

ACCULTURATION, PARENTING PRACTICES AND THE TRANSMISSION OF CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS VALUES IN MUSLIM IMMIGRANT FAMILIES

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Abstract

Acculturation is a complex and dynamic process associated with various difficulties and challenges that play a major role in raising children. This is especially true for Muslim immigrant families where instilling traditional values and a strong sense of ethnic and religious identity is a primary aspect of the parenting process.

This study addresses the process of cultural negotiation undertaken by immigrant Muslim parents and analyses how it affects their children's education and parenting practices. Eleven Muslim immigrant adults with children, settled in Italy from an average of 25 years ($F=9$; mean age= 48) participated to a semi-structured interview about their experiences of raising their children in relation to their origins and Italian culture. Atlas-ti was used for thematic analysis. The results showed that the educational role of parents in these families is challenged by the difficulty of finding a match between the traditional model of education and the mainstream model. This difficulty intertwines with the one related to the need to reconcile different needs, namely, the need to preserve and transmit religious and cultural values, and the need to adapt to the values that they and their children learn through interaction with the plural society. In response to this challenge, parents seem to prefer separation as an acculturation strategy, in terms of the content of traditional and religious values, while maintaining a negotiating space for these values. Instead, in teaching these values, they have moved increasingly closer to the Italian model of parenting, which is based on flexibility and dialogue, thus adopting integration in the field of parenting strategies.

This research was the preliminary phase of an intervention project aimed at empowering the Islamic community of Turin, Italy, to support families in practicing intentional parenting in order to address the challenges related to the migratory context. In other words, to promote the acquisition of parenting skills that can meet both children's identity needs and parents' needs for appreciation and cultural transmission, and also prevent problems and psychological distress caused by cultural conflicts. It emerged from both the research and the intervention project that the need to develop a model of "parenting in migration" is shared by the entire Muslim community and requires a collective and collaborative effort to promote this process by creating spaces for discussion and by activating the resources available in the community that can guide and accompany parents in difficulty in their educational role, creating synergies with the services offered by the territory.

Keywords: *Acculturation, parenting, cultural values, Muslim families, empowerment.*

1. Introduction

In today's Europe, the presence of a Muslim migrant population is already an established reality. As always, the stabilisation of a population in an area brings with it the presence of family units and the growth of new generations (ISTAT, 2020). The family dimension plays an important role in the migration project, both socially and culturally. Certainly, the family is of great importance both in the migration phase and in the subsequent stabilisation phase. However, the family also plays a central role in the difficult process of integration into the arrival society. (Monaci et al., 2010). On the one hand, the family is the place where traditional values and ties to the extended network of relatives and compatriots are preserved and where new psychological categories, boundaries, and identities are redefined (Chrysochoou, 2004; Berry, 1997). On the other hand, families provide emotional support, resources, and protection that are fundamental to the process of social inclusion. However, immigrant parents often feel left alone in their parenting efforts because they lack the family network that traditionally shares parental responsibility (Tummala-Narra, 2004). For this set of reasons, the family can also be a site of

conflict and sometimes very difficult negotiation between traditional practices and new lifestyles (Monaci et al, 2010).

If this picture applies to migrant families in general, Muslim families face another difficulty related to their religious affiliation. Indeed, a negative view of Islamic culture and religion in Western and especially European societies leads to a lack of support, if not outright hostility, on the part of the receiving context for the work of cultural transmission of Muslim parents and exposes the second generation to strong pressure to assimilate (Fedi et al., 2019; Kunst & Sam, 2014; Rizzo, et al., 2020). On the other hand, the multiethnic and polycultural nature of contemporary Western societies also poses crucial problems for Muslim parents. Indeed, the collectivist values of this cultural world clash with the individualistic approach of Western societies, just as the presence of religion in the public sphere, characteristic of Islam, clashes with the demand to relegate it to the private sphere coming from the Western social context.

