

INTERGENERATIONAL NETWORKS BEYOND BORDERS: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GENERATIONS FROM AN INTERCULTURAL PERSPECTIVE

TRAME INTERGENERAZIONALI OLTRE I CONFINI: IL RAPPORTO TRA LE GENERAZIONI IN PROSPETTIVA INTERCULTURALE

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Abstract

The family migration experience is characterised by multiple *presences*¹: *here*, within the context of everyday life and immigration, and *there*, in the country of origin.

These presences intertwine, with complex and multiple configurations, over the distance. They challenge borders - physical borders between different nations, as well as cultural ones - weaving existential and relational networks which outspread in intercultural contexts, constantly moving and creating meeting points between the *here* and *there*.

It is within such transnational perspective that the new generations' pathways of growth unfold. Their existential trajectories are shaped and re-shaped in light of the interlacing of plural sense of belongings, of different memories and horizons, of multiple ties and relationships, cultivated in person and across the distance. Relationships such as intergenerational ones, where the strands of older and younger generations' life experiences are woven together; bonds are built between distant and present loved ones, against the background of distant cultures and people's daily presence.

L'esperienza di migrazione familiare è caratterizzata da presenze molteplici: nel *qui*, nel contesto di vita quotidiana e d'immigrazione, e nel *là*, nel Paese d'origine. Sono presenze che si intrecciano, con configurazioni complesse e molteplici, nella distanza: sfidano i confini, non solo quelli fisici tra nazioni diverse, ma anche quelli culturali, tessendo trame esistenziali e relazionali che si snodano entro cornici interculturali, muovendosi costantemente e creando punti d'incontro tra quel *qui* e quel *là*.



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¹ The present work revolves around the dual concept of *presence-distance*, where *presence* acquires different shades of meaning. Generally, *presence* means "being present"; however, this does not necessarily mean a physical presence, but it can also include the idea of being a reference point, a memory, or a personal tie.

È entro tale prospettiva transnazionale che si dispiegano i percorsi di crescita delle nuove generazioni dell'immigrazione, traiettorie esistenziali che si elaborano e rielaborano nell'intersecarsi di appartenenze plurali, di memorie e orizzonti differenti, ma anche di legami e relazioni molteplici, coltivati tra distanze e presenze. Relazioni come quelle intergenerazionali, che intrecciano le esperienze della generazione anziana e di quella più giovane: legami fatti di vite distanti e affetti presenti, ma anche di culture lontane e quotidiane presenze.

Keywords

Plural sense of belonging; distances; transnational grandparents; presence; intergenerational relationships.

Appartenenze plurali; distanze; nonni transnazionali; presenza; rapporto intergenerazionale.

1. Migrating families: a transnational perspective

Family migration experiences are characterised by multiple presences: they are stories and life stories that unfold *here* - within the context of everyday life and immigration – and *there* - in the country of origin - at the same time.

This condition emerges clearly when considering the current migration landscape. In the past, in fact, this phenomenon was seen through the prism of the fragmentation of ties, of the *double absence*, as stated by the Algerian sociologist Sayad (1999). From this point of view, the person who migrates, often alone and hoping for a temporary stay only, experiences a double exclusion: they do not really feel part of either their country of origin or the new environment to which they moved. Today, the phenomenon takes on different connotations, by virtue of technological innovations that make it possible for people to communicate frequently and maintain ties with the family abroad despite the geographical distance, and thanks to the improvement of travel opportunities: research has thus taken on new interpretative categories (Ambrosini, 2006). Sayad's notion of *double absence* is still partly applicable to specific conditions or stages of migration (Maddaloni, 2012), but it should not be subjected to broad generalizations. Certainly, this reflection had underscored a central element: from the country of arrival's perspective migrants are "immigrants", whereas they are "emigrants" with respect to the country of origin and for the people who remain there. This is relevant to the full understanding of migration dynamics, which otherwise would risk being approached from the sole point of view of the "immigration society" (Zoletto, 2007).

