Deafness in family relationships: a study on the interactions between mother, child and maternal grandmother

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Abstract

This paper aims to identify the role of the maternal grandmother in the education of grandchildren, in a deafness context. We intend also to understand if the role of the deaf mother as the main educator element, is well defined in this family trio - deaf mother, child and maternal grandmother. So, our main goal was to comprehend the relationship between deaf mother and grandmother and if this relation respects the principles of mutual aid and cooperation. However, we also want to comprehend if this interaction, perhaps, jeopardizes the autonomy of the deaf mother who could be threatened because of the maternal grandmother's behaviour.

The qualitative study had the participation of six deaf mothers and we collected data through interviews in Portuguese sign language.

Taking the parameters described, the results reveal that maternal grandmothers actually act like ´educator assistants` in the education of grandchildren. The role of main figure is ensured by deaf mother. It is still evident a change of attitude about the communication in Portuguese sign language by grandmothers, now they are more open-minded in using this language with their grandchildren but this situation did not occur with their daughters.

Key words: Deaf woman, Family, Maternal grandmother, Maternity, Relationship.

Introduction

The family always takes an important role in the life of human being, because it is the first social group to which a person belongs. It is assumed that the family creates a favorable environment, providing basic needs such as security, food and a home, thus safeguarding the survival of its members (Santos, 2012).

The birth of a child requires a restructuring of family life, especially in women's lives (Dessen, & Polonia, 2007). The fear of not being up to the role of mother may create a lot of anxiety (Almeida, 2011). Therefore, the aid by the maternal grandmother proves to be important not only in care but also in the education of grandchildren (Dessen, & Braz, 2000; Rabinovich, Moreira, & Franco, 2012).

In the context of deafness, studies show that deaf women see motherhood from different perspectives (Viejo, 2008). The acceptance of failure on the part of their family proves to be crucial to their future performance as a mother (Viejo, 2008). It also points to the existence of overprotection by mothers with regard to their deaf children, taking this concern since they are babies until they are old (Paiva e Silva, Zanolli, & Pereira, 2008).

The motivation for this research holds up, essentially, two aspects. On the one hand, the lack of studies in this area, in particular about the mother's role of the deaf woman. On the other hand, the failure to acknowledge the kind of relationship between deaf mother, child and maternal grandmother. At the end of this study, our purpose is to get to know if the independence of the deaf woman, as a mother, is assured or not. Perhaps, the presence and behavior of the maternal grandmother limits the performance of the deaf mother as primary educator.

Summing up, we intend to encourage reflection on the role of a deaf mother and her autonomy in caring for the child. We want also to contribute to understanding about the importance of the maternal grandmother in this family triangle mother, child and maternal grandmother in a context of deafness.

Theoretical and conceptual review

The family

The concept of family[1] appears in the commonly understood sense as the group of people who lives in the same house, taking with each other any kind of relationship. However, this concept goes beyond this definition, the family is "a complex system composed of several subsystems (...) which are in constant interaction, influencing and being influenced by each other" (Dessen, 1994; Dessen, & Braz, 2000, p. 221). Thus we are talking about the first social group in which the child is placed, growing intellectu-

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1   It is not our goal to deepen the concept of ´family`, but start from this notion to later develop relations between deaf mothers, grandparents and grandchildren.

ally and culturally, through a sharing of values and affections (Dessen, & Poland, 2007).

Elisângela Maria Machado Pratta and Manoel Antonio dos Santos (2007) highlight the family's leading role in the development of the individual personality. Their education will then be influenced by different affective bonds. This can, on one hand, provide a healthy and balanced development or, on the other hand, lead to integration problems in society. Upon this, the human beings develop their social behaviour, learning ways to solve problems and to express and control emotions (Dessen & Poland, 2007).

We can identify two groups within the family elements: the nuclear family and the extended family. The first refers to parents and children; and the second one includes other elements such as grandparents, uncles, cousins, etc. (Clarke, 2001; Macedo, 1994; Serapioni, 2005). However, over the years, society has been changing in social, political and economic ways. This creates a broader concept, changing family roles and the interactions between the different elements (Dessen, & Poland, 2007; Dessen, & Braz, 2000; Oliveira, 2011).

