THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

Educational Styles and Consequences of Birth of Children for Binational Couples

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Abstract:
The paper examines the dynamics of bicultural couples in which one partner is autochthonous and the other is of foreign nationality. Referring to family dynamics, has taken into consideration two levels of analysis: the impact that the presence of children creates on the dynamic of couple and the educational styles adopted.
According to the basic assumptions of qualitative research, 22 mixed couples living in Sicily were interviewed. To analyse the contents, which emerged from interviews, the Atlas.ti software was used. Through the narrative method we explored the meanings that partners assign to their daily lives and differences they experienced.
The birth of children marks the passage from a couple dynamic to a family one and forces the two partners to confront themselves with their respective origin families. There are a lot of aspects which make these parents different from monocultural ones.
About the educational styles, the results show that the couple frequently adopts biculturalism together with bilingualism, as a strategy to evaluate the cultural background of both partners.

1. Introduction

A mixed (bicultural or intercultural) marriage is defined as the union of individuals belonging to different cultural contexts, national and/or religious (Waldman & Rubalcaba, 2005). The experience of international migration concerns the foreign partner. (Di Sciullo, 2004; Zanatta, 2003).

The term 'mixed' (originally, *mixité* in French) is quite controversial because configures a cultural variable and, consequently, susceptible to changes over time (Fenaroli, Panari, 2006). For this reason we have included 'international', 'interracial', and 'interreligious' unions to the definition of mixed couples, taking into account both the objective components of racial differences (Mancini, 2006) and aspects of social construction of ethnic identity (Tajfel, 1981).

This new family pattern arises from the political and economic transformations that, in the world, make more frequent movements of people from one country to another. In fact, immigration is becoming a structural fact, a social component that slowly changes linguistic, ethnic, cultural and religious setting of the city. The mixed couple is part perfectly of a such background (Lavanco, Novara, 2005).

To certify the relevance of the investigated phenomenon, reference is made to the official statistics according to which it is registered an incidence of nearly 15% (30.724) of mixed couples on the total number of marriages contracted in Italy (Istat Report, 2012; 2011). The 2001 census (Maffioli & Paternó, 2008) found that 39.6% of mixed marriages were composed of one Italian born partner and one nationalized Italian (naturalized). The census generally documents the remarkable increase of families with at least one partner of foreign nationality (45% of the total) and the consequent growing numbers of children of mixed couples (increase of 22%). The mixed couples residing in Italy are distributed respectively in the north (55,1%), in the centre (25,8%) and in the south (12,7%) proportionally to the migratory streams in the different areas of Italy, which mark a clear prevalence of those cases in which the foreign partner is female sex (76,12%) (ibidem).

The phenomenon, although recently, he had a surprising trend, arousing the interest of experts from various disciplines. We have to take into account the potential difficulty and stress of the couples to cope with differences not only in a larger social context but in the intimate family relationship as well (Chan & Wethington, 1998; Usita & Poulsen, 2003). Currently, however, the studies that have compared mixed and monocultural couples noticed no differences in the quality of the relations between partners (Troy, Lewis-Smith & Laurenceau, 2006; Monacelli & Mancini, 2005) while the degree of stress in the former increases in connection with the problems of children education (Fruggeri, 2005). The originality of the topic lies then both in the great impact that it may

have, placing it as an example of a project of multiethnic living together, on family collective and cultural level, and in the possibility of directing and organising services in preventing situations of uncertainty, if not of ties, breaking off.

The studies on the sector, that are not many in the Italian context due to the recent origin of the phenomenon, can be grouped into two macro-approaches: structural and motivational approaches:

- The former abandons the pathological viewpoint of the seventies[1] and explains the increase of mixed unions with the larger opening from the socio-community context to the immigrants.
- The motivational approach otherwise reduces the foreign partner's choice to individual motivations and concomitant the intimate life of each partner, just as it would happen for monocultural choices. Such approach deepens the individual stories without necessarily finding connexions among individual level, couple level and social level.

