themselves.

The close relationship of family members in the eyes of the community makes the actions of each of
the greatest concern to all, especially because of their bearing upon the marriageability of each. The
southern Italian, in fact, shows concern over issues which affect him vitally or affect the well being of
his immediate family, but he shows almost pathological distrust toward persons outside the small circle
of the family of procreation, although he distrusts least those who live within the sound of the local
church bell. "You can trust members of your own family first, relatives second, Sicilians third, Italians
fourth, and forget about the rest of them." 20 This campanilismo finds particular expression in the strong
societal taboo on marrying outside the immediate community. The contracting parties should at least
be known to each other's relatives. Associated with this type of family organization is interfamily
antagonism manifested particularly in the jealousy of property rights indicated by elaborate marks of
ownership. Those who are not in the family circle are regarded with fear and hostility, because the
greater access an individual has to one's house the more of a threat he represents.

Although individuals act as if their social worlds were circumscribed by the nuclear family, they are
required to rely on many others besides parents and siblings. The clustering of anxiety and disaffection
around extrafamilial relations can be understood as a product of the incongruity between the instru-
mental social techniques they learn in order to manage others of their family and the social environment with which they really have to cope. The structure of the family is inextricably associated with the structure of the society of which it is a part. But in southern Italy, to a large degree, the whole social system and the family system coincide. The family sentiment is practically the only sentiment with a social content. The nuclear family is a closely knit organization within which the larger family solidarity is fostered and handed down from generation to generation. The family is a small universe, an inclusive social world. Only in this environment, predictability and mutual trust reign supreme. Upon the death of a father, for example, relatives assume more or less cheerfully the job of helping the widow and orphans. The only people obliged to seek shelter in the poorhouses are those pathetic persons who have no family. The unity of society is the family, not the individual, and family relationships give the individual his or her status and guarantee a measure of security. One does not so much “achieve” anything as “obtain” something in southern Italy. An individual’s destiny is predetermined by being born into a family that owns land or into one that does not. His or her fortune is predetermined by the inability to earn a livelihood sufficient to achieve the cultural symbols pertinent to upward mobility. Absence of the means to acquire those symbols of status places an effective ceiling on the upward mobility. That ceiling blocks aspirations for enhanced prestige throughout the rural areas of southern Italy. Individuals, therefore, cannot be viewed apart from the nuclear family. The bonds of their social responsibilities are circumscribed by the advantage of the nuclear family, as if they were following this rule: “Maximize the material short-run advantage of the nuclear family; assume that all others will do likewise.” 21 Goodness and badness exist for them mainly in connection with two statuses, that of “parent” and that of “outsider-who-may-affect-the-family.”

The southern Italian culture has clearly a unifying focus properly characterized as “familism,” which seems to be the ethos of peasantry. But Edward C. Banfield is not justified in qualifying this familism as “amoral,” because in the psychocultural and economic context in which southern Italians are now considered, that is the only possible morality.22 There is not any evidence to extend familism to prove the sociopolitical absentecism of southern Italians.23 However, Banfield’s central argument that the ethos or Weltanschauung of the southern Italian community is centered around the family is accepted by most social scientists. The individual is socially and interiorly organized around the family, which determines status, roles and values. Personality is developed out of, and is sustained by, this essentially familistic orientation. Familism as referring to a kind of central pervasive psychic interest and cultural value emanating from the family system is summarized in Figure II.

The young man finds himself inserted in a closed familistic system that includes the four areas of obedience and dedication, solidarity, fidelity and generosity, and respect, which are centered around the parental figures demanding a specific moral behavior. The whole system as seen by the subject, rotates around the father’s figure, to whom is granted the right of utilizing all the components of the system—including the figures in authority—for the interest and, eventually, the defense of the family. Parts of the psychomoral familistic system are also the fiancée and the invisible world of the supernatural realities, that consecrate and sanction on the level of the absolute, the moral familistic relationships.

