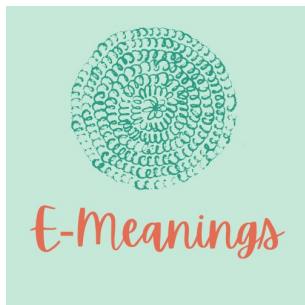




**What happens when the family system
encounters the work system and the
school system during a pandemic?**

Part 3

What happens when the family system encounters the work system and the school system during a pandemic?

PART 3- Finding meaning in the systems within.

Introduction

Welcome to the final in our series of three articles reflecting on our project, undertaken in the UK & Ireland, and in parallel in Italy, during the spring 2020 lockdown, and concluding in September 2020. Our project is based upon exploring the opportunities which have arisen to offer a space for study and thinking about the changes to work, family and school life, during a pandemic lockdown, and subsequent lifting and reapplication of lockdown rules. We designed an intervention directed at working parents in the UK, Ireland and Italy, aimed to support them in reflecting and learning about their new roles and unique experiences.

In part 1, we discussed a sense of the newly-introduced parents coming together to form groups, and highlighted some of the most salient variables presented in the project. Brought together by similar experiences, there remained some differences; differences which are difficult for individuals to explore on their own without group thinking and consultation, to help examine the processes and dynamics at work in the group.

In part 2, our analysis highlighted the importance of creating a space for reflecting and integrating changing roles and new societal rules. We discussed how negotiating the demands of working from home and managing the home-schooling and family systems, centres on finding the capacity to adapt to change and the curiosity to make sense of the experience as learning one. Organisations and education institutions are also tasked to create systems of belonging and participation of members with multiple memberships and associated identities. In order to achieve such a challenging task, is it fundamental to focus on shared and negotiated objectives and implicit and explicit co-living rules.

In this article, we will address how the parents in our study experienced participating in consulting groups, and their changing realities. We will focus on emerging desires - for both parents, and for us as consultants. In reviewing the relevance of our findings to today's lockdown scenario 3.0, we reflect upon the experience of the UK/IRL group coming back together in September, as schools reopened and a sense of a 'new normal' formed in working parent's minds.

Lastly, we will share how this project has influenced our consulting model and shaped our consulting proposal to organisations and parent support groups.

Coming back together

As discussed in previous articles, the first lockdown has challenged how parents deal with uncertainty. Uncertainty can be experienced as a traumatic event, and it can activate mechanisms of defence - such as avoidance, denial and splitting - as we previously discussed. However, exploring uncertainty, and the 'loss' of life as we knew it, can also create space for creativity and desires to emerge.

In the third consulting session, we asked our parents to share, on a virtual whiteboard, a few words representing their experience. We left our instructions open to allow words to emerge. The words which emerged seemed to express both the emotional life of time spent in lockdown, and of time shared together in the consulting groups.

Below is a list of words which emerged from the two groups:

Cooking	Time	Partenze (Leaving)	Contrasti
Food	Rethinking lifestyle	Noia (boredom)	Condivisione
Less FOMO	Chance	Gioco	Blocco
Children	Choice	Donne	Ambizioni
Goals	Balance	Punti di vista	Equilibri
Working-different rules	Play	Progetti	Tempo
Gardening	Relationships	Vite	Famiglia
Nature	Outdoor	Fatica	Fantasia
Control	Shared space	<u>Distanziamento</u>	Bambini
Empowerment	Connections	Prova	Sollievo
Fun	Fewer choice	Empatia	Sguardi
Not be afraid	New meanings	Colori	

We used linguistic analysis of this list, including other data from the two group discussions, to confirm some of the themes we noticed during previous workshops. This helped us to explore some unexpressed/unthought themes, and to check the effectiveness of the consulting process in helping parents gain a new perspective on the experience.