The only studies that in Italy assume a multidisciplinary perspective, capable of integrating different levels of analysis, can be traced back to Huston's theoretical approach (2000), to Fruggeri's multidimensional model (2003) and to Falicov's crosscultural system model (1995), even though at the moment there are no empirical data capable of explaining (quantitatively and qualitatively) the mutual inter connexions and implications of one level of analysis on the other.

In countries where the multicultural phenomenon is more common, researchers have focused on the intergroup relationships in ethnic minority contexts (Townley, Kloos, Green, Franco, 2011; Esses, Dovidio, Jackson & Armstrong, 2001). These studies highlight the importance of the relationships between the dominant and minority groups, according to the balance of power in function to the national and/or group membership: in fact, the foreign partner has to interact with the indigenous partner's group, which is considered the dominant group/culture. Hence, it is necessary to understand the process of cultural construction of similarities and differences between groups which, according to a hierarchical group model, which implicitly shared, establishes the acceptance levels between groups (Hombrados-Mendieta, Gomez-Jacinto, Dominguez-Fuentes, 2009; Bertolani, 2002). Following this line of thought, in function to the social contact established with those groups that boast of greater prestige, a discriminatory attitude takes shape against the foreign partner if the foreign partner is associated with minority group. This level of analyses is connected to the traditional social-constructivist model (Bruner, 1990; Gergen, 2009), where it is assumed that the social construction of difference and its consequential discriminative processes can obstruct the development of the foreign partner's sense of belonging.

Another trend of studies has investigated the couple and family dynamics within the difficulties to handle and negotiate the differences between partners and among partners and children, producing a series of models step by step describing how, to build its own family identity, the mixed couple would pass from the idealization of the tie, to the awareness of the real challenges which are inherent in having to negotiate meanings and values in the choices of daily life (Foeman & Nance, 1999; Gozzoli & Regalia, 2005).

In Italy, the negotiation strategies have been defined by Bertolani (2002) and classified in four typologies:

Assimilation, when the foreign partner unconditionally accepts the Italian partner's culture, supplanting his/her own.

Affirmation, when the foreign partner rejects the Italian partner's culture, affirming his/her own.

Mediation, the tow partners negotiate and agree on some uses and customs, applying them alternately, so that each partner makes small sacrifices, in order to avoid family conflicts.

Broadening of what is possible, which is an original and innovative way to establish a family culture capable of combining the two cultural heritages, producing wellness to couple. Important is the mutual commitment of the partners to know the others' cultures and to reappraise together the traditions of the two countries.

The research, detailed as follows, using this classification to understand how these strategies affect also the educational styles.

2. The Research

2.1. Group of Participants

Twenty two couples were recruited, formed by an Italian partner and a foreign partner: 17 married couples and 5 living together (respectively, years of living= 6.6 years and 3 years), all of them resident in Sicily (mean of residence= 13.05, sd= 10.4) and 11 with children (mean age of children= 13.95, sd= 8.9).

The group of foreign partners interviewed comes from both countries belonging to the European Union (N=12) and from non-EU countries (N=10)[2].

In particular, the sample of foreign partners is composed by 18 females (mean age=45 years old) and 4 males (mean age=39 years old); the proportion of gender reflects in the population the prevalence of mixed couples formed by a woman foreign partner and an indigenous partner (Peruzzi, 2009).

As for the circumstances in which partners they met, most of them had met through friends or through your travel (for study or pleasure) in their countries.

The religion of the couple, in almost all Italian partners (N=21) is Christian as well as for foreign partners (N=16), followed by Orthodox (N= 3) and Muslim (N=2).

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[1] According to this approach, the exogamic choice was transgressive for the autochthonous partner and aggressive for the foreign partner towards their respective origins.

[2] EU countries: Germany (3), Romania (2), Portugal (1), Poland (3), Greece (1), Sweden (1), France (1).

Non-EU countries: Albania (3), Cuba (1), Brazil (2), Venezuela (1), Morocco (1), Tunisia (1), U.S. (1).

