

## PARENTHOOD SOMEWHERE ELSE. CHARACTERISTICS, HISTORIES AND EDUCATIONAL MODELS OF MIGRANT FAMILIES\*

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They change their sky, not their soul, who run across the sea (Horace).

The presence of the foreign immigrants in Italy became a structural fact, sedimentary and usual. The most evident sign of its stabilization is really the consistence and the increase of familiar nucleus and foreign children. To talk about "immigrant families" as it were a homogeneous and equal world is, therefore, wrong and little efficient. In fact, it is evident the peculiar characteristic of its plurality: the national origins are really diverse; the ways of constitution and re-compounding the nucleus are different; the passages of arrival and the migratory projects are various; the familiar history and representations are singular. After describing some prominent characteristics of the immigrant familiar nucleus, the article treats the subject of the parenthood in a different context, and the necessity of a confrontation among different models of education. This, in order to favor a double authorization between generations: children recognize and receive the history and the trip of their parents; parents, in turn, follow new generations in their journey of life that many times get distance of its initial representations.

**Keywords:** Parenthood; Model of Education; Relation school/family

*A presença dos imigrantes estrangeiros na Itália tornou-se um fato estrutural, sedimentado, cotidiano e o sinal mais evidente de sua estabilização de fato á a consistência e o aumento dos núcleos familiares e das crianças estrangeiras. Falar de "famílias imigrantes" como se fosse um mundo homogêneo e indiferenciado é, porém, errôneo e pouco eficaz. De fato, é evidente a característica peculiar de sua pluralidade: diversas são de fato as proveniências nacionais; diferentes os modos de constituição e recomposição dos núcleos; variegados os percursos de chegada e os*

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\* Italian and Portuguese versions can be found at CSEM website: [www.csem.org.br](http://www.csem.org.br). The English version was not reviewed by the author.

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*projetos migratórios; singulares as histórias e as representações familiares. Depois de descrever algumas características salientes dos núcleos familiares imigrantes, o artigo trata o tema da genitura em um contexto diferente e o tema da necessidade de um confronto entre modelos educativos diferentes. Isso, para favorecer uma dúplice autorização entre as gerações: os filhos reconhecem e acolhem a história e a viagem dos pais; os pais, por sua vez, acompanham a nova geração em suas trajetórias de vida, que muitas vezes se distanciam de suas representações iniciais.*

**Palavras-chave:** Paternidade/maternidade; Modelos Educativos; Relações escola-família

## 1. From single persons to nuclear families who migrate

Foreign immigration passes through a phase in which two diverse moments are coexisting and this implies different (and even contrasting) social subjects, intervention politics and representations of the phenomenon. By one side, the phenomenon is still seen – and feared – as an unstoppable influx of persons, most of them in an irregular situation, sometimes accompanied by forms more or less marked by criminality, peripheral life, social alarming. By the other side, immigration is becoming a structural fact, a social component which crosses our day-by-day life, resides in common places and territories, and modifies cultural, linguistic and ethnic profiles of neighborhoods and cities. Immigrants, since some years ago, are fixing themselves; they are installing themselves here, together with us, many times without deciding where they will live. Their stay – which presumably will become long-term – attracts other persons: consorts and descendants that could not come at first and remained in the country of origin, other kids are born here, in the immigration country, and may become Italian when they come of age.

Initially a project and a trip of a single person, now immigration becomes familiar, involves different subjects, and makes surge new exigencies and necessities inside and outside the familiar core. This makes impossible delaying indefinitely the search for a policy of integration that puts in perspective the new social subjects and relations between them, as well as the services that must be for all persons. Far beyond the different meanings that may be attributed to the word “integration”, two of them seem to be crucial: integration does not happen at random, but it is a process that must be planned, pursued and sustained; integration is also a bilateral process, which is originated in the multiple occasions of interaction, exchange of views, confrontation between immigrants and the local community.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> ZINCONI, Giovanna (a cura di). *Secondo rapporto sull'integrazione degli immigrati in Italia*.