THE INTERGENERATIONAL PROCESS FROM FAMILISM TOWARD INDIVIDUALISM

The geographical mobility of the population is a permanent fact. Today, every young man and women is in a state of migration—even if they do not go away—and remains in an environment of cultural and, therefore, personality change. And yet migration had many unusual consequences for southern Italian peasants. They lost a great deal of background, in which old country conditions favored development of a fixed, closed and regulated familistic system of cultural forms. They left this closed community for an open and impersonal one.

Since integration is a matter of generations, the maintenance of family solidarity in the first generation should assist the integration process in the second. The acceptance of cultural pluralism during the first generation should offer greater prospects of accomplishing the ultimate merging during the second and third generations. But the study of assimilation would remain on its most superficial level if it stopped at pluralistic integration as the mode of coadaptation of migrant groups in industrial societies.
Immigrants are not just things or categories of various sexes and ages and cultures and economic systems, but they are individual human beings, "grappling with the anxieties and pleasures of life in a new world." In the process of adjustment, which is a very slow process of growth without sudden jumps, the central concern is the personality equilibrium of the individual. As shown in the second section of this paper, in the southern Italian familistic system the individual is alienated. The dimension of kinship seems to absorb the dimension of the individual. This is in contrast with the "afamilistic" individualism of the urban industrial American society. The cultural values of peasant southern Italians, for example, are in contrast with those of the American middle-class family toward which the Italian Americans are moving in the acculturation process (Table 1).

TABLE 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subculture</th>
<th>Man-Nature</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Relational</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Italian-American</td>
<td>Subjugation to Nature</td>
<td>Present</td>
<td>Being</td>
<td>Collateral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anglo-American</td>
<td>Mastery over Nature</td>
<td>Future</td>
<td>Doing</td>
<td>Individualistic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This brief sketch of the two value orientation profiles reveals the extent of the cultural gap that confronts Italian families when they arrive in the United States. It takes a long time before the process of acculturation makes much of a change in the Italian's value system. As the shift takes place, however, the spouses in these families often find themselves in conflict with each other because the shift to the American value orientation has been unequal. Although some American values have been partially adopted, the old native patterns have not been wholly relinquished. In a strange situation, as in a foreign land, lack of prior experience makes culturally appropriate roles difficult to achieve and the observer does not know how to define the situation. This produces an internal ambiguity or malintegration of values within the individual. We can then assume that familism can be taken as a cultural scheme integrating the personality of southern Italian immigrants. Consequently, the alienation and other psychological crises experienced by southern Italian immigrants arose primarily out of their familistic personality orientation. Thus, only by reintegrating and restructuring their personalities in the direction of enhancing their valuation of the human person and of personal values could these immigrants overcome their crises. But was the necessary transition of the family system toward a new integration, reflecting the changes going on in society, a conscious effort of moving from "familism" toward a distinctive individualism characterized by solidarity which arises out of collaboration for the good of the community or was it toward a "splendid isolation?"

A transition did take place in the transplanted southern Italian family. As la miseria—the degraded and impoverished condition of the peasant and the humiliation in the fact of it—was intensified, the old traditions in the structure of family life were strengthened, so were industrialization, a chance of upward mobility and a more modern and progressive family culture. The southern Italian peasants who migrated to the United States in the early 1900s were proletarian villagers unaccustomed to urban industrialization. Their adjustment in this totally new physical, social and cultural environment was guided by traditional customs and laws that were suited to the former time and place. First- and second-generation southern Italian Americans in urban ghettos were in effect "villagers" in that their familism was derived from their ethnic backgrounds. The degrees of loyalty to one's family followed a kind of genetic progression. The slow and complicated movement of the first- and second-generation Italian families away from the southern Italian pattern and toward the contemporary American family "type" may be better visualized in Table 2.

THE FIRST-GENERATION SOUTHERN ITALIAN FAMILY IN AMERICA

The first generation southern Italian family embodies the initial contact and conflict stages in the process of acculturation. This is a family in transition, marked by considerable confusion and conflict. The very fact of physical separation from the parental family and village culture, the necessity for the housewife to work outside of the home for wages and to operate with a somewhat strange and foreign environment and tools, urban ecological conditions and, above all, the children "going American" produce the incipient uneasiness among southern Italian immigrants. But the main source of conflict is their familistic culture contrasting with the emergence of a new awareness of selves as they begin to think of themselves as individuals.

