THE MAINTENANCE AND CONSTRUCTION OF CULTURAL IDENTITY: THE CASE OF FOREIGN MINORS

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Abstract: This paper draws to investigate, in a theoretical perspective, the maintenance and the construction of cultural identity of the country of origin in the case of foreign children: adopted or immigrants. In this reflection, we find a company that, from the perspective of globalization and social changes, has certainly helped transform the identity and culture concepts. It's possible to show that, following the recent waves of immigration, Italy is shown as one of the first places of "stabilization" of individual immigrants and immigrant families and as a result this has led to a broad reflection and taking charge from social, health and educational services. In this light, it is important to dwell mainly on identity construction processes of so-called "second generation" taking into account the changes that children and adolescents of foreign origin live. In the case of immigrant families, in fact, children are the center of cultural comparison of the entire family, as they are the first to have and maintain contacts and relations with the departments and institutions. As for foreign minors adopted, however, we see the same need for cultural identity at the base of the individual's identity construction. It seems important, in fact, that the adoptive parents contribute to the support and understanding of the culture of the country of the child's home to use as a protective factor to any discrimination and as a pillar of identity formation of the individual foreigner.

Keywords: cultural identity; minor foreigners adopted; young immigrants; second generation

1. INTRODUCTION

At the basis of the analysis of the construction and maintenance of the cultural identity of belonging is the society in which we live that is increasingly characterized by changes in the social nature and the phenomenon of globalization. All of this has led to the transformation of the concepts of identity and culture, and the basis for this seems to be the lack of some reference points. According to Bauman (2003:17), for example, are the state crisis and the relative sense of belonging that, together with the emergence of local communities and the transport revolution, have meant that the definition of identity became an individual's need. This collapse of local communities is based on the current situation as a result of the development of globalization and the migratory waves that characterize these last years. In fact, it is possible to highlight how to date Italy is one of the first places to "stabilize" foreigners: foreign immigrants or foreigners adopted. As a result, it is interesting to focus on the experience of foreign children regarding the development and maintenance of the

cultural identity of the country of origin. In fact, these minors grow between two different cultures, and this can be an opportunity for them: these individuals have the opportunity to live two different worlds that can grow the other one.

It is essential, however, that this opportunity be acknowledged and cultivated. Many individuals are in fact subject to double membership for varied situations; for this reason, referring to the 2003 Acts of the Province of Milan - Social Policy Sector, it is considered useful to differentiate the starting conditions that minors may have:

- *Children born in Italy by parents with regular residence permits*. Minors in this condition are among the most favored, have socialized relief since birth and do not suffer from trauma of separation, their only difficulties may be the management of intercultural dynamics;

- *Immigrant children with parents*. Those minors have suffered the trauma of separation from their world of origin, they pass from a "first" to an "after" traversing a painful trauma of being separated from the people, from the context in which they grew up and have to fit in a context

new. Moreover, these children do not know the reasons behind the journey and are therefore less prepared to deal with new situations. They often blame their parents, thus reaching family conflicts;

- *Fewer reunions* (condition identified by the Fondazione Giovanni Agnelli, Torino, 2004). This is a very delicate category, as these children have already experienced a first emotional detachment when their parents left their home country and then their children. During the posting period, children have developed an attachment to other reference figures (often their grandparents), so the risk is that in such a situation these children will be "adopted" by their biological parents with whom they no longer have any emotional bond and thus experiencing a new emotional detachment;

- *Children of parents not in compliance with the residence permit*. Children who live in this condition are at high risk because they live socio-economic marginalization conditions that impede the achievement of psychological well-being;

- *Refugee children*. In this case, the risk is to live and establish attachment links with individuals who have an altered psychic balance. Indeed, the parents of these children have suffered torture and violence so as to compromise their effective parenting skills;

- *Less orphans*. This condition, already dramatic, becomes even more important for immigrant children. In these families, there are no extended family relationships and there are no social networks that can support the child. The child is therefore able to process mourning alone and the balance is challenged;

- *Minor foreigners adopted*. These children, like immigrant children, have psychic suffering linked to events in their own country of origin. Often these issues are not taken into account because of their acquired Italian citizenship;

- *Unaccompanied minors*. The latter are young teenagers who have traveled for their own will, often in contact with criminal organizations. They are therefore facing difficulties of both legal and psychological nature.

In this work, we focus on two different conditions of being a minor foreigner: on the one hand the condition of a minor immigrant and on the other the condition of being a foreign minor adopted.

2. CULTURAL IDENTITY IN THE FOREIGN MINORS

In analyzing the cultural identity of foreign children, it is crucial to start from the definition of the concept of identity. At the basis of this concept is surely the dynamism that characterizes the dimension of identity: identity is not something immutable and definite, but it is subject to continuous change. This change arises from the relationships that the individual associates with the surrounding world and its perceptions.

Identity, as defined by Mancini (2008:162), is the pinnacle of its development during adolescence, through a process of mediation between the individual and the surrounding environment: the young man is experiencing the changes that make him in a condition of "crisis" of identity. The term "crisis" is used to emphasize the disorientation situation that the subject lives before achieving psychological and social autonomy. We emphasize that this passage is a key element in the growth and development of the personality of the individual.

There are so many reference theories that have happened, especially in the Italian landscape we can quote A. Palmonari (1993:71) who revisited and remodeled the developmental tasks of the adolescence already identified by Havinghurst (1952:15) adapting them to modern Italian society. Palmonari, in its revision, introduces three new tasks related to the features of the present society: (1) To be able to guide the era of globalization by distancing itself from belligerent and fundamentalist attitudes; (2) To develop new forms of active citizenship so that it can move agile in increasingly multicultural and interreligious cultural contexts; (3) Know how to read critical information that is offered daily by the mass media.

In order to understand the process of formation and consolidation of the identity of foreign children, it is also necessary to refer to the feelings of belonging that individuals perceive as to their origin society or ethnic identity. This kind of identity is defined as

> one of the multiple identities that individuals can choose to invoke. It is defined by a set of values, symbols and cultural models (value, symbol, pattern) that members of an ethnic group recognize as distinctive and recognize in the representation of the common origin ... The use of ethnic identity is fluid and flexible. The general characteristic is that it depends on the interaction of the groups: as Epstein writes (Epstein, 1978), the perception that a group has itself is shaped in relation to others.

The ethnic identity was also investigated by J.L. Amselle (1999:103) which defines it as a result of a two-tier process: (1) *"Internal" level*. Level activated by members of the ethnic group that translate some common features in distinctive traits of the group and will subsequently be used to

determine whether they belong to the group (performance identity); (2) *"External" level*. This level is defined by the external to the group i.e. those who are not part of it and establish the criteria for belonging to the group seen from outside (substantial identity). It is thus clear that ethnic identity is not something innate, but it is a building that is made by the individual at various points of view: political, social, historical.

It is evident, however, also from the analysis of the National Center for Documentation and Analysis on Infancy and Adolescence (1997), as the child lives a mediation between two different worlds that often have two very different ethnic identity models. Choice implies analysis under two different perspectives: on the one hand, there is the family of origin with the values and traditions of origin, on the other hand the host society. The minor therefore has to mediate between the two ethnic proposals and have to build their own identity.

The individual thus lives in a crisis situation and encounters different variables in the construction of his identity: the family, the country of origin, the host country, the fellowship communities, etc. The solutions that can be used can be summarized, according to Moyersoen (2005), according to the following four:

1. *Cultural Resistance*: this strategy refers to the attitude of the foreign minor towards the arrival company. In this case, the individual will refer almost exclusively to the parent's ethnic origin. Consequently, on a practical level, there will be friendships mostly with other fellow countrymen; maintaining language, clothing and cooking and fidelity to the traditions of origin. The risk of this mode is to make children feel like foreign perennials in the host country;

2. *Assimilation*: this solution differs completely from the previous one, the minor in this situation fully adheres to the identity proposal of the arrival company and denies that of origin. This involves advantages such as the high quality of exchanges with indigenous people and the disadvantages of shedding a part of yes or breaking family ties between generations;

3. *Marginality*: this is one of the most common conditions, the minors appear confused and at the margins of both cultures, both of origin and of arrival. They do not have an identity culture and they are both passive;

4. *Double ethnicity*: this solution has an integration between the family and the host society. The child develops a dual sense of belonging and is considered the best strategy. In fact, "dual ethnicity" has greater balance and critical capacity.

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We therefore highlight how real opportunities for choice should be the basis on which to base a possible integration policy capable of respecting ethnic identities and differences, which should therefore be understood not as obligations but as choices.

2.1 Young Immigrants: "the second generations". Defining the importance of the development and maintenance of ethnic and cultural identity, we can analyze in greater depth the dynamics of the children of emigrants, better identified with the definition of "second generation". Second-generation minors are children of immigrants and are young people who are born in the host country or young people who have completed schooling in the host country and who then emigrated to a new state. The difference, as well as definition, is to be sought within the acquisition of cultural identity, as we have already pointed out. The intergenerational difference appears to be very strong as adult individuals who have experienced an immigration situation feel, in an even more marked way, the attachment to their traditions and their own culture of origin; precisely because the comparison with each other that is different from us leads us to the discovery and valorisation of our identity (Mazzetti, 1996; Nehru, 1941; Llaumett, 1984).

