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A Research on Generations of Italians Living in Belgium*

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# *Transnational Families' Experiences.*

## *A Research on Generations of Italians Living in Belgium*

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### **Abstract**

The research in question, through a qualitative methodology, analyzes how socialization processes can evolve through generations within the family dimension. Migration experiences are indeed very different from one generation to another. Moreover, it turns out like the transnational social fields in which migrants and their descendants are embedded, span different countries and form a significant context for their everyday lives. The country chosen as case study is also for this reason Belgium, where the Italian presence is still very relevant and rooted in the territory. The study was attended by descendants of Italians who emigrated in the country after the Second World War. It seemed relevant to propose a research that deal with the Italian emigration of the past, analyzing however the most recent implications. The result is a complex renegotiation process of the migratory experience that takes place in the family dimension across generations, both of relationships and of transcultural practices.

### **Keywords**

Intergenerational relationships; transnational social field; emigration; Italy; qualitative studies.

### *Introduction*

Migration has become a family based project, whether it involves the migration of the whole family, the formation of family post-migration or the financial support of family in the country of origin (Attias-Donfut and Cook, 2017). Adopting a family perspective on the migration phenomenon means considering the relevance and strength of the links between the various components along a multi-generation temporal and relational axis (Kofman *et al*, 2011; Dubucs, Schmoll and Pfirsch, 2017). In this research, it has been considered a particular theoretical trend that within *migration studies* has investigated the family dimension in the transnational perspective (Bauer and Thompson, 2006; Charsley and Shaw, 2006; Ryan *et*

*al*, 2008; Christou and King, 2010; Goulbourne *et al*, 2010; Mazzucato and Schans, 2011; Carling *et al*, 2012; Zanfrini, 2012; Baldassar and Merla, 2014; Ambrosini, 2019). Moreover, it turns out like these transnational social fields in which contemporary migrants and their descendents are embedded (Levitt and Glick Shiller, 2004) span different countries and form a significant context for the everyday lives of a growing number of children and young people (Reynolds and Zontini, 2006).

In this research, through an intergenerational approach, it seemed interesting to propose a study dealing with the Italian emigration of the past (Corti, 2003; Colucci and Sanfilippo, 2010; Colucci and Gallo, 2015; Gjergji, 2015), analyzing its most recent evolution. Mainly in order to study how socialization processes (Castles and Miller, 2014; Zanfrini, 2016; Ambrosini, 2020) can evolve through generations within the family dimension, especially among those who have not chosen to emigrate. This research would through greater light on the impact of migration on the bond and support that passes between family generations adopting a transnational approach (Attias-Donfut and Cook, 2017).

The country chosen as case study is also for this reason Belgium, where the Italian presence is among the most relevant in the country and is also very stratified and rooted in the territory (Martiniello, Mazzola and Rea, 2017). The continuity of migratory flows, which over the years have changed shape and scope, but have not stopped, makes the presence of Italians in Belgium an interesting laboratory for analyzing dynamics and processes of migratory phenomena (Martiniello 2016, p. 157). The contribution has been focused on second generations of Italians living in Belgium, children of the first migrants who arrived in the country between 1946 and 1976 (Morelli, 2002; 2004; Corti, 2003).

Through the literature examined, in the first part this paper will discuss the relation between the family dimension and the migration processes, particularly referred to the transnational social field. In the second part, it will be introduced the research design, including the research subjects, the methodology chosen and the analysis approach. Lastly, drawing on interviews data, it will be provided an understanding of the impact that migration experiences could have on intergenerational relations and on socialization processes within the family dimension.

## 1. Migration experiences and families

In the last few decades *migration studies* reveal an exponential growth trajectory, especially since the mid-1990s (Pisarevskaya *et al.*, 2019). However, this has not produced an equal diversity of topics in the field. Instead, the data showed that there have been several important shifts in terms of which topics have been most studied in *migration studies* (Pisarevskaya *et al.*, 2019). Following Portes' predictions (1997), "transnationalism" shifts attention away from "geographies of migration", and indeed, research shows that "geographies of migration" gave way to "mobilities", the most prominent topic in the last decade. This trend is supported by the focus on "diasporas and transnationalism" and "identity narratives" since the 2000s, including literature on migrants' and their descendants' dual identities (Pisarevskaya *et al.*, 2019). These developments indicate a paradigmatic shift inside the *migration studies*, possibly caused also by criticism of methodological nationalism (Sayad, 1999; Schiller, 2010). Moreover, data show that themes of "families and gender" have been discussed more in the 21st century, which is in line with Portes' predictions (Pisarevskaya *et al.*, 2019).

