FAMILY FUNCTIONALITY AND FUNCTIONS IN THE CONTEMPORARY SOCIAL CONTEXT[1] - a contribution to theoretical considerations

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Summary*: In this paper, two constructs that are of vital importance for the family community, namely: family functions and its functionality in modern social circumstances are discussed. The paper also presents a theoretical discussion on the definitions of family as proposed by scholars of different profiles, the effects of (dys)functional families on the overall and healthy development of children and on the lives of adult family members, and on complex family functions in modern living conditions. The paper contributes to the theoretical framework of the family in the contemporary social context.*

I.   Introduction

The interest of the scientific public to research the family community has not waned in decades and it seems that in recent times the interest of scholars of various profiles has even been growing. The reason probably lies in dynamic social changes that reflect on the family community and change its traditional structure, functions, family dynamics, relationships, etc. The family is also addressed through the dimensions of its functionality. In addition, the effects that functional and dysfunctional families have on the healthy and holistic development of children and on the lives of adult members of the family community are researched and explained. Although today, owing to various impacts of the modern world, the importance and investment in the family community and family upbringing are often neglected, it will always be the foundation of every society and a safe haven for a child from the first days of his life. A healthy family environment provides the child with the most necessary: love, care, support and security, and it provides adults with stability and a predictable environment for a balanced life and action.

Contemporary scientific literature abounds in family definitions that differ in detail, i.e., they reflect the scientific profiles and areas of research interest of individual authors. However, most of the definitions share the following: the perception of the family as a system which implies the interdependence of family members, family functionality and functions, togetherness (living, acting) and emotions, love in particular as the strongest family cohesion force (Zloković and Gregorović Belaić, 2020; Maglica et al., 2020). It seems that the parental role has never been more demanding than it is now precisely because of the marked dynamics of social change. Polivanova (2018) distinguishes the constructs of "parenting" as the process of raising children and "parenthood" as a social role and highlights the main social trends that shape the modern perception of parenthood. Namely, she analyzes and problematizes modern parenthood from the perspective of specific modern challenges faced by young educated parents. These trends include: the absence of well-known educational models that the parents experienced when they were growing up, an "explosion" of the number of possible forms of family upbringing, and the growing number of products and services intended for parents. Polivanova (2018) concludes that all these factors affect the decline of "natural" parenting and are replaced by a set of consciously planned strategies. The educated members of the population increasingly rely on expert knowledge that guides them in parenting, which creates a new level of uncertainty because the

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recommendations offered are not harmonized. Understanding the contemporary family is based on the contemporary paradigms of parenting and childhood (Bašić, 2011; Slunjski, 2016a), which are constantly changing, and the need for active involvement of social structures (kindergartens, playrooms, clubs, civil associations, etc.) that directly assist parents in performing their parental role (Kaczmarek et al., 2004; El Nokali et al., 2010).

II.   UNDERSTANDING FAMILIES

Family as the oldest institution of mankind has been a constant subject of scientific debate, because of the comprehensive changes that have taken place in it throughout history (Juul, 2009). The structure of modern families in comparison to traditional ones is changing more and more dynamically (Silverstein and Auerbach, 1999; Gabud, 2016; Zloković and Čekolj, 2018). However, despite the variability of its structures, it is still understood as a community whose strongest cohesion force is love. In addition to connecting family members with love, at the same time it gives them a sense of security, protection, and understanding. While Olson et al. (1982; according to Rivera et al., 2008) point out that family cohesion should be understood as the emotional connection between family members, Park et al. (1991) note that it is necessary to recognize love, affection and intimacy as important sources of goals and desires that influence joint family decisions. Constant changes experienced by the family have been accompanied by attempts to provide its comprehensive definition, but defining family is a continuous process driven by social changes that in turn change the perception of the family (Čudina-Obradović and Obradović, 2006; McDermott, 2008; Silverstein and Auerbach, 1999; Zloković and Čekolj, 2018; Gabud, 2016; Visković and Ljubetić, 2019). Understanding the family has come a long way from ignoring and marginalizing its position and role in society to reducing society to family cells and the attitude that the society survives through the family, which is characterized by vitality even in the periods of social crises (Zuković, 2012: 9). Thus, in the teachings of all religions, family is understood as a transmitter of universal human values, moral and spiritual patterns and, as such, is an important factor in preparing an individual for life and action in the society (Zuković, 2012). For the purpose of this paper, only a few recent family definitions will be provided. Bennett and Grimley (2001), when defining the family, think mainly of the "nuclear family", which consists of a mother, father and their (biological and / or adopted) children who live together. This is the most common perception of the family in the Western civilization.

