

Time to Revisit the Family in Italian-Australian Studies: Charting a Way Forward

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ABSTRACT

Findings from our research on second-generation Italian-Australians demonstrates that the label ‘second generation’ is largely irrelevant to this group, and yet they define themselves as ‘Italian-Australian’ through their construction of the notion of the Italian family. For the informants we studied, shared understandings about the importance of family were at the centre of what it means to be Italian in Australia. This brief literature review highlights the surprising lack of research that engages explicitly with the role of family in Italian-Australian studies, and migration studies more generally. We argue that family has been implicitly and not explicitly studied in the broader literature on Italian-Australians, and in particular, on the second generation. Drawing on our research, we chart a way forward for future research to make the role of family more explicit by featuring the concepts of intimate culture and familial habitus, including in transnational contexts.

Findings from our ethnographic research on the Italian-Australian second generation (Sala 2017; Sala and Baldassar 2017a; 2017b)¹ reveal that the label ‘second generation’ is largely irrelevant to this group as a self-ascribed marker of identity, and yet our results show that they define their Italian identity (*Italianità*) through their construction of the notion of the Italian family. For example, the discussion with Rosa (second-generation Italian-Australian) clearly exemplifies this point. When questioned as to whether or not she referred to herself as ‘second generation’, Rosa replied: “I don’t know if I would say that I was second-generation Italian, but I would certainly connect with my *Italianism*, if that’s a word”. While the label ‘second generation’ is not used by this group, they still define themselves as ‘Italian-Australian’ (without specifying a generation), but they do this primarily and consistently through their construction of the notion of the Italian family. For this group, shared understandings about the

importance of family are at the centre of what it means to be Italian in Australia. Furthermore, family-oriented practices are important events where *Italianità* is performed and constructed. Our research highlights the important role of family in sustaining ethnic identity in multicultural societies like Australia.

The first aim of this paper is to review relevant scholarship to highlight the surprising lack of research that engages explicitly with the role of family in Italian Australian studies and second-generation studies more specifically. It might seem obvious to state that family plays an important role in the lives of second-generation Italian-Australians; however, the theorisation of family and its role in migration, community/settlement and transnational studies, is surprisingly absent. The second aim of this paper is to chart a way forward for future research to make the role of family more explicit by highlighting theoretical concepts such as ‘intimate culture’ (Epstein 1978) and ‘familial habitus’ (Reay 1998), including in transnational contexts (Sala and Baldassar 2017b).

Before providing a review of the literature it is important to define family. Our definition of family draws on several key theories in anthropology and sociology. We highlight the practices and processes that constitute family in the performative approach, known as ‘doing family’ (Purkayastha 2005). In this interpretation, the family is key in generating experiences, expressions and constructions of *Italianità*; for example, through performances such as family gatherings and celebrations. Additionally, our definition of family takes into consideration perspectives from cross-cultural psychology that highlight the importance of family in socialisation processes including the development of ethnic identity (Phinney and Ong 2007). Our definition of family also incorporates the transnational sphere. Drawing on Baldassar and Merla (2014), we define the transnational family as constituted by transnational practices and processes involving both proximate and distant (far away) kin. Finally, our definition of family includes the notion of ‘familial habitus’ as a useful window through which to examine ‘intimate culture’. Both these concepts will be described in more detail in the second part of the article.

Migration studies: historical perspective

There are arguably five major waves of Italian migration to Australia: early (1800s); pre-Second World War (1900-1945); post-war (1950s-1960s); recent (post-1980s); and ‘new’ (post-2000) which includes growing numbers of the Working Holiday generation (Baldassar and Pyke 2013; Bertelli 1985). An issue that is often overlooked in historical discussions of Italian migration to Australia is that the major type of migration was *family migration* (other less prominent types included political and economic). Although rarely analysed as such, the migration of the pre-Second World War and post-war Italians in particular, is best understood as a family migration strategy – it was a migration about and for family, especially for the children, the second generation (Vasta 1992). Because of this, family networks, including nuclear, extended and *comparatico* (i.e., godparenthood; Marino and Chiro 2014) in migrant settings are centrally important to Italian-Australian life-ways. We note here that for the post-war migrants in particular, the family served as a buffer against discrimination during the White Australia policy. Most migrants intended their migration project to support a repatriation back home (Huber 1977) and a successful *sistemazione* (‘to set up’ a

family). In fact, rates of repatriation were as high as 40% in northern regions and 20% in the south (Thompson 1980). Those who chose to stay often did so to ensure better opportunities for their children. While always understood as an important economic push factor in migration, the family has nevertheless tended to be implicitly studied because economic motives have taken analytical precedence (Bertelli 1985). As a result, the role of family is seldom the focus of conceptual analysis.