Familism colors the value-orientation of the first-generation southern Italian immigrants. Values more connected with the familistic orientation remain substantially unchanged, while other values evolve more rapidly. When familistic values are central in the motivation of "actors," their roles tend to assume the conservation and expansion of the family or of the individual within the family ingroup. The traditional heritage serves as ideological function for the individuals of that society. The "expected" behavior of the young does not vary proportionally to the evolution and growth of the individual, but it remains substantially the "expectation" of a "minor," (that is, anyone who does not have the status of the head-of-the-family), whose behavior must be determined by sociofamilistic responsibilities. The individual is a function of the family, totally dependent upon parental authority. The gratification of sexual impulses must be suspended according to the fundamental criterion of the family interests. Scholastic achievement, job or fiancée are values in view of a better "position" or "honor" of the family, and interpersonal relationships outside of the family's nucleus are almost eliminated.

It becomes increasingly difficult to play these roles in a milieu different from the traditional one of a closed and stationary society. In such a society the environment, which is cultural continuity with the
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Southern Italian Peasant Family in Italy</th>
<th>1st Generation Southern Italian Family in America</th>
<th>2nd Generation Southern Italian Family in America</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General Characteristics:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patriarchal</td>
<td>Fictitiously patriarchal</td>
<td>Tends to be democratic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stationary</td>
<td>Mobile</td>
<td>High degree of mobility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active community life</td>
<td>Active in Italian neighborhood</td>
<td>Active in American community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children live for parents</td>
<td>Children live for themselves</td>
<td>Parents live for children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Many family celebrations</td>
<td>Few family celebrations</td>
<td>Christmas and Thanksgiving only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong in-group solidarity</td>
<td>Weakened in-group solidarity</td>
<td>Little in-group solidarity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Many children</td>
<td>Fair number of children</td>
<td>Few children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roles and Statuses:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father has high status</td>
<td>Father loses high status</td>
<td>Father shares his status with family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother center of home only;</td>
<td>Mother may work for some wages and belongs</td>
<td>Mother reserves time for much social life and work for wages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>does not work for wages</td>
<td>to some clubs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women are educated for marriage only</td>
<td>Women receive some formal education</td>
<td>Emphasis is on general education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpersonal Relations:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husband and wife must not show affection</td>
<td>They tolerate it in married children</td>
<td>Husband and wife may be demonstrative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys are superior to girls</td>
<td>Boys are regarded as superior to girls</td>
<td>Boys regarded as superior, but girls have high status also</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selection of mate by parent</td>
<td>Selection of mate by individual with parental consent</td>
<td>Selection of mate by individual regardless of parental consent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Must marry someone in the same village</td>
<td>At least same region and religion</td>
<td>Increasing marriages outside nationality and religion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dowry rights</td>
<td>No dowry</td>
<td>No dowry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No birth control</td>
<td>Some birth control</td>
<td>Birth control is the rule</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex matters are not discussed in family</td>
<td>Sex matters not discussed in family</td>
<td>Sex matters increasingly discussed in family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No divorce allowed</td>
<td>Divorce not allowed, but some do divorce</td>
<td>Religion forbids divorce, but it is practiced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desertion is rare</td>
<td>Desertion is rare</td>
<td>Desertion is rare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family provides a specific way of life</td>
<td>Family is in conflict</td>
<td>Family reflects confused American situation, but marginally is weakened</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: a Adapted from Paul J. Campisi, "Ethnic Family Patterns: The Italian Family in the United States, American Journal of Sociology, 53:444–446. May, 1948."
family, seals the individual from suggestions extraneous to ideological patrimony and strengthens the normative system of the family through general conformism and public "dishonor" affecting the deviant from the "expected" role. But in the open, dynamic, pluralistic and urban American society the individual soon finds an inner psychomoral conflict, with regard to essential roles, because the authentically individualistic environment pushes toward an independent and egocentric realization of the roles of the young, rewarding with social prestige the eventual transgression of the parental norm of role. Unfamiliar with the autonomous and rational decision-making process and without the framework of a set of superior values, immigrants keenly experience a "moral impotence" under a strong instinctual pressure strengthened by a stimulating environment. Its consequences are anxiety, insecurity and crisis.

