

Emotions in practice: reflections on the importance of the *nonni* in the construction and transmission of ethnic identity

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Abstract

The present paper reflects on fieldnotes undertaken as part of a long-term study on the construction and transmission of ethnic identity among families of Italian ancestry in Australia. It seeks specifically to shed light on the “domestic space” of Italian-Australian grandparents’ homes, where the “sense of place” and belonging appear to be embodied through the sharing of cultural practices and the development of strong emotional attachments. It is proposed that the *nonni*’s place is a key *locus*, a generator of ethnic identity for younger (mainly third generation) family members, where an idealisation of Italian-ness appears to take place. Practices and emotions experienced at the grandparents’ homes appear to be marked, embodied, and adapted into a personalised interpretation of ethnic identity by the younger family members. Moreover, the grandparents’ personal belongings (photographs, mementoes, *object d’art*, musical instruments) appear to play a complementary role in nurturing the grandchildren’s identity. Such mementoes can be seen to authenticate the grandparent’s Italian-ness through their symbolic and cultural capital.

Keywords: emotions, practice, ethnic identity, cultural capital

Introduction

Despite significant achievements reached by previous studies on Italians in Australia, there is little literature on Calabrians and even fewer examples that investigate the construction and transmission of ethnic identity. Recently Rose (2005) and O’Connor and Rose (2008) have examined the historical settlement of migrants from the Calabrian town of Caulonia. Additionally, Misiti (1994), in his study of Calabrian migration to Australia, predicted the imminent demise or dispersal of Calabrian culture. The main factors at risk were the Calabrian language and the sense of identity of the second generation who claimed to have an Australian identity (Misiti 1994). The

1 Grandparents.

present study contributes to literature on the migration experience of third generation ‘Calabrian-Australians’. From a perspective which mainly highlights the relationship between domestic space and ethnicity, the paper attempts to bridge persistent dichotomies (metahistorically existed in the humanistic sciences), such as objectivity and subjectivity, body and mind, structure and agency, and invites to an in depth reflexivity which considers both the relevance of practice together with the *positionality*² of the social actors, in order to build holism.

As has been recently noted, despite the large number of qualitative studies of migrants’ life experiences, the emotional dimensions, and a particular reflexivity on the continuities and discontinuities emerging from individuals’ emotional experiences and dynamics remains relatively understudied (Boccagni and Baldassar (2014)). Other socio-anthropological exceptions which investigate the emotional dimensions include Levitt & Glick Schiller (2004); Bondi et al. (2007); Svasek & Skrbis (2007); Svasek 2010, Marinelli & Ricatti (2013); Vanni (2013); Noble (2004); Ahmed (2004); Zembylas (2012); Turner and Stets (2005); Boiger & Mesquita 2012; Smith et al. (2009). According to Noble (2004), the analysis of migrants’ experiences is often framed within the dominant logic of practice (Bourdieu 1987; Fussell 1992), structured by relations of economic and social power. Such studies tend to minimise or totally ignore the relevance of emotional factors while focussing on the reproductive aspects and continuity of social life.

In a recent Special Issue of *Emotion, Space and Society*, Boccagni and Baldassar (2014) draw attention to the importance of the study of emotions in furthering our understanding of the ‘migrant experience’. They go on to suggest that the migration process is characterised by important transformations along the migrant’s life course involving the transmission, reproduction and the evolution of emotions in relation to belonging, identity and ‘home’. The present paper takes its lead from this proposition by providing critical reflections on the role of the *nonni* [grandparents] in the construction and transmission of ethnic identity in a diasporic context. The reflections are based on fieldwork undertaken over a two-year period from 2012 to 2014 among members of the “Italian community” of Adelaide. Participant observation and interviews in the domestic field, allowed the researchers to reflect on participants’ narratives and observe a variety of situations and cultural practices. An interpretive anthropological approach provided insights into the linguistic and cultural capital and the subjective interpretations of 14 Australian families originating from Calabria, Italy. Such interpretive approaches rely on anthropologists’ imaginative insight into cultures and emphasise the emic perspective, highlighting subjective understandings and its meanings (Geertz 1994).

The paper starts from a critical consideration of the role of practice in understanding migrants’ ethnic identity and its transmission to subsequent generations. The authors take the view that the ‘practice’ should be juxtaposed with the emotional dispositions of migrants, in order to achieve a thick description and a more holistic understanding of their ethnic identities. This is based on the positive evaluations that younger Italian Australian participants have of the practices experienced since childhood at their nonni’s homes and the ensuing strong emotional attachments associated with the grandparents’ world.

