



Shifting borders - Exploring the relationship between women's mobility and place belonging

Barbara Iuliano

Federico II University of Naples - Italy

Abstract

The complex relationship between homeland and host-society reveals new forms of belonging and self-representation, which are related to migrant's uncertain conditions of existence and multiple interconnections (Iuliano, 2007). The present work aims to preliminarily explore the dynamics of place attachment and identity redefinition among foreign women in Italy. The research has been carried out combining complementary methods: documentary research, observation, in-depth interviews and narrative accounts. The main part of the fieldwork took place in Naples, Italy - by means of in-depth interviews with women from Latin America, Eastern-Europe, Balkans and Africa. As revealed by content and thematic analysis of the verbatim transcripts, variables such as time of permanence in the site and geo-cultural context of origin, connote in different ways the emerging of a transitional space of belonging and of an 'in-between identity' (Bhabha, 1994).

Keywords : gender - migration - identity - place belonging

Introduction

"What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to [...] focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These 'in-between' spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood - singular or communal - that initiate new signs of identity". H.K. Bhabha

Since the first 90s, Castles and Miller identified the feminisation of international flows as one of the key trends of the new "age of migration". In this context, women migrate increasingly on their own, and on their own initiative. In line with feminist approach, the gendered space of transnational mobility affects the migrant's identity within everyday practices and migration becomes a production of a subjective space of power. Migration and dislocation have been used, in temporal and spatial narratives of modernity, to naturalise the construction of space-time in terms of dichotomous notions of "host-society" versus "homeland" (Moallem, 2000). The ways in which

belonging may involve both attachment and movement, as well as the puncturing and the reshaping of boundaries is one of the approaches that we are going to take into account to develop this work.

From a theoretical perspective, attachment represents a positive connection or bond between a person and a particular place (Giuliani and Feldman, 1993; Williams and Patterson, 1999).

Close to this construct, we find the concept of "Place-identity", which refers to the symbolic importance of a place as a repository for emotions and relationships that give meaning and purpose to life (Williams and Roggenbuck, 1989; Giuliani and Feldman, 1993). Adopting a general and inclusive definition, Proshansky et al. describe place-identity as a "pot-pourri of memories, conceptions, interpretations, ideas and related feelings about specific physical settings as well as types of settings" (1983, p. 60). As a distinctive substructure of the self, they argue, place-identity might function to underwrite personal

identities, render actions or activities intelligible, express tastes and preferences and mediate efforts to change environments. As such, place identity enhances self-esteem (Korpela, 1989) increases feelings of belonging to one's community (Tuan, 1980), and is an important component of communications about environmental values and policies (Cantrill, 1998). Place-identity is not necessarily a direct result of any particular experience with the place (Proshansky et al. 1983), though it generally involves a psychological investment with the place that tends to develop over time (Giuliani and Feldman, 1993). The importance of belonging to the processes of self-definition has been stressed by researchers working in cross-cultural research, confirming Korpela's claim that it is a central feature of place-identity (see e.g. Cuba & Hummon, 1993 ; Tuan, 1980).

On this basis (within the wider context of my PhD research project), I've explored the different dimensions which could influence migrants' rootedness into destination countries.

Aim

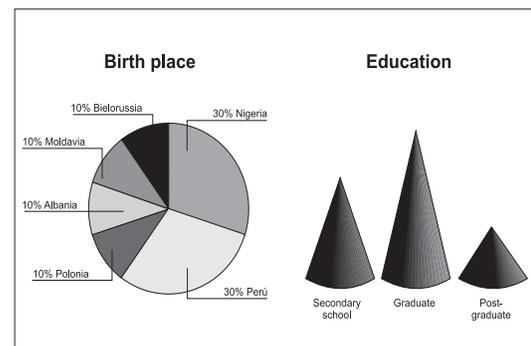
This paper attempts to preliminarily explore the dynamics of place attachment and identity redefinition among foreign skilled women in Italy through a narrative approach.

It pays particular attention to skilled women, who are usually marginalised in migration research, but who are central actors in the ongoing migrations to Mediterranean countries¹.