Taking into account these developments, this contribution will focus on the family dimension in relation to the migratory experience adopting a transnational approach. Research on migrant families has been slow to emerge (Kofman, 2004) and only in recent decades has witnessed a growth in interest on migrant families in both research and policy arenas. Nevertheless family is increasingly understood as essential to migration, influencing migration strategies, supporting the migration experience, and shaping transition to settlement (Nauck and Settles, 2001). As said migration has become a family based project, whether it involves the migration of the whole family, the formation of family post-migration or the financial support of family in the country of origin (Attias-Donfut, Cook 2017).

In this research, it has been considered a particular theoretical trend that within *migration studies* has investigated the family dimension in the transnational perspective especially in recent decades (Bauer and Thompson 2006; Charsley and Shaw 2006; Reynolds and Zontini 2006; Ryan *et al.*, 2008; Christou and King, 2010; Goulbourne, *et al.*, 2010; Mazzucato and Schans, 2011; Carling *et al.*, 2012; Baldassar and Merla,

2014). Nowadays, thanks to increased mobility and improvements in both travel and communication technologies, more and more people are experiencing *transnational family's lives* (Baldassar and Merla, 2014). Various scholars have observed and studied the transnational experiences of families and conceptualized migrants and their kin as transnational families with increased mobility and improvements in both travel and communication technologies (Reynolds, Zontini, 2006; Christou, King, 2010; Goulbourne *et al.*, 2010; Mazzucato, Schans, 2011). Those family members who remain in their place of birth or ancestral homeland, become part of social relationship stretched across time and place, even though they might never actually relocate or move at all. As Bryceson and Vuorella (2002) underline, despite being separated by distance and over the time, members of *transnational families* maintain a *sense of family-hood*, thank to which they continue to feel they belong to a family even though they could not see each other and be present physically for a long time (Baldassar and Merla, 2014).

As Baldassar, Baldock and Wilding (2007, p. 13) clarify, the concept of transnational family is intended to capture the growing awareness that members of families retain their sense of collectively and kinship in spite of being spread across different nations. Therefore, in transnational families, relationships and roles do not depend only on proximity and physical presence. Shared feelings and mutual obligations remain. Emotionally significant ties are rethought and recoded through physical absence.

## 2. *Intergenerational relations and transnational social field*

Taking a family perspective on the migration phenomenon means observe the different relations between the various components along a multi-generation temporal and relational axis (Dubucs, Schmoll and Pfirsch, 2017). Migration experiences are very different from one generation to another and they often could underline or exacerbate generational differences (Attias-Donfut and Cook, 2017). Therefore, a generational approach illuminates several debates in contemporary migration and mobility studies. By introducing "generation" as a key variable, it may help to understand migration processes from an intersectional perspective (Kofman *et al.*, 2011; Dubucs, Schmoll and Pfirsch, 2017). Thus, it is

necessary to develop studies in order to identify intergenerational relations within migrant families and to observe the impact of migration experiences between generations.

While generational transition can prove problematic post migration, as parents and children adapt to the new country at differing rates, research and policy has been overly concentrated on the divides this creates and has, consequently, problematized migrants families as traditional and resistant to integration (Kofman, 2004; Foner and Dreby, 2011; Waite and Cook, 2011). Evidences show a more complex understanding of migrant families (Attias-Donfut and Cook, 2017). It frames migrants families as fluid structure of intergenerational adaptation, renegotiation and change, and capable of supporting the transition of both parent and new generations as well as at times sites of conflict and contestation (Kofman, 2004; Creese, 2011;).