This notion assumes even more importance when a new child is coming. This is a significant change that inevitably creates some tension within the family (Junior, & Messa, 2007; Oliveira, 2011). Thus, the various family members are required to find strategies that allow them to adapt to this new situation in order to restore the balance (Dessen, & Poland, 2007).

In this transition phase, women indicated that their main support are their husbands and their mothers, neglecting the role of mother-in-law (Dessen, & Braz, 2000; Houndoumadi, 1996; Ibanez-Novion cited by Ferreira, 1991). So, we seek to better understand the role of grandparents.

The role of grandparents in the family

The support of grandparents is extremely important in the current context, since both couple elements (mother and father) have a job in their lives.

Most grandparents have more free time, so they can assist in the care and education of grandchildren, the household chores and can often give financial support to new families (Dessen, & Braz, 2000; Rabinovich, Moreira, & Franco, 2012). As Cristina Maria de Souza Brito Dias, Flávia Fernanda Araújo da Hora and Ana Gabriela de Souza Aguiar (2010) say, their maturity and life experience, allows them to become 'educator assistants' of their grandchildren.

Several studies about the relationship between young children and grandparents (Dias, & Araújo, 2002; Dias et al, 2010; Coutrim, 2007; Lopes, Neri, & Park, 2005; Oliveira, Vianna, & Cárdenas, 2010) show the importance of the presence of these elements on the education of grandchildren. The existence of affective bonds in addition to those already established with parents, give the child a greater sense of security, influencing the formation of their personality (Baroto, Vieira, & Maia, 2007). Dias and his collaborators (2010) also show that grandchildren give favorable statements about this education assistance.

The involvement of grandparents appears in the literature under two perspectives: the positive influence and the negative influence (Dias, 2008; Dias, Hora, & Aguiar, 2010). The positive focuses on participation of grandparents in the life of grandchildren. This situation gives them moral and social values and helps grandchildren to understand better the decisions of their parents. The negative influence relates to the possible criticism comments made about the way that parents give education (ibid.). However, despite the possibility of conflicts appearing because of this interference, the same author advocates that parents consider essential the help of grandparents. According to André Pessoa (2005), grandparents and parents themselves should understand that educating the children, is parent's responsibility. This assumption should be respected by all the family subsystems involved (as reported by Dias, 2008; Dias, Hora, & Aguiar, 2010).

However, about the mother and grandmother roles there is a lack of clarity in their definition. In specific situations when grandparents become responsible for their grandchildren because the mothers do not have skills to educate their children[2], the role of the grandmother is considered to be similar to the mother. These grandmothers feel they can renew their role, starting their participation in the family (Kipper, & Lopez, 2006). Thus seem to show a willingness to replace the mother (Mainetti, & Wanderbrooke, 2013).

Deaf women and their families

As we mentioned previously, the birth of a child changes the whole family dynamics. However, when the child born with some kind of disability, like deafness, this situation makes other aspects even more pronounced because the dream of a 'perfect child' is destroyed (Carvalho, 2000; Paiva e Silva, Zanolli, M., & Pereira, 2008).

Our goal is to understand the relationship between maternal grandmothers, deaf daughters and grandchildren, we need to ask: When a child is born whose mother is deaf, which role is taken by the maternal grandmother?

Thinking about the possibility of a transfer experiences, this leads us back to the way the mother (and now grandmother) experienced and reacts when she knows about the diagnosis of her deaf daughter. The way she sees the deafness in her daughter takes "influence (...) in the cognitive and emotional development of the deaf individual" (Kelman, Silva, Amorim, Monteiro, & Azevedo, 2011, p. 354.), so we put the hypothesis that this can affect the perception that she will have about the adult daughter.

Several authors (e.g. Brown, 1997; Kelman, Silva, Amorim, Monteiro, & Azevedo, 2011; Oliveira, 2011; Paiva e Silva, Zanolli, M., & Pereira, 2008) talk about the various steps through which, mothers take to the acceptance of deafness. Thus we have, the shock phase, the mourning because of the ´death

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2   This means drug addicts mothers, deceased parents or with a physical disability or mental illness.

of the perfect child`, sadness, anxiety and, finally, acceptance[3]. After over-coming these steps, we can infer - as previously discussed on the concept of family - the way that mother sees the child, will play a leading role in its autonomy.