Nonni’s world

It is evident that the *nonni* play a fundamental role in the construction of the participants’ ethnic identity. Firstly, the *nonni’s* house and all that is encapsulated within such space (practices *in loco*, personal belongings, stories and associated memories) appear to contribute to the development of a specifically “Italian” sense of place. This is what Bourdieu (1990) referred to as a state of *doxa*, a state of unquestioning attachment for a field. It became apparent from our observations among

2 By positionality, I intend the perceived social actor’s ethnic positions of “being in the world”. This is an ontological matter which concerns the struggle for individuals to locate and affirm what De Martino (1977) called their *presenza*, in terms of ethnic presence, and the way such *presenza* is perceived by themselves and others.

the participants that the third generation have spent a great deal of time at their grandparent's homes and many of them have been brought up by them. In this world, they have experienced the cultural practices that the grandparents have brought from their homelands (the annual ritual of making the tomato sauce and sausages, playing Italian cards with *nonni*, removing the "evil eye"). Like their parents, the third generation also have grown up immersed in their grandparents' stories of the "old world" and experiences of migration. They have also grown up surrounded by the *nonni's* personal belongings, *objects d'art*, mementoes that come to represent "Italian culture" in the eyes of the grandchildren. The following examples are typical.

Such experiences can be either mundane or "exotic". For example, Rocco (who was given his grandfather's name) remembers how happy he was when his *nonno* presented him with the shirt of an iconic football player for his 10th birthday, claiming he has followed the Italian fc ever since, becoming a supporter of the Juventus football club. Caterina (who has her grandmother's name) spends every afternoon with her *nonna* and is present when her *nonna* "removes the evil eye" from the "cursed" *paesani* (fellow countrymen and women). All the participants in the present study talked about their "happy memories" at *nonni's* and indicated they had developed strong emotional attachments to their grandparents' worlds during their formative years. Often such ethnically derived practises and emotions are not present in their own parents' homes. The grandparents' world, on the other hand, is a social field where ethnic differentiation is embodied into their early world as children and is maintained into adulthood. A certain "ethnic being"³ (Noble 2004) is internalised in the form of emotions within their grandparents' domestic world which becomes a powerful catalyser of the young persons' ethnic identity.

Transnational objects

Grandparents' personal belongings also appear to play a complementary but nonetheless crucial role in nurturing grandchildren's ethnic identity. This happens specifically when there is a strong emotional attachment with the *nonno* passed away, and when the object has symbolic meanings for the grandchildren. It seems that when an object is passed on from *nonno* to *nipote* [grandparent to grandchild], individuals develop a deep sense of empathy towards their *nonni* and their ethnicity. This is evident in the following extract of Anthony's cabinet.

Anthony's display cabinet

There is a display cabinet in Anthony's bedroom that appears to be a microcosm of his Calabrian family: There is a photographic enlargement showing him at his nonni's Australian house, in Seaton, in which a very young Anthony is playing the organetto (concertina/squeezebox) with nonno. Next to the photo there is the original Paolo Soprano, the concertina nonno Antonio brought with him when, at the age of 20, he migrated to Australia. Anthony says his nonno played tarantella on the nave [ship] Roma every day for 40 days, to ward off the fear of being at sea. Having come from Siderno Superiore he was not used to sea travel. Nonno's concertina was handed down to him when he was a child, and it is treasured by Anthony who says:

Check this out, mate, this is a Paolo Soprano, nonno gave it to me as a gift for my First Communion. He left Calabria with a suitcase and this organetto, that's all. What a man, mate. I haven't got my nonno anymore, but I have this organetto which is his. Nonno gave me a lot, he always said to me that "family is everything", "be proud and honest". Nonno taught me how to play tarantella calabbrisi [Calabrian tarantella]. He used to sing lots of songs, like "the servant and Christ", nu servu e nu Cristu, that was my favourite song. I loved when nonno sang: "cu

3 By "ethnic being", following an Heideggerian line, I intend an ontological presence which transcends the situational nature and dynamics of self and other categorisations of ethnic identity. Such "ethnic being" could be seen as a philosophical ethnic habitus, or the De Martinian *presenza*, something which is accumulated, internalised and concerns the individual's presence of "being in the history" (i.e. *da-sein* of Heidegger).

voli giustizi⁴ [he who wants justice] ehmm don't wait for it, but just go for it", you know⁵? He told me the meaning of that song that is: don't expect others to do something for you, just try do it yourself and take justice into your own hands. That's the real Italian attitude, which is fair enough. If you wait or complain, you don't actually live your life. Nonno was cool and wise [Seaton, SA. Saturday 12nd June 2014]

Borrowing from Vanni's (2013) concept, Anthony's concertina can be thought of as an *oggetto spaesato* (transnational object out of place and time). The display cabinet positioned in his bedroom and replete with his grandfather's mementoes is imbued with symbolic meaning. Indeed, the emotional attachments Anthony displays towards his *nonno* and his memory approaches the level of reverence (if not veneration). In this case, the *oggetti spaesati*, are strong cognitive and affective markers of identity that, in the idiom of Talcott Parsons (1975), have a cathectic character that is invested with emotional energy.