The concept of culture clash calls into question the acculturation paradigm, which refers to the cultural changes following a prolonged contact with another culture. Berry's seminal model (Berry, 1997) identifies four main acculturation strategies (assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalisation) that result from the intersection of two motivational drivers: the willingness to maintain one's cultural heritage and the willingness to participate in the plural society. Authors (e.g., Arends-Tòth & Van de Vijver, 2003; Ward, 2001) have emphasised that the acculturation strategy chosen is not unique, but can change depending on the area of life. Research has shown that in public spheres of life such as work and business, immigrants tend to adapt to the dominant culture. In private domains such as family values and relationships, immigrants want to maintain their culture of origin (Arends-Tòth & Van de Vijver, 2004). In these areas, change occurs very slowly. For this reason, it is a major challenge for parents to integrate different and sometimes conflicting cultural models and values in order to meet the new needs of their children. In this framework, the acculturation gap between parents and children is likely to be linked to an intergenerational gap, making the reconciliation of different values one of the most important challenges for immigrant families (Dwairy & Menshar, 2006).

The aim of the present study was twofold. First, it examined the cultural negotiation process of a group of Muslim migrant parents who have been living in a large city in northern Italy for more than ten years. Second, by analysing the impact of this negotiation on the upbringing of the children and the parenting practices of the parents, the research laid the groundwork for a community psychology intervention aimed at strengthening the local Islamic community and supporting the families in practicing intentional parenting in migration.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants and procedure

The study involved 11 Muslim migrant parents ($F = 9$; average age: 48 range: 43-60), residing in Italy from an average of 25 years (range: 20-32). All participants were first generation immigrants who migrated to Italy from Morocco ($n = 4$), Egypt ($n = 6$) and Algeria ($n=1$). All participants got their educational degree in their country of origin. Specifically, seven participants hold a university degree, two a high school diploma; one participant attended primary school and one had no education. All participants were parents of at least one adolescent child.

For all participants except one, Italy and Piedmont were the only place of destination. In one case, a participant migrated to France before arriving in Italy. In the men's case, migration was due to economic reasons, while all the women participants migrated for family reunification.

Although 4 participants were Italian speakers, all the interviews were conducted in Arabic by a native speaker researcher and then translated in Italian.

2.2. Data collection

A qualitative method was chosen because it is best suited to examine the complex dynamics of cultural negotiation. In an early phase, participants were recruited within the local Islamic community from public settings (mainly mosques) and personal contacts. Then, a snowball sampling procedure was followed. All participants were informed verbally and in writing of their consent and gave written consent to participate. The recorded interviews took place in private residences. Interviews were conducted between February and December 2020 by an Arabic and Italian-speaking trained interviewer who followed a semi-structured in-depth interview guide and asked for additional information as needed. The interview grid included (a) demographic data, (b) family and immigration history (c) questions about raising children in migration. The interviews lasted an average of 1.30 hours; participants volunteered and received no compensation for their participation. The Ethics committee at the local university approved the study protocol.

2.3. Data analysis

The audiotaped interviews were transcribed verbatim in Arabic and translated by the Arabic-Italian speaking researcher who collected them; the translations were reviewed for accuracy by members of the research team. All identifying information was deleted from the final transcripts. The transcribed interviews were subjected to qualitative content analysis using Atlas.ti 9 software (Muhr, 1997). We adopted a collaborative approach and an open and axial coding method to iteratively create thematic categories (Olson et al., 2016). Disagreements were explored and discussed together to agree on final coding.

A total of 58 codes were created for the text analysis (coding a total of 841 quotations). In keeping with the purpose of this study, we focused only on the following codes: Parental control (n = 99) parental affect (n= 45); parenting (n= 82); second generations (n= 398).