However, the literature points to difficulties in the relationship between hearing parents[4] and deaf children due to emotional conflicts and socialization (Oliveira, 2011; Rossi, 2003). Angélica Bronzatto de Paiva e Silva and his collaborators (2008) reported to be common, having feelings of overprotection by mothers, regarding children. Despite this being a feature of all the love they feel, it could adversely affect the development of their individual independence (Paiva e Silva, Zanolli, & Pereira, 2008; Kelman, Silva, Amorim, Monteiro, & Azevedo, 2011). Helen B. Miltiades and Rachel Pruchno (2001) and Celeste Azulay Kelman and his collaborators (2011) agree with A. B. de Paiva and Silva, Maria Lurdes Zanolli, Maria Cristina da Cunha Pereira (2008) because they found that the mothers of adult children with a disability take "a lifelong role of caregivers". They are concerned with their children since they are babies until they are old. Such statements make us assume once again that this type of behavior can damage the autonomy of the deaf daughter, who can be always dependent on her mother.

Through the study object, mentioned previously, it is pertinent to raise another issue, the established communication links, considered essential for proper cognitive development (Kelman, Silva, Amorim, Monteiro, & Azevedo, 2011). Maria José Freire Almeida (2009) states that 95% of deaf children have hearing parents. This brings us to the presence of sign language in the family. It is known, however, that most families show little interest in learning sign language, leading to poor communication quality (Kelman, Silva, Amorim, Monteiro, & Azevedo, 2011).

These findings allow us to ask: what behaviour / roles do deaf mothers and maternal grandmothers have towards this new child who comes into the family? Can deaf mothers take on the necessary autonomy to care for a baby? Will maternal grandmothers allow them this autonomy?

Social representations of motherhood in deaf women

The concept of motherhood is part of a whole socio-cultural construction. There seems to exist a set of pre-established skills and stereotypes that define what it is to be a good mother and what aptitudes she must have (Belo, 2014; Jodelet, 2009; Porto, 2011; Scavone, 2001). Antonia Silva Paredes Moreira reinforced this idea (2000) and mentioned that "the representation of women contains a set of well-defined parameters of the good mother. The perfor-

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3   According to Maria do Carmo Conti Vaz de Oliveira (2011), parents feel frustrated when faced with the reality of having a child with special needs. Given this diagnosis, mothers feel guilty, thinking to have made a mistake during pregnancy that influences her child's disability. Then go through feelings of anger and fury, coming to feel the need to blame the other (e.g. medical malpractice). As time goes by, parents begin to restore mental and emotional balance, entering the stage of acceptance (Kelman, Silva, Amorim, Monteiro, & Azevedo, 2011).

4   It is important to clarify that we are referring to both parents.

mance of the maternal role [...] should respect pre-defined ideas [...]"(p. 156). Therefore, it is possible to induce that this definition gives difference and inequality of women in society.

Carrying this reality to the case of a deaf mother, the social imaginary[5] questions if the woman should have the right to maternity and if she may be considered unsuitable for this function. We assume, therefore, that this notion may restrict the behaviour of women / deaf mothers, limiting the performance of their role.

Most of the time the disability of an individual (medical concept) appears associated to social interaction skills, which are often seen in a negative way (Queiroz, 2007). So this representation that others have about women leads us to believe that it will affect inevitably to her mother's role: "The social identity of the woman (...) is built by assigning different roles, which the society expects to see fulfilled. (...) The society defines (...) the fields in which the woman can act (Saffioti, 1987, p. 8).

Studies on the perceptions of women / deaf mothers reveal that they face motherhood differently according to their individual characteristics. Carmen Mañas Viejo (2008) found three perceptions: double effort, fear and fearlessness. Thus, there are women who say their role as mothers makes more work than for other women / mothers due to their deafness. Others show fear regarding their skills to care for a child as well as the fear of hereditary deafness. They relate it to the possibility of social discrimination. Finally, most women show no fear in being a mother, assuming motherhood as any other woman with the same expectations and fears. This last group of women demonstrate accepting their deafness as natural stating that doesn´t matter if the child is deaf or hearing. Their child will become a future bilingual person.