In this process, which can profoundly change places, cities and services, the immigrant family assumes a pivotal role through different points of view. First and foremost, respecting the time and the immigration project: the transformation of the situation of a transitional dimension to one of stabilization and definite residence happens “because of” and “through the family”. Through the point of view of spatial references: the presence of sons and daughters growing up “here and now” always re-sends more the symbolic, affective and economic investments from the country of origin to the host country. The family is the place in which the internal solidarity is reorganized by a new manner, and priorities regarding the use of available resources are re-defined. It is also the place in which it is possible to conciliate the great diversity of life routes, and to make new purposes to the external context your own diversity as a product of the elaboration and of the alchemy among histories conducted here, that came from other places. Thus, we can summarize this way the components of the immigrant nuclear cores, if confronted with the migration of a single person<sup>2</sup>:

- Through the point of view of time, it passes from a provisional to a permanent situation;
- Through the point of view of spatial references, a pivotal role is assumed – but with resistance in many occasions – by the host place/country, instead of the country of origin;
- Through the point of view of internal relations, immigrant family functions as a crucible that intends to conciliate and amalgamate the diversity of histories and individual route;
- Through the point of view of external relations, the immigrant core proposes references and behaviors, more or less elaborated, which are related to the themes of the differences and of the analogies, and this may create alliances or confronts, questions, conflicts. One misperception or mistake, which commonly occurs in the relations regarding the immigrant nuclear family, is that agents tend to consider each person by himself/herself, with its own necessities and choices, apart from the network and history of the family. On the contrary, behind each history and each trip, there is always a familiar group, more or less extended, that accompanies the exodus and the stay of the people. The departure is alone, but the trip occurs through the family, thanks to help and support networks,

<sup>2</sup> FAVARO, Graziella. *Le famiglie immigrate: microcosmo di affetti, progetti, cambiamenti*.

and also against and despite of the family. The migrant's projects are originated, organized and realized anchoring them to the expectations, necessities and promises made to the departure core (Cf. Chapter I of the volume cited above). It does not mean that one's choices are conditioned always to its family, but it means that it is necessary to consider individual histories within the richness and the relation ties of the family and/or belonging group.

- Through the point of view of resources, immigrant family reorganizes in new ways its own solidarity, and defines new priorities of consumption within a network of obligations and attention to the necessities and desires of each person, which can be variable.

## 2. Different trips and family histories

All migrant families – as well as native ones – are constituted as a world in itself, a microcosm made by ties and histories of foundation, roles and resources, affection and events. Therefore, talking about migrant families as if they were homogeneous social subjects is abstract and erroneous. Differences about them are considerable, as well about differences regarding their life projects and the modalities of relations with the services and with the territory in which they live. We will try to introduce the reader to some of the distinction elements, highlighting some aspects which are more “visible” and may be documented.

An initial distinction can be made between families which were constituted in the country of origin and reconstituted in Italy and families which begin their lives consolidating networks and relations in the host country. In the first case, the family history is marked by, as we said before, notable events which profoundly changed routes and roles. The core which was formed had been living part of its own history in this land, until the first “fracture” happened, the departure of one of the consorts (the husband, in the case of Moroccans, Tunisians, Senegalese; in other cases, the wife, in the case of Filipinos, Peruvians, Ecuadorians; in other situations, both of them, many Chinese, Albanians and Ghanaians). The time of separation may vary, but it is of five years on average. After this separation – during which each member of the “divided” family elaborates its absences and its hope – the family is reconstituted in the host country.

