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## Belonging: Growing up between two Worlds

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### Abstract

As international research has shown, the emancipation and integration of the second generation represents the path to a successful multicultural society. Nevertheless, their socio-cultural, economic and political integration is not at all an easy process. As the literature attests, a sense of belonging to their society plays an important role in this integration process. For the first time, Italian-born youth of immigrant descent are becoming adults. This study tries to discover what roles a sense of belonging plays for these Italian-born youth and their process of identity-building. The source of qualitative data were 10 conversational interviews with 10 young adults with immigrant parents, aged between 18 to 22 years, born and raised in Italy. The inquiry paradigm used is ecological in nature, and phenomenology is the theoretical and methodological frame in which the data was analysed. The main research questions were: According to you, what is the meaning of the word 'belonging'? What do you feel you belong to? Do you have any difficulties in your state of belonging? These young adults referred to themselves by saying "I am Italian and...". Their words underlined the complexity of their identity: "I am Italian although I am not Italian". Their sense of belonging is multifaceted with feelings of ambivalence. The Pakistani culture seems to have fostered stronger resistance to the development of a double belonging. The Italian citizenship law impedes their belongingness. In Italy, ethnic discrimination against visible minorities, significantly diverse in terms of nationality, narrowing labour market opportunities and the restrictive law about citizenship make the situation of these Italian-born youth more difficult. Society, politics and their family seem to refuse the changes that being a second generation immigrant represents. This is why they prefer not to recognize their double belonging.

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## 1. Introduction

As the news demonstrates on a daily basis, the arrival of immigrants in Italy does not seem to have any intention of waning, and the management of the flow of immigrants has become one of the central themes of Italy's turn in the Presidency of the European Council. In the meantime, the current economic crisis has caused many immigrants already residing in Italy to return to their countries of origin or to move to other European countries. The statistical framework is extremely fluid, the scenarios are complex, and the current period is one of significant social-economic and cultural transformation.

In this context, on January 1, 2013 the presence of minors without Italian citizenship (or European citizenship) constituted 24.1% of the resident foreign population. The presence of unaccompanied minors is also quite significant. According to data released by the Ministry of Labor and Social Policies, on the date 31/12/2012 there were also 5,281 unaccompanied minors present in Italy, of which more than 70% were over 15 years old (Istat, 2014).

Over the course of the scholastic year 2012/2013, there were 786,630 foreign students present in the Italian school system, equal to 8.8% of the total student population (9.8% in elementary school and kindergarten, 9.6% in middle school and 6.6% in high school). 47.2% of these students (371,332) were born in Italy. The nationalities represented are 193. Different areas of the country are affected in different ways by the presence of minors without Italian citizenship, concentrated primarily in the regions of northern Italy, where 86% of foreigners in the country currently reside.

In short, the minors without Italian citizenship ageing from 0 to 18 years present in our country as of 31.12.12 were 1,235,059. Of these, 21% arrived during their first 5 years of life, 20% arrived from 6 to 17 years old, while nearly 60% were born in Italy (Istat, 2014).

The presence of second generations (see Portes & Rumbaut, 2001) demonstrates the structural dimension assumed by immigration flows and the process through which immigrants are taking root in Italy. The new generations also make it necessary to research new social equilibriums and new forms of belonging.

Being born in a country where your parents have an immigrant status means being born into a complex position from multiple points of view, in particular from a standpoint of identity and belonging (in Italy, also from a legislative standpoint).

The immigrant has been defined as “*atopos*, a strange hybrid without a place, a person “moved” with the dual sense of being incongruent and inopportune, trapped in that hybrid space in an intermediate position between being social and non-being” (Bourdieu - Wacquant, 2000). Those who belong to the second generation of immigrants seem to find themselves in a paradoxical situation, even more difficult on a psycho-anthropological level and social-cultural level than their parents. The children of immigrants born in their second countries are forced to share their parents' lack of social belonging, because they are often perceived as foreigners in their own country, as recounted by Amir, a rapper with an Egyptian father and an Italian mother:

*s.o.s. negative balance sheet if they call me a foreigner in the place where I live s.o.s. if they call me foreigner in my own country s.o.s. negative balance sheet if they call me foreigner I turn around and smile at them s.o.s. ready to execute if they make me feel like a foreigner in my own country*

They are forced to construct their personal identities in an uncertain terrain, where their roots have difficulty penetrating because they are so new. They often must do it alone, because the society in which they live does not recognize them as fully-fledged members, instead perceiving them to be “illegitimate children” (Sayad, 2006). Their parents do not know about or do not want to accompany them on a journey that requires reformulation of ideas about culture and family belonging to be successful. The position of these children in Italy is made even more complicated due to citizenship laws. There is currently an *ius sanguinis* law in effect in Italy, according to which all those immigrants who have foreign parents, even if they were born in Italy, upon their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday have one year to present an application for Italian citizenship if in possession of all necessary requisites.

## 2. Problem Statement: Theoretical Background

Measurement of the size and composition of second generations depends on what is intended by these terms. In literature some authors prefer to distinguish – in the context of the second generation – those who have a native-born

parent (the 2.5 generation) from those who have two foreign-born parents (the 2.0 generation) (Martin & Poston, 1977; Ramakrishnan, 2004). Scholarly articles on youth with an immigrant background define the second generation as native-born residents who have at least one foreign-born parent (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001).

The presence of a native-born parent can provide significant differences in the educational attainment, income, social status, ethnical identification of the second generation (Jensen, 2001). These have not been uniformly defined in the literature. Furthermore, it is necessary to be aware that differences in family structure, social status, and culture of origin significantly affect “the modes of acculturation of adults and children in immigrant families, especially with regard to language and identity, and thus may also affect their propensity to sustain transnational attachments over time” (Rumbaut, 2002: 47-48).

Second generations have a multifaceted identity; they need help from their family and from the community to find their place in their country, to bolster their sense of belonging to the community, to improve their social position and therefore achieve their families’ goals. However, as social scientists and policy researchers attested, the integration process often lasts for generations, and its outcome becomes evident only over the long-term (Social Planning Council of Ottawa, 2012).

Research conducted on immigrant adaptation considered the experiences of the second generation to be a crucial factor in understanding the long-term acculturation of people with an immigrant background (Portes and Zhou, 1993; Perlmann and Waldinger, 1997; Waters, 1999; Ramakrishnan, 2004). Research conducted in the U.S.A. shows that the progress made by people from the second generation is crucial to assuring a better future to the generations that follow them. If the second generation fails, there is also a greater risk that the third generation will fail (Kasinitz et al., 2008).

Many youths of the second generation are falling behind other children in their age groups at school (Crul et al., 2012). In Italy, as in most of Europe, they are over-represented in vocational schools, or abandon education early (Ismu-Miur, 2014). In many European countries, where the flow of immigration has a longer history than in Italy, the second and third generations are still considered and labelled as “migrants” or “newcomers”. Increasingly often, in Europe, for these young adults identity is presented “as a choice between two loyalties” (Crul et al., 2013: 70).

Italy, due to its legislative restrictions, lengthy bureaucratic times, working conditions offered and scarce social mobility is not very attractive on the immigration market. Italy is the destination for immigrants at a lower social-cultural level from the poorest countries (Rumania; Albania; Morocco; China are the first nationalities. Istat 2014). It is also for this reason that the younger generations often have a difficult time finding any support from their families of origin for the challenges of constructing a new identity and reformulating their own sense of belonging. As recounted by a Pakistani mother:

*The difference is that most of the families that immigrate to Italy are those who have always lived in villages. And in villages, even today, things have not changed very much.(...) For the families that come from villages, the word “change”, in my opinion, doesn’t exist. Their lives are surrounded by three walls. The walls are always the same. Even here. (...)The world exists in the home, and they must create their world in the home (MC5/68-excerpt from an interview with mediators during a previous research project).*

The rituals and traditions of rural families – in relation to gender roles, relationships between generations, etc.– are deeply rooted and minors are the tools with which parents confront the changes that immigration brings. It is therefore the task of the new generations to explore, discover and dominate the external world, an ambivalent, familiar and foreign reality all at the same time, just like their identities.

### 3. Research Questions

The inquiry paradigm used is ecological in nature. Phenomenology is the theoretical and methodological frame in which the data analysis was conducted. The main research questions were: According to you, what is the meaning of the word “belonging”? What do you feel you belong to? Are there any difficulties in your sense of belonging?

#### 3.1. Method

To investigate similar perceptual phenomena, we followed a dialogic methodological approach, as the purpose of

this study was to ascertain the second generation's perspectives.

**Participants.** For this study we selected 10 young adults aged eighteen to thirty-two, all of whom were born in Italy. Both of their parents were foreign-born. They therefore belong to “the 2.0 generation”. They are all students, six participants are women and 4 men. 8 of them attended secondary school, 2 university. Their citizenships are Ghana, Rumania, China, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

The criteria used for their selection were as follows:

- Born in Italy;
- Excellent Italian language skills;
- Positive educational history;
- Free adhesion to the research project.

**Data collection.** Data were collected through conversational interviews, which lasted between 45 minutes and one hour and a half. The average length of the interview was approximately one hour. Interviews were recorded and transcribed.

#### 4. Findings

With a much longer immigration tradition. These conclusions highlight how a sense of belonging is a central aspect that – with or without awareness – is the responsibility of the second generation.

*You could also not accept a sense of belonging, but underneath you still try to be part of the group, whether you want to or not IB4/66*

The voices of these young people speak of the difficult condition one confronts when born between two very different worlds. They recount stories of everyday lives trying to create bonds among diverse parts of themselves and the different universes in which they somehow belong.

##### 4.1. Belonging

If in traditional societies being part of a group is for the most part a right acquired at birth, in contemporary societies marked by multi-ethnicity, rapid change and uncertainty, a sense of belonging becomes ever more tenuous and hybrid in nature.

*Belonging means being part of a large or small group. There are many different contexts that make you feel that you belong to something. IB2/14 In one way or another we always belong to a community every day of our lives, at school, at work, in many diverse contexts. IB2/18*

A sense of belonging reveals itself to be multi-faceted, but there is a price that must be paid to be part of a community to others and to our-selves.

*You feel part of something when you are accepted. When you are accepted by the community you can then also feel that you belong. IB2/16*

Belonging requires reciprocity: reciprocal acceptance. This aspect is at times also lacking in interpersonal relationships. It is an aspect that very often the other person seems to reject. But acknowledgement from a group is a condition for feeling at home, for feeling like your-self.

*If I consider the word “belonging” I think of feeling at home, I think of a place where I don't need to explain myself, where I don't have to translate myself for others, where I can just be myself, a place where I feel close to my true self. IB10/30*

The etymology of the term “*appartenenza*” [belonging] – a sociological concept–comes from the Latin word *appartenēre*, “to be the property of someone, be a part of”, parasynthetic compound of *pārs*, possessive of *pārtis*,

part, with the prefix *ād-* (Zingarelli, 2008, p. 116). What one is part of, belongs to, from the start, according to Émile Benveniste is the society of man:

*“What exists right from the start is society, this totality, not the family, then the clan, then the city. Society, from its origins, is broken up into units that come to together. Families are necessarily united within a large unit and so forth” (Benveniste, 2001, p. 239).*

Etymology uses terms and their meanings taken from the dawn of time to sustain the hypothesis proposed by Baumeister and Leary: “the belongingness hypothesis”, according to which

*“Human beings have a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships” (Id., 1995: 497).*

A drive that is more than just a need for social contact and that is satisfied by the presence of interpersonal bonds characterized by “*stability, affective concern, and continuation into the foreseeable future*” (Id., 1995:500).

*Belonging, belonging to your own group of a certain type of people... (...) Being born here, in this reality but with parents of different origins, different mentalities, you are born trying to understand which group is yours, which group you should belong to and grow up in, trying to understand which group you want to belong to. IB4/17*

“A pervasive drive” that is difficult to satisfy in the second generations, because they have certain “limits”, cultural, social, political confines, which are therefore also bound to identity. The paradoxical and ambivalent nature of belonging - closely connected to the identity of the individual – becomes evident over the lifetimes of second generations.

#### 4.2. Out of place

Youth of the second generation from a standpoint of identity are forced to confront the categories and labels of their groups of origin as well as those of their native country. They are subject to a process of constructing themselves, made even more complex by the multiplicity of their sense of belonging, always through a distinct line of division, of separation. These diverse types of belonging constitute a fracture that is always emphasized by those who watch from the outside, whether in the family group or in the common group.

*For white people I am different because of how I talk, because I sometimes switch languages or change Italian words, or for the music I listen to, so they always label me by saying: “you can see she is a black girl”. While at the same time blacks see me as a bit quieter, a bit more thoughtful, not as spontaneous like they are, because I don’t speak Ghanaian very well, saying, “how can you know this or that or that”, and I speak much more Italian than they do. IB3/44*

*I almost always feel Italian... actually, hmm... I mean, I’m Italian even though I’m not Italian. I mean, I’m Sri Lankan for Sri Lankans and Italian for Italians. IB1/24*

Acceptance of one’s context is never total, because the difference that one was born into must still be read as difference. It seems to become an indelible mark (Maalouf, 1988):

*Whether you like it or not, you are considered a member of the other group. Like with your hair, if it’s curly, you change it and straighten it, but you are still considered someone with curly hair. IB7/69*

*I come from this environment, I feel like I am from this environment, but my origins will always be different... you are always from somewhere else. I can only say that I was born here in Italy, I am used to an Italian environment, but my origins are different. I know my parents’ culture well and I also know what my own culture is. IB7/91*

They are asked to switch their diverse identities, representations of themselves, diverse senses of belonging; to learn and use those that are more functional in different social situations in their native countries or in their parents’ countries of origin.

This game is tiresome to sustain over time, because it more or less forces them to learn the rules on their own, without any adult figures to protect, accompany and acknowledge them. Some manage to find an unstable balance between the two worlds, to manage their essential differentness:

*Let's say that no matter how Italian we may be, born here, having gone to school here and so forth, perhaps only a little, but we are always different, even though this is not something that prevents us from moving forward. IB2/32*

Others do not acknowledge the country where they were born as their country. They do not develop a sufficient bond of belonging for a country where they feel like foreigners:

*I was born and raised here. For the last few years we have been going back home for holidays and during the summer (...). I do not feel Italian, I am not Italian, my home, that place that gives me a feeling of interior peace is not here, because here I always have to be someone else, I always have to translate myself and my thoughts for others, and often what I am feeling cannot be translated... I do not live badly here now but I know that as soon as I can I want to return to my country and build my life there. IB9/58*

Among the interviewees, there was also a female Pakistani student who seemed to have chosen to experience her family of origin only in a symbolic-cultural and identity related sense. An experience which does not require a dual sense of self, nor living for long within the bounds of a sense of belonging.

### 4.3. Hybrids

If in traditional societies, being part of a group is for the most part a right acquired at birth, in contemporary societies marked by multi-ethnicity, rapid change and uncertainty, a sense of belonging becomes ever more tenuous and hybrid in nature. These young men and women emphasize that they are constantly perceived as being different, and that they must learn how to manage dual lives:

*I am a person divided in two, I am usually with colored people half of the time, and the other half no... I therefore am comfortable in both situations, I can change my behavior automatically. IB5/24*

*Since I live in a world that is split in two, for colored people my behavior sometimes seems strange. They label it as white behavior when it is actually my normal behavior, so I can see that I am actually a bit whiter IB3/36 but I am stuck right in the middle... I could say that I if I am on one side I miss the other side. IB3/59*

*You could say that I have two cultures. If I go to a festival that is not rooted in my origins I know that I might behave in one way, while at other festivals where I am with people from my same origins I behave in another way. My whole way of acting changes. IB4/42*

*Belonging to two worlds is normal... I was born into it, I live with it, it is nothing so strange, it comes to me naturally, like the saying: "if you are born into this context you know how to navigate between the two"; therefore based on the environment where we are we act differently. IB7/94*

Growing up between two worlds forces them to maintain dual frames of reference. The home – the ultimate place of shelter – assumes a crucial role. It also becomes “the” place where we can be ourselves, especially for those who accept and choose their own identity limits.

*I know that I am Italian, but I am also Chinese, sometimes I wish... I mean that I am both or perhaps, neither one... I know, I sound crazy (...) I was also born and raised here, in Italy. But there has always been a bit of China in my house and my parents always made me feel like I was both, maybe because my mother is also half Italian... but I wanted to leave, I wanted to try and stay where my mother was born for a while, where my father grew up, try and stay in China alone and see what it was like (...) It was a good experience but I missed home, I really missed my home (...), it is in my home that I feel safe. It is a strong feeling, and I also felt it when I came back from China. When I returned home, even though there are so many things that are different, which may seem contradictions to others, when I am there I know who I am... I feel like I can see things better (...) I am Chinese*



*and I am also Italian. IB5/45-57*

These young people grow up in the midst of the pressures of the domestic world and the world outside, with the ambivalent desire to be similar and different, to belong and to be themselves. They have the task of weaving the deep bonds between here and somewhere else, because they were “made” here and somewhere else. Their identity can be the fruit of a kind of mutual-cross fertilization between the two worlds where they have their roots. These young men and women use the following conjunction to define themselves, when they can: “I am Chinese and I am also Italian”. They have both worlds at their disposition to cultivate their identities, to discover that they are capable, to enrich their own sense of life and experiences. These are two worlds that also are difficult to reconcile.

## 5. Conclusions

The responsibility of the children of immigrants is different from that of their parents, in some ways easier and in other ways more arduous. They are asked to bring their parents’ project to a conclusion, to complete the process of social ascent started by the latter, who remain bound to the world where they were born and raised. Above all, they are asked to confront the theme of identity, to explore the outer territories of identity, to find a place in the succession of family generations (Moro, 2011) and in the destination society.

In the contemporary context, influenced by the economic crisis, the task of the children of immigrants has also become, if possible, even more difficult and complex. Due to economic difficulties, the “host” country – which is ever more often “the” birth country – seems to withdraw into itself and read only an idea of foreignness in eyes of these children and adolescents, considering them as children of somewhere else, another place that marks their identity in the way they are represented to the external world.