However, despite the different perspectives about being a mother, all women reported feeling a negative view on the part of others. They often encourage them not to marry and not to have children, highlighting their limitations. This kind of behaviour in which society sees them as asexual and invisible human beings (Viejo, 2008) can put many obstacles to personal and emotional development of deaf women.

Summing up, the perception that the family has about the deaf woman, as the acceptance of disability as the key aspect for the future performance of this woman as a mother. So, she could take the role of mother to the fullest, with autonomy in deciding the various aspects of life and the child's education. However, deaf woman may be entirely dependent on the role of the maternal grandmother who, through an imposing behaviour of her will, may release the function of the deaf mother.

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5   According to M. J. F. Almeida (2005), the social representations tell us the thinking of common sense. That is, "act as guides to interpretation and organization of reality [...]." It is thus a set of acquired guidelines that are applied in everyday situations, ie, "what they think [...] and why they think it" (p.122). Also according to the same author, these are divided into three major groups: communication, real reconstruction and world domination. So, the existence of a code allows individuals to classify the world (communication), building their reality (real reconstruction) and dominating the social and material environment (domination).

We consider it therefore urgent to understand the different roles assumed, inquiring how is the relationship among this three person family.

Method

We carried out this empirical study in Portugal. We highlighted some data for future reflections about the scope proposed in this paper. We collected data through interviews with deaf mothers which we did in portuguese sign language.

Thus, the qualitative method used in this study to collect data occurred through the application of interviews. This method facilitates and promotes a better adaptation between question and answer, in order to pick up the desired information for our study (Walliman, 2011).

We applied the interview to six deaf mothers ($n = 6$), between 38 and 44 years old. The majority of these women had higher education ($n = 5$), only one said that had qualifications at the level of high school.

About the geographical distribution, four live in the north of the country (Porto, Valongo, Póvoa de Varzim and Braga) and two mothers in southern Portugal (Lisbon and Cascais). Four ($n = 4$) of the interviewedare deaf from birth, and only two said about their deafness: "I was deaf when I was four years old"[6] and "after an ear infection".

In relation to marital status, five of the interviewees are married and four of these have also deaf husbands. Only one claims to be single and the father of her daughter is deaf too. Most women have only one child ($n = 5$), a sixth interviewee has two children. The age of the children varies from 3 to 8 years old. It is important to note that in total only two of the children are deaf (one with slight deafness and one with severe deafness), and the remaining are hearing children.

The development of the interview followed the same script, and focused on four main categories:
* Expectations of maternal grandmother about deaf daughter pregnancy,
* Reaction of maternal grandmother to daughter's deafness,
* Maternal grandmother interest in learning portuguese sign language, and
* Relationship between maternal grandmother, mother and child.

In order to analyze the interviews, we resorted to content analysis. As Laurence Bardin says (1977), it provides an explanation of procedures and an interpretation of interview criteria, political discourses and others. Thus, it contributes to the achievement of a more rigorous research.

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6   The interviews transcribed speech are in italics and quotation marks in order to differentiate them from other authors' citations referenced in this work.

Data presentation and discussion

We transcribed the interviews accurately and in full, and the end result was the analysis *corpus*. We used a hierarchical coding, organizing the data (analysis unit) into categories. Before this coding task, we made a selection of the most representative speech excerpts obtained from the interviewed speech segmentation (indicating who are them: Mother 1 - M1, Mother 2 - M2; Mother 3 - M3; Mother 4 - M4; Mother 5 - M5 and Mother 6 - M6). These excerpts correspond to the analysis units present in the discourse of participants.

When we focus on the **first category - expectations maternal grand-mother about deaf daughter pregnancy**, the literature refers that deaf mothers are concerned about their children from birth until an older age. When we analyze their reaction facing the pregnancy of their daughters we verify that the reactions were very positive: "my parents were very happy with my pregnancy ..." (M1), "(...) my mother was anxious, which is normal "(M3)," (...) she hugged me and said, finally a grandson "(M4)," my mother responded well, (...)the whole family reacted well, I was a happy pregnant!" (M6).