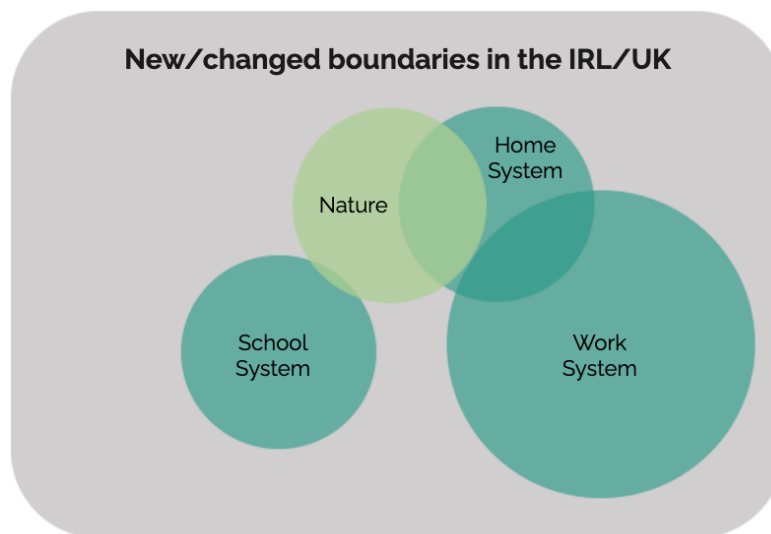
The Italian group spoke of a sense of fatica (fatigue) - from Latin *fatigare* "to weary, to tire out," originally "to cause to break down". The group reflected that this sense of fatigue almost broke their identities as working/parenting women (donne).

The Italian word *prova* (trial), from Latin *probare* "recognise something as good or not", is particularly interesting. A 'trial' (or judgement) describes the experience of the first Italian session where mums were comparing and confronting their experiences - asking themselves if what they were living through was good or bad/positive or negative, as they defined those terms. Taking time to share experiences and emotions, allowed participants

to find a different perspective; one in which they could identify both good and bad aspects of their experiences.

In the group sessions, the Italian participant's sense of ambivalence and loss of identity was manifested in words such as *equilibri* (balance), *ambizioni* (ambition), *condivisione* (sharing) and *progetti* (projects) - from the Latin *projectare* - "to thrust forward". The sessions created a space where the experience could be shared and thought about/reflected upon. Many participants could see that had been really resourceful during the lockdown, in ways which surprised them. This process allowed the participants to integrate (Klein, 1946) their good and bad experiences in a balanced way; this helped them to move forward.

In the UK group, we had different words talking to different experiences. The origin of the word nature is from the Latin *natura*, or "course of things". Nature is represented in our graphic representation below as a new shared system of belonging, where extra-curricular learning took the form of parents and children taking the classroom outdoors, sharing an immersive, restorative, natural experience; a counterbalance to the stresses of lockdown life. Parents also shared some enjoyable aspects of the home-schooling experience, through the return to teaching their kids the basic skills of reading, writing and some maths.



The UK group also talked about their pleasure of cooking and gardening. Both cooking and gardening are verbs associated with the creation of new products. In this way, both are activities which allow new desires to emerge. One mum in the UK spoke of losing her FOMO (fear of missing out) - to describe this sense of freedom experienced during the time spent at home. Through the experience of lockdown - with life outside the house being put on hold - participants could experience and explore their own personal desires. Jacques Lacan's theory of desire (1951) describes the gap between our own desire and the desire of the others. It seems that distancing - from Latin *distantia* "a standing apart" - had allowed a sense of separation to emerge. Participant's expectations of the external world had become separated from their expectations of their internal world.

Through the process of participants exploring and naming these desires in the group, the UK parents got in touch with a previously forgotten part of themselves - the pleasure of creativity. This allowed them to rethink the expectations of their roles as home schoolteachers and workers from home. This analysis highlights how physical distancing represented an opportunity to regain power over unexplored desires. It also allowed people to explore their desired resources and to create new identities.