A crucial event in the biography of the family is, therefore, the moment of family reunification: precedent situations of equilibrium decay, new ties must be arranged to diminish deep distances, absences and separations. Among these core families in Italy, this way of “being a

family” prevails. However, there are numerous cases of newly constituted cores, which are originated in two different forms: by the engagement of consorts of the same country (or different ones), or there is also the case of marriage of the immigrant person with one of the same nationality, and the emigration to Italy thereafter. Within the group of reunited families, we can consider other distinctions which can permit us use a typology based on the modalities of arrival and reunifications of the cores, as well as of the protagonist role of one or another consort.<sup>3</sup>

It is possible to verify:

- Family reunification organized by the man, which make the necessary arrangements to the arrival of the spouse and sons, in a second moment. This is the most common modality among groups from the north of Africa (Morocco and Tunisia), from Senegal, composed in most cases by Muslim persons;
- “Female” family reunification. In this case, the woman leaves its own country and, in a second moment, makes the necessary arrangements to bring her husband and kids to the host country. It is the most common modality among Filipinos, Salvadorians, Peruvians, communities and groups with female prevalence;
- The reunification with the sons and daughters, when both parents are migrants, having left the country of origin together or with a little difference of time from one departure to another. After some time, they decide to bring their kids, who until that moment were guarded by relatives (for example, among immigrants from Ghana and China). In some cases, family reunification of parents with kids may be “selective” or a “step-by-step” process: firstly parents arrange to bring to host country the underage or younger kids, because they have special needs, or vice-versa, they may choose to bring firstly the older sons because they are more autonomous. The first ones to arrive may be the boys, brought to Italy in order to study and therefore get good opportunities in the labor market, leaving the girls in the country of origin, in this case, so that they can be educated according to the family traditions.

Whatever the modality of arrival, the reestablishment of the divided core by migration represents a crucial event for all members of the meeting because it ends precedent situations of equilibrium, exposes expectations and deceptions, demands a redefinition of each and every

<sup>3</sup> BORDOGNA, Mara Tognetti (a cura di). *Ricongiungere la famiglia altrove*.

person, a redefinition of roles and relations which are condensed inside the space of the new habitation. Restarting a new life together in the immigration country represents a decisive stage in the history of the family, which marks profoundly a “before” and an “after” and which contains important changes implying different planes and subjects. In reality, these may refer to legal, social, economic, psychological, interrelational (internal to the family and external, with the services) and project aspects.

If the single migrant may live for years and years as if he/she were “socially invisible”, regarding services and places of living for all, the presence of the familiar core constrains to get in touch with the services, to modify their projects, to review the modalities of relations inside and outside the family. There are many elements at stake in the moment of reunification, after the moment of the separation that may have lasted for years. We cite some of them:

- a new space to divide and share in a different way;
- the migratory project must be reconsidered in its length and objectives;
- affective relations must be reconstructed from mutual experiences of distance materialized in time and from a consequent feeling of strangeness because of the prolonged distance in time;
- mutual images to recognize and confront with the representation elaborated by each and every person during the absence period;
- expectations and illusions to make or to let fall or make a new dimension to give place to new promises and hope to build together...

### **3. Some characteristics of the immigrant core**

It is proposed, in a synthetically manner, some characteristics of the migrant families, distinguished as: general aspects, family history and core composition.

#### **3.1 General characteristics**

- The plurality of origins. Migrant families in Italy come from many different countries. Among foreign children who are inserted in Italian schools, 191 nationalities could be accounted.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> MINISTERO DELLA PUBBLICA ISTRUZIONE. *Alunni con cittadinanza non italiana*. Anno scolastico 2006-2007.

- Stability. It is always more relevant the number of immigrants that reached the conditions to obtain the permanent visa, since in Italy for more than 5/6 years.
- Reproductive behavior more fecund. The number of children per foreign family is more or less the double of the number of children among native families, but it is lower than the number of children in the country of origin (except China).

### **3.2 Family history**

Among migrant families, there are three different situations related to the origin and history of the family. There are:

- families newly constituted, which were formed in Italy and conduct here the history of the family;
- reunited families, whose members reunite in the host country after a long period of separation of the core, after the trip of one of its members;
- “divided” families, living in a situation of separation and transnational ties: the father here, the mother and their children in the country of origin; the mother here, the father and their children in the country of origin; both parents here and their children still there...