An important exception is work by De Lepervanche who argued that during the post-war era, Australian migration policy was “infected by family ideology” (1991: 14). She explains that Australia promoted family migration because families (women) were thought to have a stabilising influence and would result in permanent settlement and citizenship rather than temporary sojourners. This Marxist feminist analysis is a rare example of work that features the role of family in understanding migration processes, albeit at the level of the state and policy. This policy discourse about the ‘civilising influence of women’ (De Lepervanche 1991), and the idea that family migration needed to be supported, is also evident in the public perception that single Italian men (and southern European men more generally) were seen as a threat (to ‘Australian women’) without their own women-folk around to keep them in check. The Italian proxy bride history in Australia (Iuliano 1999) in many ways mirrors this gendered discourse; conforming to strong cultural traditions about morality in Italian culture, single women could not travel alone, they had to be married and stitched into family networks for their moral protection. Both the literature on assimilation into Australian society and on Italian migrant communities have tended to foreground the role of gender (Miller 2011, Sharpe 2001), which eclipses family, despite the latter being integral to the processes involved.

Historically, Italian families in Australia have been affected by policies regarding *family reunion*, through which single men could sponsor wives, fiancées, children and parents to join them in Australia (Castles 2000; Huber 1977; Storer 1985; Vasta 1995). Price (1963) identified a three-step model of chain migration that reflects the policy of the time: the arrival of the sole man, the calling out of wives, and subsequent calling out of elderly parents once the family was established in Australia. Here again, the conceptualisation focuses on the chain migration process, particularly the role of men as the main economic actors, and renders secondary the role of family.

Even the more recent experience of the post-1980s cohort can still be conceptualised as falling under ‘family motives’, and yet these reasons are not foregrounded. For example, although their migration is often motivated by love and marriage, it is primarily characterised as a lifestyle migration and as a type of economic migration and their identities as ‘professional’ skilled migrants are emphasised (Baldassar 2007). Furthermore, while the migration of any person, regardless of when they migrated, is quintessentially a family ‘crisis’ in the anthropological sense, as it impacts on the whole family, migrants are primarily seen as individual economic actors. This is even more evident in the current migration agenda, where, for the first time in Australian history, migration policy has moved to a raft of new ‘temporary visas’ (Robertson 2014) taking the place of family migration. This current policy categorically devalues family by prioritising skilled economic migration.

Community and settlement

In addition to the large body of literature on migration, there is also an important set of work on community and settlement. The family is also central to these studies, but again, is largely implicit and often conceptually overlooked. We review two key themes in this literature.

Core ‘family’ values

An example of work that engages directly with family is that of ‘family values’. One early contribution to this literature is Storer’s (1985) edited volume that set out to investigate traditional values and the effect of migration on these values for migrants from diverse backgrounds. Here Bertelli (1985) focuses on the variety of family models found in post-Second World War Italy (e.g., family honour and respect, authoritarianism, the importance of extended family). While his descriptions are convincing, there is little conceptual theorisation of the impact these family types have on Australia and vice versa, except in a very simplistic fashion. Bertelli implies that these values are static and transported wholesale to Australia. He states, for example, that these family models are “consequently [found] among Italian migrants in Australia” (1985: 34). In addition, Bertelli does not discuss the maintenance, transmission, and potential transformation of these family values for the second generation.