We noted that participating in the workshops also allowed the participants to form new relationships. Their connection - from Latin *connexionem* "a binding or joining together" - also describes the experience of the workshop awakening a mostly unexplored desire on the participant's behalf; to participate in a process of re-thinking about some challenging experiences with likeminded others.

More analysis could be performed on the richness of the words shared. However, in this final article we wanted to offer a taste of the methods employed to help working parents find a reflective space in which to come together, as we summarise a complex experience and a snapshot into one of our models of analysis.

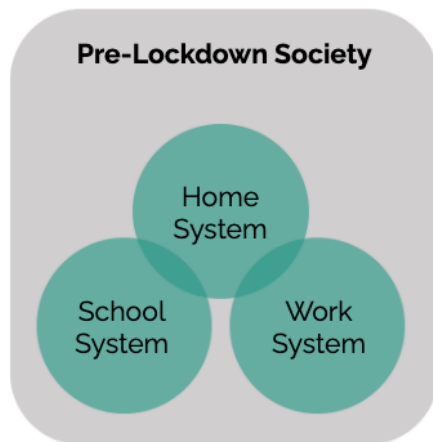
Time and Systems

The concept of time and the word time itself strongly emerged in both English and Italian speaking groups. The etymology of the word time both in English and Italian (*tempo*) recall several meanings. In old English, *tima* - a "limited space of time" - defines the experience of the first lockdown, which was limited to a relatively short period of time.

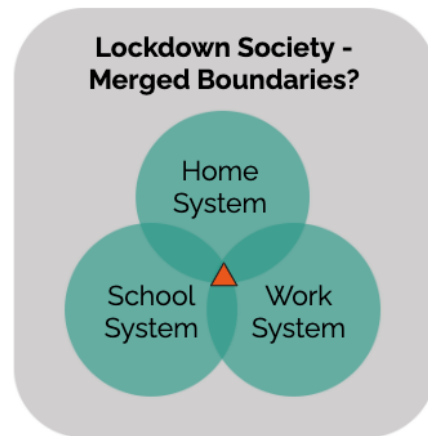
The other definition of *tima* is "to divide", which we can source back to both Greek, and Proto-Indo-European origins. This definition of time (to divide) is particularly interesting for us, as it explains the importance of time as space. In this sense, time divides experiences in and out of the home. We take time to go to work and come home, we spend time at work, as kids spend time at school. Time is the divider, a boundary between systems; as with shared work/home/schooling space, it is contested during lockdown.

If we think of the expression 'work-life balance' it normally means the balance between the time spent working or doing personal/family activities. The home normally functions as a base and shared family system of belonging, from which the family conducts their working and school lives separately.

So, what happened when those three systems overlap in the same shared space (*fig 2, right*)?



A representation of boundaries Pre C-19



Loss of identity in the merging systems?

Our initial hypothesis was to find a sense of these systems merging, to explore if boundaries had collapsed, and if new boundaries or systems had been created. We were interested to discover if the boundaries of the home/school/work systems (Miller and Rice, 1967) *really did merge* during the lockdown (*right*), and if this was connected to a sense of boundary and identity loss.

If we go back to the hypothesis that time represents a symbolic expression of the emotional experience, we can conclude that there was a sense of merging boundaries as parents were lamenting a loss of time, as constant family time became the norm for each member of the family. They missed time to be able to focus on their work but also the pleasure of spending more time with their children.

However, as systemic theories (Hirschhorn, L. 1988; Lawrence, W., G., 1979) illustrate, systems need boundaries to exist, which separate the system from its environment. Our project illustrates how new implicit boundaries formed in the shared family/work/home-schooling space. These new boundaries show how all three system cultures adapted to change.

Some families struggled with contested space needs; many participants spoke of the kitchen table morphing into a hotdesking and home-schooling solution each morning and afternoon.

With roles thrust upon parents and children, new boundaries appeared, often unthought through, and not discussed/renegeotiated. The resulting pressures caused both children and parents to sometimes act out in aggressive, repulsive ways. For some, this experience has been traumatic and characterised by feelings of impotence connected to their

new/changed roles. This resulted in a loss of identity and inhibited a new creativity to emerge.