The practice of courtship by individuals and the selection of mates on the basis of romantic love regarded as an inalienable right in the new society create some of the most serious disagreements within the family, which expects that any dating has its conclusion in marriage, and finds it difficult to understand the American girl who puts herself only on a purely friendly level. The problems imposed on Italian girls by the greater freedom of association with the other sex are met with little more to guide them than their mother's traditional admonitions. The stigma on exogamy has not been forgotten, but it starts breaking down because a man and a woman become acquainted while working in the same place of business. In sharp contrast to the American conception of marriage as "companionate" and as a service to the spouses, in the southern Italian culture marriage is considered a familistic institution. It is structured with the goal of contribution to the realization of the essential functions of the family as an ingroup: its physical and cultural identity, its perpetuation in the children, its social and material rise. The conjugal link is, therefore, irrevocably welded to the intrafamily solidarity; separation and divorce become unthinkable. That solidarity will psychologically continue even after death, because everything must be done or mutually sacrificed to keep the "two together." Besides, the conjugal dyad is "unbalanced" toward the male pole: the wife always, at the end, must give in to the husband's opinion, although there are degrees in acceptance of the old mores. When a woman questions the authority of her father or husband, her waywardness is blamed on lack of discipline during her childhood. But the disciplining of children in this country is controlled by laws. Fathers of the first generation and their children both know this and are influenced by it. The southern Italian has not yet adjusted to this situation adequately, either by developing new methods for inculcation that society expects, or by learning those currently conceived in America as the correct devices for child training. The children thus grow up with less sense of the significance of social laws than did their parents. Irrational method of indoctrination through repetition of the norm and its fixation through a reward-punishment system of the "consecrated" southern Italian immigrant father "is of little use to his children in their effort to adjust to a new world." 26

In this transition from the stagnant, gregarious and rural sociocultural system of southern Italy to the dynamic, individualistic and urban America system, intercultural and intergenerational conflict and changes intermingle, but it is possible to detect psychological dynamics of the social integration of the southern Italian immigrant family. The first phase is marked by isolation and anomie. Immigrants lack experience of social interaction outside of the family. They are bewildered at the "desecration" of the family values and are forced, in a defensive move, to reevaluate their own traditional values, but without avoiding the weakening of their normative character. They uncritically accept new norms not as values internally bounding, but as procedures or instrumental indications; deeply they remain anchored in the set of internalized familistic values. This behavioristic incoherence has functional reasons not always clear, and is always accompanied with anxiety, a sense of guilt and tendency of "returning." Change or cultural adjustment takes place in the effort of synthesizing the old and new values. Frustrations, privations and loss of self-respect which are derived from living in a new society with the cultural instrument of the old country generate an awareness of limitations of one's own values and a thrust to adopt new ones. Such adjustment takes place in a selective way; that is, according to the dispositions of the changing personalities of the interacting cultures. While assimilation is smooth and fast on the level of economic progress, education, equality and order, it is much more difficult for the southern Italian immigrant to accept the individualistic spirit of the American culture with the "independence of women and children," a spirit which opposes on all levels the southern Italian spirit of
gregarious dependence on the family. For the “economic” to be focused on the values level is a cultural heresy. But is it possible in an industrial society to keep nonintegrated the level of economic instrumentation and the level of goals?