Perhaps the best illustration of work that engages directly with the issue of cultural maintenance is research by Chiro and Smolicz (2002) on ‘core values’. We note here that ‘core values theory’ was originally used to explain the patterns of cultural maintenance and loss of minority language in Australia (Smolicz 1981), but here is applied to ‘family’ values. Their study on students of Italian descent in Australia demonstrates the importance of family values in the development of ethnic identity. Chiro and Smolicz argue that: “the notion of family values represents core values for Italian cultural systems in Australia … these values are being maintained at the second and later generation stage” (2002: 13). The family, Chiro and Smolicz claim, is the most important agent for the transmission of values that surpasses even that of language. Further, they argue that core (family) values form the “heartland of a group’s culture, and act as identifying values that are symbolic of the group and its membership” (1994: 4), for example the importance of family. This theme resonates with our own ethnographic research. For example, Baldassar (2011: 173) states that “close families are recognized internationally as characteristics of Italian culture” and “notions about close family ties have come to be associated with Italianità (...) at home and abroad”. However, similar to Bertelli’s (1985) study, core values theory tends to present an essentialist and unchanging conception of family that does not account for change. Issues of potential mixity and change within the family environment are not central concepts of investigation. Original writings on core values (i.e., Smolicz 1981: 75) portray this essentialist standpoint:

[R]ejection of core values carries with it the threat of exclusion from the group. Indeed, the deviant individual may himself feel unable to continue as a member. Core values (...) provide the indispensable link between the group's cultural and social systems; in their absence both systems would suffer eventual disintegration.

Work on conflict and contestation in second-generation youth deals with the notion of core family values in a less static way. Scholars of Italian migration to Australia have examined the tensions that exist between first-generation parents and their children during their youth (especially women) on issues as diverse as gender relations, control, obligations to kin, and responsibility within the family (Bertelli 1985; Gucciardo 1987; Pallotta-Chiarolli and Skrbis 1994; Vasta 1992). Although the family has been analysed primarily as a source of conflict and contestation in this literature, this does not diminish the argument that family is a central factor in identity construction, as we describe below.

It is important to note here that the majority of scholarship on second-generation Italian-Australians has dealt with the post-Second World War cohort, during their youth, leaving unexamined their experiences of family as adults (but see Sala and Baldassar, 2017a). Another recent exception is Cosmini-Rose's (2015) edited volume on ageing in the Italian-Australian community, which considers traditional family values such as filial responsibility to be centrally important to second-generation adults (especially women) caring for their ageing parents. Here too, the role of family is in the background of their central investigation on aged care and, conforming to the trend in scholarship outlined above, is largely under-theorised.

Ethnicity and hybridity

Australian social and migration policy was dominated by assimilationist approaches up until the 1970s. During this time, immigrant groups like the post-war Italians were expected to assimilate and 'lose their heritage'. Traditional or straight-line theories of assimilation in migration receiving societies (Alba 1990; Gans 1979; Waters 1990) present a negative view of cultural maintenance and judge ethnicity to be weakening over generations. Ethnicity has been defined as "a sense of affinity with some others, based on a presumption of common origins" (Alba 1994: 21). Similarly, and often used interchangeably, ethnic identity has been defined as "the feeling of belonging to some ethnically defined group" (Banks 1996: 9). For second-generation individuals in the migrant host setting, expressions, experiences and constructions of ethnicity are related to cultural heritage and maintenance (Bottomley 1992). Social mobility factors such as better employment and education opportunities, compared to their first-generation parents, are thought to move the second generation further away from their cultural heritage and closer to mainstream society through improved integration (Sarantakos 1996). Loss of language over time (Chiro and Smolicz 1994) and intermarriage (Khoo et al. 2009) have also been used as an indication of 'culture loss'.

For example, in his classical work on the post-war Italian-Australian family Bertelli (1985) described intermarriage and the issue of cultural maintenance as a major challenge faced by the Italian-Australian migrant family. Similarly, prominent American scholar, Richard Alba saw increasing intermarriage rates for Americans of

mixed ancestry as a sign of the ‘twilight of ethnicity’ (Alba 1985). Instead, our ethnographic research illustrates that even for those second generation Italian-Australians who married outside of their cultural background, *Italianità* is far from lost.² On the contrary, it is lived in the family and is often adapted by non-Italian spouses (see also Chock 1986). Implicit in these assimilationist notions of ethnicity is the idea that culture is a collection of attributes and practices that change over time and that in migrant host settings, the host culture will eventually take over. The straight-line thesis overlooks the important role of family in constructions of ethnicity (but see Sala and Baldassar 2017a) and eclipses family because family is thought to become less important over time.