Therefore, the issue of the second generations becomes relevant in relation to the *transnational families* (Mazzucato and Schans 2011). Influenced by the work of Lewitt (2009), it is possible to consider transnational second generation as embedded in a social field created by cross-boarder connections between sending and receiving countries, irrespective of the frequency of physical travel to their country of origin. The transnational social fields in which contemporary migrants are embedded (Levitt, Glick Shiller 2004) span different countries and form a significant context for the everyday lives of a growing number of children, young people and in general second generations, descendent of first migrants. Transnational family relationships are valuable social recourses in reaffirming notions of cultural, ethnic and family belonging.

Zontini and Reynold (2018) look at migrant children and young people as members of wider networks that go beyond the nuclear ones and suggest that: "the real and symbolic transnational engagement are pervasive taken-for-granted aspect of family life. They might vary in intensity from family to family and from time to time, but they remain latent and can be activated or reactivated at variuos time" (Zontini and Reynold, 2018, p. 433). In their research, Zontini and Reynold (2018) underline how, considering variations and differences in youth's transnantiional experiences, however they have a link to their parents' homeland that is more than just symbolic. It is real and embodied, in the meaning that these generations maintain communication across national

borders, they express emotional and material attachment to their parent's homeland. Furthermore they express and live this condition in the everyday interactions with others.

### 3. Methodology

Considering the theoretical issues, in this research it seemed interesting to propose a study focused on the past Italian emigration (Gjergji 2015; Tintori and Colucci 2015) analyzing however the most recent implications, for different orders of reasons. First of all to underline how migration processes are phenomena whose effects persist over time and borders, connecting people and generations through a transnational logic, which goes beyond the methodological nationalism (Sayad, 1999; Schiller, 2010) that today risks being a limit of the "research" in itself. It also seemed to be relevant to bring out a different point of view on the migration phenomenon, the ones of Italians as foreigners, often set aside despite the evidence emerged from statistics concerning the most recent Italian emigration abroad (Fondazione Caritas Migrantes, 2019; IOM, 2019). Moreover, over the years the scientific interest on Italian emigration has mainly focused on the historical evolution of the phenomenon or rather on the recent flows and therefore, the experiences of these second generations is currently little investigated (Colucci and Sanfilippo, 2010).

The research in question, through a qualitative methodology (Corbetta, 1999; Creswell and Poth, 2018) analyzes how socialization processes can evolve through generations within the family dimension, especially among those who have not chosen to emigrate. Considering the *transnational social fields* in which migrants and their descendents are embedded (Levitt and Glick Shiller, 2004) as a significant context for the everyday lives, the research will examine in the families' dimensions: relationships between the different generations of migrants (Caponio, Schmoll, 2011); opportunities and consequences of a *transnational families' experiences* (Zontini, Reynold, 2018).

The country chosen as case study is also for this reason Belgium, where the Italian presence is among the most considerable in the country and is also very stratified and rooted in the territory (Martiniello, Mazzola and Rea, 2017). According to AIRE statistics in 2019 in Belgium there are almost 271.919 Italians citizens (Fondazione Caritas Migrantes 2019). From an



historical perspective, it was after the second World War that Italy experienced a second relevant wave of mass migration due to the critical economic and social situation (Tintori, Colucci, 2015). These migrations stimulated and assisted by the governments took place throughout Europe, especially in this direction, from South to North. Italians started to emigrate to Belgium thanks to the agreements signed by the governments in 1946. Only in the 70s, considering the new political and economic contexts, the Italian net migration return to be positive (Morelli, 2002; 2004; Corti 2003). This continuity of migratory flows over the years makes the presence of Italians in Belgium, especially through a family dimension an interesting laboratory for analyzing processes of migratory phenomena.

The contribution has been focused on second generations of Italians living in Belgium, descendants of Italian migrants who arrived in the country between 1946 and 1976 (Morelli, 2002; 2004; Corti, 2003)<sup>1</sup>. The data for this article are mainly drawn from 32 biographical interviews (Bichi, 2000; 2002) carried out in Belgium<sup>2</sup> between May 2018 and September 2019. The choice was oriented towards the biographical interview in order to bring out the experience of the participants (Gobo 1998; Bichi 2000; 2007). All the interviews were conducted in dialect or Italian language<sup>3</sup>. The respondents respect a roughly gender breakdown (17 females and 15 males). Italians associations in the country and migrant support organizations were used to recruit participants.