### **3.3 Composition of the core**

Some remarks regarding the composition of foreign families:

- The absence of the generation of elder people. In interpersonal, affective relations, there are some problems: adults, because of migration, cease to exercise the role of sons and daughters, and miss the day-by-day conflicts with the precedent generation. Kids cannot count with a memory of infantile histories, memories and traditions which create familiar ties.
- The presence of mono-genitorial cores. Especially in some communities, because of the female prevalence, it is very common to see families which only count on the presence of the mother with their kids (Latin American, Eastern Europeans...). Initiated as a temporary migration, the female presence in fact stabilizes, forming groups of female solidarity, but confronting also with

situations of adolescents growing “without a father”.<sup>5</sup>

- Co-habitation and the prevalence of horizontal relations. Situations of co-habitation among members of the same family in horizontal course are also very common. In the same core, they can count on forms of neighborhood and reciprocal solidarity, brothers, sisters, cousins, which share spaces, organize forms of mutual help, collaborate in the care of childhood.

#### 4. The expectations of migrant families

The insertion of a son in the educational services and in the school of the immigration country represents a crucial event for the foreign parents, a stage which deeply modifies the project of the core and the generational ties. Like one more migration, inside the same migration, which demands new forms of adaptation, mutual authorizations and unprecedented adjustments among losses and gains/new acquisitions. The fact that the son will learn how to read and write in the new language (and only in this new one), becomes more competent and feels more comfortable in the world of new words and new meanings, this is certainly a source of satisfaction for the parents, but it is also the cause of fears for the loss of ties and for the fracture in the familiar history and the memory of the group.

It is also a re-discussion of the own functions and roles of the parents. A father/mother who is considered and considers himself/herself inadequate to understand the messages and contents and respond in a correct manner, to support the child in the labyrinth of new apprenticeship, to be example and mediator by his side, and therefore a competent adult in the new language, not only an *infans* (literally, the one that is wordless) to whom it is necessary to translate and to explain. The school, even if it does not want to, exposes the communicative inabilities of parents, and does not know their abilities acquired in other places and not usable here. When children overcome the barrier of entrance to the educational structure of the host country, satisfaction and hope are mixed to fear, resistance, loss of power and authority. Thus, how is structured the relation between school and immigrant families from this ambivalent emotions and expectations?

Respecting the educational model of the immigration country and foreign parents may assume different attitudes of: antagonism and

<sup>5</sup> FAVARO, Graziella; NAPOLI, Monica (a cura di). *Ragazze e ragazzi nella migrazione*. Adolescenti stranieri: identità, racconti, progetti.



closure; distance and non-interference; passive and subaltern acceptance; reinterpretation and confrontation.

The existence of a cognitive dissonance which is experienced by someone living in a situation of incoherence regarding what the person thinks (his/her values and references) and what the person makes (his/her choices and adjustments here and now, for himself/herself or his/her sons) may lead to behaviors of self-exclusion, passiveness, delegation or, vice-versa, of defense and rejection. Naturally diverse attitudes are never definitive once and for all, and the day-by-day relation with who educates its own sons and daughters contributes to the modification of behaviors, to overcome communicative barriers, to build shared spaces of mutual comprehension.

A research carried out in different cities of the Emilia Romagna region proposed, among other objectives, to investigate the expectations of immigrant families regarding the Italian school. To do this, significant samples of immigrant families coming from five different countries (Senegal, Egypt, Ghana, Morocco and Albania) were heard.<sup>6</sup>

Here are some of the results and reflections which emerged. Interviewed foreign parents had different courses of scholarship in their territories of origin, from few years of basic school to complete graduation. Personal experience, therefore, not always permits deep confrontations between the provenance context and Italian school; furthermore, the figures of reality, as it is obvious, are conjugated with transformations related to age and with those referring to the experience of emigration. However, the territorial provenance and personal degree of scholarship help to understand the orientation of families regarding scholar institution in general and the Italian one in particular. Representations of school as an instrumental type prevail, especially about the acquisition of necessary knowledge to the insertion in the society and, specifically, to the job world. This orientation is stronger in what comes to the Italian school, to what they do not seem to recognize a larger role as a formative and valued entity.

