UNIVERSITÀ
DEGLI STUDI DI MILANO-BICOCCA

COURSE SYLLABUS

Family Pedagogy

2526-2-E1901R111

Course title

Families in transition: a systemic ethnographic approach

Topics and course structure

In educational work, there is always a family. Maybe it’s not visible, not acknowledged. To truly understand a person — a child in daycare, an elderly woman in a nursing home, an adult in difficulty, a person with a disability — we need to know their context, their network of meaningful relationships.
If you want to work with families in educational, social, or community contexts, be aware that caring for family relationships is neither a “natural” nor neutral issue. It requires, first and foremost, moving beyond clichés, prejudices, and the tendency to blame parents (especially mothers) for their children's difficulties.
This course will guide you in working with real, complex, diverse families. The theme of intergenerationality will help us include at least three generations in our educational thinking and reflect on the transitions that family systems undergo throughout life stages.
We will develop reflective and systemic skills: collaboration, critical thinking, curiosity, and creativity.
We will explore the diversity of families, going beyond linear and stereotypical views.
We aim to challenge common assumptions about families: perhaps you think you already know what it means to be “good parents,” how to “properly” raise a child, or how to deal with complex topics such as parenting, couple life, family vulnerability, and aging.
A research-oriented approach will support us: during the course, you’ll be asked to engage personally, ask yourself questions, and carry out a study, a field experience, or design an activity inspired by the course themes.
We will learn to identify and transform our biases, blame, and the stigma often present in how educators talk about families.
We will examine the dynamics of power — across genders and generations, between professionals and users — and explore together what it means to build participation.
We will focus on transitions — in roles, identities, and life stages — and how each family faces them, whether by adapting or not to individual trajectories.

How You Will Work
You will learn to:

- independently search for reliable scientific sources
- critically analyze publications
- observe and listen methodically
- argue your ideas and positions effectively
- use imagination and narrative and aesthetic languages

During the course, we will work in small groups to explore a theme and a research question and then develop a concrete project.
for example:
watching a film with a critical lens
interviewing individuals or families
inventing a game or activity
creating a performance, podcast, or narrative product

This course requires creativity and personal engagement, tolerance for uncertainty, active commitment, and openness to dialogue and exchange.
You'll need to start reading from day one, as the texts are essential for developing strong research questions and equipping yourself with the right tools for the work.
Course Structure: 40 hours of in-person teaching, 16 hours of asynchronous online learning (video lectures and individual exercises)

Teaching (16 hours) will be provided mostly online, apart from the initial introductory lessons. The remaining 40 hours will have dialoguing sessions, groupwork, and exercises.

Contents and Timeline

1. Introduction to the systemic ethnographic approach and transitions: key concepts and methods (approx. 2 weeks)
2. Studying transitions: research questions, literature review (approx. 3 weeks)
3. Critical analysis of the experience (approx. 3 weeks)
4. Presentations and sharing of research findings (approx. 2 weeks)

Objectives

At the end of the training programme, and after completing all the planned activities (both in-person and online), you will be expected to demonstrate a significant improvement in the knowledge, skills, and competences developed during the course, articulated in the following areas:

1. Knowledge and Understanding
You will be expected to know and understand the key concepts listed below, recognizing their scientific sources and being able to apply them to educational contexts:

- Families as systems: (learn and understand the definitions of): family context and dynamics, symmetrical and complementary relationships, feedback, escalation, schismogenesis, roles, scripts, family paradigms, narrative, myths, rituals, and the sense of "We".
- Systemic approach in education: communication and learning levels; structural and co-evolutionary coupling; system analysis at micro, meso, and macro levels.
- Family services: what they are; socio-educational and networking work; teams as a collective mind; participation and rights.

- Contemporary family and the tri-generational society: transitions, ageism, and the “sandwich” generation.
- In-depth thematic areas specific to each group.