In the interviews, we examined their considerations of maintaining transnational ties and how they perceived these experiences in a family dimension. The approach chosen for the analysis of the interviews was an intergenerational type in order to better investigate the complexity of the socialization dynamics of different generations in the space of everyday life (Levitt, 2009; Reynolds, Zontini, 2006). In sum, three types of information were sought during the interviews and coded the data accordingly: (1) their experiences of family; (2) the ways how they live and maintain

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<sup>1</sup> Using the year of arrival in Belgium of the first generations as a survey criterion, the second generations can be identified.

<sup>2</sup> The interviews were carried out in the cities of Brussels, Tubize, Genk and Charleroi.

<sup>3</sup> In the last part of this paper, *Findings and discussion*, all the interviews' quotes reported have been freely translated into English language.

transnational ties; (3) and the reasons why they maintain them through an intergenerational approach<sup>4</sup>.

#### 4. *Findings and discussion*

##### Intergenerational relations: between crisis, gift and reciprocity

In line with the studies observed, in the interviews the migratory experiences are lived and elaborated in a very different way through generations involved in the family dimension. As said, by introducing “generation” as a key variable, it may help to understand migration processes from an intersectional perspective (Kofman *et al.*, 2011; Dubucs, Schmoll and Pfirsch, 2017).

According to their family’s experiences, interviews reveal clear moments of intergenerational conflict and crisis, which concern above all the second generations involved in the research. The family project is being reconstructed mainly around the central position taken by the children and sons, who then have a “moral” obligation to social success in the host country, take care of the family as a return gift for their parents’ sacrifices. Moreover, these generations often play an important role as helpers at a younger age than non-migrant families. Since they have a better knowledge of the language and of the social code than their parents, they are able to serve as mediators between them and the social environment. The most integrated children in the new society, especially from a linguistic point of view, become parents of their parents or take choices, responsibilities that parents cannot take due to lack of knowledge.

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<sup>4</sup> After collecting the data, the interviews’ transcripts were managed through the qualitative computer program NVivo 12. The interviews’ transcripts, together with all data collected (field notes, literature), were managed through the qualitative computer software. The anonymity of the participants was guaranteed through the attribution of a reference code to each person. The approach chosen for the analysis of the interviews was an intergenerational type in order to better investigate the complexity of the socialization dynamics of different generations in the space of everyday life (Reynolds and Zontini, 2006). The created codes for the encoding focusing on: family dimension; types of transnational practice, aspirations for maintaining transnational ties and perceptions of individual integration progress and the life in Belgium.

One year mom was almost without income, with six children [due to my father's death] ... I was going to high school [at the moment], I quit, I went to normal school, I got that diploma there, and I immediately went to work, to make sure that mom had some money ... and also the coal, which we could warm up .

(I\_2G\_M\_N8)

The issue under consideration becomes even more relevant when the school experience is analyzed in the interviews. In that case the second generations underline, in some cases, the loss of authority and educational ability of their parents, which is a consequence in part of the phenomenon mentioned above.

Our parents were not informed, my mother was not informed. My father was always at work. We had to rely on ourselves, they never asked us for our intentions. Our parents hoped for us a good job. It was already a great thing for them if we had found a job. For our parents the first thing was to work. Today we want university [a good education] for our children.

(III\_2G\_F\_N6)

The interviews' analysis reveal moments of contrast and critical issues between the different generations in the everyday life. But despite the reported evidence seems to confirm the possible conflicts and crises of which the generations are protagonists in the complex intra-family dynamics (Ambrosini, 2020) in the migration process and post-migration context, other dimensions emerge from the narratives taken into consideration.

In particular, the migratory experience lived by the first generation is constantly reprocess by following generations through the notion of "sacrifice" and "reciprocity". Family reveals as a social capital, capable of generating reliable, continuous social bonds based on the symbolically generalized means of exchange of reciprocity. The "reciprocity" dimension therefore also seems to outline family and intergenerational dynamics, with reference to the migration phenomenon. And therefore, the personal choice of the first migrant or the couple who decided to live in another country, through the shared stories in the family dimension, become a sacrifice made but for the benefit of future generations.