Overall, ‘family’ is under-theorised, overlooked and undervalued in ethnicity studies. Interestingly, important work on Italian identity in the US was premised on debunking the role of family. In her study of Italian-Americans, Di Leonardo (1984) questions the theory of ethnicity that defines it as being dependent on family and socialisation, maintaining that this type of ‘family’ theory depicts a static view of ethnic identity transmission based on normative or standard behaviour. Di Leonardo (1984) states that those studies that treat ethnicity solely based on normative behaviour ignore history, the economy, as well as age, generational, class and gender divisions. We agree with Di Leonardo’s argument that ethnicity is influenced by economic and historical processes; however, we also argue that the family is a key feature in the development of ethnicity and cultural transmission that must not be discounted. The preoccupation with macro domains has significantly shifted attention away from the family. Most anthropological and sociological literature on ethnicity has focused on macro (state and citizenship) and meso (community life) aspects, presenting a view of ethnicity that is lived in the community (e.g. on the Italian diaspora see Fortier 2000; Harney 1998).

In Australia, the advent of multicultural approaches to migrant settlement developed since the 1980s has promoted a two-way approach to integration with the acknowledgment of the value of immigrant cultures leading to notions of hybrid or hyphenated identities, in particular for the second and subsequent generations (Baldassar 1999; Pallotta-Chiarolli and Skrbis 1994; Vasta 1992).³ In contrast to the straight-line thesis that overlooks the important role of family, hybridity studies are more nuanced because they acknowledge the role of family as one of three spaces: home, host and ‘third space’; that is, ‘in-between’ the home and host country (Bhabha 1990).

Although family is part of the puzzle in hybridity studies, it is still not featured. For example, Zevallos’ (2003; 2008) key study of second-generation immigrant Australian women (from Turkish and Latin American backgrounds) indirectly focuses on family through a discussion of ‘sides’. The main analytical focus of this study is the ‘Australian side’ to second-generation identity, characterised by ideals of gender equality and multiculturalism. What is implicitly valued but explicitly overlooked is her informants’ expressions of Latin American or Turkish ethnicity that are constructed around notions of family. This tendency to oversee the centrality of family in constructions of ethnicity is overlooked not only in Zevallos’ study, but also in Italian-Australian research more generally. For example, Gucciardo states that for second-generation Italian-Australians the family “is the structure through which the individual learns how to interpret his or her social environment; self-identity [is] inextricably bound to it” (1987: 13). However, the primary focus of Gucciardo’s study is on socio-cultural, socio-religious and socio-political dimensions. More recently, Glenn’s (2015:

268) study on Italian-Australian first- and second-generation cohorts hints at the importance of the “familial” (and “intimate”) in one’s sense of identity; however, these concepts are not explicitly analysed. One exception is an early psychological study on Italian-Australian adolescents by Rosenthal and Cichello (1986) who demonstrate the direct link between family and ethnic identity. They state: “One context (...) which is plainly important in establishing and maintaining ethnic identity is that of the family” (1986: 488). Notwithstanding this crucial finding, the family remains under-theorised in ethnicity and settlement studies.

Transnational studies

Until recently the dominant view of migration in Australia was of a one-way migration of settlement. By the 1990s, the transnational approach began to change our understanding of migration processes by acknowledging that migrants maintained connections to their homelands (Glick Schiller et al. 1995). Like the migration studies literature that preceded it, the role of family in the transnational literature is also less explicit with regards to family. For example, in her classic study on return migration of post-Second World War Italian-Australians to Italy, Thompson (1980) mentions ‘family reasons’ as an important motive for return and yet family is not a central feature of Thompson’s overall analysis that emphasises discrimination experiences in Australia influencing repatriations to Italy. Similarly, Goulbourne and colleagues’ research on Italian transnational families hints at the role of family when they state: “strong family ties and strong connections to the family homeland provide the primary reason for return over and above other economic, social and political considerations” (2010: 129), and yet they feature an analysis of social capital.

