

Childhoods on the move

Twelve researches on unaccompanied minors in Italy

Andrea Traverso
(Ed.)



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Chapter 6

A young refugee in the family. Intercultural relations during a hosting experience in Milan.

Anna Granata, University of Torino

6.1 Introduction

Intercultural relations are usually studied in specific contexts such as education, health and business. Typical fields of intercultural studies are school classrooms, youth centers and other institutions in which cultural differences are widespread. However, according to Roy, also in this field of research can we distinguish two different intercultural ways: “institutional” and “non-institutional”, with different relational dynamics (Roy 1992, 55). By non-institutional ways we mean contexts without specific written rules for interpersonal relationships, where cultural differences may also emerge in a most spontaneous way.

This essay aims to explore when intercultural relations take place in a domestic environment and people from different cultures share daily life, outside a regulatory framework. The main difference is between a context of rules and norms also concerning intercultural relations, on the one hand, and a more spontaneous and informal context on the other. The fundamental theoretical reference is Michel de Certeau’s (1990) thinking about everyday life.

The project was inspired by some Italian experiences of hosting young refugees inside people’s homes for a short and long period²¹. Domestic hospitality is a diversified experience in European contexts, involving people for varying reasons such as international experience (i.e. exchange students) or accommodation in a new country (i.e. foreign refugees). Host families as actors in international youth exchange projects or as accommodation for refugees have not been investigated. There are only a few empirical studies that consider this topic (Lowe, Askling, Bates 1984; Weidemann, Blüm 2009). On the contrary, the construct of

²¹ The reflection of this essay starts from a project conducted in Lombardy between 2016 and 2018, promoted by the O.N.G. Action for a United World (AMU) and the New Families (AFN onlus) association and financed with the FAMI Fund of the Ministry of the Interior. It involved 40 minors and newcomers residing with a host community in eastern Sicily and focused on experiences of training internships and family stays within the national territory. A deepening of this experience as a whole is reported in the books Granata A., Granata E. (2019), *Teen Immigration. La grande migrazione dei ragazzini*, Vita e Pensiero, Milano.

“multicultural daily practice” (Baumann 1999, 98-99) has had a certain success in sociological studies (Beck 2002).

The general topic of this research was to explore how daily life could influence the cultural experience of all people involved in a domestic context.

The aim of this study was operationalized in the following research questions:

- (RQ1) in which situations do cultural differences emerge during domestic life?
- (RQ2) how do people manage cultural differences in their different roles?
- (RQ3) how does culture change by experiencing daily intercultural relations?

The essay first sets out the theoretical and social context, exploring the relationships between daily cohabitation, cultural differences and intercultural relations within the domestic walls. The core of the paper presents qualitative analysis of an auto-ethnography of intercultural relations inside a domestic context, during a year of co-habitation between an Italian family and a young refugee from Gambia. Auto-ethnography can allow researchers to offer insider accounts of families, study the everyday, unexpected experiences of families, ‘especially as they face unique or difficult situations’ (Adams, Manning 2015, 350). The essay concludes with the implications of the findings for intercultural studies.

6.2 The theoretical standpoints

I propose two theoretical standpoints to investigate intercultural relations within the domestic walls. The first theoretical standpoint concerns *everyday life and cohabitation* as a specific framework in which intercultural relations take place in a specific informal way where people manage cultural differences. The second theoretical standpoint regards *culture like a non-Newtonian fluid* or a plural and dynamic construct, according to Ogay and Edelmann (2016). These two standpoints are closely connected.

Everyday life and cohabitation

Michel de Certeau (1990) has introduced the concept of everyday life as a fundamental framework for social relationships. In this essay, the author explains that ordinary people are not merely passive consumers of culture but active through everyday actions. De Certeau distinguishes between strategies and tactics to explain this dynamic: strategies are a method for following the rule of institutions and their objectives (such as discipline or profit), while tactics are individual actions including walking, talking and reading. The latter are not the results of planning but more depend on the situations and opportunities. The author states that everyday practices are a form of political resistance (de Certeau 1990).