The effort they made to come here [in Belgium], are also values that belong to you, I want to say, they left Italy, they took an important decision, and they wanted to make us aware they did it for us ... and in the future, we will explain it to our children, in another way, but we will try to do it. (III\_2G\_M\_N5)

From this point of view the intergenerational relationship, made up of shared values, respect and responsibility towards other generations, is strengthened. Children and grandchildren aware of the sacrifices faced by parents and grandparents, are consciously and respectfully linked to a culture that has been given to them. These approaches reveal the fluid nature of migrant families and the complex renegotiation that take place across both generations to ensure the successful settlement of family in a new land (Attias-Donfut and Cook, 2017). In this sense, therefore, the migratory experience, but above all its narration and sharing, becomes a family memory, preserved and transmitted through the generations, helping to define the identity of individuals, to strengthen not only relationships of the family unit but also those with the family beyond the borders, between the host country and the country of origin.

According to the literature two main opposing propositions have been set up to describe family changes following migration (Attias-Donfut and Cook, 2017). On the one hand family cohesion is assumed to be higher in immigrant families in the receiving countries. On the other hand, the second proposition suggests greater family disintegration, alienation and conflict due to the contradiction between traditional family values and individualization. As analysed interviews reveal, migration involves all family generations linked by a complex set of gift, debt and reciprocity. In addition, conflicts and solidarity are not incompatible with each other, and the notion of ambivalent relationships is applicable to migrant and non migrant families. Inevitably migration brings specific changes in the functioning of families following migration. Thus, rather than a fracturing of intergenerational relations, the research has revealed complex processes of renegotiation that take place in migrant families that involve restructuring, contestation, compromise and in some circumstances conflict (Foner, 1997; Kofman *et al.*, 2004).

### Transnational practices and the everyday lives

Through the interviews carried out, the transnational perspective also emerges, so that the creation of a transnational social field constitutes a significant context for the daily life of migrants' descendants. The transnational relations and practices, within certain limits, have an impact even on those who do not experience any type of mobility, precisely because they live in a space permeated by exchanges and the contributions that the mobility of others has produced (Zontini and Reynold, 2018). Immigrants' children could be in any case conditioned in their everyday life and in the ways of building themselves by transnational social field. Therefore through the interviews it becomes relevant to analyze the various experiences in the way in which, descendants of Italians emigrated in Belgium after the Second World War, live and maintain this transnational social field.

A first aspect that clearly emerges from the interviews conducted is that, transnational connections shaped their ideas of what and who constituted families. In their accounts families emerged as broad, where presence/absence and spatial proximity/distance were normalized. As for many of the interviewees, having family members in other countries and maintaining close relationship even if infrequent contacts, has an important social value, because it enabled them to be part of a dispersed family network. Many of the participants noted that absent family members are just as important as physically present ones.

Yes, we are still in touch via what sup, with the cousins...Almost every day ... and now my daughter is getting married, [...]... and the family from Italy will be there too [...] yes relations are still alive with the family on my mother's side. (I\_2G\_M\_N8)

Secondly, interviews shows different practices and family rituals in which absent members are made present: video and phone calls; material objects; family narratives and memories; travelling for vacation and celebration of life-cycle. A further demonstration of how, the migratory experience does not end within the first migrant experiences but clearly influences the future generations, in the elaboration of cultural, spatial and family references.

Moreover, from the interviews, it is possible to find some of transnational migrant characteristics in the daily life practices shared between generations (Zanfrini, 2016). Such as a double belonging or the frequent use of more than a language. Basically, this condition is not experienced as temporary, but on the contrary as a conscious, permanent and strategic condition, when, for example, it allows to manage commercial or financial activities. The second and third generations, embedded in transnational social spaces, open real spaces of coexistence between different cultures. Considering also the peculiar nature of the interviewees' group examined, in which the Italian language has been transmitted and preserved through generations, as a fundamental element of Italian culture, but also as a tool, to communicate both within the family in Belgium, with the older generations, and with the family beyond the borders, through transnational relationships. It has allowed them to keep alive the bond with the family in Italy, to move more autonomously in the contexts of origin and to deepen knowledge and customs of Italian culture.