The foreign adult rediscovers himself in comparison with the host society, sometimes hostile, from which it is distanced. Very often, however, the child appears to be positively oriented towards the host country. It is interesting to note how the change and the distance to the origin identity that is recorded among young people This figure emerges from "research on identity and perceptions among second- or third-generation immigrants" (Delle Donne 2000:79); from the latter, it emerges that: culture has taken place in terms of values and orientation, and people fluctuate between their two cultural identities, so there is often a tension between these individuals and their parents.

It is clear then that today, in our society, for children and adolescents, immigrant status or immigrant childhood has difficulties in realizing their individuality. Sometimes, somatic traits or different skin color can hinder identification in the Italian community: on the one hand the young person is not recognized in the image of the average Italian, on the other hand the society is considering it with mistrust. Moreover, these young people according to the theory of L. Zanfrini (2004:101) are often discriminated against by the friendly society and the labor market precisely because of their context of origin. Often,

the different accent, ascendancy and belonging become the exclusion elements (theory of three A).

Finally, these are children who were unable to have their say with respect to the migration decision. Made in most cases by parents or adults of reference, but which are to take a position, so these children have only to choose between respect for majority culture or to anchor to the past.

2.2 Minor foreigners adopted. Another type of status that we find among foreign children is foreign children adopted. The children adopted are both pre-teen and teenage children, as well as brothers or sisters, of different ages. Children adopted by means of international adoption are characterized by difficulties in building their own identity. In fact, these children live in two different family contexts: the source of origin and the reception. Along with this, there are also issues related to culture and ethnicity, as we have already seen. The adoptive child carries with it a wealth of experiences that will affect its overall development. The adopted children, in fact, experienced a significant trauma: losing primary care figures; these figures (usually the parents) should have been for him the guarantee of security and protection. This loss may have been of two types: primary when the child was abandoned at birth and could not develop an attachment relationship, or secondary, that is, when the child was able to establish an attachment bond with the parental figure. Each situation is therefore different and involves a bag of experience that the child has acquired; for this reason, the role of adoptive parents is a delicate and crucial role in the development of the child and the realization of the young adult. As defined by the Adoption Commission, adoptive parents should be eligible for education and emotional transmission to the child and must be ready to assume the title of "multicultural" family and therefore a family made up of different cultural elaborations. The adoptive family must therefore be aware of this characteristic and must engage in the knowledge and promotion of the original cultural identity of the child. This implies that parents know the culture of the child's country of origin and that they cover the positive aspects by trying to convey them to the child as a reference point.

It is also essential that parents have prevention and protection strategies against racial prejudice and stereotypes. For the family is good to have frequent contacts with individuals and families of other ethnicities, in particular it would be very useful for family members to engage with families of the minor's ethnicity. In this way, it favors the construction of positive models in the child and these children are more prepared to deal with any injury actions. We must be prepared to develop their awareness of the difference and a very useful resource is the ongoing relationship with other adoptive families. It is necessary to make the very concept that difference is a wealth to be cultivated, never minimizing the child's experience and never ignoring the difficulties the child may experience.

It is good that adoptive parents guide the child on the identity journey he is doing, paying attention to his emotions and understanding his reasons. At the basis of all this, there is a constant confrontation with the child, listening to his experiences, and considering him entirely as an interracial family, as A. Dell'Antonio (1994) also states.

> The important thing is that the new nucleus can assume those features of interplay that allows everyone to accept each other without having to lose anything of their own values and history.

3. CONCLUSIONS

Following the analysis of the literature above, it is important to emphasize that the assumption of an intercultural perspective is fundamental when it comes to reception. Welcoming must be supported as a source of sharing and common growth and it is important to focus on the notion that difference should be understood as a resource.

In fact, we have exposed the difficulties that minors of foreign origin live in their migration or adoption pathway, these children have undergone an emotional cut and it seems necessary to seek to cure their wounds. We need to ensure the proper support for their development by developing appropriate intervention strategies: institutions should first and foremost be guarantors of genuine care and help relationships. Parents, teachers, and educators must have the appropriate preparation to deal with situations and must be prepared to use the right tools. It is therefore essential to continue to foster the culture of inclusion through ad hoc social policies, not claiming that these children forget their culture of origin but accept diversity as wealth; only in this way will it be possible to speak of true hospitality.

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