The construct of “multicultural daily practice” (Baumann 1999, 98-99) was rather successful in social sciences studies. It describes ordinary practices that take place in daily contexts such as a classroom, a playground or a neighborhood. Ulrich Beck speaks about “trivial cosmopolitanism”: “what is small, familiar, close, delimited and fenced, or rather its own shell, becomes the theater of universal experiences” (Beck 2002, 19). According to Gerd Baumann (1999, 92), the everyday multicultural practices of ‘perfectly unexceptional people’ can improve some specific competences in relationships with people of other cultures. In a global

era, intercultural encounters are a daily experience, in the school, municipality, condominium or university. Taking the concept of daily life can help to overstep visions suspended from reality. Pedagogical studies speak of everyday diversity as a widespread feature in educational environments.

In this paper, we adopt a strong meaning of everyday life by the association with cohabitation and familiar experience. Daily cohabitation in a family context involves activities such as cooking and eating together, waking up and going to bed, sharing free time, managing cleaning and hygiene activities. Within the domestic walls there are specific routines that can bring out gender and intergenerational roles in family contexts. The sharing of common places and borders can explain some dynamics of intercultural relations. In the domestic environment people share daily life outside a regulatory framework, adopting more spontaneous and informal attitudes. Unexpected experiences within a daily routine are the most interesting objects of this idea of intercultural relations.

According to Weidemann and Blüm (2009), an outsider who has been socialized in a different family system (and also in our case in a different national, cultural and religious system) acts, at least at the beginning of cohabitation, according to different norms, values and rules. “Thus, both parties (host family and exchange student) have to go through adaptation processes since both are facing (cultural) differences” (Weidemann, Blüm 2009, 90). Interactional and situational approach we can observe how culture changes through a face-to-face meeting (Goffman 1959). In this case study, intercultural relationship takes place between people from different cultures with different roles: parents of the family, children of the family, and the guest in the family as a full member.

Culture like a non-Newtonian fluid

Culture is an indispensable construct for the social and human sciences. Human groups are different not because of genetic differences but because they live and grow up in different environments and historical periods. Culture is to be understood as an everyday, socially symbolic practice. “It is a way to understand how individuals in their specific social conditions of life symbolically acquire their own lifestyle and attribute a unique meaning to their own life” (Ogay, Edelmann 2016, 390).

Although this concept is frequently misunderstood. Many scholars have criticized in particular a “solid” understanding of culture (Granata, Mejri, Rizzi 2016). Others have recommended for the same reason to renounce the concept (Abdallah-Preteille 2010).

According to Ogay and Edelmann (2016), we think that culture is an indispensable concept in intercultural education. Metaphorical expressions can help to define, through imagination and creativity, this ambiguous construct.

The most famous metaphor of culture is that of an iceberg (see e.g. Ting-Toomey 1999) - stating that the visible, observable part of culture (artefacts) is much smaller than the invisible part (assumptions, norms, values) - is misleading. It emphasizes the idea that culture is solid and that we can divide cultures into separated objects. Ogay and Edelmann (2016) propose three alternative metaphors of culture, able to overcome a solid idea of the construct: culture like language, culture like the air we breathe and culture like a non-Newtonian fluid. All these metaphors contribute to explain a dynamic, liquid and plural idea of culture but the third is the

most interesting and unusual. This concept of physics can include different states of matter: liquid, fluid and gas:

“We here tentatively propose the metaphor of culture as a non-Newtonian fluid: these special types of fluid become almost solid (their viscosity increases) when a force (like movement, or sound waves) is applied to them; when the force disappears, the fluid turns back to a liquid state. Culture is usually liquid (or gaseous like air), permeating everything in the context but remaining unnoticed. But when there is pressure (for example through identification/differentiation issues as a result of intercultural contact), culture becomes solid and perceptible, and differences are perceived and performed” (Ogay, Edelmann 2016, 396-7).

Through this metaphor we can argue that the relational dimension is crucial in cultural experiences. Group affiliation and relationships between people sharing a same context become salient in intercultural dynamics. A “solid” conception of culture could be the temporary effect of a specific condition of the subject in reference to the context and other people, as well a “liquid” one or a “gas” one. From a pedagogical point of view, understanding culture means not dismissing it when liquid and not taking it too seriously when solidified by pressure (Ogay, Edelmann 2016). In this case study, we approach the ‘specific family culture’ of the members of a family in contact with a new “family member”, coming from another family and national culture (Weidemann, Blüm 2009, 9). People assume a unique version of their culture, starting from his/her personal and familiar experience. Living together in a domestic context they recreate their familiar culture.