Keresteš (2002: 83) states that the family is a complex and connected whole, a hierarchically organized system consisting of smaller subsystems (marital, parental, siblings). Therefore, a complex relationship between members, who also establish numerous social relationships outside their families, constitutes the family community. For Pašalić-Kreso (2004), family is the source of the most important emotional and material support needed for the development and growth of children and youth and is, at the same time, a fundamental unit needed to preserve and transmit cultural values. Ljubetić (2007: 10), on the other hand, defines family as a community of parents and their biological and/or adopted children who live together and form three types of family relationships: husband-father, wife-mother and descendant (son/daughter) - brother /sister. Archard (2010) defines the family as a multigenerational group living stably in a community, whose adult individuals take primary care of dependent children. All the above definitions, as well as a number of other definitions, especially those of modern families (Zloković and Gregorović Belaić, 2020; Maglica et al., 2020) are linked by the elements of system, community and togetherness, emotions (love), care (child-rearing, upbringing, education), and relationships (interactions, family subsystems). Families in modern society are increasingly focused on institutional forms of care, upbringing and education, especially of early and preschool children (Slunjski, 2016; Ljubetić 2007), although the family still remains the child's primary environment at a time when it is most susceptible to various influences (Malić and Mužić, 1990). Therefore, care, upbringing and education of early and preschool aged children in the institutional context, regardless of how efficiently it is organized, cannot appropriately replace the family upbringing, but can only complement it (Petrović-Sočo, 2007). Contemporary views of the family focus on the child and childhood and the parents and their parenthood while applying a new paradigmatic approach to understanding and explaining them. McDermott (2008: 37) thus emphasizes that early theories of parent and child development cannot adequately explain the complex socio-contextual world of parents and children we witness today. Various philosophical, sociological, psychological, medical, and other scientific insights have had an impact on a different perception of parenting than the conventional, traditional one. In contrast to the traditional understanding of parenthood, which has often been equated with motherhood, in the analysis of modern parenthood the emphasis has been placed on the "equality of parenthood of both partners" (Čudina-Obradović and Obradović, 2006: 265; Silverstein and Auerbach, 1999). Understanding and explaining parenthood and family today with regard to those of a few decades ago is not easy and such an empirical research poses a particular challenge for researchers (Lück and Castrén, 2018). The

challenge lies in the fact that individuals' subjective understandings and shared family cultural conceptions are difficult to measure. Personal understandings and cultural conceptions can be more or less pronounced, latent, unarticulated or very fluctuating, and there is still no methodologically appropriate approach that would combine the analysis of subjective understandings and cultural conceptions of the family, which would provide the researcher with a comprehensive insight and complete picture of the modern family (Lück and Castrén, 2018). Therefore, researching and understanding family and family culture needs to be approached with extreme caution and responsibility, and special attention needs to be paid to it, because the family significantly determines the quality of life, development and learning of children and adults in the family community (Ljubetić, 2014; Dai and Wang, 2015; Obiekwe , 2018).

III.   CONTEMPORARY FAMILY - FUNCTIONALITY AND FUNCTIONS

Researches dating back to the 1970s have increasingly focused on examining family functioning as an essential factor in an individual's overall psychosocial adjustment (Wentzel, 1994; Haines et al., 2016). Dai and Wang (2015) emphasize that family functioning is determined by the characteristics of the family itself and depends on social expectations. The term "family functioning" refers to the ability of the family to meet the physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of each member of the family (Karpowitz, 2001) in which not all families are equally successful. In recent times, more and more researchers have been gradually turning to studying the functioning of the family instead of exploring one or just some of the family factors. Currently, researchers apply two main theories: the first is result-oriented and defines family functioning by specific family characteristics, while the other one, which is process-oriented, describes the family functioning from the tasks that the family needs to carry out (Dai and Wang, 2015; Visković, 2018). In this context, we can speak of functional and dysfunctional families. A study by Szcześniak and Tułecka (2020) provides evidence of an indirect link between family functioning and life satisfaction through the mediating role of emotional intelligence. Individuals who assess their family functioning as cohesive, flexible, communicative, and fulfilling are more likely to cultivate their own emotions and experience greater life satisfaction. In contrast, individuals who assess their families as unconnected and chaotic may badly manage their own emotions, which in turn can lead to lower life satisfaction (Farajzadegan et al., 2013).

