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Cross-cultural rearing. Italian-Swedish young adults' experiences of growing up with two cultures

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Introduction

This paper describes cross-cultural child-raising processes where the parents come from two different cultural traditions. Young adults between 17-30 years with one Swedish and one Italian parent who grew up either in Italy or in Sweden were interviewed about their childhood. The main issues discussed were the way they grew up, their opinions about their childhood and how they regarded having one parent deriving from another culture from that in which they were growing up, with a different way of looking upon rearing and education. There was no intention of making comparisons between Italian and Swedish ways of rearing children, but it appeared impossible for the informants to describe their upbringing without at the same time describing what they considered to be the characteristics of Italian and Swedish child-rearing.

Background

Anthropological research (Mead 1972, Le Vine 1974, Whiting & Whiting 1975), has pointed to the great cultural variations in upbringing and rearing, and in the way parents understand and relate to their children, which is strongly influenced by both the culture and the time in which they live. Harkness & Super (1996) discuss "parents' understanding" of the nature, the development and the behaviour of children, which is to a large extent shared by members of a cultural group. They refer to the cultural understandings that parents hold as "parents' cultural belief systems" or parental "ethnotheories". In a multicultural world, however, it cannot be assumed that children are brought up to belong to and are influenced by the norms and values of a single culture, that into which they are born. Life is no longer a matter of cultural heritage and cultural traditions that are automatically transmitted to the next generation. Rather old cultural traditions, when meeting other cultural traditions, are transformed, creating new opportunities and new possibilities for forming identities.

When different cultural traditions representing different values and norms meet, a change occurs, something new is created. Svensson (1997:122) talks about "flows between cultures themselves". He continues: "The 'spatial' cultural flows represent conditions for the flows between cultures and flows between cultures mean cultural change". In which ways will the 'cultural flows' affect the children being brought up in Europe today, considering that every European country today is more-or-less a multicultural society? In which ways will children growing up in a family with more than one ethnical background be affected by and participate in creating cultural flows? Their upbringing will be influenced by two different cultural traditions; they will receive what in this study is called a 'cross-cultural education'. In this study 'cross-cultural education' is taken to mean the way children are brought up in those families, living in either Sweden or Italy, where one parent is Swedish and the other Italian, and 'cultural flow' is taken to be what the informants have encountered from the two cultures, and the informants' own continuous evaluation and re-evaluation of elements from both cultural traditions.

Aim

The immediate aim of the study was to describe cross-cultural rearing in Swedish-Italian families, focussing on the informants' ways of describing and interpreting their childhood. A more general aim was to describe, analyse and interpret what occurs in a rearing-process where two different cultural traditions meet, using the informants' experiences of their childhood and rearing.

Method

A qualitative case study was chosen as being the most relevant method to best obtain my aim of understanding the meaning of a special phenomenon. The method was interpretative rather than quantitative as I wanted to understand the meaning of rearing as it has been experienced and described by the informants.

In qualitative research, descriptive, heuristic and inductive characteristics are significant. Descriptive, in the way that it tries to present a detailed account of the phenomenon being studied; heuristic, in being able to create meanings, widening the experience of the reader, or confirming what already was known. Because the focus of this study was the experiences of Swedish-Italian young adults growing up in two cultures, it was important that the researcher had a good knowledge of these contexts. During my thirty years as pre-school-teacher in Sweden and Italy, I have had the opportunities to experience and live in close contact with these two different ways of looking at and relating to upbringing or rearing-processes.

The empirical data consists of interviews made with 41 young women and men between 17 and 30 years of age, conducted in Rome, Italy and the Lund-Malmö region of southern Sweden. Their focus is on their particular experiences of being brought up in a cross-cultural ambience, with a Swedish mother and an Italian father. An interpretative hermeneutic analysis has been used in order to obtain a deeper understanding when interpreting the data. This has resulted in identifying various themes, that represent the main aspects expressed by the informants.

Results

The informants expressed contentment with the experience of being brought up with two different cultural values. They also showed a strong awareness of their identity and a consciousness of various aspects of the content in their cross-cultural rearing. A majority of the informants described the family, and what the family has represented for them, as being of great importance during their childhood. These descriptions portrayed the family as the base for security, for togetherness, love and respect. The Italian way of emphasising the importance of the value of the family with its unconditional love and togetherness was dominant in these cross-cultural families. The informants pointed out that the Italian father in Sweden, rather than the Swedish mother, played a more dominant role in keeping these particular family values alive.

The influence of the Swedish mothers in the rearing process is characterised by what dominates a Swedish upbringing - an emphasis on independence, freedom and equality. The female informants in Rome were very content with their Swedish mothers and appreciated their different ways of dealing with rearing questions; ways that differed markedly from those of Italian mothers. In Lund-Malmö neither the male nor the female

respondents commented to the same extent about their Swedish mothers and Sweden methods of child-rearing. However, it may be that Swedish mothers in Sweden were simply taken for granted in their own context. It is the difference between the two approaches, and the combination of what mother and father represent together, that the young adults identify with. This is the cross-cultural rearing (upbringing) process.

The male informants in Rome seem to have had more problems with personal identity than did other informants. They had difficulties in identifying with their Italian father and his male ideals, norms and values. The reason for this may be that the Italian fathers did not participate in upbringing as actively as the mothers. The Italian fathers also showed great confidence in the way their Swedish wives handled the upbringing of their children.

The consciousness of and reflection about identity is significant: there seemed to be a continuous swing between Swedish and Italian values and norms. Informants described themselves as belonging to both cultures, which can also be seen as having a double identity.

The content of cross-cultural education is strongly related to what each country considers the most important norms and values in upbringing and rearing. Sweden, oriented to individualism, prioritises independence, freedom and responsibility, while Italy, where the family still plays an important role, emphasises respect towards the older generation, obedience towards parents, and love. The cross-cultural education in this study can be said to represent a balance between the belonging/dependency and independence/freedom emphasised in the other respective cultures.

Discussion

The main result of this study can be seen as a successful combination of Swedish and Italian cultures where the differences in traditions have enriched and benefited the Swedish-Italian families. The identities created were described with words like trust, independence and flexibility.

Judging from the informants' experiences of their childhood and upbringing, a "feeling of trust" seems to have dominated their childhoods. The young adults describe in many different ways strong feeling of being loved, and being important persons in the family, thus giving them a solid base of security which has been of great importance for developing good self-confidence and self-esteem.

Without generalising widely one might expect to obtain similar results in other studies of education where the parents have different backgrounds. This study has shown that it has been very enriching for these young adults to grow up in a cross-cultural family. Could it be that we have underestimated children and young adults' capacity to choose what is the best for their development and future life?