It is common that the behaviour of a maternal grandmother may put into risk the autonomy of her deaf daughter, which could lead to a depen-dence on its mother, as already indicated in the literature .In our sample that is not the case. In fact, some authors point to possible difficulties in the relationship between hearing parents and deaf children due to emotional conflicts and socialization (Bevilacqua & Formigoni, 1997, Lafon, 1989; Leibovic, 1996; Luterman, 1987; Oliveira, 2011). It is customary to have a feeling of overprotection by mothers with regard to their children (Paiva e Silva, Zanolli, & Pereira, 2008; Kelman, Silva, Amorim, Monteiro, & Aze-vedo, 2011). However, none of the deaf women interviewed referred indi-cators accordingly.

With regard to the **second category - reaction maternal grandmother to daughter's deafness**, as already mentioned, the birth of a child changes the whole family dynamics. The fear that the child has a disability such as deaf-ness, makes this situation assume even more importance because the dream of the 'perfect child' is destroyed (Carvalho, 2000; Paiva e Silva, Zanolli, & Pereira, 2008). This study tries to understand how maternal grandmothers react to deafness due to the possibility that their deaf daughter may be preg-nant and her children may also become deaf.

A situation indicated in this study was the birth of a hearing baby and, later, with four years old was diagnosed a hearing loss. This led to a surprised reaction of the family: "My mother was surprised / shocked. My father and my brother too, but my mother even more, they were surprised and a little shocked. Why? Every day they spoke to him and he seemed to hear every-thing ... and the doctor breaks the news, my mother was incredulous but thought she said: let's see how it goes in the future! "(M1)

Opinions are divided between the desire that their grandchildren will be born hearings and the deafness acceptance, because their daughters are already deaf: "Me and my sister, we are deaf and there are other cases of deafness in the family, she took it well, because we already knew that this could happen - be a deaf child "(M2)," (...) if my mother really wanted my children to be deaf or really wanted him to be a hearing, my mother never told me!"(M4)," When my mother knew that her granddaughter was hearing, she was very happy because she could communicate with her through speech "(M6).

We also questioned the possibility of a transfer of mother's experiences (and now grandmother) and the possibility to influence the perception they have about their adult daughters. We understood that the relationship of maternal grandmothers with their respective daughters and grandchildren is different. The way they educated their daughters is different from the way they relate to their grandchildren: "(...) Not with me [would not allow communication by LGP], but with him you leave, you should tell him to speak. But my mother said that my child speaks well and that I was different. I understand ... is now fashionable type ... "(M1)," (...) he knows the mother represents the rules and grandmother is more pampering, then he takes and calls his grandma, because grandmother is cool "(M3).

As regards **the interest of the maternal grandmother in learning portuguese sign language (third category)**, we focus on the relevance of understanding the kind of communication links established. This is considered essential for proper cognitive development (Kelman, Silva, Amorim, Monteiro, & Azevedo, 2011). As mentioned in the literature review, most families show little interest in learning sign language, leading to a poor quality communication (Kelman, Silva, Amorim, Monteiro, & Azevedo, 2011). The women in the sample also said that: "(...) from baby that I teach him sign language and my mother said to me: you cannot (...) Now my child knows sign language and once when I went to the kitchen I saw my child teaching his grandmother to say his name in portuguese sign language and I was really amazed! (...) I told her: your grandson teaches you sign language and with me when I was a little child and when I spoke in sign language, you f e it "(M1).

Other deaf women indicated that their mothers communicate with their grandchildren through mime, "It's just some mime with him. (...) With me always talked, knows how to talk to me, and I grew up always much closed to her, we could understand each other "(M2). The interviewees told of the disappointment felt if their mothers would learn to communicate in portuguese sign language with the grandchildren when they do not communicate well with them "If my mother did not learn sign language to communicate with me and teach her granddaughter, if she[granddaughter] were deaf, I would be sad / amazed / surprised" (M4). We can exemplify with other situations: "The grandmother with my daughter speaks normally because she is hearing, but when I am among them the communication changes, there

is a mixture of portuguese sign language, mime and oral…they always find a way for me to understand and engage in conversation "(M5)," my mother does not need to learn portuguese sign language to talk with my daughter because she speaks. But with me, when I was little one, she did not learn, we had gestures / our own mime "(M6).

