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# Negotiating Italianità: Ethnicity and Peer-Group Formation among Transnational Second- Generation Italians in Switzerland

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## Abstract

It is common for the descendants of migrants to go through phases of contrasting feelings of belonging during adolescence, negotiating their affiliations to their co-ethnics, the majority society and migrants of other origins. Many studies focusing on the second generation have looked at how migrant youth create new spaces of belonging, shaped by the plural social systems in which they grow up. Drawing on research on second-generation Italians in Switzerland, this paper analyses such processes of negotiation and discusses the importance of peer groups. It looks at the various positionalities developed by members of the second generation and demonstrates that rather than solely motivated by ethnicity and shared culture, these are also shaped by factors such as shared interests with peers. By moving away from a primary focus on ethnicity, which dominates research on migrant youth, the paper shows why members of the second generation consciously or unconsciously reify or disregard their migrant backgrounds.

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## Introduction

At the end of the day, your whole life is about Italy, whether you want it to be or not. At home you speak Italian, you eat Italian, but you have to be at work punctually anyway, you are surrounded by Swiss, and that's good, that's what makes it all perfect, ..., you just take the best of both worlds .... But still, you'll have difficulties classifying yourself, because you are not Swiss, you are not Italian, you are something in between, and it's still cool to, well it's like a trademark, ..., With an Armani T-shirt you show what exactly you represent, and with an 'Italia' T-shirt, I also want to show 'hey, look, THIS is who I am, this is my background, and I am here anyway.

Pasquale is a second-generation Italian DJ. He is part of an association called *Gentediaare*<sup>1</sup>, a group of five second-

1992; Hall 2002; Alund 1991), and how diasporic people create new identities and cultural forms, known for example as 'creolised', 'syncretic', 'alternate' or 'hybrid' (Hall 1990; Rutherford 1990; Vertovec/Cohen 1999; Werbner/Modood 1997).

To describe such diverse forms of social and cultural affiliations and identifications, Anthias (2002) proposes the concept of 'multiple positionalities' to understand



a year together with their children and the

Swiss families, where instances of domestic violence against women are often left uncovered.

This example shows that perceptions of integration and cultural difference within mainstream society must be treated carefully. Second-generation Italians were lucky in that they grew up in the context of the post-war economic boom, a time when integration into the labour market was easier than for the second generation today, and when their country of origin evolved into a holiday destination and therefore became somewhat idealised. Hence, second-generation Italians did not experience the same extent of discrimination that other youth of migrant background experience today, particularly in education and access to the labour market.

Nevertheless, many of them went through negotiations of belonging during adolescence or in their early twenties, and they repositioned themselves in relation to the majority society, their co-ethnics and their regions of origin. The people they met at particular points in time, or, in other words, the formation of peer groups, shaped these evolving positionalities. For example, some second-generation Italians spent their childhood primarily with other Italian children, but extended their social networks to peers of other national origins during adolescence through common interests such as sports and other hobbies. In contrast, some children who had few Italian friends during primary school related to Italian peers during adolescence. Thus, ethnic affiliations can change during the course of life and can sometimes become more or less important during adolescence. In the following section, I discuss the reasons underlying these processes, using two life-history examples of second-generation Italians.

#### **Differing positionalities: the family, the peer group and the country of origin**

##### *Luca: Belonging to a big family*

Luca was born in Switzerland in 1972. His parents are Sicilian and migrated to

Switzerland in the early 1960s. They both worked in low-skilled jobs, while Luca's grandmother, who also lived in Switzerland, looked after him and several of his cousins. Luca spent his first three years of school in an Italian primary school because his parents planned to return to Sicily. When they reevaluated the possibilities of returning home and decided to stay longer in Switzerland, they sent him to a Swiss school. He integrated quickly into the new

the party scene. ... We went to Raves and Techno Parties every Saturday. The people there were all *secondos*<sup>5</sup>, mainly Spanish and Italian.'