Functional families successfully adapt to developmental changes inside and outside the family, and can cope very successfully with life stresses because its members can connect quickly and easily in times of crisis. Within such a family system, relatively few problems are present, and members function well in everyday circumstances (Chan, 2002; Peterson and Green, 2009; according to Yöntem, 2019). In such families, communication is effective, free expression of emotions is encouraged, and humour and optimism are often present. In functional families, there is also more negotiation than compromise and reconciliation, so children growing up in such families are more likely to be more responsible and better prepared to start their own families (Karpowitz, 2001). Lattanzi-Licht (1996) argues that the basic characteristics of functional families are as follows: family members believe that the family is a safe, accepting and belonging group of people that encourages openness and negotiation as the main element in communication and problem solving; flexible coping styles are used within the family; the boundaries of the functions of the family as a unit and of the individuals within that unit are clearly defined. Bouillet (2010) adds that functional families are characterized by a marriage in which partners support healthy relationships, parents agree on their parenting attitudes, family attachment and support are present, family rules are agreed on, spending time together at play and work is encouraged, communication is effective (active listening and understanding), responsibility is shared, privacy is respected, etc. Great importance is attached to family communication, mutual respect and cooperation in family functions because healthy family relationships are an important determinant of proper family functioning (Chan, 2002; according to Yöntem, 2019). Family communication understood as one of the most important determinants of the family atmosphere significantly determines the communication between parents and their children. This relationship begins to develop from the first days of the child's life and is visible in the way a parent responds to the child's needs. By responding to the child's needs in a timely and appropriate manner with warm, caring, and appropriate communication, parents lay the foundations for the child's healthy development and functioning. In these first "steps" in the parent-child dyad, one of the possible types of attachment (secure, insecure, or anxious one) develops. Secure attachment is characterized by a relationship full of trust, warmth, a sense of protection and security, meeting the child's needs and establishing the foundations for positive child outcomes (Reić Ercegovac et al., 2013; Behrendt et al., 2019; according to Vranjican et al., 2019). As a child grows up, responsible parents adopt family rules that can be understood as limitations, but are, at the same time, elements that protect or provide security and help children develop the ability to cope with reality. For adults, setting family rules is the greatest proof of trust in children's ability to respect themselves and others, but also to

take on their own role within the family, as Rossini (2016) points out. All of the above is most often absent from dysfunctional families, which is why they find it harder to face life's challenges. In dysfunctional families, different forms of violence are often present, marital relationships are tense and disengaged, and children often lack parent supervision as well as a sense of emotional stability. Frustration and rage often accumulate and thus destroy the family, but also affect the entire community (Karpowitz, 1996). Luzi (2015) emphasizes that particularly in recent times the family understood as a socio-cultural community, is often becoming increasingly vulnerable in its foundations, while it should be the stronghold of emotional relationships and connections between all its members. Every family should rest on the foundations of generally accepted human values (care, protection, support, connection, security, love, respect, solidarity, etc.) but, unfortunately, in some cases the family environment is full of tensions, carelessness, neglect, hostility and violence that can seriously impair a child's psychophysical development as well as permanently endanger adult individuals in the family community. Marinoff (2000; according to Ljubetić, 2007) states that every person needs family love in order to grow up feeling love and security, and it is the responsibility of parents and others who care for their children to provide it.

Living and growing up in dysfunctional families most often correlates with the occurrence of prostitution in children and youth (Mohd et al., 2011), delinquent behaviour, questionable moral values and poorer education (Bateva, 2014), anxiety when initiating and maintaining a romantic relationships with peers, more relationship dissatisfaction, and delayed and less frequent romantic relationships in comparison to young people from functional families (Larson et al., 2001), more frustration caused by the rules and work, overall personal judgment, and irrational expectations about and assessments of what is good (Tomuletiu et al., 2012) and childhood and youth psychopathology (Flores et al., 2014). Dysfunctional families are less capable of addressing life challenges *inside* and *outside* the family. In most cases, members use defensive communication (e.g., punishment, threats), while supportive communication is rarely present (Bouillet, 2010). In unhealthy functioning families, interpersonal relationships are most often based on fear and hatred, and relationships between parents and children deteriorate over time (Horwitz, 2005; according to Yöntem, 2019).