Regarding to the **kind of relationship between maternal grandmother, mother and child**, women pointed out as main support their husbands and their mothers (Dessen, & Braz, 2000; Houndoumadi, 1996; Ibanez-Novion cited by Ferreira, 1991), using its support in various situations. As it turned out, "I agree with the help / intervention / education / opinion of the maternal grandmothers (...)" (M1).

In the literature review, we highlighted some situations like non employment and retirement as a facilitating factor. This could increase the availability of grandmothers to help in the care and education of grandchildren (Dessen, & Braz, 2000; Rabinovich, Moreira, & Franco, 2012). The interviewed women recognized their presence as a support to their grandchildren, inferring the idea of 'educator assistants' (Dias, Hora, & Aguiar, 2010), "When I was pregnant, my mother helped me and I like this help, I needed it when he (the baby) was not good, how I should care for him and my mother explained to me "(M1).

Most of the deaf mothers did not assume this grandmother's role and said that "About taking care of my child, the grandmother does not care about anything" (M3), "My mother gives opinions about my life, that just never happened, she only helps me"(M4), "my mother does not interfere much but sometimes I feel it is to be deaf" (M5), "When my mother interferes I do not feel well because I'm the mother. I know how to raise my daughter"(M6).

Then, we tried to comprehend the relationship between maternal grandmothers, deaf daughters and grandchildren. We understand that, at the time of birth of the grandchild, the role of the maternal grandmother is distinct from the mother's role: "In the presence of grandmother and mother, my child does not show preference for any one "(M5)," with regard to education, I think mother and grandmother must have distinct roles "(M4)," (...) when I punish or scold my child he will call the grandmother and tell her, then the grandmother talks with him and comforts him. He knows, he is wise. He knows that if the mother doesn´t let him do something, he goes and asks grandmother "(M3).

 Finally, about the autonomy of the deaf woman to take care of a baby, our interviewees consider that their mothers allow them to this autonomy, "My mother has a positive image of me. My mother did not look at me and think I cannot do anything because of being deaf "(M4), deaf women should have personality strength" (...) as mothers, who are capable and can be good mothers, equal to hearing ones" (M6).

Conclusion

Each family is one and unique and can only be understood in this perspective. The family, however, must not be perceived as a whole that is the sum of its parts but as a system integrated in other systems (e. g. community school). Those contain subsystems as individual (composed of individual roles plays and functions in the family system and other systems) and the parents (can be made up of the parents or the grandfather and grandmother, for example). The family is an open system, which means that you receive outside influences and that, in turn, influences its surroundings. So, we can understand a family if we know the context in which it is.

As a family is an open system, it is constantly developing. Over time the roles of its members are undergoing changes. So it is necessary for the group to adapt to them to safeguard its equilibrium and survival. The family develops according to the adoption of new tasks and new roles for its members. The change of behaviour of a family member affects the family as a whole, forcing it to restructure and / or reorganize itself.

In this study, we found that women recognized the importance of the support provided by maternal grandmothers in the current context, since both couple elements (mother and father) actively participate in job life. There are some examples in which women are far from their husbands during the week.

The availability of maternal grandmothers, either because they are unemployed or already retired, means that they can assist in the care and education of grandchildren. For example, they can go with them to the doctor or do other tasks.

In this sense, as the literature pointed out, the grandmothers have the role of 'educator assistants` of their grandchildren. We found that deaf mothers recognize this role, but they distinguish the role of the grandmother from their role as mother – who is the main figure.

From this study we can assume a change in grandmother's behaviour, in most women interviewed, with regard to communication in sign language. Deaf mothers of the sample were forbidden to communicate in portuguese sign language in its childhood with their mothers. At the time, parents thought that way was the best way for them. However, now they sign with their grandchildren. Grandparents are more interested in learning sign language. Now, they find it acceptable that the grandchildren use portuguese sign language without talking.

As a conclusion, we would say that the family relationships that happen between mother, child and maternal grandmother in a deafness context are similar to the hearing context. Grandmothers accompany the pregnancy time and help grandchildren when needed. They do this, without intervening directly in their education and the mothers of our study feel respected and supported by the family.

We understand that in the future this study can be replicated with more deaf mothers, in order to increase the sample. So, it may be possible to examine more categories that contribute to a better comprehension of this three family members.

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