More recent work by Marinelli and Ricatti (2013) on the transnational spaces of Italian migrants in Australia highlights the more emotive and intimate aspect of transnationalism when they introduce the notion of the ‘uncanny of transnational spaces’; “the emotional reaction to something that is, at the same time, familiar and unfamiliar, homely and unhomely” (7). However, they do not explicitly feature family. We argue that ideas about the ‘familiar’, ‘home’ and ‘emotions’ are closely linked to family (Sala and Baldassar 2017b). Baldassar’s previous work has also documented the role of family suggesting that mobility amongst Italian-Australians is often motivated by the need to care for left-behind kin in Italy (Baldassar et al. 2007), while also examining the return visits of second-generation Italo-Australian youth whose return to Italy is closely linked to visiting family (Baldassar 2001).

In reviewing international literature on transnational studies, it is clear that the role of family, while acknowledged as an important motivation to travel homeward, is also seldom the focus of conceptual analysis. One key example is Wessendorf (2013) who examined how some second-generation Italians in Switzerland make efforts to belong to their country of origin. In her analysis, Wessendorf focuses on the Italian-Swiss second generations’ return to Italy, without explicitly acknowledging that this movement also involves a return to family. Even the concept of ‘roots migration’, which emphasises “the migration of the second generation to their parents’ homeland” (Wessendorf 2007: 1083) implies a migration *to* family – one’s roots are one’s family.

Below we suggest some ways forward to revisit family in Italian migration studies through the concept of intimate culture and familial habitus, which foreground the role

of family in ethnic identity construction (as well as in transnational spaces) in contrast to the studies we have reviewed above, which tend to overlook family and render it implicit.

Family revisited: making the role of family explicit through the concepts of ‘intimate culture’ and ‘familial habitus’

The notion of intimate culture highlights the significant role of family in ethnic identity development. Epstein advocated for a “deeper understanding of the affective component of ethnic identity” (1978: 112), which, he argues, is best revealed in intimate culture, defined as the subtle expressions of ethnic behaviours that are revealed in the home or family. Epstein points out that ethnicity can be transmitted and constructed in intimate culture as opposed to more public domains, which have often been the focus of analysis. Connected to the notion of intimate culture is the concept of ‘familial habitus’, which originates from Bourdieu’s (1984) notion of habitus. For Bourdieu, habitus refers to cultural understandings as unconscious, internalised dispositions that are engrained within ourselves and socially produced. Habitus focuses on ways of “acting, feeling, thinking and being” (Maton 2014: 51) and influences the way a person reacts to the world around them and “involves an unconscious calculation of what is possible, impossible and probable for individuals” (Swartz 1997: 106-107). Habitus relates to intimate culture because it occurs in family environments. Dumais (2002) maintains that habitus is developed (unconsciously) through the primary socialisation that takes place within the family. The more specific term of ‘familial habitus’ refers to “the deeply ingrained system of perspectives, experiences and predispositions family members share” (Reay 1998: 527) and “invokes an understanding of identity premised on familial legacy and early childhood socialization” (Reay 1998: 521). It is important to note here that ‘family’ was also not a key feature of Bourdieu’s theories (but rather capital); however, he discusses the importance of early socialisation in several texts. For example, he describes how ‘social origin’ derives from family and that culture is entrenched in early life (Bourdieu 1984). Further he states that family:

plays a decisive role in the maintenance of social order (...) It is one of the key sites of the accumulation of capital in its different forms, and its transmission between the generations (Bourdieu 1998: 69).

We find familial habitus to be a useful extension of Bourdieu’s notion of habitus (Burke et al. 2013). By highlighting the ‘familial’ we are emphasising the key impact of family on constructions and expressions of ethnicity; however, our view is not that ethnic identity formation is entirely private or within the family only – meso and macro factors also play a role (e.g. historical, class and regional issues). Familial habitus can inform our options and life choices; however, we acknowledge that individuals may challenge the family and reject conforming to its practices (Burke et al. 2013). Importantly, the notion of familial habitus acknowledges the role of family in guiding behaviour, but permits a degree of individual agency. The transnational perspective also highlights the importance of familial habitus. The latter plays a significant role in the lives of the second-generation Italian-Australian informants we studied because family was a major

influence in their imaginary, informing their relationship with and orientation to their ancestral homeland (Sala and Baldassar 2017b).