Culture is, in fact, a function of the social system that it serves. For southern Italian immigrants from a familistic society coming into an individualistic afamilistic culture, a thrust to change their familistic culture becomes a functional necessity. In reality, the process of change starts from the periphery and moves toward the nucleus of family relations. Young male southern Italian immigrants admit that it is possible to change the “Italian” ideal of the family. The qualities men like to see in their future wives are more personal than related to the family, and most of them would like to equally share authority in the family. Some agree that the wife may work outside of the family. Although, de facto, almost all women are engaged in factory or industrial work, the “spirit” is still familistic. There is, again, a dichotomy between cultural norm and behavior. The work of women outside of the family does not mean the acceptance of women’s rights to “expand” in their social and professional lives, but to take advantage of a miraculous occasion to help the “progress” of the family. Most immigrants overcame the old southern Italian model of restriction, or even segregation, of girls to the house. However, the evolution does not notch the essence of the familistic cultural model, because almost all still admit the discriminating distinction between men and women in the rights to social life, and uphold the necessity of a social control, denying to women the exercise of an autonomous responsibility. So, in spite of some practical compromises and certain incoherent forms of behavior, the substance and its “informing spirit” of a familistic culture still remains. Its persistence is related to the whole social system. It is not the family directly involved, but the entire socioeconomic system which conditions the family’s functions. Such a system originated “familism,” because it forced the family to completely assume the obligation of protecting and serving the individual, in conditions of such structural isolation and socioeconomic precariousness that it called for a concentration of the family on primary needs and its authoritarian and depersonalizing “polarization” of all its members for survival.

THE SECOND-GENERATION SOUTHERN ITALIAN FAMILY IN AMERICA

Many scholars of the second- and third-generation Italian American family see patterns of organization and orientation similar to those of strong patriarchy in the medieval Italian family and of obedience to tradition in the southern Italian family. They describe the patterns of family structure among Italian Americans as initially patriarchal; in subsequent generations, as Italian Americans become assimilated, they would begin to internalize American family norms and generate the kind of matricentric family structure characteristic of American family life.

The range of class and regional differences among American family patterns seems to preclude significant statements of central tendency presupposed by that oversimplified view, which does not take into consideration the partial pluralism of American society. “On one hand, we do not yet have measures of the centrality and durability of ethnicity in the personalities of Americans. On the other hand, we do not fully know the extent of influence ethnicity has had on American family patterns.” From ongoing research it seems to emerge that among Italian American families there exists simultaneously a patriarchal and matriarchal family authority structure. The patriarchy is public and conscious, the matriarchy is “hidden” and unconscious. The authority of the father appears to be one of verbalizing final decisions, but the home is the domain of the wife. She attempts in every way to reduce any disagreements to questions about the household where she has jurisdiction, and she reminds the husband that as the father of the family it is his obligation to command what is right, but she points out what the right thing is. Thus, she avoids face-to-face confrontation and power conflict which enables her to maintain publicly and consciously her convictions and beliefs in a patriarchal system while at the same time actually retaining power. The father is the legitimate authority who has a certain amount of power, but the influences of industrialization and urbanization have served to decrease the degree of power of the patriarch. The father rules according to ideals and law. The ideals are established by the family, however and the law is what is taken by the members of the family as the right thing to do. On the other hand, the traditional affiliation of Italians with Roman Catholicism serves to strengthen the authority of the father in the family. The fact that children in this adult-centered family are not planned affects the way in which parents relate to them and the methods by which they raise them
without being concerned with “developing” them. Second-generation parents have accepted the need for education, but they—like their own parents—have continued to maintain the traditional demand that within the household the child must obey parental rules. The adolescent, however, does not accept the traditional pattern and searches for “action” which generates a state of quasi-hypnotic excitement enabling the individual to feel that he is in control both of his own drives and of the environment. It allows him to forget that he is living in a routine-seeking world, where “they,” that is, the routine-seeking adults, make and enforce most of the rules. The second-generation Italian is apt to choose his wife for reasons other than thrift, industry and knowledge of housekeeping. Sentiment plays a part to a degree unknown before, but to the girl’s parents the American innocent freedom of dating seems like wild behavior threatening their family honor. Coeducation has particularly devastated the old taboos on social intercourse between boys and girls and the traditional southern Italian belief that sexual intercourse is unavoidable when a man and a woman are by themselves. The barriers between male and female are translated into a “marital relationship that can be best described as “segregated,” as distinguished from the “joint” relationship that characterizes the middle-class family. There is less communication and conversation between husband and wife and much less gratification of emotional needs of one spouse by the other. These functions are handled by other members of the extended family. But families are smaller among second-generation southern Italians than among their parents. Women of the first-generation became pregnant every year or so, because of the passive and subordinate condition of the wife and of the strength of religious taboos against any interference with sexual impulse. Children do not appear so frequently in the second-generation Italian families. The average number of children born to an Italian woman in the 1910 census is six, while in the 1940 census, the average number is about five and one half. 30 However, the high fecundity of Italian women before 1920 is not only due to familism, but also to the biological selection of immigrant women and to their high and early marriage-ability. After 1920, there is a rapid and continuous diminution due to the transition from a peasant environment to an industrial and urban one, but the astonishing rapidity with which the transition took place among Italian women has further reasons. World War I—except during the lustrum, 1920–25—stopped mass immigration. The economic crisis of the 1930s made it difficult for the working class to raise children and favored the propagation of anticonceptional methods. To the working class belongs the second-generation immigrants, who as “foreigners” were the first to be laid off from their jobs. During the period between the two World Wars there is, then, a strong tendency in the Italian immigrant group to conform very rapidly to the fecundity level prevailing in the American population. In this sense, in the span of twenty years the demographic assimilation of the Italians seems to be complete, according to census statistics. That this implies an equally complete and definitive acceptance of the new customs and of new ideas about the meaning and function of the family is only an hypothetical induction. After 1936, American statistics ceased to present data of births by groups of immigrants, and there are no data at all about births of the second-generation of immigrants, which would be essential to assess the demographic assimilation of the Italian group.