Sharing the home with working parents whilst studying could offer children a sense of reality and view into their parents working lives. Instead of lockdown provoking guilt in parents, and a sense of abandonment in children, projects which create the space to consider what authenticity may be discovered during this enforced time together, could also offer opportunities for growth in the parent/child relationship. There is an opportunity to lever this sense of transparency into each other's lives, thereby creating healthier emotional boundaries, facilitating a healthier, considered, transition to a post-lockdown family/work/school life balance.

Complex boundaries, roles, and interdependencies between school, work, and home

As boundaries shifted, so also did the roles that working parents took on. We reflected with our groups, that the pre-lockdown roles in the home, school, and work systems were mostly clearly defined (Figure 3 below; left hand column). These 'neat' roles reflect the 'neat' organisation of the pre-lockdown boundaries in our graphic above, which noted three equal circles/systems neatly merged.

Home System	School System	Work System	Home System	School System	Work System
Caring & nurturing	Teacher as 'impastare' element	Task	Caring, nurturing, but constant family time	Giving online tasks	Task
Create meals	Schoolkid friends	Meetings & 1 to 1s = presence/ body language	Create meals	Absence of online friends	Role, in person
Activity	Giving lessons	Commute / distance	Activity	School Child Failed Dependency	Diminished sense of work role for Italian Women
Family time & focus on coming together	Assessment		Parent as as 'impastare' teacher (UK/IRL)	Initial sense of compliance with school regulations	A greater sense of competition (UK/Irl)
	School Child dependency upon the institution and teacher		Entire system dependent on the mother (IT)	UK/IRL - nature as classroom	

Figure 3: A summary of roles and boundaries; pre-lockdown on the left, and on the right, some of the post- lockdown changes are highlighted

This table identifies some key pre-lockdown roles (left). It also highlights key intra-system roles - both explicit and implicit. Many of these intra-system roles and connections have been 'taken for granted'; such as the aforementioned school system offering the child the dependency relationship to teachers and the school system, as well as offering children a network of school friends.

On the right-hand side of the table, we highlight some of the new lockdown roles for the home, school and work systems. In 'normal' circumstances, when we start a new job, we navigate several key stages as we take up our role, and make the role our own (Grubb Institute, 1988). However, the nature of the lockdown being imposed upon working parents meant that many of these new roles (which the parent has no previous experience of) had to be undertaken immediately, with no choice. This left little or no chance for the parent to find, or negotiate the role; many felt they didn't know what they were doing, leading to feelings of overwhelm and frustration.

These demands were enormously stressful and anxiety-provoking for our participants. The table highlights in bold some of the more complex roles which parents had to navigate their way through. Many roles had complex 'under the surface' implications for working parents, and their families, such as how to help their child cope with the loss of their relationship to the school, and their school friends. The child's feelings of failed dependency (Miller, E. J., 1999) upon the school system was very painful for the parents to witness; they felt powerless.

Constant family time was exhausting for parents. The entire system was sometimes dependent upon one parent, and for the Italian groups, it was the mother who bore the brunt of meeting these responsibilities (in article 1, we discussed the experience of a loss of feminism). We note the Italian verb here, *impastare*, which means to 'get stuck in' or 'knead together'; a strong theme for this group, and highly symbolic for many parents.