Participants

¹ See Kofman, E "The invisibility of female skilled migrants and gender relations in studies of skilled migration in Europe" *International Journal of Population Geography* 2000, 6(1)45-59. "The choice of research agendas has played a major part in rendering women invisible. The emphasis has generally been on transnational corporations, which, especially in their higher ranks, remain resolutely male-dominated. The presence of migrants in welfare sectors (i.e. education, health and social services), which are strongly feminised, has been ignored. Feminist research has also tended to obscure the role of skilled migrants in its emphasis on the unskilled. Theoretical and methodological developments in studies of migration have also made few inroads into our understanding of skilled migration".

12 skilled female migrants, between 25 and 40, coming from Latin America, Africa, Eastern Europe, Balkans - engaged in social development projects and linguistic mediation. In order to guarantee that they have had time to build some form of attachment, migrants with more than 2 years residing in the host site have been preferably interviewed. Participants have been recruited through their own institutions (associations, social cooperatives, governmental services). A snowball approach has been used to meet other migrants such as professionals and social entrepreneurs.



Tab.1 – Participants

Approach and methodology

The research has been carried out developing a qualitative approach that combines different as well as complementary methods (triangulation): documentary research, observation, in-depth interviews and narrative accounts of migrants. The fieldwork took place in Naples, Italy.

The data collected through documentary research and interviews have been complemented by an ethnographic study realized by means of observation, that took place in migrants' workplace.

Qualitative data collected through generative questions helped to elicit personal narratives of migration and rootedness from each participant. Data gathered from the interviews have been analyzed using thematic narrative analysis. The interviews have been transcribed and coded, line by line, under the major themes.

A content analysis has been realized extracting 5 key dimensions related to the themes. The information and findings obtained with the above methods has been constantly tested against each other in order to ensure more reliable and valid results.

Narrative accounts

In order to clarify the changing contours of the relationships between gender, mobility and shifting identity, the research employed women's personal narratives. These accounts illuminate the spatial processes of migration as essential for the repositioning of self into networks of family, workplace, local and global relationships.

By examining the production of narratives of the self, both some of the processes involved in taking up different subject positions and the impact on the sense of the self became accessible. Place and autobiography are effortlessly united through language.

A discursive approach, as Danziger (1997) has explained, entails a psychology that shifts individual mental processes from inside the head into 'the interpersonal space of the conversation'.

It thereby reconstitutes place-identity as something that people create together through talk: a social construction that allows them to make sense of their connectivity to place and to guide their actions and projects accordingly. One advantage of this approach is that it recovers the irreducibly social origins of place identification. Not only does it acknowledge the relevance of places to their collective senses of self, but it also highlights the collective practices through which specific place identities are formed, reproduced and modified. Language becomes the force that binds people to places (cf. Tuan, 1991). It is through language that the everyday experiences of self-in-place form and mutate.

In this theoretical framework, in-depth interviews were conducted, through a main 'generative question', related to their job. This approach permits to explore their life-histories in a no compelling way and to gain access to the following areas:

- Personal Dimension
- Social Dimension
- Spatial / Temporal Dimension with specific regard to migration
- Interconnectedness of the Dimensions

Data Analysis

In order to carry out a content and thematic analysis, the set of texts has been explored with the Atlas.ti software, a linguistic and statistical instrument for text analysis.

This software provides different kinds of tools for the analysis of narratives:

- develops hypertext to perform complex model building;
- manages data;
- combines narratives and observations into a hermeneutic unit;
- explicates conceptual constructs from linked relationships, facilitate the development of conceptual frameworks.

Preliminary results

Narrative Themes

The texts analysis has defined three main narrative themes related to migration topic:

a) the future is here

- "I bought a car, I have a good contract I'm going to apply for citizenship. (int. B)

b) the return myth

- "I spend a lot of time thinking in coming back ... (int. A)
- "I hope to come back, meanwhile, I work in Italy (int. F)

c) between two sides

- "I'm always happy to come back home. Sometimes I ask myself: why have I decided to migrate? But when I'm there, in my birth country, after few days, I feel me uncomfortable. My life is here, now (int. C).

