ABSTRACT

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SESSION I: THEORETICAL CONCEPTS IN STUDYING FAMILIES AND FAMILY RESEARCH METHODS

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A COMBINED ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK IN STUDYING FAMILY REUNIFICATION

Keywords: reunited families, transnational families, civic stratification, migrants in Italy, structure / agency

In this paper we focus on family reunification. How emigrant families are put together and the forms they take varies with the culture and social origin, though also with the subject's and the family’s migratory strategy, the socio-cultural context of the host country and the latter’s chosen migration policy. The range of migrant family types and the differing patterns under which they reunite suggest they should be seen as the dynamic outcome of a process responding to a host of rules, including those of law (Tognetti Bordogna, 2004). Therefore, the issue of family reunification appears extremely complex. Faced with this complexity, the risk is to approach the question of family reunification overly emphasizing the normative regulation and forcing the subjects in a passive dimension; or, on the contrary, de-contextualize the subjective strategies of migrants and their families.

Exploratory fieldwork in Italy – in the province of Reggio Emilia which has one of the highest immigrant densities in Europe – led us to adopt a combined analytical framework in studying such families, bearing in mind both the theory of civic stratification (Kofman, 2004; Kraler et al., 2011; Morris, 2002; Rinaldini, 2010) the transnational perspective of migratory processes (Bertolani, 2012; Portes et al., 1999; Vertovec, 2004) and the linked concepts of “agency” and “social capital” of individuals (Aheam, 2002; Coleman, 1988). In particular, in our opinion, the combination of these analytical perspectives, helps to avoid theoretical limits concerning the determinism of
structuralist readings of migration, but without to ignore the presence of devices tending to desubjectification of the actors. In this sense, individuals’ “agency” should not be considered as unconditional free will but as a constant process of choice that is subject to relational, cultural, economic and political constraints, contributing at the same time to modify these same constraints. Therefore, human actions are dialectically related to the social structure in form such that the two dimensions are mutually constitutive.

Our paper is based on results from qualitative empirical research of an exploratory nature, carried out in the province of Reggio Emilia, Northern Italy. The research lasted three years and investigated processes of family reunion and family formation, living experience and the daily affairs of migrant families residing in that area. We held 33 interviews with reunited family members (10 Moroccan, 13 Pakistani, 10 Indian; usually with the spouses, though in 4 cases with children as well) and about 40 semi-structured interviews with young Indians who had been reunited. The choice of three national groups was dictated by the commissioning body’s need to know the true picture of these three communities, which are especially dense locally. The sampling technique employed was mixed: we adopted snowball sampling, based on reports coming in from friends or acquaintances of the same nationality; then, we partly adopted a “reasoned selection” so as to be able to saturate the concepts that emerged during research.

Our analysis focuses on the combined outcomes of structural limits and subjective and family migratory plans in the transnational social field. We reports some outcomes on the ways through which restrictions may be turned to possibilities and on how this affects the formation of the families and the roles within them. The study focuses on how traditional reproductive behaviors change taking in account national family reunification rules, constraints and resources offered by kin-networks and also personal desires. Also, it aims at illustrating the meaning that a transnational marriage can assume for the parental network and the individuals involved, in terms of personal and family’s prestige or of redefinition of family roles, of power-relations among the spouses and of gender identity within the newly born family. Finally, the paper discusses how traditional marriage practices (like for example “arranged marriages”) may be redefined in a transnational perspective.

In the first part of the paper we point out the characters of ambivalence that the institution of family reunification entails in itself, as a device that should favor and allow the family reunification while, at the same time, regulating, defining and restraining the number of the admitted family members. Then, we point out some of its social consequences, as family reunification may foster a process of stabilization but, at the same time, favor processes of redefinition of family roles and of negotiation of tradition. In the second part of the paper we explore some aspects of the concept of transnationalism applied to reunited families, to conclude that they are intrinsically transnational and to point out the implications of this fact in their everyday life. In the third part we apply the concept of civic stratification to the study of family reunification. A final section analyses some of the results of our fieldwork, on which to validate the combined analytical approach.

Our contention is that a transnational perspective, civic stratification and the concepts of “agency” and “social capital” can be usefully integrated and provide a new interpretive key to various aspects of family reunification.

References