It is registered, however, different levels in the current or potential instruction of sons and daughters. People who arrive in Italy with undergraduate/graduate degree, regardless of their nationality, projects in a stronger way to their sons and daughters a desire for entering the university, not only to make them build better job opportunities for themselves, but also in order to conserve in a high standard its their own prestige, especially before the relatives who remained in the country of origin.

<sup>6</sup> GIOVANNINI, Graziella. *A partire dai figli. Strutture, relazioni e bisogni educativi delle famiglie immigrate.*

Among the diverse groups interviewed, the investment in instruction is very high among the Egyptians, in continuity with the experience already acquired in the country of origin. Many of them reveal to be disposed to face huge sacrifices in order to guarantee a high degree of academic formation to their own sons, and some register their sons both in Egyptian and Italian schools, so they can have both study degrees. It is also strong the investment in general for Albanians, who tend to, more than other groups, recognize the validity of Italian instruction, compared to that instruction which can be received in Albania. Representations and expectations of Senegalese interviewed are more heterogeneous – almost all of them with few years of study – which many times put religion and employment ahead of education and cultural formation.

Regarding the confrontation between the Italian school and the one from the country of origin, all groups recognize some “superiority” from the first one, especially in the sense of availability of educational structures, less number of students *per class*, materials at disposal. But, with the exception of Albanians, which especially refer to the decadence of current formative institutions in their country, the opinion of interviewed people about Italian school, in general, is not very positive, for many reasons. Criticism especially refers to:

- problems of religious and cultural values. It is considered that the Italian school is not able to “educate”, especially about the values in which immigrants believe;
- respect to authority and discipline. It is feared that the kind of relation teacher-student in Italian school could damage also the learning process by the part of students regarding traditional and indispensable behaviors, marked by respect and obedience to adults and, specifically, to parents. However, there are ambivalent positions, tending to review the idea of childhood, in favor of a “sweeter” and more egalitarian dynamic between the kid and the adult;
- problems with acquisition of competences. Many interviewed people highlighted that the Italian school is less exigent and selective than those of their home countries, but criticism is especially concentrated on linguistic formation. Besides some requests of new courses which could help the conservation of the mother language, there is the desire that the school could guarantee, beyond the apprenticeship of the Italian language, also the knowledge of other languages which are valued outside Italy, not in search of bilingualism, but multilingualism. English,

in particular, is the language which is more desired to be taught, because it opens the possibility of return to the country of origin, but also enables English-speakers to move in the world with more tools, resources and opportunities.

## 5. Parenthood in confrontation

The modalities of relations between the migrant family and the educational services of the host country represent an adequate occasion to express and confront different representations of parenthood and relations among generations.

The ways, roles and actions through which the meanings of parenthood are expressed change during time and strictly depend on social and cultural contexts. Migration introduces one more element of complexity because it demands from adults that have different histories and roots somewhere else to be fathers and mothers in the host country, which remains for a long time and, in a certain way, opaque and indecipherable. Assuming the role of father/mother in the immigration country means to find himself/herself in the center of different expectations and, many times, of own and true conflicts. There are the core of expectations, wishes and pressures that are originated from the family that remained in the country and which are expressed by far through indications, prohibitions, and preoccupations. Messages which are, on the contrary, elements of day-by-day negotiation in the case of visits to the native land. There are also the suggestions and pressures of the subjects, particularly significant and crucial when they refer to themes as protection, health and prevention. In short, there are the personal and familiar convictions, made by convictions, doubts and various adjustments, which besides being dictated by knowledge and experience, are dictated by day-by-day interactions with the kid, the sensitivity and the attention of the parents.