As to educational qualifications, the majority of both Italian and foreign participants have a high school diploma (N=20); among the foreign partners, there is a small number with a professional training (N=6), follow the graduates (N=4) and those with a junior school certificate (N=2); among the Italians there are those who have a junior school certificate (N=6), then the graduates (N=5) and, finally, those with a vocational training (N=1).

As to the motivation of foreign partners' emigration, the majority (N=6) emigrated to improve their economic situation, followed by those (N=5) emigrating for sentimental reasons, and after them there are those who have emigrated to study (N=3) and, finally, those who have emigrated (N=1) to find political asylum (N=1), or to join other family members (N=1), or take a vacation (N=1).

In particular, most of the foreign partners emigrated voluntarily (N=19), while only a small number (N=3) did it forced by political events or family problems.

2.2. Methodology

The research was conducted according to the perspective of Grounded Theory and wanted to give voice to the mixed couple, in order to understand the meanings that partners attach to some aspects of their married life and their ways of thinking and putting into practice biculturalism as a possible educational style.

The approach of Grounded Theory (Glauser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 2008; Charmaz, 2006) suggests that the assumptions are not applied to the object of research, but discovered and formulated from the analysis of collected data, and subsequently verified by the comparison with the emergence of other data, in a circular process where the phase of data collection and their analysis interact (Cicognani, 2002). This circularity is a strength because it sees the researcher committed to continually reflect on the entire research process, step by step. This enables us to evaluate the appropriateness of the methods, categories and theories, with regard to the data (ibidem).

In the present study we used a mixed model, therefore we took into consideration both theoretical key contributions, and the interpretative method (bottom up) that is the interpretation of all answers of the interviews in a new way as compared to the theoretical input.

To analyze the textual material we used the content analysis supported by Atlas.ti software (version 5.0), with the goal of reducing the text corpus into units of easier meaning (Trabia, 2005).

Atlas.ti software identifies parts of the text considered most significant (called *quotations*) and assembles them into smaller categories of meaning (called *codes*). Then, the codes can be assembled into *code-families*, in order to show the semantic relation among codes.

Interviews were conducted face to face with both partners of bicultural couples, they were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed maintaining the original text.

The average duration for each interview is 45'.

3. Analysis of Data

The analysis of the interviews enables us to draw out 158 units of meaning (called *codes*) concerning dynamics of mixed couples, from a number of 496 *quotation.*

Therefore, examining the semantic relationship among codes, it was possible to group them in six great conceptual dimensions, called code-families, which Atlas.ti graphically displays through cognitive maps with a network structure. In this paper, we examine two code-families:

- Impact of children on the couple (Map 1)
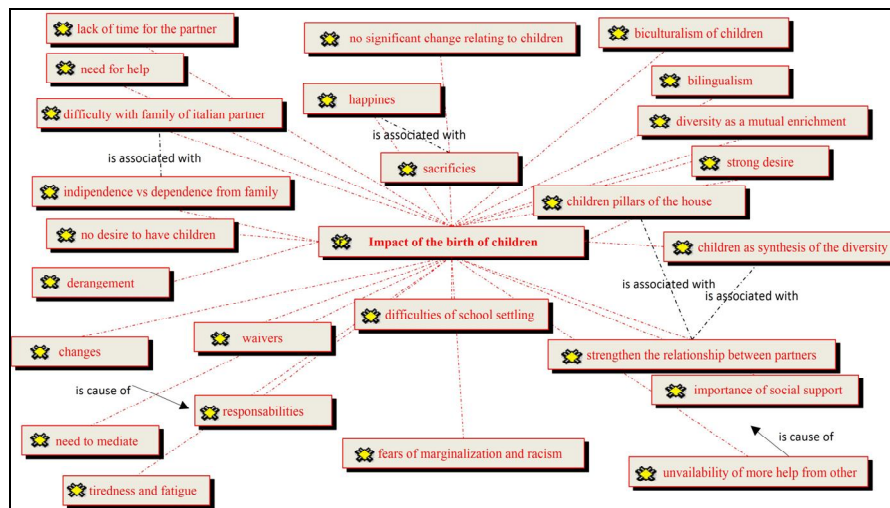
Map 1: Impact of children on the couple

- Parental educational styles (Map 2)
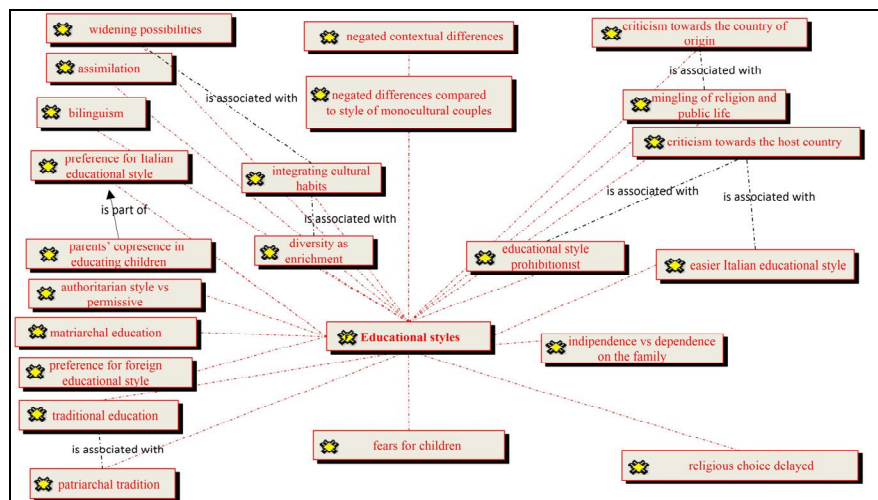
Map 2: Educational styles

Map n. 1 shows, on the left, the negative sides; in the centre, the children's difficulties and the parents' fears for them; on the right, you can see the positive aspects in the couple after the birth of children.

Among the negative aspects, there are: the *lack of time* for the partner, the *increased need for help*, *tiredness and fatigue*, codes which describe the load of effort that occurs with the arrival of children.

Other problems have been attributed to the upsetting due to *renunciations*, *changes* for the *new responsibilities*, the difficulty with the family of the Italian partner due to too *many attentions of the grandparents* for the children, which parents perceive as intruding.

It is pointed out the couples' happiness despite being associated with sacrifices, of which partners seem to be aware, and the *difficulties of school settling* due to bilingualism:

the teachers sometimes do not understand him because he is still a little confused and sometimes speaks in German (PD 13, 54).

Among the difficulties (bottom centre of map 1), there is also the partners' fear for a possible marginalization of their children, if not real fear for their being targets of racism:

We are afraid of diversity and the religion of others. We are worried for our children because they represent the synthesis of two cultures and, in our case, our children carry it in their somatic traits. We are proud of this, if they came too white or too black, it would give us trouble, it would be something not very successful (PD 1, 29).

The meaning attributed to biculturalism is unequivocally positive (right of the map 1). Most couples recognize it as an added value, however, followed by the choice of children's bilingualism for which emerge feelings of pride, openness, uniqueness, wealth. Most of the couples affirmed they complement each other's cultures and they feel their bicultural experience and diversity as a mutual enrichment, as a resource to teach their children. On the other hand, their presence indicates a strengthening of the relationship between partners and, probably, the acceptance of the couples as "family" so that after the birth of children increases the perception of support received from others.

As illustrated by the code: "children are the pillars of the house."

As regards map 2, concerning "educational styles" we can see: 1) the different educational styles of the interviewed couples (on the left), among which we recognize also the styles identified by Bertolani (2002); 2) fears of the couple in relation to children (in the centre of the map), and finally, 3) criticism towards their country of origin and the host country, about the culturally-based educational practices.

Many couples adopt the strategy defined by Bertolani as "enlargement of the possible" (left of Map 2), which enhances the dual cultural heritage considered as an enrichment:

Our children have made their first communion with the Orthodox rite here (…), pray in arbëreshë think in Italian, hope in Brazilian (PD 1, 26);

I lost my roots and I realized that it is better to be equal to all mankind, that is, losing a root to understand that there is a root of all mankind equal, more or less, then change the language, skin colour, culture, but the essence is we are all equal, then you lose this nationalism and become the peoples of the world (PD 12, 9).

