Breaking with tradition through cultural continuity. Gender and generation in a migratory setting

Deianira Ganga[1]

Abstract

The process of intergenerational transmission is the site of contrasts and negotiations. Within families of Italian origin in the United Kingdom, the gender-specific roles and social control of patriarchal families are enduring, particularly for second and third generation women. Through the years, however, this cultural phenomenon has undergone important transformations. On the surface, tradition is maintained by the appearance of a compliant acceptance of long-dated views. In reality, second generation mothers support their daughters' wishes of independence. Consequently, long-established roles - fundamental to the cultural survival of the community - continue being displayed so, safeguarding the symbolic continuation of tradition.

Keywords: cultural transmission; family; gender roles; Italian; patriarchal values; second generation.

The family

The role of the family as the children's first socialising agent is crucial. It is within the family children are born (called family *of orientation*), that they start their 'primary socialisation' (Parson and Bales 1956: 16), *i.e.* they learn the customs, role models, values and norms of the society they live in. At the same time, it is within the family that cultural transmission (Kulik 2002; Saenz *et al.* 1995) and participation take place. Through the family, 'the individual from an ex-

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[1] Deianira Ganga, Researcher and Public Relation Officer, HER-MES, European Researchers for Migration and Ethnic Studies, Via Masaniello 1, 91011 Alcamo (TP), Italy.
Email: deianirahermes@hotmail.co.uk.

clusively biological being, becomes a member of a certain social group' (Cesareo 1993: 147) and acquires sets of norms and values and learn how to make decisions for themselves and to liaise with the multiplicity of other agents of socialisation (school, peer group, mass media and so on) that sooner or later will involve them (Dekker 2001: 84-5). These norms and values are strongly linked to historical, social and economic events, which through the centuries have shaped individuals' attitudes towards childcare, older members in the family, processes of departure from the parental home, marriage, the position of women within the family and the society, religion and so on. As a result, as argued by Reher (1998), some areas in the western world (*i.e.* the Mediterranean) appear characterised by strong family ties, while other areas (*i.e.* Northern Europe) would see weak family ties as more prevalent. According to Reher's classification of family ties, people of Italian origin living in the UK then originate from a country socially and historically founded on more pervasive familial bonds, which should be expected to differ from the British family system.

Within this complex system, gender, being a very significant dimension of ethnic identity, plays a very important role in the complex choices of individuals living in most socio-cultural settings. In particular, in a migratory context, it is likely that older migrants' attachment to cultural practices and beliefs of the place of origin can increase the generation gap between parents and children, through an emphasis of the cultural difference between them. This difference is usually even more pronounced in the case of the female members of the family. Traditionally, in fact, women are considered as the custodians of culturally specific ethnic values and family customs (Baldassar 1999, Pedraza 1991). Due to this, within some migrant communities, young women could be at the receiving end of a double standard upbringing, which privileges the independence of the male counterpart within the family and the outside world. The double standards affecting the female offspring of people of immigrant origin as members of their own family and main-

stream society are often perceived as unjust and can be difficult do reconcile. The analysis of these complex phenomena are at the basis of the present article, which is based on a wider qualitative research investigating the cultural identity transmission in three-generational families of Italian origin living in Nottingham, UK (Ganga 2004). Thirty-five individuals participated in the research: fifteen of whom belonged to the migrant generation (emigrated from the South of Italy in the second post-war period), ten belonged to the second generation and ten to the third one. The ethnographic material on which this article is based was collected through semi-structured interviews and observational techniques. Observations in the field and the analysis of interviews showed that some immigrants managed to transfer certain ideas on roles and duties from their places of origin[2] to the new country and applied them to their own families. Although some of the older women interviewed immigrated to the UK on their own and found independence from the patriarchal structure of their families of origin, as soon as they married somebody from Italy, they were automatically swallowed up in a world ruled by the same patriarchal norms to which they were subjected prior to their migration.

According to Medaglia (2001), who investigated the Italian community in Britain, Italian families seem to be characterised by a strong patriarchal structure. They also seem to have undergone a slower transformation than families in Italy, which - in comparison - appear to be as more dynamic. This paper, not only strengthens this point further, but also adds a new aspect to this issue by identifying emerging trends for change (such as an increasing equality between sexes and a more democratic stance towards parents/children relationship) within families of Italian origin in the UK which are currently kept covert by its main actors.

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[2] See Ganga (2005) for the transfer of religious duties and belief from the place or origin to that of immigration, and its effect on the migrants' identification processes.

Gendered Roles and Double Standards

The roles of men and women of the first generation appear to be very much gendered, *i.e.* they show clear-cut gender-based distinctions, based on the reference to specific sets of norms applicable to the male or female members of the family. As stated by Fortier (2000: 167), 'gender is the central vehicle for the mobilisation of family and generations in the collective re-enactment and display of cultural continuity. It is the modality through which young Italian boys and girls participate in the communal expression of local particularity'. This is further reinforced by Romanucci-Ross, who in the article entitled *Ethnic Identity: Creation, Conflict, and Accommodation* states: 'children are reared to become what they must be for their immediate and future family roles' (1995: 85).