6.3 Methods

Social context of the study: domestic hospitality in Italy

Domestic hospitality is not a novelty in the Italian context. Historically, there are many experiences of hospitality of war orphans, young people in difficulty or non-autonomous adults. These experiences were characterized by temporary hospitality carried out by family adoptions and foster care systems. The distinction between formal foster care and informal domestic hospitality is crucial, activating very different relational dynamics. Firstly, because informal hospitality doesn’t regard social services and tribunal. Secondly, because this experience could be short or temporary, very different from adoption. Thirdly, because most of these hospitalities regard adult people and not minors.

In recent years, other kinds of domestic hospitality have been undertaken. In particular, we can distinguish two different voluntary experiences: one, slightly further back, was the domestic hospitality of exchange students coming from foreign countries to study in Italy; another, more recent one was the domestic hospitality of refugees fleeing from their homelands. Refugee hospitality was born as a way to cope to the crisis of refugees in the recent years (Catarci 2016).

The conventional way of hosting refugees in Italy is based on big structures separated from local people. Currently many experiments of domestic hospitality are being introduced. These

experiences aim purpose to promote integration in the social context and build a social network throughout the families.

There is still a lack of systematic findings on the perspective of host families, both regarding the reception of refugees and exchange students, especially in terms of managing cultural differences. There are only a few empirical studies that focus on host families in their research (Lowe, Askling, Bates 1984; Weidemann, Blüm 2009).

Auto-ethnography inside the house

This research was based on auto-ethnography within the domestic context. By auto-ethnography we mean a form of self-narrative that places the self within a social context. Indeed, this method is very useful in connecting the personal and cultural dimensions. Auto-ethnography can allow researchers to offer inside accounts of families, studying everyday life and the unexpected experiences of families. *“The ethnographer also tries to conduct fieldwork in ‘natural settings’ – that is everyday contexts of the practice, experience, identity, or group that would exist regardless of the ethnographer’s presence”* (Adams, Manning 2015, 351).

Unlike autobiography, which concentrates more on personal life, auto-ethnography uses subjectivity and reflexivity to contribute to cultural change. The personal vulnerability and sensibility of the author also contribute to the comprehension of social and cultural context.

Usually researchers used auto-ethnography to study sensitive topics such as gender or racism in families (Adams, Manning 2015). For example, many scholars have used auto-ethnography to investigate the experiences of young gay and lesbian people in their families; others focused on religious experiences between people of different faiths in the same family; others investigated the life experience of same-sex partners or partner separation (Adams, Manning 2015).

Certainly, this method could have also many limitations such as self-referentiality and indifference toward the “outside world”. But in this particular research, studying intercultural relations within the domestic walls, it is the most suitable instrument.

The role of the researcher is very delicate. According to Khosravi (2007), in this method “the distinction between ethnographer and others is not clear. It challenges imposed identities and boundaries” (Khosravi 2007, 322). However, they may be able to report on experiences that outsiders may have difficulty accessing on the long-term and observing in a “natural” setting. The auto-ethnographer is involved as a full member in his study.

The main reason of this study is to investigate the peculiarities of intercultural relations within the domestic context. In particular, we want to observe how cultural differences emerge and change when people share the same place of daily life. Indeed, everyday unexpected experiences are the main objects of observation of this study.

In keeping with auto-ethnographic tradition, my data are comprised entirely of narratives I have constructed. These narratives aim to show how people manage cultural differences in daily life focusing on gestures, behaviors, words and silences. The narratives collected in this study during a year of co-habitation (May 2017-May 2018) include:

- small narratives of daily life and unexpected experiences;
- text messages by different people involved in the cohabitation and other virtual communications by social networks.

Although the small stories did not always constitute a coherent narrative, they were pertinent in describing how people manage cultural differences and how culture changes within a daily intercultural relationship.