2. Applied Knowledge and Understanding

- Search and select reliable information from accredited sources
- Critically analyse scientific texts
- Observe and decode interactions through systemic lenses
- Use aesthetic and narrative languages critically
- Work in teams, welcoming multiple perspectives
- Argue your positions with awareness and rigour

3. Independent Judgement
Analyse complex phenomena using systemic tools
Recognise and challenge ideas, values, and prejudices
Collaborate and express curiosity, creativity, and critical thinking

4. Communication Skills
Speak in the first person reflectively
Communicate appropriately and contextually
Language skills (English or, alternatively, French/Spanish)

5. Learning Skills
Mastery of academic language
Conscious use of applications and digital research tools
Critical thinking and autonomous re-elaboration of ideas and concepts
Self-management, reflexivity, and self-awarenessActive citizenship: participation, inclusion, rights

Methodologies

Part of the teaching is delivered online (16 hrs), through short video lessons and assignments to be submitted in the course repository. Approximately 30% of the teaching is content-delivery, while 70% is interactive. The teaching language is italian. Using the english language is encouraged for some tasks (e.g. reading a paper).
Each group will be required to develop a project, with collective presentations in class and discussions of both partial and final results.
Each topic will be introduced by short online lectures, followed by exercises, presentations, and in-class discussions, including peer evaluation. In-person sessions will be interactive and dialogical.
From the very first session, students are expected to adopt an active and reflective attitude, keep a reflective journal (which will support the final exam paper), and collaborate with peers, overcoming inevitable differences — educational work is always collective in nature.
The required readings for the final exam must be studied from the start of the course, and used as tools for reflection, critical analysis, and knowledge integration.

Online and offline teaching materials

Diverse materials, readings, videolectures, and links will be uploaded in the Moodle platform of the course, as well as the links to stories, video excerpts, and the record of lessons. Other materials will be provided by the students through research activities.

Programme and references

The programme has 40 hours of didactics in presence, 16 online, and the hours needed for exercises and individual study.
"Attending" students are those who belong to a work group, upload their weekly tasks and attend classes. Those who do not want to do group work or cannot always attend lessons can define themselves "not attending" but they will be able to follow the course at their own rhythm thanks to the materials in the elearning platform and recorded lessons.

Bibliography
Bibliography entails 2 mandatory books and 4-5 research papers (the latter have to add up at least to 90 pages), chosen during the course following the teacher's instructions. It is part of the competences to know the difference between a scientific and non-scientific text.

Books:
Formenti L. (a cura di) *Re-inventare la famiglia. Guida teorico-pratica per i professionisti dell'educazione*. Apogeo, Milano 2012.
Formenti L., Cino D. *Oltre il senso comune. Un viaggio di ricerca nella pedagogia della famiglia*. Franco Angeli, Milano 2023 (in press).

Papers of students' choice
They are the outcome of the literature review done by the groups; they may be in Italian, English, French or Spanish; they may be parts of larger publications (e.g. book chapters). They must be analyzed and summarized for the group work, then studied thoroughly to be discussed at the oral exam.

For students who are not fluent in Italian, the whole bibliography can be in English, French or Spanish, provided that books and papers are scientific publications; the list has to be negotiated as soon as possible with the teacher. Novels, films or websites cannot be brought as texts for the exam, but, as cultural objects, they can be used for the research

How can not-attending students prepare the exam and achieve the course's learning objectives?
The program is the same for everybody and all students must write the reflexive essay, but working alone makes it harder. Reading books is not enough, something concrete needs to be done. Doing a research is not mandatory, it could be not sustainable for a single person. It is possible to analyse a cultural object (movie, series, website, novel...) or a professional or personal experience, paying attention to connect it explicitly to the ecosystemic and critical theory and methodology.
Advices: take regular times to study (e.g. fixed moments in the week); for each topic, start from your experience and question it; do the exercises in the book Re-inventare la famiglia; take part in the students' forums.

Assessment methods

Exam Structure
The exam is oral, but access is granted only after submitting a reflective paper.
The paper consists of a personal and well-argued text that answers the question: "What have I learned and how?"

The content of the paper must be based on personal experience (related to the course, group work, professional or personal life—any experience is valid, as long as it is concrete and lived). It must include: acquired concepts (with references to sources), knowledge, skills, and competences developed, any difficulties encountered, and how they were addressed.
Accepted languages for both the paper and the oral exam: Italian, English, French, Spanish.

Coherence Between Objectives and Assessment Method
The chosen exam format is coherent with the course objectives. Writing the reflective paper allows students to develop and demonstrate not only their personal interests and thoughts, but also their reflective capacity, their ability to connect theory and practice, and to build well-founded arguments. The oral exam offers an opportunity to interact with the instructor, demonstrating autonomy, critical understanding of the course content, and the ability to receive and rework formative feedback.