Luca was strongly integrated into this group of young people with Italian and Spanish backgrounds who shared interests in consumer culture (cars, designer clothes) and music. Their being together was motivated by several factors. It was based on shared experiences of southern Europeanness within their families and in the transnational social fields in which they grew up, the negotiation of the lived Italianness at home, and the Swissness outside the home, for example at work. Furthermore, the group's identity was shaped by the conscious segregation from other migrant youth, such as the Turks, on the grounds of 'turf-wars' in inner-city public space, a phenomenon that has been observed in other contexts, too (Alexander 2000). The strengthening and performance of male group-identity in such conflicts was particularly important, the 'Latinos' being a male-only group.

However, it was not only the 'Latinos' who provided Luca with a strong sense of belonging, but also his wider network of kin, in both Switzerland and Sicily. Luca and his family went to Sicily for holidays every summer. He describes these holidays as wonderful times of being together in big, lively groups of relatives. But after a few weeks, he usually longed to go back to Switzerland to see his friends.

Today, Luca works for an insurance company and has a successful professional career. His partner is a second-generation Sicilian and they visit Sicily every year. Up until today, the majority of his friends are of Italian or Italian-Swiss origin. He explains



appreciate as a more enjoyable and relaxed way of life.

But why do not all second-generation Italians celebrate their Italian background? In the following section, I show that cultural practices and expectations of co-ethnics can play a dominant role in the second generation's positionings.

*Anna: 'This is NOT what I wanted to be'*

Anna was born in Switzerland in 1974. She is the oldest of three sisters. Her parents migrated from Apulia in southern Italy in the 1960s. Her father worked in a factory, and her mother worked as a seamstress from home. Anna went to a Swiss kindergarten and a Swiss primary school. She did not know any German when she entered kindergarten because she had spent most of her time with Italian relatives and Italian children in the neighbourhood. However, she learnt German quickly when she started making Swiss friends at school. Her parents were very integrated in the Italian social networks in Switzerland and active in an Apulian association, where they regularly organised social and cultural activities. Anna enjoyed these activities as a child, but felt increasingly pushed into participation as she grew into adolescence. During this time, she joined a youth group related to the church in her neighbourhood and got to know many Swiss youngsters. She describes this period during her adolescence as very important:

A: You know, when it was about finding my identity, I mean, belonging - am I Swiss or Italian? - it was difficult, it was a phase that I guess every child of migrants goes through.

SW: How did you resolve it?

A: The youth group was very important. There were extremely creative and active people. With my Italian friends it was more like, listening to Eros [Eros Ramazzotti: a famous Italian pop star], ..., and make-up, it was somehow more superficial, I noticed that it wasn't about creating and developing but instead, about representing something. In the

youth group, it was more about what I really felt like doing and creating.'

Anna says that during this time she had two options. She had friendships with other Italians, but realised that she did not share their interests in consumer culture, Italian fashion, make-up and pop music. Through the youth group, she learned that other youngsters did things she was more

everybody was talking about her. On the grounds of her experiences in the transnational social field, i.e. at home, with Italian peers in Switzerland, and in Italy, Anna distanced herself from other Italians in Switzerland and from Italy during her adolescence, and she knew that 'Italian' was *not* what she wanted to be. She felt integrated among the Swiss, and she felt that this was where she really belonged. The fact that she had not had any experiences of discrimination facilitated this affiliation. Distancing herself from people of Italian origin became less important with time and today, she no longer has such strong feelings about Italy and Italians in Switzerland, and neither does she emphasise her affiliation with the Swiss.

Anna's adolescence was characterised by both choice and restriction. The choices were experienced through her Swiss peers, with whom she could follow her own interests, while the restrictions were experienced through what she describes as her parents' 'Italian, more rigid way of education', the villagers in Italy, and her second-generation peers with what she perceived as their superficial interests. Importantly, Anna's 'ethnic choices' (Gans 1979; Waters 1990) were strongly influenced by the more traditional attitudes about gender relations among Italians in Switzerland, and her parents' fears of letting their daughter spend time with youngsters of the opposite sex, particularly in the evenings.