Thus, the complexity and multiplicity of the relational configurations of migration emerge instead. This aspect is also central to the prevailing interpretative framework in today's cultural landscape: the transnationalism perspective. This takes the form of a new outlook (Levitt, DeWind & Vertovec, 2003), rather than a new phenomenon, albeit with some changes in the relational dynamics of migration (such

as the aforementioned new means of communication and transport). It makes it possible to appreciate the numerous ties that, in a bi-directional way and transcending geographical boundaries, permeate the everyday life of migrant people and families.

Nevertheless, a significant change has been noted as the presence of immigrant workers has taken root and become more structured in the European context first, and thus in Italy. In fact, the phenomenon of family reunifications has increasingly grown, as underpinned by the change in the reasons for issuing residence permits (Ambrosini, 2019). Migration has therefore shown, today in a particularly evident way, its family dimension. This familial nature of the phenomenon is always present, as a matter of fact, even in the case of “lone” migrants. Indeed, those who migrate always carry with them their family ties, which are testified to in various ways: by the very reason that drives them to leave, by keeping in touch on a daily basis through technology. Exemplary in this sense are the experiences of Unaccompanied And Separated Children (UASC).

Migration is thus a family phenomenon and a transnational one. The *double absence* appears today more so as a *double presence*. This concept is used here in a broad sense: its origin can, in fact, be traced back to studies on women's work conciliation (Balbo, 1978) and has since then been frequently used within the field of intercultural studies to describe the specific condition of women who migrate to work as family carers, often experiencing the condition of transnational mothers.

In general, however, one can argue that transnational families deal with presences that intertwine, with complex and multiple configurations, over the distance: they challenge borders – physical borders between different nations, as well as cultural ones. They weave transcultural existential and relational networks, constantly moving and creating meeting points between the *here* and *there*. Vertovec (2004) defines *bifocality* this co-existence of references in everyday life. Bifocality informs, shapes, and contaminates both frames in which it exists, and acquires an interdependent quality: a cultural presence that travels across distance and geographical dispersion, challenges it and redefines boundaries by maintaining “a sense of bonding” (Wall & Bolzman, 2014); a cultural presence that also travels through distance, generating new ways in which diversities can, to some extent, clash, but also meet.

The transnational framework also gives us a key for understanding the new generations' pathways of growth. Their existential trajectories are shaped and re-shaped in light of the interlacing of plural identities, of different memories and horizons, of multiple ties and relationships. It is in the interweaving of proximity and distance that the new generations are called upon to respond to the complex task of identity elaboration, in relation to which they can then establish and plan their own life path. Self-identity, in fact, stems from the relationship with one's past and personal

history, as well as family and collective history; a history which then unfolds towards the future, in a planning perspective: "the future element is essential and it is for this reason that it is important to be careful never to categorise a person according to an immutable concept of identity", as Vandebroek (1999/2011, pp.13-14) argues. Indeed, the identity construct cannot be understood as given, but rather as having a dynamic and multifaceted nature, that can combine different and multiple dimensions. Within such perspective based upon self-determination, the individual takes on an active role of intentional search, discovery, and definition of self. It is a complex role, that will hopefully be addressed with conscious educational support.

The new generations make their own pathways against the background of a unique and unprecedented interlacing of *presences* and *distances*. It is from the very words of the boys and girls with a migration background - but also of the people who operate in the territorial services – that we can grasp the interlacing and mixing between the *here* and *there*, between proximity and distance. The reflections shared below will therefore be accompanied by these voices, collected during the research "Nurturing the roots: memory and intergenerational responsibility in an intercultural perspective"².

There are many ways in which the concept of *presence* materializes in the experience of the younger generations:

- Presence is first and foremost the physical one, experienced in the context of everyday life, of which they feel part of and in which they live every day, creating bonds and relationships;
- The family background is co-existing at the same time. Parents play a mediation role with respect to their culture of origin. In one interview it was emphasised that younger people «do not have their parents' culture of origin, they only share a portion of it, and this makes all the difference: the parents' mediation is very much needed; when it is lacking, the whole intergenerational relationship is missing». In everyday life parents can transmit elements of their cultural background to their children through example, experience and encouraging participation in cultural and religious practices (Mussi, 2022). This mediation role is particularly relevant during family trips to the country of origin. These trips, Baldassar emphasises, are strongly desired by the parents and constitute an important step for younger people in terms of identity re-elaboration: they are «a rite of passage through which they get to know the family and make themselves