3. Results and discussion

Our analysis began by answering the question, "What are the greatest fears that parents of Muslim immigrants feel about raising their children in a Western context?". It emerged that our participants' fears were mainly related to the possibility of their children assimilating to the Italian context and losing the connection with their country of origin and the heritage culture. In fact, in the perception of our interviewees, the assimilation of children means a complete abandonment of cultural habits strongly linked to the Islamic value system. In this framework, assimilation would take on the meaning of a total rejection of the moral and religious rules that form the basis of traditional culture. An Egyptian father noted:

When you come to a Western country you are faced with that typical openness of their culture such as the excessive contact between men and women you find here, which is limited for us and in this you find a strong cultural conflict. [int. 11; M; 54 years; Egypt]

The threat to Islamic values coming from Italian society is destabilising for Muslim families. Parents find themselves forced to defend behavioural rules that are not supported by the context of their children's lives. An Egyptian mother explained:

The society we come from has raised us to have values and moral principles that guide your actions, but they also tell you that you can go out and do what you want without violating your values. But how can a teenager maintain his values if everyone around him does not? [int. 2; F; 51 years; Egypt]

The impact of cross-cultural contact on parents' acculturation emerged from the comparison our respondents made with the Italian parents they met in their daily lives. All of our participants noted the difference between the way Italian parents raise their children and the way they see as typical of the Arab world. A Moroccan mother told us:

Italian parents cuddle a lot with their children, we Arab families have a more aggressive style: Come here! Sit down! Do that!!! instead they turn to their children and say "love", "darling, would you give me...". I have noticed this many times and regret that we did not do the same with our children. Instead, when their children are grown up, they have the boyfriend, they can take him home. We Arab parents say to our children "Eib" (shame) to have the boyfriend. Italian parents give so many freedoms that we can't give [int. 5; F; 46 years; Morocco].

Parental socialization toward autonomy and self-determination is highly valued by the Muslim parents interviewed when directed toward young children. Autonomy and self-determination, on the other hand, become a problem in adolescence, when children are confronted with the customs and traditions of their Italian peers and clashes with the need to demand compliance with Islamic cultural rules. A mother explained:

Then the boy in the puberty stage says to you "Why my friends can and I cannot" and therefore his values go against his desires, so even if you teach him certain limits, but then he sees that all these things are allowed in his environment [int. 2; F; 51 years; Egypt].

It appeared that the comparison with Italian parents led our respondents through a negotiation process by questioning their traditional parenting style and trying new ways of interacting and raising children. This led them to try to understand the kid's perspective and to soften certain rules of behaviour, as another Egyptian mother explained:

You see the psychological side... if you are a boy in a group of friends whose parents allow you to stay out maybe until 5 in the morning, while you are the only one whose father wants you to come home no later than midnight... then you feel bad psychologically and that's why sometimes I did not say anything when he was late and I turned a blind eye [int 1; F; 53 years; Egypt].

Similarly, an Egyptian father noted:

I want to say one thing: the life of an adolescent here in Italy goes in phases and each phase lasts 1 or 2 years, after which there is a change. Also, in the way of thinking... you may find a boy who

goes through a moment of loss and after a few years matures and leaves that path and others who are very good and then after a few years go astray... [int.10; M; 60 years; Egypt].

However, accepting that children have needs different from those their parents consider culturally acceptable puts the parenting couple in crisis, as this Egyptian father describes:

My son did not want to feel different from his Italian friends. At puberty, hormones change, you want to be freer, and he wanted to be free. He could not control his desires and impulses because he saw them as acceptable in that cultural context. It was too difficult for us as parents to accept it. [int. 2; M; 54 years; Egypt]

Parents have adopted some strategies that they consider efficient in dealing with these challenges. For example, they encourage their children to build friendship networks within the Muslim community, thus promoting the formation of a strong sense of ethnic identity in the children, which is seen as a greater guarantee of religious observance. This is particularly true when children's intimate relationships are at stake. Here it follows the opinion of two mothers:

When my daughter was a child, I explained to her that in the future she would choose an Egyptian, Muslim boy to marry. This is not because we reject those who are different (...). Our customs and traditions are different from theirs [i.e.: Italian people]. There are things that are normal for them but not for us. We Egyptians are more conservative in certain things. For example, here you can marry civilly and not religiously; we do not have that distinction [int. 3; F; 48 years; Egypt].