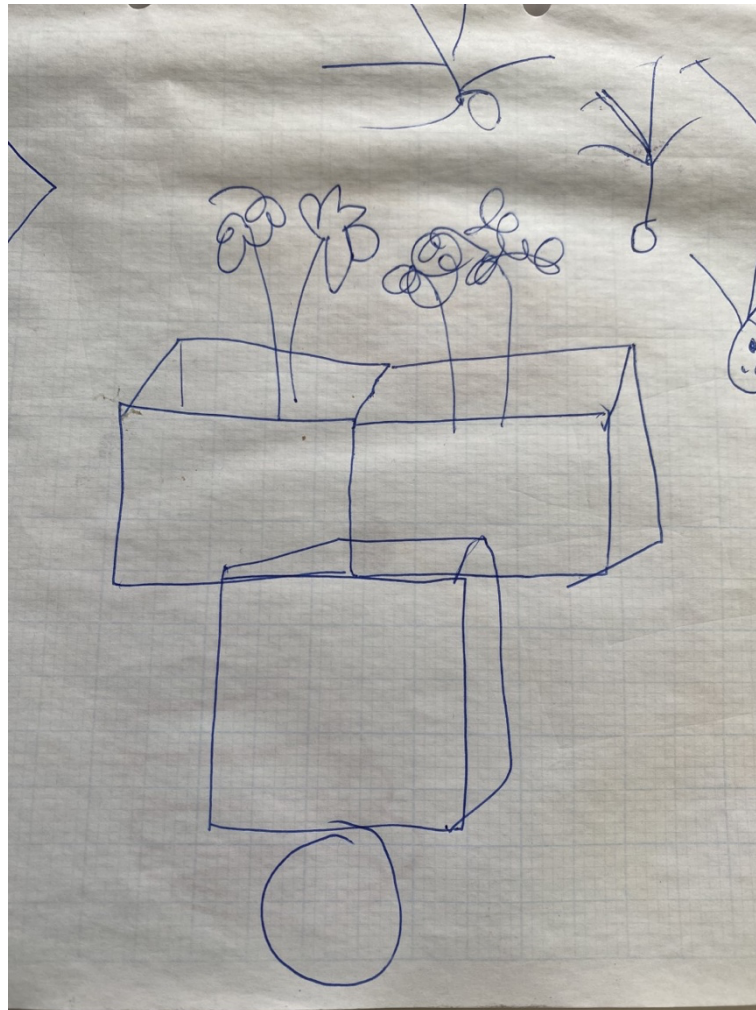
It's all about emotions

Everything we discussed so far tells us about the complexity and ambivalence that describes the encounter of three systems of belonging. We looked at this experience not just at a cognitive level (facts) but also as a social and emotional experience. We set ourselves a task: to push back on the idea that it's been the same for every working parent - and therefore that there's been a norm of behaviour established that parents have to comply or to refuse to adhere to. There has been a myriad of articles online on about the 5/10/20 things to do to deal with your children during the lockdown. Although these tips are useful, the risk of treating this incredible experience as an experience in which to measure against a 'right or wrong' standard, or as an experience we need to survive, is highly dangerous

Ignoring the complexity of the emotional experience may create a mechanism of unspoken anger or idealisation, challenging the relationship with reality and the opportunity to change.

One particular participant's drawing illustrates that what we are dealing with is much more than facts. In the last session and fourth session (8th September, 2020) in the UK/Irl group, schools had just reopened and pupils went back to their classrooms. We wondered if this reopening had offered a sense of relief and normality to families.

On this occasion, we invited parents to draw their experience of schools reopening. Below (figure 4) is the drawing of a mum of 2.



We can find many interpretations to this image. We are sharing one interpretation; that we three systems in our project are still intersecting, supported by a faceless parent/ball which is balancing three boxes. The three systems touch, but remain in their own separate, bounded spaces. The topmost boxes seem to represent an ideal/hope, with flowers/trees blossoming. The family floats, ungrounded and (somewhat scarily) inverted, in a system which is also inverted. This can be seen as a mirror of our original diagram (*left, figure 1*). The theme of growth is opposed to one of death - people falling from the sky. There is a lack of the system being grounded to the earth; a theme which constantly appears in our participant's drawings.

This drawing represents the emotional experience of the mum in our group; though she is relieved by her kids going back to school, she still feels the burden of holding the school system. It appears as if the lockdown experience had changed her role and her internal boundaries. Drawing her feelings and discussing these in the group, helped her to recognise her challenges, and have them heard by the group. This resonated with the other participants; they could see how they have been resourceful and not necessarily always acting out in over-protective or idealised behaviours.