² The PhD research, which is still ongoing, specifically investigates the role that roots and memory can play in the growth and identity development of pre-teens with a migration background. This theme is studied in relation to the intergenerational relationship, understood as the link between the older and younger generations: the elderly figures referred to may belong both to the family and to the local intercultural community. The research personally involved and gave voice to girls and boys with a migration background; interviews were also conducted with expert witnesses, workers in educational, social and religious services in the city of Brescia, the reference context of the study.

known. At the same time, they learn first-hand about values and customs» (2011, p.21);

- Finally, there are the distant people and relations, the extended family members who have remained in their country of origin. Interactions, close and frequent to varying degrees, can be maintained with them in different ways (through technologies, or more or less regular travels), but they tend to be persisting bonds: «If the parents managed to maintain the relationship, that part of their origins that is very present in the family, then you can find that in one way or another the relationship is indeed there, it exists». Sometimes part of the family is indeed present in the everyday life context of the younger generations.

Similarly, *distance* can too manifest itself in a multifaceted way:

- It can be generated vis-à-vis the family's culture background, as one educator points out: «very often it causes a rift and they struggle. They struggle with certain things». This can result in a dynamic of rejection and denial of one's origins, which in fact leads to a loss of a part of self (Granata, 2011);
- Distance is also the physical, geographical distance of some relationships that exist only by virtue of various means of communications or are characterized by infrequent in-person meetings: as in the case of «[two girls who] were going to return to their country of origin for the summer holidays; they were very nervous, because they were about to go back and meet their grandparents in person for the very first time»;

Finally, distance is also what the younger generations may experience within the context of their everyday life (a context in which they grow up and feel part of) when the social or formal recognition of that sense of belonging is missing (Siino, 2020). This becomes particularly evident in the bureaucratic procedures, which underline the lack of citizenship status: «They feel Italian, but they also feel a bit rejected by the... you still see new generations queuing up at the Questura...they are a bit bewildered; their parents do everything for them. What does “residence permit” mean to them?”»

2. Intergenerational networks beyond borders

Amidst the interlacing of distances and presences, a significant role is played by relationships, which can be interwoven in a variety of different ways within this continuum. Relationships such as intergenerational ones, where the strands of older and younger generations' life experiences are woven together; bonds are built between distant and present loved ones, against the background of distant cultures and people's daily presence.

On the one hand, for the new generations, their relationship with their grandparents is once again marked by distance:

- *In space*, first and foremost. Grandparents tend to remain in the context of origin, physically distant from their grandchildren in everyday life. Exceptions are, of course, cases where the whole family has emigrated or where family reunification

has occurred. A different dynamic is observed, on the other hand, with third generations, who are more likely to have a personal, day-to-day relationship (Leung & McDonald, 2007): however, this is a rather new phenomenon, which in the Brescian context, where this research has been conducted, only involves very young children;

- *In time.* Schedules cannot always be coordinated, time stretches out, when families are unable to return to their country of origin for long periods, for many reasons. The life story of grandparents is also distant: grandparents tell of a past where temporal distance and geo-cultural distance intersect. One boy recounts that his grandfather and his brothers «fought in the war to liberate Pakistan from India and they always tell me [...] when they were not independent they lived in India and were very rich, but then when there was, shall we say, the revolution, they became poor and lived in a very small house and built it themselves»;
- *Between cultural horizons.* Grandparents bear witness to their culture and traditions, which younger people may struggle to approach when «there's a language barrier, the frequency of the encounters is scarce, there's a lack of understanding, because they do not understand each other, being from different generations; there's a lack of skills [...] So these are all cultural aspects that our kids are missing, and, being born here, we cannot deny that they also share an Italian background».