Until Mom died, Italian was spoken at home because... Mom did not understand the Belgian language and was not even able to speak it. Let's say we have always been ... we always have a family that we care to stay together. (I\_2G\_M\_N7)

My grandmother was and is still very present, she helped me to grow up with Italy in my heart ... she arrived [in Belgium] just after the war, so she remained with her culture, her language, her country [...] she did everything as if she remained at XXXX ... and [...] I lived like this, and she transmitted these little things to me in a gentle way, we didn't have to make much effort, [...] she introduced me to her country, the food, the relatives, the sufferings, the difficulties ... but always with this pride of being Italian. (I\_3G\_F\_N2)

Language competence became not only an asset for cross-cultural communication and a potential advantage, but it also strengthens a sense of belonging within families (Reynolds and Zontini, 2006). The knowledge of one's own cultural and therefore linguistic origins was not in these cases a reason for exclusion or lack of integration in Belgian society.

It has always bothered me that ... here it wasn't a problem when the Belgians said to me "you are Italian", but when I went to Italy and my relatives said to me "you are Belgian" ... as a child you are looking for an identity, you want to know who you are and I have always felt Italian ... at one moment I said to my cousins...I am more Italian than you are in Italy ... [...] you are always complain about Italy ...before I was always upset about that... now I don't care anymore ... I think we represent the real Europeans... we are the generation who live outside of Italy ... we are not fully recognize by either one, so then we are Europe. (III\_2G\_M\_N5)

And this is beautiful, because if as Italians in Belgium we are not [fully ] recognized on either side at least we are lucky enough to know two cultures. And we have the opportunity to know more cultures and it is important, it is pleasant. (I\_3G\_M\_N3)

As already analyzed, the interviews show that second generations have rather had to acquire all the tools and information useful to live the two worlds of reference. Different but still important. By maturing a greater awareness of their own history and in the continuous conflict between estrangement and belonging, the second generations were also able to develop a plural and flexible identity. Contrary to popular perceptions, as literature underline, having a transnational family experience and being integrated into the receiving society is "not a zero-sum game" (Reynolds and Zontini 2006, p. 433).

### *Conclusion*

This contribution explores migration processes through a family perspective, with the aim to consider the relevance and strength of the links between the various components along a multi-generation temporal and relational axis (Dubucs, Schmoll and Pfirsch 2017).

The study carried out on second generations of Italians in Belgium, has allowed to observe the Italian emigration of the past, analyzing however the most recent implications in order to underline how migration processes are phenomena whose effects persist over time and borders, connecting people and generations through a transnational logic.

Through a qualitative methodology the research analyzes how socialization processes can evolve through generations within the family dimension, especially among those who have not chosen to emigrate. Considering the *transnational social fields* in which migrants and their descendents are embedded (Levitt and Glick Shiller, 2004) as a significant context for the everyday lives, the research examines in the families' dimensions: relationships between the different generations of migrants (Caponio, Schmoll, 2011); opportunities and consequences of a *transnational families' experiences* (Zontini and Reynold, 2018).

The interviews' analysis reveal different aspects. Firstly, how migration experiences involve all family generations linked by a complex set of gift, debt and reciprocity. The research has revealed complex processes of renegotiation that take place in migrant families that involve restructuring, contestation, compromise and in some circumstances conflict. Moreover, interviews reveal transnational relations and practices, which have an impact even on those who do not experience any type of mobility precisely because they live in a space permeated by exchanges and the contributions that the mobility of others has produced. Although the interviews carried out concern a migration that took place after World War II.

To conclude, family has proved to be a relevant dimension in the migratory experience and in the post-migratory context which is in line with Portes' predictions (Pisarevskaya *et al.*, 2019). This contribution reveal once again the fluid nature of migrant families and the complex renegotiation that take place across both generations to ensure the successful settlement of family in a new land.

Therefore, the use of "generation" as a key variable, help to understand migration processes and mobility studies from an intersectional perspective (Kofman *et al.*, 2011; Dubucs, Schmoll and Pfirsch, 2017).

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