Assessment Objectives
The general goal is to promote personalized learning, by connecting theory and practice, experiences and studied concepts, and encouraging critical and reflective thinking. The reflective paper is considered the most suitable method to both develop and assess these learning outcomes.

Assessment Criteria for the Reflective Paper
Evaluation will be based on the following elements:

- Acquired knowledge, skills, and competencies
- Linguistic accuracy (spelling, syntax, punctuation, vocabulary)
- Academic adequacy: argumentative style, correct citation, and complete bibliography
- Conceptual clarity and alignment with systemic theory (appropriate use of theoretical concepts and language)
- Relevance and thematic depth (all required readings must be critically discussed)
- Reflective and self-reflective abilities (ability to analyze one's own ideas, values, and biases)

Assessment Criteria for the Oral Exam
The same criteria as the written paper apply, with the following additions:

- Ability to receive and integrate formative feedback
- Ability to critically reflect on one's own limitations
- Ability to respond articulately to questions based on the course readings

Paper Submission Guidelines
Format: 8 numbered pages (excluding cover page and bibliography)
File type: Word (.doc or .docx)
Formatting:
Readable font, size 12
1.5 line spacing
2.5 cm margins on all sides

Cover page must include:
Degree program, course title and instructor
Academic year
Full name and student ID number
Title of the paper
Indication of whether the student is attending or non-attending
Optional image

The text may include images, charts, literary or poetic excerpts, as long as it remains accurate and coherent.

Where to upload: in the "Assignment" folder on the e-learning platform

Deadline: strictly within 10 days before the oral exam

Communication Guidelines
Use the general course forum for any questions. Do not send the paper by email.
?? Warning. The university uses anti-plagiarism software: Copy-pasting from texts, the internet, or other students'

work is prohibited. Plagiarism is a serious academic offense and will be reported.

How to Study for This Exam
Systemic theory can be counterintuitive and often challenges common sense. Superficial study is not effective: you will need to engage deeply with the texts, reflect on their meanings, take notes, and write during the course in order to develop your own personal and critical thinking.
Don't worry if you find academic writing or personal reflection challenging: the course is also designed to help you develop these skills, and you will receive guidance on how to improve.

Office hours

Prof. Formenti receives upon appointment (write an email), however for most issues related to the course the best thing to do is writing in the dedicated forum. Only in very exceptional and motivated cases it will be possible to do personalized interviews to prepare the exam (being non attending student is not such a case - with 400 exams in a year, this is not sustainable, sorry).

For Erasmus incoming students, it is advisable to fix a meeting as soon as possible to orient them and decide a personalized program together.

Programme validity

Programmes have 2 years' validity

Course tutors and assistants

Mara Pirotta, pedagogista, consulente sistemica, tutor tirocini, docente incaricata (laboratori)

Davide Cino, PhD, ricercatore del Dipartimento, vice-presidente della Commissione d’esame
Silvia Luraschi, PhD, pedagogista, ricercatrice indipendente, insegnante metodo Feldenkrais e consulente sistemica
Ludovica Sebastiano, laureata in Scienze Pedagogiche, dottoranda
Valentina Calciano, pedagogista, coordinatrice Lab'O
Antonella Cuppari, PhD, psicologa, pedagogista, responsabile servizi per la disabilità
Andrea Di Martino, insegnante, collaboratore esterno
Marcella Lisi, pedagogista, coordinatrice "Signori bambini" servizio diurno per minori e famiglie
Sonia Mastroeni, laureata in Scienze Pedagogiche, collaboratrice esterna
Chiara Morandini, educatrice e pedagogista
Martina Paoli, educatrice e pedagogista
Silvia Pinciroli, pedagogista, consulente sistemica, formatrice Lab'O, docente incaricata (laboratori)
Andrea Prandin, pedagogista, consulente, formatore e supervisore sistemico
Maddalena Rossi, insegnante, collaboratrice esterna
Federica Vergani, pedagogista, psicomotricista, consulente sistemica

Sustainable Development Goals

QUALITY EDUCATION | GENDER EQUALITY | REDUCED INEQUALITIES | PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS