

Moroccan and Albanian second generation migrants in Italy: integration and identity formation

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Italy has only relatively recently become a country of in-migration and so the presence of migrants' children is a relatively new phenomenon for the country. The number of young migrants and Italian-born children of immigrants, however, is rapidly increasing, making those second generation migrants who are either approaching or have reached adulthood "involuntary pioneers" (Andall, 2002:390) of a growing reality. This paper focuses on these young "involuntary pioneers" and questions the classical linear theories of integration which see children of immigrants as either following the straight line towards total assimilation into the mainstream culture or as remaining "locked" in their parents' culture and tradition. The paper will show how for youths of Moroccan and Albanian origin living in northern Italy 'integration' and 'identity formation' are complex and multilayered processes interlinked with legal and social exclusion, parents' and peers' pressures, personal projects and desires. In particular, it focuses on how attitudes towards relationships, marriage and reproduction, often used as demographic indicators of integration of the second generation, are the result of a continual, delicate balancing between family expectations and pressures on relationships and marriage, peer pressures and judgements on sexual performance and their personal desires, outlooks and future plans.

Methods

This paper is based on fieldwork conducted during the summer months of 2008 in two northern Italian cities, Ferrara and Bologna, with Moroccan and Albanian second generation youths. Fieldwork consisted mainly of in depth, lengthy interviews with nineteen respondents of which six of Albanian origin (four girls and two boys) and thirteen of Moroccan origin (nine girls and four boys). Interviewees were aged between 18 and 25, had both parents of either Moroccan or Albanian origin and were either born in Italy or had moved to Italy with their parents when young, mostly between the ages of 2 and 12. Interviews touched on a variety of subjects related to interviewees' everyday lives, immigration history, future projects, legal status, relationships, family life, sexuality, interaction with peers, religious attachments, visits to parents' countries of origin, local immigrant "community", racism, gender inequity, marriage and police stations. Together with interviews, fieldwork included focus groups with Albanian and Moroccan girls on male-female relationships, participant observation at young Moroccans' social events and meetings with two of the main second generation pressure groups in Italy, the "G2 network" and the "Giovani Musulmani d'Italia" (Young Muslims of Italy) organisation.

Classical linear theories of integration

Children of immigrants have always been an object of academic, political and journalistic speculation on 'identity' and 'integration'. An immense amount of literature has been published on the subject of second generation identity (see Thomson and Crul, 2007) and a general worry about whether second generations will "culturally adapt" and integrate in a given host country can be often detected both in mass media coverage and scholarly publication on the issue (Vertovec and Rogers, 1998). Debates have often made use of classical linear theories of integration where migrants are conceptualised as moving from a state of 'non-integration', where behaviours reflect their cultures of origin, to 'integration' where mainstream culture and behaviours are adopted. For children of immigrants, integration is thus measured on the basis of how much their behaviours and attitudes resemble on the one hand behaviours and attitudes of their migrant parents and on the other those of their "native" peers; the more second generation youths' behaviours resemble

'mainstream culture' the closer, classical linear theory argues, they are to integration. Within this theoretical framework, demographic indices of family formation such as marriage and reproduction patterns have often been used to determine the level of integration of both first and second generation migrant individuals and groups (LeGrand et al., 2008; Berthoud, 2000; Hennink et al., 1999). This is a problematic theoretical stance as it implies not only that demographic indices are unambiguous reflections of integration but also that integration must be seen as a kind of inexorable shift from one set of cultural/demographic behaviours to another, neglecting how integration may constitute a complex and multilayered process rooted in the everyday life experiences of second generation migrant youths.

The problematic nature of classical linear theories of integration clearly emerges when one considers the processes of identity formation of Albanian and Moroccan second generation youths in Italy. Rather than moving from a more 'Albanian/Arab identity' to a more 'Italian' one, young immigrants are constructing their own dynamic identities in continual "conversations" with a myriad of elements, ranging from legal issues and religious attachments to sexual behaviours of Italian peers. The paper argues in detail how the different dimensions of apparent demographic integration are conditioned and interlocked with the legal context of second generation migrants in Italy and are themselves fluid and negotiated. The discussions are illustrated with quotations from young second generation migrants to show how they articulate their understanding of their position in Italy and their identity formation.

