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The Italian family, motherhood and Italianness in New Zealand. The case of the Italian community of Wellington

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SYNOPSIS

Recent studies of the Italian diaspora have examined the role of migrant families in constructing Italian identities. The mother's role is normally that of reproducing and guarding Italian morality. Different scenarios are also possible, with mothers often questioning, resisting or revising the models imported from the homeland. Based on fifty interviews with members of the Italian community of Island Bay, Wellington, the article looks at how the Italian maternal archetype and the extended family have been translated to New Zealand. It focuses on themes which underscore the links between mothering practices and Italianness: food, family, women's work, gender roles, raising sons and daughters, living-at-home children and intergenerational relations. These aspects are examined against ideals, ideologies, practices and policies current in Italy and New Zealand, to assess areas of departure from the Italian models, the influence of the host country and the impact of change on the community's sense of Italianness.

Introduction: migrant families and the Italian maternal archetype

Family migration has only recently attracted the attention of scholars of migration studies and mainstream family studies (Kofman, Kohli, Kraler, & Schmoll, 2011). Following from feminist insights that challenged the sharp separation between public and private spheres as well as common assumptions about women's allegedly secondary role in economic migration, since the 1990s migrant families have been seen as "an interface between the individual and the social world and between private and public spaces", and, thus, as capable of creating connections between sending and receiving societies (Kofman et al., 2011: 17). Recent studies (Baldassar, 2007; Baldassar & Merla, 2013; Evergeti, 2006; Zontini, 2007) have focused on the role of women and mothers, within transnational families, in negotiating family practices and the work of caring for and about the family, including maintaining kinship ties.

The family is widely recognized as being at the core of Italian society (Ginsborg, 1990, 2001), despite recent diversification of its forms (Saraceno, 2004). Close family ties are considered to be the distinguishing feature of Italian migrant communities vis-à-vis other ethnic migrant groups and the dominant, national groups of the receiving countries (Baldassar, 2011). From the Risorgimento[1] to the 1950s, religious and lay discourses have constructed Italian women as self-effacing, suffering yet resilient mothers, who produce children, care for them and teach them the highest moral, religious and patriotic values (Accati, 1998; Boneschi, 1998; D'Amelia, 1997). The resulting maternal archetype, combining power and powerlessness, has implications for mothering. Women have responded to their subordination by becoming agents of oppression and domination of their children, normally socializing daughters to accept gender norms, hence sanctioning their lack of agency, and sons to become excessively devoted to and dependent on them (Bravo, 1997). This psycho-social order has an inbuilt capacity to reproduce itself from generation to generation.

The ideal of the Italian mother as a being exclusively devoted to her family – a bourgeois ideal that already at inception clashed with the reality of peasant and working-class women's lives (Bravo, 1997; Gabaccia, 2003) – still permeates the Italian socio-cultural imagination. Today, despite intervening changes in women's material circumstances and symbolic position, Italian working women must still be perfect mothers

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and housewives. Care of home, children and the elderly is still assumed to be primarily their responsibility, even though, with access to higher education in the 1970s, women have entered the labour market in greater numbers, especially since the 1990s (Falcinelli & Magaraggia, 2013). In Italy, norms in matters of cleanliness, food preparation, appearance and sociability have remained largely unchanged: very high standards are internalized by both sexes and expected of women, whether single or married, employed or not. Middle-class women fulfil these expectations by outsourcing their domestic responsibilities, often employing migrant mothers who have left their children in their homeland. The persistence of traditional gender roles may have contributed to the phenomenon of *mammismo* ("mammism", from *mamma*, "mum"), that lifelong, stifling mother–child attachment, especially between mother and son, which has recently attracted the interest of academics and the press.[2] Using as evidence the correspondence between prominent exiled patriots and soldiers and their forceful, publicly engaged mothers, D'Amelia (2005) traces the mother–son bond back to the Risorgimento and the two World Wars. Loss through exile or death at war appears to be key to Italian mothers' overriding concern for sons (to the detriment of daughters). The consolidation of this concern during the 1950s and 1960s, when a primitive mother, whose quasi-animal instinct protects as well as oppresses and devours the (male) child, was superimposed onto the spiritual mother of Catholicism (D'Amelia, 2005). D'Amelia's study explains not only today's *mammismo*, but also the link between motherhood and national identity.