The second generations live in an impossible human condition: imperfectly integrated and nevertheless perfectly unable to be assimilated. They are also – to use the definition that Pierre Bourdieu attributes to immigrants – “out of place people”, “without their own place in the social spectrum and a place assigned in the social classes” (Bourdieu, 2002: 6).

Second generations in Italy, where *ius sanguinis* legislation is in effect, are neither citizens, nor foreigners, but *atopos* subjects, without a place, out of place, unclassifiable, not only from a legislative standpoint but also from an identity standpoint. People forced to live along the borderline between diverse senses of belonging, to confront a kind of acknowledgement that never seems to truly become whole.

The words of these young men and women highlight the complexity of their experiences on a psychological-identity and sociological-cultural plane, leaving the dimension of citizenship in its most narrow political-legislative sense in the background. Only one in ten talks about this aspect explicitly:

*I feel Italian when they talk about immigrants at school, about immigration in Italy, I don't feel like an immigrant, I was born here, but because I don't have citizenship every time we have to go to Rome I am treated like an immigrant, and I'm not one. (...) When anyone talks about immigration I look away, not like an immigrant but like an Italian. They are others, we are not the immigrants. IB1/42-44*

The presence of second generations is placing pressure on the Italian society and creating debate about the validity of *ius sanguinis* (Law 91/1992) in the reality of today. It requires a new in-depth look into the fundamental questions of legitimate citizenship, of what it means to be a citizen. Despite the central role played by the legislative question in regards to acknowledgement of one's self as a legitimate member of a society (Honneth, 2002), the words of these young people all focus in particular on the difficulty of being acknowledged because they are hybrids, different, divided in half between the two world sin which they live: the family realm and the social realm. As is true for second generations in Canada and elsewhere, in our country it can also be said of the second generation:

*Experiences of alienation, racism and belonging are vastly different from those of their immigrant parents, but are no less significant in terms of how we continue to construct our ideas of who is and is not a 'real' (Mithili, 2005:25) citizen.*

Freedom of identity and belonging seems to be only an ideal, brought to the table by social policies and legislative standards. Young men and women who were born in Italy, seen only as diverse subjects, half beings, social-cultural hybrids, are not acknowledged as people with inherent rights equal to those of their contemporaries born in the very same places: they are not born with the right to be citizens of their native country. Their motivation and strength in feeling and realizing their own sense of belonging is not supported by the social-political context in which they are living.

Due to poor labor market outcomes, parents' settlement difficulties, discrimination, and their peculiar identity issues, the second generation at times experiences a different kind of exclusion than that of their parents, likely more difficult.

As research has attested, they learn to move between their own community and a variety of other ethnic groups from an early age. Nevertheless, this is not their biggest problem. Their problem is being recognized by the other group, at home and out in the world. Fully recognized. Their problem is finding themselves. Among the second generation, some members feel that they do not really belong anywhere. In Europe as in the U.S.A., young people from immigrant families feel most comfortable when they are able to identify strongly with their two identities: that of their parents and that of their country of birth.

*My mother is a very curious person and has always tried to understand this new country because she always says "in the end it is here that we live, and we can't fake that we are not at home. We must not forget who we are but we must also not close ourselves up in a bubble". She knows that she is not Italian but she always said that we had to understand who we were and who we wanted to be on our own, and at the beginning I had a really hard time because I could find a balance where I felt good outside of my home and also at home. It seemed like I had to be two different things, two different people and this made me feel bad, because in the end I never felt like I was in the right place (...). Now I understand more about who I am, and at times I still feel divided on the inside. I think that in a certain sense I will always be that way, and in the end I carry two different worlds with me, but I must still somehow learn how they can co-exist. These worlds taught me and gave me something that I think is something I can deal with better now, and I feel like I have something more, as if this has enriched my inner self somehow. IB6/42-46*

Members of the second generation born and raised in France, Germany, and Italy have to somehow find a full place in their native society. Will they have better opportunities than their parents? Will they ever feel at home? Will they be able to maintain double frames of reference? Will they be able to live in the multiple realities with different senses of belonging that life has chosen for them? Will they be left alone to face this challenge?

Social inclusion relies on active civic participation to identify the barriers to access and to ensure that people have a collective sense of belonging to their society. Building inclusive environments requires proactive strategies to remove existing barriers, on the one hand, and to create new inclusive processes, policies and institutional structures for the full engagement of all residents, on the other. (S.P.C.O., 2012: 28).

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