Legal exclusion and integration

One of the principle problems with classical linear theories of integration is that they overlook the very real barriers and limitations second generation youths encounter in their processes of identity formation. The generally restrictive and exclusionary immigration policies and regulations in force in Italy and the extremely limited legal status assigned to children of immigrants in particular makes "*avere i documenti*" (having documents/papers) play a central role in second generations' transition to adulthood, identity formation and 'integration'. Turning eighteen for many informants was something of a "culture shock", as suddenly they were no longer legally linked to their parents and had to obtain a separate legal permit (either for work or for study) to reside in the country they had always lived in:

"you can't just say ok I'm eighteen, I want to take a break, think about the future, go on holiday and then start university or simply I want my parents to support me for a while, be a real Italian no? ...no!... at eighteen you have to decide...either you get a work permit or a study permit...there is no other alternative...and you see your school friends, the people you grew up with that are doing sweet nothing and you risk being deported if you don't make a quick decision and organise yourself..." (A., 22M, Albanian parents)

The question of having/not having documents, citizenship or residence permits is, for young second generation individuals, not only a frustrating burden which has important practical and material consequences but also has the power to instil in them a sense of being different, separate and unequal to the people around them (Mandel, 1995). Italian laws and legislation on immigration, then, have a direct impact on immigrants' children's sense of identity, belonging and on processes of 'integration'; laws and legislations are one of the main obstacles against them feeling "Italian" and, also, one of the clearest reminders that Italy, as a nation, has little intention of considering them Italian.

Informants constructed, negotiated and actively elaborated identities and life trajectories despite, and often in response to, institutional, legal and social limits and barriers. Islam, for example,

played a central role in the lives of many young Moroccans and involvement in religious organisations, far from being an obstacle to 'integration', has become in some cases a way of constructing (and claiming) "active belonging" (Frisina, 2007) to a country which often denies them both formal citizenship and social inclusion. This active construction of identity and life trajectories emerged also in more intimate behaviours of informants through the management, conceptualisation and negotiation (with both families and peers) of male-female relationships, sexuality and marriage.

Sexuality and integration

Female respondents highlighted how relationships with boys was one of the main areas of conflict within their families; what emerged clearly from the fieldwork was how second generation girls were engaged in daily negotiations with their parents as far as female-male relationships were concerned and were elaborating new ways, different from both those of their Italian peers and those of their parents, to engage and conceptualise relationships and sexuality (Baldassar, 1999). On the one hand, respondents were highly critical of parents' concern with female-male interactions and were questioning how social and sexual freedom was distributed unequally along gender lines among siblings, often resulting in a much more intense monitoring of girls' pre-marital chastity than that of their brothers. On the other hand, however, female respondents in particular were eager to distance themselves from their Italian peers' way of envisioning male-female relationships and sexual behaviours, highlighting how Italian girls often engaged in pre-marital sex because of the pressure received from partners and peers. By distancing themselves from Italian girls who had sex because (amongst other things) they "had to", the second generation presented themselves as being more "sexually free" than their Italian peers, despite the control exerted on them by parents and brothers, as they had the willpower to resist what they did not want to do and the strength to defend what they believed was important - their virginity. Girls, thus, were consciously defining themselves in opposition to the perceived patterns of gender relations and sexuality of their 'Italian' peers.

Marriage and integration

Marriage was discussed in a similar way to sexuality as respondents highlighted how, whilst having no intention to marry as early as their parents, nor were they planning to behave "like Italians" who were described as not giving enough importance to marriage, marrying far too late and divorcing far too often. Although educational plans and career projects delayed marriage arrangements and put the idea of marriage into the background both for youths and their parents, in no way did interviewees exclude the idea of marriage altogether. On the contrary, many respondents considered marriage as a central stage in their future lives and none of them intended to

"marry as late as the Italians do...or not marry at all! (laughs)" (V., 18F, Albanian parents)

Parents were described, no doubt also as a reaction to dominant stereotypes of "backward" Albanian/Arab parents, as being relatively open minded as far as choice of husband was concerned, generally preferring (but not necessarily demanding) individuals with similar origins and, especially for girls, with the same religious belief. Interestingly, the "pressures" on marriage some interviewees were subjected to by their parents actually openly contradicted these stereotypes:

"yes, of course my mother was happy I married a Moroccan but you know, in general, she would much prefer me marrying an Italian rather than one of those Muslim integralists... I'm sure I would have had more problems introducing her to a prospective husband with a beard and all that (laughs) you know, a very very religious guy...she doesn't trust them, and I don't either" (L., 24F, Moroccan parents)