6.4 Results

In this auto-ethnography I attempt to describe intercultural relations within the domestic context over a full year (April 2017- April 2018). Based on my family experience of co-habitation and hospitality I will offer a narrative of different phases of intercultural relations in the house. My writing, in the form of an ethnographic diary, is accompanied by transcriptions of small dialogues and photos. The focus is concentrated on small narratives about daily life and unexpected experiences.

Waiting for the new guest

Domestic hospitality starts before the new guest arrives. The emotions felt in the days before the arrival as well the concrete actions to prepare the reception have an important role. As for emotions, I feel a great enthusiasm in the previous weeks but also feelings of fear and suspension in the last days before the arrival of B. This feeling regards how to manage time with the new guest, how my children (G aged 1 and S aged 3) would react to the new member and the consequences of this new experience for my life and my family. These emotions have an important role in preparing me for the new experience. Many people around me have made comments such as “are you crazy?”, or “you are very good and generous”, or “but are your children happy?”. These words and questions have further impressed on me the exceptionality of this experience.

Regarding concrete actions, the weeks before the arrival of B, I prepared his accommodation in our living room. We spent some time deciding where to place our guest and imagining his needs. In particular, we have procured a prayer carpet, knowing that he is Muslim. I did not have any contact with our young guest, before meeting him in the airport in Milan, Italy.

Welcome and approach

The first days spent together were like a holiday. Firstly, because all the members of my family were on holiday during Easter week; secondly, because we had to introduce B to his new context, very different from his city in Gambia but also different to where he started in the young people’s community in Sicily (south of Italy).

Some gestures inside the home characterized our life together during the first hours. For example, taking off outside shoes upon entering the house. This is a habit of our family, unlike other families in my country. B immediately observed and adopted this practice for the future. Through this gesture he implies his intent to enter our family’s life.

Other important initial actions upon entering the house were in the form of questions posed by our guest. In particular, he asked me three things: (1) where is Mecca; (2) a body cream; (3) the password for the Wi-Fi. These three questions are a “business card” for me. The first one

showed me the importance of religion for B. I knew that he was a Muslim but I did not know his relationship with religion. I had no idea of the meaning of the second question: I later discovered that B uses a lot of body cream to protect his skin, like many other sub-Saharan African people coming to Europe. The third request gave me a feeling of normality: the Wi-Fi password is the first things teenagers ask me when they come to my home, for example my nephews and their friends.

In the first 48 hours an important thing happens. During a walk in the park, B starts to tell me and my husband the story of his migration journey: a very dramatic telling about crossing the Sahara, the killing of fellow travelers, his detention in Libyan prisons with violence and torture, his escape and travel over sea and finally his arrival on Italian soil. After that first time, B speaks again about his journey in particular moments of daily life such as at breakfast together after a night of nightmares and memories. Many new details emerge by his telling, related to people lost during the trip. Delivering his dramatic story has a strong meaning for our cohabitation. First of all because it gave clearer and deeper meaning to us for our hosting him, well beyond our first application to the hosting project. Secondly, because his telling of this story is an important step in the relationship between B and us, sharing a delicate and traumatic experience within the family context.

Boundaries of the house

Over the months, we have adopted some habits of common life. In particular, we have many temporal and physical boundaries inside the home. Temporal boundaries are linked to our different working hours during the week. Physical boundaries depend on our different activities inside the home, regarding cooking and eating, domestic work, caring for children, relaxing and free time.

Regarding our time spent together, we have breakfast all together on the weekend, often dinner on Friday and Saturday, B and I also share a tea before bedtime during the week. Meals are moments in which we talk about work and B's schooling, share time with the children joking and laughing, and spend some time speaking about childhood and youth spent in Gambia or the long and dramatic journey from Africa to Europe.

Regarding the physical boundaries of the house, B has a bed and wardrobe in our living room with a screen and a private bathroom. As you can see from the plan, the home is separated in two blocs: one with our bedrooms, our bathroom and the kitchen; the other one with the living room. B rarely comes to the night area of the house without a particular reason. In the same way, my husband and I don't enter his little "room" beyond the screen. On the other hand, the children often trespass over the boundaries of the home, using all the corners of the house to create game spaces or spend time with us and our guest. Our little son in particular loves going behind the screen to spend time with B, watching videos on his mobile or asking B to play with him.