Curiosity, exploration, desire and creativity: An invitation to reflect and implement

Writing about this experience has been a challenging task, one of putting together, and ending, an experience that has not yet ended in the wider society. The Covid-19 outbreak has shaken our sense of certainty, opening us up to a myriad of possibilities in the new normal.

Our project highlighted four key findings:

1. Parents may have been adversely affected by the need to take on so many complex, and sometimes overwhelming, roles. We can create a safe space for working parents to explore their ability to negotiate and take on new roles as they return to the workplace, or as they continue to work remotely. In this way, as organisations emerge from lockdown, parents can be assisted in their transition to life 4.0, knowing when and how to ask for support in taking up the new roles which they might need to find post-lockdown.
2. Giving space to share and think can give rise to finding the desire to explore and give life to a sense of curiosity to explore this new post-lockdown world. Being curious means that you can balance feelings of being e.g. frightened or weary/desensitised. Taking care of each other can enhance the capacity to face anxieties, and moderated reflective groups can help this aim.
3. Systems of belonging have been squeezed and morphed into new structures, as illustrated in figures 4 and 5. What was taken for granted and simple (clearly defined roles, boundaries and tasks), changed overnight. Working parents lost a lot of their working identity in this process, but sharing these experiences in groups, can help parents to recognise where they lost their identity, and to see how others have similarly lost and re-found their identities.
4. Parent/child relationships have also changed. Both have met each other's previously unknown identities. Children have encountered their parent's working identity, and parents have met their children's learning identity. There is an opportunity to re-evaluate previous idealised and omnipotent images (such as the perfect schoolchild, and the satisfied working parent). In this way, authentic and vulnerable aspects of the parent/child relationships cannot get lost, as parents consider returning to the office workspace, and children return to school.

This experience helped us to understand that in order to meet lockdown challenges, it is necessary to design 'adaptive' changes (Kegan, R., & Lahey L., 2009), which are different from technical ones. Technical changes require well known 'techniques' (Heifetz). Adaptive changes require a change in our mental attitude, requiring us to move towards a more sophisticated level of mental development. Negotiating the emergence from painful lockdown emotions and experiences isn't just a cognitive issue, it is a goal linked to the head and heart, and to thought and feelings (Kegan, R., & Lahey L., 2009).

To address these challenges, we have designed a program of 8/10 sessions directed at leaders and working parents in organisations with the objective of creatively facilitating the development of an emotionally integrated experience of the pandemic. In this way, we guide organisations in the definition of new and re-negotiated rules of co-living, re-finding a sense of belonging in the organisation for working parents

Our program will focus on the following points:

1. **Elaborate** on the experience of merging boundaries in a shared and safe space.
2. **Identify** new identities, roles and boundaries from their challenges and resources.
3. **Build** new belongings and narratives of desire related to integrative identities.
4. **Share** learning experiences with the whole organisation, creating new opportunities in the systems.

Conclusion

"Water is very adaptable, it is fluid and takes different shapes, this is what my husband and I remind us to be" (*Italian Mum of 3, session 2*).

This association gave us the image of fragility and strength at the same time. We believe that families, as much as organisations, can be like water, and we are committed to helping identify how to deal with uncertainty and change, to form new opportunities and better, more adaptive shapes; allowing the water to flow, and the loaf to rise.

About us:

E-meanings is a consulting group formed of three consultants from the UK, Ireland and Italy with skills and experiences in organisational change, social research and psychoanalysis. We share a systems-psychodynamic approach, and complement it with three perspectives: an affective neurosciences approach, a data and social psychological perspective, and a cognitive behavioural psychotherapeutic approach.

We offer consultation for individuals, groups, and organisations in transition and change, remote working, resilience, conflict resolution and more. If you or organisation are interested in discovering more about how we can help, please get in touch.

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