The individual of the second-generation is, in fact, socialized under a dual influence of American and Italian culture. Consequently, he is in a state of psychological conflict. “The second-generation Italian cannot escape from being a member of American society and from being constantly shown that he will be punished, or will not be rewarded, by his fellow Americans for behaving like an Italian. The Italian part of the community likewise demands that individuals conform to certain norms if they are to be accepted as members of the group, and rewards individuals for living as members of the group.” 31

The second-generation southern Italians react to this conflict in different ways. They tend to adjust either by completely abandoning any tie with the southern Italian heritage and passing for an American (the “rebel” reaction), but this is rare; or by gradually shaping the structure and functions of the family in accordance with the contemporary urban American type of family, maintaining intimate communication with parental household and with immigrant relatives (the “in-group” reaction), and this is the most representative type; or by orienting inward toward an Italian way of life, but this is very rare.

The “Rebel” Reaction

The “rebel” reaction to nationality problems involves the individual achieving complete acceptance by the American group by getting rid of habits and associations that mark a person as Italian. The rebel
reaction is found in an expressed preference for marrying a non-Italian, by marrying a person who is not of Italian descent or one who is of Italian descent but, also, a rebel against the Italian group. They desire to sever Italian affiliations with their parents and siblings and their expectations. While they do not wish to turn over their pay to their parents as expected by southern Italian family structure the individual generally is willing to accept the frustrations imposed by adherence to this tradition rather than suffer the frustrations that would result from arousing the parents’ hatred. In accordance with the American pattern of family organization the husband is determined not to dominate his wife but to have a relationship of equality with her, in his planning to give their children full information about sex, and in his wanting his wife not to devote herself to housework entirely but to have outside interests of her own and to be free to leave the house when she wishes. So, despite group barriers, the individual continues the effort to become thoroughly American.