Parenthood in migration is at a crossroads between different directions, decisions to be made and behaviors to assume, considering all points of view. In spite of the huge varieties of the ways of being of fathers/mothers in a foreign country (each family is, in fact, a cultural world), there are some differences which become evident and which are highlighted by mothers and mediators interviewed. There is a crystallized representation – which is also very mitigated and deplored – of a distributed and shared parenthood, in conflict with a vision of parenthood in emigration which is reduced only to the parents, excessively overloading them with this responsibility. In the countries of origin, big and small choices, as well as

the task of protecting kids, are attributed to many parent and adults in a great sense: relatives, neighbors, people with who the kid has contact with. Therefore, the mother can “control” in an easier and tranquil manner because she is also “controlled” by many people with supportive role, since “it is not for a single person to deal with newborn children. Whoever provides care must also receive assistance and care”.<sup>7</sup> Because of this complex situation which attributes to each and every person an interdependent role in what comes to other people, becoming a father or mother is a crucial and undeniable event in one’s own history, but it is also a natural and “banal” event.

We can say that motherhood, as represented by women immigrants, is therefore spontaneous and less “thought about”, instead of being planned and strictly controlled, as it usually happen here. Knowledge and gesture of parenthood, besides, are transmitted from one generation to another and assimilated through the proximity of two worlds, one of the adults and one of the kids. It is learned to become father and mother (especially mother) through the example, the experience of others, through the observation which involves who observes, more than information and written opinions of experts.

Therefore, from the shared “pillars” of parenthood in emigration, which we can define as care, love and respect, there may have different crossroads and encounters of knowledge, gestures, attention which emphasize one or other dimension and component, and which are oriented to paths of ways of being more “traditional” or more modern fathers/mothers.

<sup>7</sup> BOWLBY, John. *Una base sicura*.

### Modes of parenthood in emigration

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• distributed among all components of the familiar group</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• concentrated and referred only to the parents</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• based on a shared responsibility with other adults and relatives which are part of the extended family</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• based on a personal responsibility, restricted only to the familiar core</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• contextualized and referred to the dimension of "here and now"</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• projected and elaborated in time and during pregnancy</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• transmitted and assimilated through the generational exchange, proximity between the adult and child worlds</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• learned through specialized information, books and services dedicated to the care of children</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• not thought about, resulted from the family's history, verified and approved by the proximity among generations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• carefully planned and all to be experienced</li> </ul>

Naturally, representation, practices and gestures of fatherhood/motherhood are combined in various situations, in "traditional" paths or modern ones. Ties imposed by the situation of migration frequently leads to choices and behaviors never thought or lived before. In spite of a gradual representation of being a father/mother and the growth of a kid as a "kid of all", it becomes necessary to deal with a fatherhood/motherhood that, because of all circumstances, is lived in a restricted, overloaded, concentrated manner, limited to the father and the mother, for instance. Therefore, the agents of educational services come to be other adults who take care of the children, who give support to the mother and extend the familiar landscape, exerting roles until that moment reserved only to consanguine relatives. However, for all mothers, loneliness and isolation which characterize motherhood in emigration awakes some fears and ghosts of who feels inadequate and in isolation, and so it is the relations among generations which become defined, for many foreign parents, as an image of a vertical asymmetry, in emigration it is hardly tested by an intense, confusing proximity and symmetry. And also, to a crystallized educational "model", based on the premature promotion of autonomy, but always in the sphere of strong ties of interdependence, immigrant parents confront themselves with a model which values the independence of the child, though without promoting forms of responsibility and autonomy. Therefore, there are many questions which appear, doubts that must be elucidated, questions almost always not expressed, disseminated in the road.

The great challenge is to accept, as a family, its own history of migration, of “desiring the migration”, in some way. If single migrants can live for a long time, provisionally and in transit, familiar cores must modify the project, opening new spaces of belonging and future to the new generations.

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