Idealisation of culture

The grandparents' homes seem to be a locus where an idealisation of Italian-ness takes place. For example, a number of everyday moments experienced at *nonni's* place, such as watering the tomatoes or feeding the chicken with *nonno*, or eating *nonna's* food, are emotionally and symbolically charged and to an extent idealised as "Italian" by the younger participants in a way that was not typical of the second generation. The following example extracted from the fieldnotes is illustrative:

Pasquale is Anthony's father. He confides that he has never enjoyed, and therefore never fully learned, how to make satizzi (sausages) in spite of the fact that he has been making them with his father since he himself was a boy. The real expert is his son, who has nonno Antonio's same touch. Pasquale says:

"You know, every bloody June we got to make the *satizzi* [...] I don't have any good memory about that. I remember one day, at school, my classmates teased me because they said I stank of pig. Bastards. When making the *satizzi*, dad was very harsh with me. He used to scold me, in front of the others every time I made a mistake. I wasn't any good at it. I still remember lots of *carci 'nto culu* [kicks up the arse] dad used to give me for every mistake. Whereas Anthony is good at it and for him it's fun. He has got my dad's same touch".

The subjectivity of the practice and the emotional attachments evident in Anthony loving memory and idolisation of his grandfather is not present to the same extent in Pasquale's experience who was ridiculed by his schoolmates and scolded by his father.

The idealisation can therefore be seen to be the result of the combined practical experience with the grandparents who are seen as objective models of "Italian" ethnicity *par excellence* and the emotions which are attached to such experiences by the third generation. For example, Anthony constructed his idea of the way Italians deal with injustice as a result of the song he used to hear his *nonno* singing. He epitomised *nonno's* folkloric song in one sentence: "taking justice into your own hands, is a real Italian attitude". In short, the experiences at *nonni's* loci appears to have contributed to a number of incidents, which have been idealised as axiomatic of an Italian identity in Australia. Clearly, the extent to which such cultural identity is idealised originates also from exogenous fields, *in primis* those of the dominant society⁶ (i.t. the way "Italians" are currently "institutionally" seen) and participants' *institutio positionality*.

4 Anthony attempts to speak Calabrian.

5 The folkloric song is actually called, Lamento di un servo ad un Cristo crocifisso [the lament of a servant to the crucified Christ], it was composed by Leonardo Vigo, 1857 (circa), probably before the unification of Italy. It tells of the condition of poor Calabrian peasants living in a remote villages with no justice. The servant, tired of the continuous humiliations and abuses from his landowner (who does not pay him), prays to the image of the crucified Christ, asking him for justice. Jesus replies by saying to take the law into his own hands, get a stick and bare his teeth.

6 The third generation, compared to their parents, has more "sovereignty" to choose and negotiate

Reflections on ethnic identity: from practice to subjectivity

In order to interpret participants' understanding of ethnic identity, we must bridge the theoretical gap between practice and subjectivity. The link appears to be provided by the strong emotional attachments that the participants invest in the cultural practices experienced mainly at their *nonni's* place, such as dancing tarantella, playing cards, helping *nonno* in the garden or cooking pasta and *pruppetti* [meatballs] with *nonna*.

Following the Bourdieusian line, in *practice*, the reproduction of certain practices related to the *conduite de vie* of the grandparents may have generated an ethnic habitus among the young participants who have spent a significant amount of time with their *nonni*. Once the practice is embodied (within the body or mind of those who "know how to do" certain valued things), individuals "learn" how to behave within that field, what needs to be said, what not. And when their habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it finds itself "as a fish in water". In other words, social actors, by internalizing specific practices, generate and reproduce certain durable dispositions of the social world they are the product.

However, the feeling of being "a fish in the water" (at one's parents' or grandparents' place), does not necessarily coincide with ethnic identity *per se*. One can feel comfortable at one's migrant parents' (or grandparents') house, but might express antipathy towards one's background. And vice versa: one can manifest ethnic identity without possessing any embodied habitus. Therefore, ethnic identity is not necessarily linked to the individual's practice and habitus⁷. Rather, in order to understand participants' ethnic identity, the *theory of practice* is fundamental only if juxtaposed with their subjectivity and emotional life experiences. Such synergy appears to be the *condicio sine qua non* with which to interpret the complexity and dynamic nature of ethnic identity.

By taking into account both the objectivity of practice and the subjectivity of the emotional dimension of experience one can perhaps understand why some third generation "Italian-Australians" assume an "Italian" identity that is often more pronounced than their parents' and why they "cannot wait" to go with *nonno* to pick the olives, or make the tomato sauce, or sausages or wine.

While acknowledging the Bourdieusian distinction between the *vis insita*, that is, the force inscribed in objective structures, and the *lex insita*, which is the principle regulating the social worlds (Bourdieu 1987)", the authors are of the view that the 'feel for the game' can only be understood in terms of the emotional attachments which subjects invest in their lived experience.

their ethnic identity. The relationship with the "Italian culture" is characterised by more freedom and less conflict compared to the second generation. This seems to be the result of the way Italian culture and its migrants are currently perceived in Australia.

7 Clearly, also second-generation have an 'ethnic habitus' which differs to the first and third generation as a result of the different cultural capital accumulated (i.e., inter alia knowledge and experiences). However, in the diasporic field, it would be simplistic to interpret the different emotional attachments to one's culture only as a result of differences in 'ethnic habitus'. Although an 'ethnic habitus' encapsulates certain elements which are common and shared across generational lines, ethnic identity appears to be likely a matter of individuals' positionality.

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