Within these two extremes (functionality and dysfunctionality), a large number of family communities function creating a unique family dynamic. Therefore, Al Ubaidi (2017) emphasizes that each family has its unique characteristics and creates its own useful and useless dynamics. Family dynamics will ultimately influence the way young people view themselves, others, and the world around them. It will also affect their relationships, but also their behaviour and future well-being.

Significant dividing lines of family (dis)functionality are also (in)efficiency to deal with crisis situations, the value system and readiness to act, and these dimensions (among other things) are extremely important for children's psychosocial adjustment (Ljubetić, 2007). For good family functioning, it is important to express emotions in a marriage. Therefore, healthy and harmonious marital relationships marked by mutual acceptance, love, trust, satisfaction and communication between partners reflect on the overall family atmosphere but also become a model for the way children learn and how they behave (Ljubetić, 2007). The results of previous research show that girls have a more pronounced ability to recognize and control emotions in comparison to boys. Boys, on the other hand, do not express and regulate emotions equally well and show a lower level of sensitivity in contrast to girls (Chung-Hall and Chen, 2009; Curby et al., 2015; according to Vranjican et al., 2019). Many scholars stress the importance of emotion for the well-being of children and other family members, who also emphasize its vital role in all endeavours, cognitive processing, social behaviour and even in the physical health of individuals (Halle, 2003; Berk, 2015). A healthy family atmosphere predominantly filled with positive emotions makes it a desirable context for fulfilling family functions. Berk (2015) states that the family, in addition to ensuring the survival of its members, also performs important functions for the society: reproduction, economic function, social order, socialization, and emotional support by helping others. All these functions have a significant impact on social life, and their goal is to provide conditions for an individual to adapt in the social environment and enable him to function successfully in it. The emotional function of the family is particularly emphasized as it provides the individual with the security to face reality.

Most authors single out two basic functions of the family that are common to families in almost all societies: "primary socialization of children" and "stabilization of adult members of society" (Ljubetić, 2007: 10). Socialization begins in the family where the process of the child's development and shaping also begins. In the family environment, the child begins to adopt habits, norms of behaviour, values, and to develop attitudes, i.e., where he shapes the overall view of the world and life. A healthy and stimulating family environment is, therefore, an important prerequisite for the successful socialization of a child later in life (Miljković et al., 2019). Among other functions, most authors agree that biological and social reproduction of immediate life are

the primary functions of every family (Maleš, 1988; according to Ljubetić, 2007). In addition to encouraging the survival of its members, the family as a community has essential social functions: reproduction, economic function, social order, socialization, and emotional support (Berk, 2015). Given the constant changes that society is experiencing, the main concern of the family remains the preservation of the health of its members, the upbringing of children, parental guidance, encouragement and support of children in both educational and professional choices they make. Therefore, one of the important family functions is the pedagogical function (Ljubetić, 2007). As the child's main educators, all family members work together to bring up and educate children providing them with a broader picture of values and rules as a basic stronghold that it must have (Roostin, 2018). As societies changed and became more complex, the demands placed on the family became too heavy for the family to respond to on its own. Therefore, state institutions, and more recently civil associations have been helping parents in performing some family functions, so families have become more connected and dependent on other social structures (Parke and Kellam, 1994, according to Berk 2015).

IV.   CONCLUSION

Modern society families continue to carry out their fundamental tasks, which are becoming increasingly complex and demanding. Healthy and functional families cope better with the challenges of everyday life, unlike the dysfunctional ones. Therefore, there is an evident need to conduct continuous scientific research, which will enable a broader and deeper understanding of the family in current social circumstances, detect the real needs of the family and provide appropriate support to parents in performing increasingly demanding parenting tasks. It can be anticipated that families who are provided with social support and assistance in a timely and appropriate manner will be increasingly functional and thus be a desirable environment for healthy and complete development of children and adult life of family members.

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