Reproduction and integration

Many second generation interviewees highlighted how, before thinking about marriage and reproduction, they would have to sort out their own academic and professional careers. However, for female interviewees especially, children were seen as much more of a hurdle in the attainment of their life goals than marriage. Many girls, in fact, linked their intention not to have children in the near future (and, for some, not at all) to the fact that their life plans would necessarily be interrupted with reproduction:

“ I am a very ambitious person, I think also because of my parents’ pressures about studying...I’m working hard at uni so that I can get somewhere, I want to open my own pharmaceutical company, change the ethics of what a medicine is (smiles)...and there is absolutely no way that I’m going to start having babies and give up my plan...I know this may sound selfish of me but once I finish uni I will have time to think just about my life and my career...I want to do something with my life, you see, not like my parents...not just have loads of children and end up with loads of regrets...I am really scared of ending up like my mother...or my aunts...full of children and completely dependent on a man...I want to be independent.” (Q., 20F, Moroccan parents)

The above quote demonstrates how problematic it would be to read reproductive behaviours and attitudes as clear signs of ‘integration’ of second generation migrants. What lies behind the delaying and critical attitude toward reproduction, as much as a move from parents’ behaviours to Italian behaviours, is the structural position, in Italy, of immigrants on the one hand and working mothers on the other. One of the reasons girls gave for their limited enthusiasm for reproduction, in fact, was not wanting to end up like their mothers. Many girls tended automatically to equate reproduction with their mothers’ life trajectories and saw these life trajectories as undesirable, several seeing their mothers’ reproduction as being the main thing responsible for their limited life achievements. One of the reasons for second generation girls’ lack of interest in reproduction, then, can be found in their rejection of the life trajectories of their immigrant mothers who, every day, remind them of what they are working hard not to end up being: cleaners, carers for the elderly and not independent. Italy’s specific context plays a central role in this mechanism. As Italy’s institutions and policies offer little if no support to working mothers, various studies argue how Italian women often feel they have to choose between having a career and starting up a family (Mills et al., 2008). Young second generation girls are well aware of this and of the sacrifices they would have to make in their career if they started having children. Well aware of the structural and social limitations they will have to fight against anyway in order to move away from their parents’ societal and occupational positions, positions that legal and social institutions seem to impose on them as well, young second generation girls have no intention of making this fight even harder by having children while young.

Discussion

When approaching the identity formation of second generation youths, simplistic theoretical models of integration are often utilised where sons and daughters of immigrants are conceptualised as moving, at different paces according to their levels of integration, along a straight line which runs from ‘parents’ culture’ to ‘mainstream culture’. Results from the study of second generation Albanian and Moroccan youths living in Italy demonstrate not only how problematic it is to speak of one, single and inevitable path for integration but also the necessity to take into account the many realities involved in processes of identity formation and ‘integration’ of young second generation migrants. In particular, the study shows how attitudes and behaviours linked to sexuality, marriage

and reproduction, often utilised as measures of integration, cannot be read in any simplistic fashion as signs of integration (or non-integration) to 'Italian culture'.

Given the general young age of second generation immigrants in Italy, no data are yet available on their marriage and reproductive patterns and behaviour. The young "involuntary pioneers" objects of this study, however, will soon begin to contribute to Italy's demographic constellation and this study shows how their marriage and reproduction patterns will have to be read through a much more complex theoretical framework than those of classical linear theories of integration. Respondents, and in particular female respondents, spoke of sexuality, reproduction and marriage as being the result of careful balancing acts constructed in a context of various powers, pressures and projects. Rather than a straight integration line, then, the phenomena that lie behind demographic indices such as marriage or reproduction patterns are negotiations with parents and conscious differentiation from sexual behaviours of Italian peers, employment patterns of immigrant mothers and Italy's limited support to working mothers, legal exclusion of second generation migrants in Italy and religious affiliations. The study shows how attitudes towards sexuality, marriage and reproduction play an important role in the processes of identity formation of second generation young adults and how these processes are rooted in daily negotiations, conflicts and aspirations which not only contradict any simple theory of integration but also implicitly question those theoretical models which see 'culture', 'identity' and 'belonging' as bounded, fixed and rigid:

"I'm African, I'm Italian, I'm Arab, I'm Muslim, I'm ferrarese [from Ferrara], I'm terrone [derogatory term for southern Italians], I'm European...and they'll all just have to learn to deal with this" (T., 25M, Moroccan parents)

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