The “In-group” Reaction

The “in-group” reaction strives to resolve the conflict brought about by the conditions of acculturation by accepting and confirming the affiliation with the Italians as a distinctive group within American society. The in-groupers show a greater tendency to date other Italians, but they do not restrict themselves entirely to them. Persons from other nationalities are generally supposed to provide more gratification in a casual relationship than Italians. But the in-groupers prefer an Italian spouse, because they think it will be better for them and for the family, to which they feel strong loyalty. They usually follow the Italian custom of turning over their entire pay to their parents, although they resent patriarchal rule. The tradition of large families is not sustained. “Barriers are imposed by the American group against the attainment of full membership in it by a second-generation Italian. These barriers do not lose their character as barriers when the in-group reaction is adopted. The individual is not actively striving for personal affiliation with the American group, but he is striving for the dominance in American society of the Italian group with which he has affiliated himself. Barriers set up against individual attainment in American society constitute also barriers against the rise in status of the Italians as a group. Thus, they remain a threat to the individual’s feeling of status and security, for that is gained in part through his identification with the group.” To the extent that a person is striving for acceptance by Americans, his affiliation with the Italian group is a barrier. The rebel responds to that barrier by hostility toward the Italian group. It is quite possible, Irving L. Child stated in his study of male second-generation Italians in New Haven, Connecticut, that the hostility of the in-grouper toward other nationalities represents a displacement of the aggression that is felt against the Italian group as a barrier.

The “Apathetic” Reaction

The “apathetic” reaction involves the attempt of the individual to become removed from the conflict situation by de-emotionalizing the symbols and facts relating to nationality and by an attempt to deny the significance of the societal and cultural conditions to which the individual is responding. In the course of this retreat, the emotional significance of the facts and symbols of nationality grouping is blurred and diminished. There is an effort at a compromise solution of the conflict. The apathetic individual does not show any marked tendency to restrict social life with either Italians or non-Italians. Nationality makes no difference in considering a possible spouse, although an Italian spouse is preferred to escape from barriers a non-Italian may impose. Most of the apathetic individuals turn over their entire pay to their parents, accepting an Italian cultural trait which is a very good symbol of the more general trait of family solidarity and parental control. This accommodation stage begins when children reach adulthood and marry and establish households of their own. The success of the first-generation family instills in the offspring respect and affection for the parents. The gradual understanding by the children that successful interaction with the American world is possible by accepting marginal roles assures them that complete denial of the Old World family is unnecessary. Considerable intermarriage makes the transition comparatively easy.
THE THIRD-GENERATION SOUTHERN ITALIAN FAMILY IN AMERICA

Italian Americans in the third generation and beyond tend not to exhibit these traditional patterns. The decimation of the family circle by differential mobility is one step in a larger social process that brings nuclear family members into a more intimate dependence on each other. The influence of industrialization and urbanization on fertility, residential mobility, occupational choice, class status, child rearing and other family behavior is evident. According to a recent Census Bureau study, for example (Figure III), women of Italian, Polish and Russian-Jewish origin have had fewer children than other white women generally. Katherine F. Sandalls found that Catholic third-generation women of Irish ethnic origin have higher mean cumulative fertility, higher fertility ideals, and higher fertility expectations than Catholic third-generation women of Italian ethnic origin regardless of the controls imposed on the data for nativity, religiousness, Catholic education or socioeconomic status. However, the view that the middle-class, suburban and upwardly mobile third-generation Italian Americans are familistic only to the same degree as others in their class, regardless of ethnicity, may also be familistic, and that they are losing their ethnic identity and are assimilating into American culture is based upon observation of only the most superficial levels of behavior. On another level, a retention and reinforcement of ethnic bonds seems too evident. On one hand, Italian Americans have learned to extend their sense of loyalty beyond the family and the village, and their successes in the United States have taught them to trust the government and to enter into a kind of clientele relationship with it. On the other hand, the rejection and prejudice experienced by the first- and second-generation Italian Americans in the larger community led many to reject their family allegiance and their heritage in order to become Americanized. These become a traditionless and socially disorganized group of individuals. Others responded to the attempts at amalgamation by reinforcing their traditional values and their “Italianness.” Out of the conflict of this second group with the American community, a modification of the lives of both parties was engendered so that today, as Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan concluded, the ethnic group is no longer a remnant of the past but a new social form. Once Italian Americans migrate into suburbia, their ecological and sociocultural characteristics of cohesive family life can be explained in terms of

FIGURE III
CHILDREN EVER BORN PER 1,000 WOMEN EVER MARRIED 35 TO 44 YEARS OLD BY RACE AND ETHNIC ORIGIN, FOR THE NONINSTITUTIONAL POPULATION, NOVEMBER 1969

suburban and middle-class culture than rather by their history. But, it remains open to research whether their familism can be traced more clearly to traditional roots than to middle-class culture.

THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN INDIVIDUAL, FAMILY AND SOCIETY

Further study is needed on the consistence and direction of the ongoing process of sociocultural change of the southern Italian family, in connection with the general process of transformation of the nation and of other ethnic groups. Unanswered questions are still how much and in what sense familistic culture and religion are related; how much the changes in attitude by southern Italians in this country toward the authority of the Church and the observance of religious duties have resulted in corresponding changes in the conceptions of parental control and of the rights of women.

Our analysis shows that in the southern Italian culture the key institution—"the only Italian institution"—is the family. As a functional consequence, the individual is absorbed by the family in-group and, therefore, alienated.56 Under the impact of an industrial civilization, the whole southern Italian familistic system is in a state of physical, cultural and social change. A psychic, moral and "spiritual" disturbance affects the immigrant's personality, which tends to disintegrate. Immigrants reveal anxiety, deep discontent, and moral deviance. They lack an individualistic orientation which is indispensable in a modern sociocultural system with a universalistic ideal of people and with attitudes defining social relations in general terms, without any consideration of the qualities of the interacting individuals or the circumstances of the interaction. In practice, the individual as such becomes the center of motivation of social relations. The immigrant's psychosocial crises, then, seem to be overcome only by the transition from familism to individualism. This does not imply that in an industrial society the family ceased to be functional.57 The general crisis of the immigrant family indicates only that the family in its present form and orientation is not functionally adequate to serve the individual in a new social context. The critical process of cultural assimilation and intergenerational adaptation of the southern Italian immigrant family is not one of dissolution, but one of transition toward a new integration of its values and its roles. Substantial equality of man and woman, diminution of the father's authority concomitant to his diminished "necessity" on the economic-professional level, differentiation and professionalization of roles and other family behaviors are proving to the southern Italians that the family is not the only or the principal institution to serve the individual, but that it is one of the subsocial systems, related to, but differentiated from, the whole system. It is the coherence of cultural, social, group and individual processes—their relative integration within a conflict-control field of behavior—that may be identified as the specific condition which must be obtained if the person and family are to function at an optimum level of behavior. The overcoming of "familism" is, then, required in order to give back to the family, purified of its historically conditioned "authoritarianism" and freed of its alienating anxiety for "primary" needs, the possibility to serve the individual also in "superior" needs, thus favoring growth and total expansion.

FOOTNOTES

1 Paper presented at the In-Service Course D 210, "Italian Americans in Contemporary American Society" sponsored by the American Italian Historical Association at the Italian Cultural Institute, December 15, 1971.
2 Lydio F. Tomasi is Executive Director of the Center for Migration Studies of New York, Inc.
4 "Southern" refers to the southern Italian family as an "ideal" type from the South of Italy, not from a specific town. See Chapman, 1971.
14 Ibid., p. 402.
19 Charlotte Gower Chapman, o.c.
20 Fred Ferretti, o.c.
25 By the first-generation southern Italian peasant family in America is simply meant that organization of parents and offspring wherein both parents and offspring are of foreign birth; second generation refers to that organization of parents and offspring wherein both parents are native American born, but have foreign-born parents.
27 Pier Giovanni Grasso, o.c., pp. 191-204.
29 Ibid., p. 132.
32 Ibid., p. 147.
36 John Spiegel, Transactions: The Interplay between Individual, Family, and Society (New York: Science House, 1971), pp. 143-309. This section is an in depth study of two Italian American families, one of which has a high degree of conflict and the other substantially less disorder.
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