Within the Italian community of Nottingham, while the women were, and still are, in charge of the housework and childcare (either as mothers or grandmothers), men contribute to the running of their family through small chores in the house or in the garden. Their children, however, although belonging to a different generation, during the interviews stated that they felt still subjected to the same old norms. Their upbringing, taking place along the traditional patterns of a patriarchal system, was often defined as very strict, especially if compared to their British peers'. According to the second-generation female respondents stressed their role of acting-mothers from a very early age: in the absence of their mothers, they had to do the cleaning, the ironing, and preparing the dinner for other members of the family. In the presence of their mothers, they had to help them in these chores. In contrast, no routine tasks seem to have been assigned to the male counterpart in the family, whose activities were mainly limited to occasional jobs around the house. As observed by Bowes *et al.* (1997) household work represents a significant area for the transmission of cultural values, which differs from country to country (and even within a single country) in relation to expectations, gender and socio-economic class. Moreover, as among the respondents family

control over girls was stronger, most second generation girls were not allowed to spend much time unsupervised: therefore many of them ended up spending most of their time at their home or at the homes of family friends or relatives, so reinforcing the links with the culture of origin.

In their upbringing there was, however, one element of potential disruption, unforeseeable to the parents: their education. The children of the immigrants were attending school. Through schooling and engaging with classmates, they got acquainted with "the other" and different patterns of behaviour and rules. This is the moment in which majority of children of immigrants started to acquire that 'hyphen' in their identity, which will require them to come to terms with some inexplicable or incoherent sides of their or their close ones' attitudes or behaviour, when in contact with the 'others' or, in other words, the members of the mainstream society. The children of the Italian migrants have found themselves confronted with the double burden of growing up and following rules which were fundamentally different and more rigorous than those of their peers. In particular the parental social control over their children was especially painful and frustrating during adolescence, when individuals struggle to adjust their own personalities to the outside world. However, upbringing is a process that engages both parents and children: during this process both the parents' and the children's identities are involved, being both engaged in a revision of their sense of self and 'we-ness' (Jenkins 1996: 145). 'Identities […] are at the same time both individual and collective. It is extremely rare that an aspect of personal identity is formed which is not also forming the identity of other human beings' (Szakolczai 2001: 5). On one side, the children express their dissatisfaction towards their parent's treatment by rebelling towards them and pointing at their peers' different rules. On the other hand, parents are forced to think about the reasons behind the clash of what they thought were traditional and widely-accepted values, resulting from different practices in their own country and the local reality. On some occasions, the older generation

considers the presumed lack of respect, consideration and gratitude for the parents' effort to give a better life to their own children as an indication of the younger generation's rejection of their culture of origin. In the following excerpt from an interview with a member of the migrant generation, Matilde vividly depicts the children of the Italian immigrants of Nottingham, and holds some of them responsible for their lack of sensibility towards their parents.

Matilde: *I think that the younger ones grew up here, they learnt English, and they got the English habits. To be true they are more English than Italian. Then the parents have always spoken with them in dialect, they cannot speak Italian. These youngsters are almost ashamed to be told of being Italian … it seems. Because they cannot speak Italian well, they cannot socialize. They feel they belong to a higher level because they are educated. Thanks to us who gave it to them! Therefore, this is the impression I get. They don't want to mix with us as if it was a 'smacco'* [letdown]: *'No, I don't want to hear about these Italians. What are these Italians? Why do I have to mingle with these Italians?' You have to know that your father is Italian, was and still is your father, who gave you birth … whatever person your father is, it is always your father … and you, who are a clever person, who has studied, should say 'thanks, dad, if I am what I am'* (first generation, interview in Italian).

In some cases, by clinging to the old values, the older generation attempts to find protection from a culture that could be considered as alien. It is clear that the rigidity of the immigrants' positions can create an extra difficulty in bridging the inter-generational gap, although some interviewees - such as Giacomo - state that now that they have children they can understand their own parents' perspective. The following quotation refers to the difference between the respondent's upbringing and that of his friends, due to his parents' authoritarianism.

Giacomo: *My upbringing was … [pause] strict. Mainly because my dad didn't want sort of … any problems. Because,*

you know, as they were foreigners and things like that, so they wanted to make sure that you would keep your hands clean and don't get into trouble (second generation, interview in English).

On many occasions second generation interviewees declared that there was a clash between their attitudes and the traditional values of their parents. In particular during adolescence, girls appeared to be more affected by the parents' views than the boys, who instead were granted more freedom. Thus, it was especially the girls who complained about the rigid rules they had been subjected to, which had not been used in Britain nor, often, in Italy for quite some time. While teenage boys were generally free to go out, with the only condition that they did not come back home drunk, the daughters of the first generation Italian immigrants were not allowed to do so. They found themselves torn between a very authoritarian patriarchal family tradition at home and life as it could have been for many of their peers in the 1960s and 1970s.