These are examples of a cultural strategy that allows partners to implement a gradual process of differentiation from their symbolic references to build a new one, through a "mix" of the many cultural universes.

However, even couples who favour assimilation are several. They meant a*ssimilation* as a way to penetrate the partner's culture, which is the dominant culture of the society where we live; in fact, this choice derives from the interest to avoid discrimination and to feel the least different possible.

It comes out that those who, among foreigner partners, prefers the Italian educational style, do it for the *simultaneous presence of both parents* as educators, unlike in the countries of origin of foreigners in which, often, there is a *matriarchal style* of education;

In the map we find (top centre) the codes that show the negation (although sporadic) of the differences between families mono and bicultural concerning educational styles:

being a parent, there are no differences, it depends on the person (PD 3, 32).

Referring to the educational methods employed, there are (bottom centre) fears for the children concerning the somatic and religious diversity and the consequent lack of integration:

the cultural trend seeing the stranger as a problem (PD, 1, 28). The Italian state is not secular but Catholic and I'm Jewish (Giuisch) and I am afraid of the future for my children and for their choices (PD, 8, 42).

The words of these couples imply that the parents should also educate their children to defend themselves from cultural injustices. Referring to the criticism towards the country of origin the partner complaints a mingling between religion and public life.

The Arabs say you mustn't do this because it is sin (PD 2, 28).

When I see something... I do not like, he mustn't do it (PD 2, 26).

While, the criticism toward the host country refers to a prohibitionist educational style.

With regard to religious education, the interviews revealed that some parents choose to avoid open confrontation on the issue of religion, preferring the path of compromise, choosing, for example, to postpone the choice of religion to when the son/daughter will be able to decide for himself/herself, or opting for a joint secularism; otherwise, the couple may choose to teach the fundamental principles of both religions, favouring the universalistic aspects of faith; in the end they could renounce to transmitting their religious culture to the child to avoid conflicts with their partner.

This decision may result from different motivations mixed with personal experiences and relationships with their communities. Thus, reports an interviewed person of Chinese origin:

As a rule, both in China and in Europe it is necessary to follow the father's culture and I personally would favour that (PD 15, 48).

4. Concluding Remarks

Considering the family as a laboratory for intercultural interaction and comparison between different cultures, we can draw from this research innovative suggestions to improve psychological, educational and social services and, above all, help the parental development of the bicultural couple in different transition phases.

The mixed couples are faced with some problem-areas which can be summarized in following points:

- The delicate passage from a couple dynamic to a parental one highlights the typical duties coming from the birth of the first baby: take care of the newcomer, redefine the relationship with the respective origin families, find time to spend with the partner, manage the tiredness of day-to-day activities; moreover, some peculiar aspects of the bicultural couple and related to the fear of growing children in a non-inclusive or even racist environment emerge.
- The couples meaning biculturalism as strategy to appreciate and value their being culturally and religiously different, resulting from the combination of their family histories (Novara, Romano, Lavanco, 2013); Indeed, an important finding emerged from the interviews is that couples with children often adopt a bilingualism, which does not necessarily lead to the mutual recognition and working-cultures of belonging.
- As to education styles, the strategies defined "enlargement of possible" is as popular as that of "assimilation"; the first sees the mixed couples evaluating in a creative way the background of both partners combining them in innovative choices; the second strategy sees the foreign partner detaching him/her self artificially from his/her own cultural of origin because it is the easiest way to avoid discrimination of all sort.

In all the cases examined, social support coming from origin families, as well as friends and neighbours, is the key variable to ensure the new family wellbeing (Novara, Romano, Petralia, 2011). Indeed, the "other" perfectly fits in the mixed couple dynamic, delimiting their development and entrenchment possibility or on the contrary isolating the couple and undermining its wellbeing.

Therefore, the results show the relevance of the context, both in terms of positive relationships into the family and in terms of reduced stereotypical relations with the social context (Cunningham, 2005; Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006).

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