The argument regarding the centrality of family in socialisation is relevant to core values theory (Chiro and Smolicz 2002), which also features family as key to Italian identity. However, rather than conceptualising family as a core value, which tends to present an essentialist and unchanging conception of family, the notion of familial habitus permits fluidity, mixity and change over time. In this way, habitus is a concept that helps us explain the Italo-Australian identity as it emphasises the plasticity of culture. We argue that ethnicity is best considered as not ‘lost’ in the second generation, but as possibly re-created (Baldassar 1999) and most apparent in the private domain of the family and intimate culture.

We have described the family as ‘habitus’ and ‘practice’, but we also understand family to be ‘field’ (Burke et al. 2013, Silva 2005). Bourdieu’s notion of ‘field’ is linked to habitus and refers to ‘social space’ in which interactions and events occur (Tabar et al. 2010, Thomson 2014). One concern with the studies we have reviewed above, which indirectly focus on family, is that they do not frame the family as field. In other words, they have not focussed on the family as a ‘social space’ worthy of investigation. In combination with habitus, the notion of field gives us an understanding of social life and social phenomena (Thomson 2014). Maton explains the relationship between habitus and field and describes how “it is the relation between these two structures (...) that gives rise to practices” (2014: 51), for example second-generation *Italianità*.

Conclusion

This brief literature review has highlighted the surprising lack of research that engages explicitly with the role of family in Italian Australian studies. The question remains why a theoretical framework for discussing the family, at least in the last three decades, has been overlooked. Morgan (1996) offers an explanation and argues that beginning with the 1970s the sociology of the family became marginalised as a field of study. He claimed that the household based family, or the micro dimension, “looked too small, perhaps too dull for detailed, theoretical rich study” (Morgan 1996: 5). Further, Uhlmann (2006) describes how a sense of crisis of the family arose in Australia due to the emergence of diverse family types. We agree with Allan who argues that “change there has most certainly been, but this does not (...) indicate that family life is in ‘decline’; in this regard, difference does not mean decay” (2000: 5). In this paper, we do not dispute the significant work that we have reviewed, but rather we make evident how family is central, but undertheorised, muted and often invisible. We have charted a way forward for future research to make the role of family more explicit by featuring the concepts of intimate culture and familial habitus, including in transnational contexts, as a more productive way forward.

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¹ The key role of family for second-generation Italian-Australians was a central focus of Sala's PhD thesis on second-generation Italian-Australians, conducted at the University of Western Australia. Sala's thesis included and extended three ethnographic research projects conducted by Baldassar in 1985-1987, in 1991-1993, and in 2007-2009 on the post-Second World War cohort (Baldassar 1992; 1999; 2001; Baldassar et al., 2007) providing a longitudinal perspective. Sala's thesis fills an important gap in the literature, in which the influence of family has tended to be overlooked and undertheorised. The key aim of the thesis was to critically examine and demonstrate the role of the family in analyses of migrant generations. The central hypothesis was that the family, its practices, processes and symbolic constructions, play a critical role in constructions of ethnic identity and ties to homeland among two cohorts of second-generation Italian-Australians (post-Second World War and post-1980s). Several articles from Sala's PhD have been published (see, e.g. Sala and Baldassar, 2017a; 2017b).

² We note here that the majority of second-generation Italian-Australian informants we studied represented the traditional nuclear family type. However, we acknowledge that Italian migrant families have also experienced growing levels of divorce, separation and co-habitation.

³ Our ethnographic research focused primarily on two cohorts of second-generation Italian-Australians (post-Second World War and post-1980s). Further studies are needed to investigate the role of family in sustaining ethnicity in the lives of the third generation.

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We note that this piece has not been submitted for publication elsewhere.