I try to bring Islam closer to them [i.e.: my children] by making friends like them. For example, my daughters have made friends with Moroccan girls who are our neighbours and are honest and good girls, like them, and well brought up Islamically. From them they have learned to wear the veil. I did not force any of them to wear it. [int. 4; F; 49 years; Morocco].

Thus, the desire to preserve cultural values leads parents to adapt their parenting model in order to find the most effective way to pass on their values to their children. However, this often leads to uncertainty about which model is best to ensure the well-being of children and the preservation of cultural heritage. The words of these mothers explain well the challenge of parenting in a culturally different country:

You see so much negative experiences around that you are afraid this will happen to your children. So you put a lot of pressure on them and this sometimes leads to the opposite outcome ... leads them to explode. Then you realize that you need to put pressure on yourself and hold back and relieve the pressure on them. A balance must be ensured. And this is by no means easy. I think it will be easier for the second and third generations. Our first generation is the one that has the most difficulties. We must not give up our own culture and at the same time adapt to the new context. It is a difficult equation to solve. Not everyone succeeds. As I told you, sometimes my son tells me things that are unacceptable for my culture that if I could I would tear him to pieces, but I hold back and pretend nothing has happened. This is the challenge. [int. 3; F ; 48 years ; Egypt].

During adolescence, as she grew up and became more independent, there was a time when she fell in love with an Italian boyfriend. I tried to explain to her that we cannot have relationships like the Italians, but obviously the moral standards with which you speak to her are different from hers, so she looks at you as if you came from another world. It was very difficult to convince her that this relationship goes against our values. [int. 8; F; 43 years; Egypt].

In general, the interviews highlighted the perception that in Muslim families parenting roles are challenged both by the difficulty of finding coherence between different parenting models and by the fact that they cannot rely on the support of their extended family as they would have in their home country. An Algerian mother noted:

Here in migration you have no family network. In our countries, when a child fights with his parents, instead he goes to his uncle for a few days and the uncle talks to him, talks to the parents and mediates between them. This kind of character does not exist here in Italy, but here we can find a psychologist (...) [int. 9; F; 54 years; Algeria].

4. Conclusion

Overall, the research has highlighted the difficulties Muslim parents face in carrying out their parental role in a context that is perceived as unsupportive, if not hostile, to their traditional values and culture. Interaction with Italian society, which is perceived as very distant from the moral codes these parents rely on, is perceived as a threat to the religious values they seek to transmit to their children. Identifying the most effective strategies to respond to these challenges seems to require a long process of negotiation. For the participants in our study, this process resulted in mixed acculturation strategies: on the one hand, separation through the preservation and transmission of cultural values and through the promotion of intra-ethnic relations to foster in the children a strong sense of ethnic identity that

encourages them to adhere to traditional and religious values. On the other hand, they seem to have opted for integration in terms of educational style, which thus tries to approach the "Italian" one through dialogue and flexibility.

Although this study was not without limitations, such as the overall small number of participants, the results served as the basis for developing a capacity building project in the local Islamic community. The project, named UMMA: *Community Empowerment for Integrated Families*, is currently underway and starts from a collaboration between the psychology department of the local university and an Islamic association in the area, in partnership with the city's socio-educational services; its implementation was funded by a major bank foundation and the local municipality.

From an operational perspective, UMMA consists in two main lines of intervention. A first action targeted the local Islamic community as a whole with a series of open online meetings, in which professionals and experts, whenever possible recruited from within the Islamic community itself, debated and deepen topics related to the educational challenges in intercultural contexts. The second action aimed to train a group of *Community Mediators* by developing a set of skills and knowledge that the people involved will be able to spend within the community itself and by acting in a network with the city's socio-educational services in accompanying vulnerable parents. In short, UMMA's overall aim was to activate synergies and integrated interventions, favouring the development of bridging relationships between the Islamic and the Italian communities and overcoming the emergency and assistance logic of taking care of the individual case.

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