My personal communication with B occurs face to face, during meals or other common moments, but very often by telematic tools. In particular our first period of cohabitation while we were getting to know each other, we shared emotions and words through WhatsApp expressing affection and gratitude to each other from and to various parts of the house.

Unexpected experiences

Daily life and habits are interrupted by unexpected experiences. These episodes and little events reveal important aspects of intercultural relations inside the home, interrupting normal life and habitual relations. Here we pay attention to three little unexpected experiences that occurred during our year under the same roof.

The first experience concerns in particular the boundaries of the house, the relationship between B, the children and me. I report here the ethnographic diary page directly:

“It was evening and I was putting pajamas on my little son (aged 1) in the bathroom. He was tired and complained. At one point he started crying loudly and I was unable to calm him. B, who never comes to this part of the house, arrived and entered the bathroom in a very decisive manner. He took the child and carried him to the living room, and slowly calmed him. When the baby calmed down he told me” (ethnographic diary, October 2017).

I was very surprised by B’s intervention. At first, it seemed an overstepping of boundaries and roles inside the house when my husband was not there. But then, I considered that act as one of help and mostly responsibility regarding child care. Reflecting now on that particular episode it marked a more active and significant presence of B in our family life, even in the eyes of our children.

Many months after, another similar experience occurred. This in particular concerns the roles of the adults inside the house, regarding the relationship with my children and between them.

“It was evening and I was at home with my children and B, watching the TV. My little son (aged 2) was tired and started annoying his sister (aged 3). At one point he exaggerated and hit her on the head. B intervened immediately scolding the child in his mother tongue. The baby did not understand anything but immediately stopped annoying his sister” (ethnographic diary, February 2018).

This experience really amused me. I was surprised by the intervention in itself, almost as the head of the family. But also, I was surprised by the use of the mother tongue: I interpreted that as a way to be more effective and express a strong emotion.

Discovering cultural differences

Sharing daily life, the different conception of life and visions emerged very clear. One of these experiences regards the conception of age. The third unexpected experience revealed a different conception of age between B and us. Starting from first periods, it was clear that B had a strong history and self-conception as an adult. It depends on his dramatic family and migration story but also on a different cultural heritage. As B explained to us, in his country at the age of six children spend a few months in the forest with other male children, no parents and with other adults who introduce them to adulthood. This experience was also marked by some rites of passage.

By sharing our daily lives, this different conception of age and in particular of adolescence emerged very clear. I remember in particular one time I used the term “teen” and he asked me what it meant. He was very surprised and amused by the concept. Another time we were speaking about the child of a friend and, not remembering the name, he said to me “that boy”. I cannot understand because to my mind a three-year-old child is not yet a boy. This little fact - among many others - was very important in becoming aware of our different viewpoints and in getting to know each other more deeply.

Still on the subject of different viewpoints, I remember another dialogue between B, myself and my husband during a car trip. We were speaking about his mother’s name, M. He explained that it is a male name, because his grandparents had many daughters and no sons, and so by naming her thus they expressed the desire to have a son. I was very surprised by this and tried to explain to change his point of view about this choice and experience. He was not surprised and affirmed that it was normal doing this.

Changing habits

Living together influences habits, practices and also viewpoints. Adopting a longitudinal view, I can observe some little and big changes of all the people involved in this experience.

The first example regards religious practices. B is a Muslim and at the beginning of our common life would emphasize this part of his identity a lot. He prays five times in a day, always at the same time; he would excuse himself from the dinner table if it was time to pray, and so on. Over time, these rules became softer and sometimes I asked him if it was time to pray and he answered “later”. In my perception, I see his religious practice as being very strict and serious but he no longer has to prove to us that he was a “good Muslim”.

This was clear also regarding food. At the beginning he would repeat how he cannot eat pork or drink wine. We always respected this rule and, for example, I changed my “ragù” (Italian food usually made with pork) recipe and started using beef. Over time, B no longer needed to voice his choice, but simply organized himself to distinguish his food. Our habits changed very little bit (e.g., ragù), while his habits obviously changed more.