At the same time, however, the relationship between grandparents, grandmothers, and grandchildren in the context of migration is also marked by meaningful presences, which translates:

- *Into frequent contacts.* Through technology, via phone or videocall, grandparents are indeed present in the family and grandchildren's lives and follow their pathways of growth (Demirsu, 2022). One of the girls interviewed recounts that «when I feel like it, I call her in the morning before going to school and sometimes I say: “But grandma, I'm going to school now, I have to go” and my grandma is like: [...] “Ah ok, ok, have fun at school then”»;
- *Into feelings and memories.* A strong emotional bond and a feeling of missing these family figures emerges from the boys' and girls' words («Of course, I'm very happy [to come back] because I haven't seen her for five years... or even longer»), when going back to Italy («And it's hard to go back to Italy, too, because there's your grandmas you don't want to leave and stuff») or when mourning their loss («Grandpa I miss you, and I want you to come back please. I'm begging you»). Even then, however, their presence still lives in their memories;
- *Into care.* Even if they are far away, grandparents can take care of their grandchildren using their words, as one of the girls interviewed recounts: «If I start crying, she is always there for me to ask me what happened and comfort me [...] She always knows how to cheer me up, always». Care is shown through gestures and forms of protection: «They tell you “I asked my grandma on the phone to pray for me, to recite an invocation”». It's little things like this, but they're present for the kids»;
- *Into being guides and links to the country of origin.* Some of the children recounted what they learnt from their grandparents: «My grandparents taught me, in a way, not to

hate and taught me to have a generous heart, at least a little bit, and to think about what I'm about to do ten times over before actually doing it. And it was an effective method because I used to be more aggressive than I am now». Grandparents are then described as figures to whom respect must be paid, as the family glue, and as the bridge between different cultures and countries, which is underlined by the words of some of the witnesses interviewed: «I think, when you hear these stories, they're always [...], a bridge, a special link to the country of origin» and «as long as there's grandparents, the families will always try to keep ties with their country. But when grandparents are no longer there, ties are cut».

3. Intercultural and intergenerational networks: possible encounters in the local community

However, intergenerational relationships between old people and children with a migrant background can also blossom within the local community where the children grow up: these types of relationships may develop spontaneously or be fostered through projects and spaces for intercultural meetings. Some examples are the neighbours, or old people from the retirement home, or retired people in charge of after-school and neighbourhood activities. Someone might even open their own house to young children on a daily basis: this is the case of an «old Italian man with a carpentry workshop, in which he held after-school activities for the children of the building, who are Chinese, Pakistani... He embodies the figure of the elderly mentor. Now retired, he uses his time to try and impart knowledge to these children [...] He has followed about ten to fifteen children, who are now a bit older, in their pathway of growing up, and he continues to do so as they keep looking up to him as a guide and mentor».

These relationships are built in the context of physical presence, of daily life in the same neighbourhood or city, as the needs and desires of both old and young people intertwine. They do not replace the bond with the actual grandparents but become an additional opportunity to experience intergenerational relationships.

These relationships, however, are once again confronted with another kind of distance: the age gap, which co-exists and overlaps with the cultural gap as one interviewee points out: «meaning that there is a generational issue, because old people, in general, don't really like 15-year-olds, well, not all old people, but they frequently don't; so if - on top of that - these kids are Moroccans, Albanians, Senegalese, etc., things can get even more heated. And something did actually happen, meaning that when there was a big controversy in the park about the kids, it was based on this kind of prejudice». Moreover, sometimes the distance feeds on the fears of families regarding the possibility that these new bonds might distance younger children from their cultural background.

Still, it is in the context of co-presence, and with the care and educational support of this presence, that distances can be shortened: «If we engender a feeling of community based on different activities, we see its strengths emerging and, within a collective context, even the most mistrustful impulses towards culturally different children subside [...] This, in my opinion, is the key strength of this, and can somehow change even older people's minds [...] People discover a welcoming environment of mutual exchange, and tensions lower, even though they don't ever fully disappear». Community gathering places can indeed play a crucial role in fostering intergenerational and intercultural exchanges, especially when they are informal spaces that encourage a high level of participation, responsibility, and involvement of the local community. Such spaces facilitate the engagement in different kinds of aggregative activities, that are not culturally connoted or differentiated by age groups, which «encourage people in proximity to one another to explore and discover together their common identity dimensions» (Ben-Ner & Hill, 2008, p.596). Each person – unique in their multiple cultural identities - can thus feel acknowledged in their diversity and at the same time feel part of something bigger, a collective.

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