The arena of gender relations is one in which female descendants of Italian migrants most often disagree with their parents, and more traditional expectations of female gender roles can lead to conflict within families. At the time of Italian migration to Switzerland, southern Italian families were characterised by patriarchal family structures with strict gender roles, compulsory heterosexuality and a considerable responsibility for kin relations. Much of the anthropological research on Italian families at the time focused on what was defined as the 'honour and shame complex' described as a gender-based

division of labour and morality.<sup>7</sup> The categories of honour and shame have been criticised as essentialist cultural categories that serve the simplified homogenisation of the Mediterranean as 'cultural space'. However, even though family relations in both Italy and among Italian migrants in Switzerland have seen changes (King/Zontini 2000; Meyer-Sabino 2003), honour and shame continue to play an important role in southern Italian family relations and gender ideologies (Baldassar 1999; Kertzer 1991).

For Anna, gender relations were important not only in her negotiations with her nuclear family in Switzerland, but also during her holidays in Italy. Hence, Anna made her ethnic choices on several grounds. First, the cultural practices of her parents and other Italians which she experienced as restrictive; second, a lack of a 'double-tie' and shared interests with co-ethnic peers, and third, the possibilities offered to her by her Swiss peers with whom she shared many interests. Importantly, her association with Swiss peers cannot be described simply as a reaction to the cultural expectations of co-ethnics. Rather, the process of discovering her own interests and the wish to integrate into a particular peer group with a particular life-style is an integral part of every person's adolescence. Unlike Luca, Anna was not interested in 'doing ethnicity', because she did not share the interests of those who called themselves 'Latinos', and her experiences within this social field were not characterised by integration and belonging, but rather by the pressures and expectations to conform to specific cultural practices. Anna feels integrated into Swiss society, though the process of integration was characterised by disruption rather than continuity because it entailed conflicts within her family. Today, she realises that her parents were more flexible and less

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<sup>7</sup> In fact, the honour and shame complex has been described as one of the major analytic tools for the exoticisation of Mediterranean societies. See for example Driessen (2002), Greverus, *et al.* (2002). For a critical examination of the concept and a historical overview of anthropology's use of it, see Giordano (2002).

rigid than many of their migrant relatives and friends. They were open to change and to negotiations with their daughter, which Anna now greatly appreciates.

The difference between Anna's parents and some other first-generation migrants shows the diversity of how migrants deal with the socio-cultural surroundings they encounter. But despite these variations, there are certain cultural and social characteristics that migrants of the same ethnic and class backgrounds share, and specific ideas of gender relations is one of the most prevalent examples of them. All in all, parents' attitudes about gender relations play a crucial role for second-generation girls and women regarding the possibilities of developing mixed ethnic networks outside the home. Male descendants of Italian migrants are mostly not affected by such restrictions during their upbringing and can follow their interests in whichever peer group they prefer.

The research presented here shows that many of the conflicts within families occur between heterosexual daughters and their parents, and homosexual sons and daughters and their parents. Such conflicts are not specific to Italian families, but also take place in Swiss families and families of other backgrounds. However, the tightly-knit Italian social networks in Switzerland play an important role in ensuring compliance with cultural norms because of the public consequences that non-conformist behaviour can entail. In this context, 'family responsibilities take on an almost formal quality of rights and duties owed to one another by virtue of common membership in a reputation-bearing social unit' (Berkowitz 1984: 84). Thus, the concern for a family's honourable image is one of the main reasons why cultural norms, even if questioned and criticised on an individual level, are reproduced and sometimes reinforced within Italian families (Wessendorf 2008).

Negotiations of belonging in relation to co-ethnics are not always as dramatic as in Anna's case and they are not always characterised by disruption. Some

members of the second generation simply drift away from kin and Italian peers, whether because of the sites and social

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