At the beginning he would never drink milk. As he worked in a factory producing milk, he started drinking it in tea. Recently, he has also accepted a coffee when very tired.

B has very clear many habits of his Gambian life. For example, he told us that when an adult person enters a room in the house, children must stand up to show respect. Or, young children call ladies by names such as “mum” or “lady”, never by name. B never calls me in this way, neither does he stand when adults enter a room. It is clear to him that such behavior here is not necessary as in his homeland.

6.5 Discussion

The auto-ethnography of domestic co-habitation between an Italian family and a young refugee from Gambia has shown many important and unexpected dynamics of intercultural relations. No doubt, the domestic context is characterized by informal and spontaneous dynamics that distinguish it from other institutional contexts as school, social and health

services. However, these findings can be considered interesting far beyond the private and domestic boundaries.

In particular, it has revealed many specific traits of daily intercultural relations that we can explain in five adjectives: fast, informal, silent, unexpected, mutual.

Fast. The first specific aspect of intercultural relations emerging from this experience regards the speed of dynamics. People living in the same house share habits, conceptions, stories of personal life, in very brief times. Having a deep and direct experience of the other person and their lifestyle, prejudices about others and “other cultures” disappear more quickly. Making a comparison with the school context on which there has been much research over recent years, we can observe that people have fewer opportunities for exchange, familiarity and spontaneous behaviors at school. Moreover, mutual knowledge is mediated by the rules of institutions that risk influencing the attitude and behavior of different players (i.e., timetables, classroom arrangements, relationships with teachers and pupils’ academic performance).

Informal. Another aspect of intercultural relations inside the domestic context regards the ways in which relationships occur. It is obvious that each member (including the guest) assumes a specific role inside the family, depending on age, gender, parental role, etc. It is also true that the intercultural relation is not completely on a par, involving people of the dominant culture (members of the family, Italians) and only one person of a foreign culture (young guest from Gambia). However, relationships between people are more spontaneous and informal, compared to other contexts of meeting. The rules of familial life are not written rules; something very different from the statement of scholar documents about cultural difference and its place within the institution. In the other context, we speak about the strong role of “structural aspects” of society, which influence people’s choices and behavior. Within the familial context these aspects have less pervasive effects.

Silent. We can say that domestic co-habitation is built more by silences and non-sayings than narrations and declarations of intents. Examples of this aspect is the decision to change some habits by each member of this experience: playing with children, drinking coffee, taking off shoes at home are examples of B’s new home experience; cooking a traditional dish in a different way, accessing just certain parts of your own home, sharing the caregiving of children with a new person, have become new ways of living my home for me. With no precise awareness or explanation of our own choices, we decide to change some habits.

Unexpected. An informal and familial context can easily be the frame in which unexpected behaviors take place. Institutional environments such as school have written rules that decrease this possibility. Instead, the daily and domestic routine is interrupted very often by a change of style or some emotional reactions that reveal deep and hidden dynamics. I had many conversations with B about gender roles revealing different approaches on this matter, but the way he acts inside my family shows me other approaches and attitudes, very difficult to express in words. The unexpected experience is more accessible in a daily and domestic context where each person takes off his cultural mask, at least at some points of the day like when people are tired or relaxing.

Mutual. Each member of the family (including the young guest) is involved in the process of cultural change that we have observed by this auto-ethnographic exploration. The metaphor of non-Newtonian fluid can help us to interpret the different dynamics: first of all, culture is a fluid construct and people change the way in which they present their culture to other people (i.e., our young guest's emphasis on religion in the early days of our); secondly, the relationship with people of other cultures changes the perception of our own culture (i.e., my idea about children's caregiving questioned by B's behaviors and attitudes). This process is unavoidably mutual: even when the people involved have different roles: none of the involved parties can be said to be exempt.

Finally, we can make some general remarks about the research on intercultural relations. We think that this reflection on intercultural relations in the domestic context can have strong implications for intercultural studies in general. In particular, paying attention to informal and silent aspect of intercultural dynamics, beyond the written rules of life within institutional contexts. In that situation, people express their own culture in a more free and spontaneous way. A focus on institutional contexts risks reducing the researcher's point of observation. We hope that many other areas of investigation on intercultural relations can be considered as domestic and familial context.

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