In instilling and preserving spiritual, moral and patriotic values in their children, mothers contribute to the process of nation building, now understood as taking place outside as much as within national boundaries (Baldassar & Gabaccia, 2011). The Italian migrant family plays a significant role in constructing and maintaining Italian identities, and the mother, as its pillar, is entrusted with reproducing and guarding "Italian" morality, thus promoting a sense of ethnic belonging (Baldassar, 2011; De Tona, 2011; Ricatti, 2011). However, this process is not as straightforward as it seems. The pressure to abide by the myth of the self-sacrificing mother is often accompanied by an expectation to conform to social norms of the destination country which may clash with those of the community (Baldassar & Gabaccia, 2011; De Tona, 2011; Ricatti, 2011). More liberal lifestyles in the host country can be liberating for some migrant women (De Tona, 2004) or may create intergenerational conflict, especially with daughters, when mothers, who are responsible for regulating their daughters' sexuality, impose norms of behaviour that are outdated in the host country and sometimes also in the homeland. Motherhood may be a conflicted experience for recent, emancipated migrants who are expected to act like their mothers in order to respect the community's values. Pressure is compounded when the host country upholds, as in Ireland, more conservative values (De Tona, 2004).

These scenarios demonstrate that, if migrants take their own society's family organization and "idealized family morality" to their new country (McDonald, 2000: 433), these ideals, values and practices are by necessity put to the test when confronted with other cultures. It also becomes evident that Italian migrant mothers are not simply the keepers of an imagined national identity. They also, consciously or unconsciously, question and possibly revise the models imported from the homeland. This is borne out by recent research on Italian communities in the US (McKibben, 2011), Australia (Baldassar, 2011; Miller, 2011), Switzerland (Wessendorf, 2011) and Ireland (De Tona, 2004, 2011), underscoring the shift in Italian migration studies (and generally in migration studies) from a view of migrant mothers solely as passive, disempowered victims to an approach that brings to light agency, resistance and choice (Baldassar & Gabaccia, 2011; De Tona, 2011; Ricatti, 2011).

This article attempts to establish how the Italian ideals of family and motherhood have been translated to New Zealand, home to a less-known Italian diaspora often overshadowed by its giant neighbouring community of Australia. Since the Italians are only a minority in New Zealand, they have received little attention from academics and policy makers.[3] Yet the country has seen an ongoing stream of Italian migrants since the 1870s. In the census of 5 March 2013, 3795 people identified themselves as Italian: of them 1239 were born in Italy and 741 lived in the Wellington region.[4] The Island Bay community in Wellington has been selected for this ethnographic study for its relative compactness. This article, based on fifty interviews with members of this community, consists of three main sections. The next one describes the sample and the methodology. The following one, devoted to the findings, is organized in four subsections focusing on recurrent themes which provide strong evidence of the link between mothering practices and the informants' self-perceptions as Italians and performance of Italianness: food and family, women's work and gender roles, raising sons and daughters and the regulation of daughters, living-at-home children and intergenerational relations. The final section examines these aspects against the ideals, ideologies, practices and policies current in Italy and New Zealand, to assess whether and how the community has departed from the Italian models, the influence of the host country and the impact of these factors on their sense of Italianness. The contribution of this study to an understanding of Italian, and generally, migrant motherhood is in the area of maternal agency and choice. It emerges that Italian women in New Zealand have always practised motherhood in a responsible, balanced, creative and progressive way. The earlier generations were able to compromise with and adapt to the values and practices of the host community in a sensible and practical way, in order to maintain control over their children and preserve the Italian ideals and morality, yet without denying them opportunities (including daughters). The following generations have increasingly selected and adopted practices and ideals of the host country to replace the more persistently conservative Italian ones, while still benefitting from and focusing on the deeper ideals and more valuable aspects of Italian culture. Thus, they demonstrate greater agency and capacity to shape their own lives and well-being than their contemporary counterparts in Italy where legislation, policies and attitudes to work, domestic responsibilities and parenting still prevent them from developing their own ways to be mothers and in some cases even from becoming mothers.

The Italian community of Island Bay

The research presented in this article is part of a wider project on Italian, New Zealand and European identity constructions