Luca C.: *My sister was limited: she couldn't go out. And she found herself with some difficulties because she was living in a society that was like that in England, and not being able to do anything. She could have rebelled but … she didn't. But when she had a moment of freedom, she was always in trouble, because only in that moment she could do something, as there was no possibility to do those things … gradually* (second generation, interview in Italian).

Marcella, second generation, looks back to her teenage years and reflects on her response to her strict upbringing. She felt that due to the rules she was subjected to, when she was younger she had to lie to her parents. Marcella does not seem keen to stand up for what she believes is right, probably to avoid tensions within her family. Although a woman, a wife and a mother, she is still unable to express her views and to fight for what she believes is right. She prefers to

move around the issue without raising it. Now Marcella, by taking full responsibility for her actions, allows her children to do things she could not do when she was their age, things that her husband would probably oppose.

> Marcella: *I don't think I had a horrible upbringing but, looking back, I feel cheated, because my friends were out, English and Italian, and I couldn't go out. I couldn't go to the clubs, dancing …Which I do now anyway. If I wanted to go out, I had to lie. I am not blaming my father because he was strict but it's partly my fault because I felt timid and frightened to ask. The idea to receive a 'no' stopped me from asking. I now want the truth from my kids. I tell them 'please, don't lie to me … I won't stop you … unless there are drugs ...' I want to know where to find them* (second generation, interview in English).

The resistance and the severity of the parents were such that the young Italian girls were hardly allowed to do anything outside the control of their parents. Unable to openly disagree with their parents' rule, by forming a coalition of young girls, they used to deceive the strict surveillance of the older generation and enjoy what their English peers were habitually doing, such as going out clubbing.

> Marina: *Well we used to get together ... the girls ... we used to go to the Italian club and then we used to say that we were going into town … we used to go to night clubs* [laughs]. *Then we used to get home, we used to make sure that we left for about midnight … no later than midnight! Otherwise our parents used to get worried …well, not worried but …* (second generation, interview in English).

On the surface, the strict tradition of stronger social control over teenage girls was preserved by the parents. In reality, the second generation was bending the first generation's rules which were no longer suitable to the new cultural circumstances and changed social environment. Marina also reminded us that, according to the tradition, girls of Italian

origin could not go out without being chaperoned by an-other member of the family, namely her younger sister. She also underlines the role of mediation that she assumed be-tween her parents and her younger sister on many occasions, which in reality is a role of conciliation between her parents' culture and that of their place of settlement.

> Marina: *With my sister it was totally different, she could do what she wanted and … she was encouraged because she got me. I'd say: 'yeah', you know, 'send her!' Yeah 'everybody else is going why can't she go?'* (Second generation, interview in English).

In this sense, through Marina's intervention, her parents' cultural models of themselves as parents, of their daughters as children, and of the family (parental ethno theories)[3], ended up being modified. As suggested by Harkness *et al.* (2001: 12), 'although parental ethno-theories are rooted in shared ideas and practices, they function for individual par-ents as flexible systems, always in the process of construction and adaptation in relation to the demands of the moment'.

The strong and rigid patriarchal system to which the sec-ond generation Italians of Nottingham have been subjected to is, thus, changing. However, if younger generations are liberating themselves from traditional rules and conventions, and gradually adopting those of their mainstream peers, this is due to the 'silent revolution', made of small, yet important, decisions and responsibilities of the people who have first-hand experience of them: the women of the Italian commu-nity.

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[3] Parental ethnotheories are frames of mind or "belief systems" (Harkness *et al.* 2001; Harkness and Super, 1995) relative to indi-viduals' supposed acceptable behaviour as parents and/or chil-dren. As specific ideas on upbringing, duties to parents, duties to children, etc. are culturally embedded, these are often shared among the members of a specific ethnic/cultural group.

Conclusion

Within the Italian community of Nottingham, the first generation Italians who arrived in the UK in the post-WW2 period had to come to terms with the cultural values of the place of immigration, especially in relation to the upbringing of their own children. Unable to accept them, they held on to the conservative values of the traditional working-class Italian family of the pre-war period. They applied these rules of patriarchy, obedience and prescribed behaviour to both their daughters and sons, although the girls were usually more protected and closely watched. The environment, the time and the circumstances had, however, changed through migration.

Mainly through contact with their native classmates and peers, and the media, the children of these immigrants learnt about the existence of new behavioural modes. They realised how deep was the difference between their upbringing and that of youngsters who had been raised in a less authoritarian environment and often they resented the restrictions imposed on them. The children found themselves cast in a special role: that of mediators between their parents' culture and that of the place they now live in. The children of the immigrants, in particular the girls, through attitudes and behaviours in disagreement with their parents' values - but still quite tame and unadventurous, according to them, if compared to their British peers' standards - broke up with the traditions by maintaining an apparent cultural continuity. By referring to heir own parents' strict traditional values and norms imported from the place of origin, they, however, adapted them to the new social situation of the place of residence, so ensuring a not always painless process of adaptation to the new environment in continuity with the past.

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