The main part of the foregoing extracts might be seen as reflecting a dis-location of identity brought about by a relocation. From this perspective, the sense of loss that they express is not only a loss of place but also, more profoundly, a loss of Self. For as Krupat (1983) insists: "*The concept of place-identity makes explicit the key role that a person's relationship to the environment plays not simply in terms of a context for action or in facilitating certain forms of behaviour, but in becoming 'part of the person', of being incorporated into one's concept of Self*" (p. 343).

A wide literature describes the first two narrative subjects, while the third lacks in a psychological theoretical synthesis. According to Clifford anthropological approach to contemporary culture, we are specifically interested in the emerging of the third narrative theme, which is strictly connected (in the accounts) with the Self: migration and relocation

can generate the perception of an “in between” space of presence (Bhabha, 1994).

“When I’m there, I’d like to come back. And vice versa [...] My heart always lays on the wrong side of the border” (int. M)

Key Dimensions Identified

The content analysis of the verbatim transcripts reveals the emerging of 5 key dimensions that imply at different level the type of place attachment:

- 1) Geo-cultural context of origin;
- 2) Time of permanence;
- 3) Social/familiar network;
- 4) Second generation;
- 5) Gender dimension.

With regard to the Gender Dimension, the most interesting findings are related to the role played by women both into the original and the new context.

In short, we identify a potential range between Gender Emancipation and Regression.

As detailed in tab. 2, an emancipator role played by women in the destination country determines a sense of Self-Efficacy.

“A new life gave me the opportunity to start a lot of positive changes” (int. G)

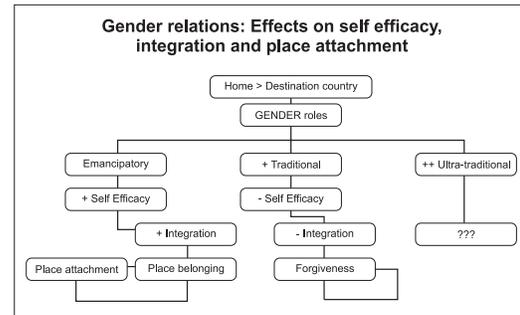
“... After my arrival in Italy, I’ve experienced some troubles with my husband. As a consequence, we have been separated since 2001. I’ve found the courage to revolt at him, because in my culture it is very hard to leave the husband. I gave valour to my clients, finding it in myself. We have done so much, with all the courage of the life” (int. B)

Self-Efficacy is correlated with a better integration.

“I think to grow professionally, not just like mediator, but also like professional trainer. To improve my skills, to learn more. Here, in my new city” (int. D)

“In my country I had a well defined job, because I was mechanical engineer. Completely different from my ongoing work! I came in Italy following my husband” (int. A)

Both integration and Self-efficacy promote the emerging of a place attachment.



Tab. 2

Open answers

According with Per Gustafson (2001), we don’t consider place attachment and mobility as opposite and mutually exclusive phenomena. The preliminary findings from this qualitative study suggest that women may regard place attachment and mobility, and the reflections between them on the Self, in several different ways. This approach tries to highlight a dimension of self-definition often neglected by social psychologists, the dimension of location. It also implies a gendered vision of place attachment.

The restrictions of a situated and ecological approach to research, do not permit to generalize the first outcomes, specifically related to the “in-between identity”.

This concept displaces the researchers’ attention from a static vision of the location of the self (in terms of homeland Vs destination place) to a dynamic interaction between the subject and his/her environment.

In order to develop a productive implication for the practice, we still need to answer to a number of open questions, first of all, related to:

- Differences between female and male in place belonging;
- Cultural variables (e.g. ethnicity, religion);
- Trans-national families and place attachment;
- Belonging and ultra traditional gender roles.

Basic References

Anthias F. 2000, Metaphors of Home: Gendering New Migrations to Southern Europe in Anthias F. and Lazaridis G. eds., Gender and Migration in

- Southern Europe: Women on the Move, pp. 15-47. New York, Berg, Oxford
- Boyd M. and Grieco E. 2003, Women and Migration: Incorporating Gender into International Migration Theory
<http://www.migrationinformation.org/Feature/print.cfm?ID=106>
- Bhabha H.K. 1994, The location of Culture. London-New York, Routledge
- Bonnes M., & Secchiaroli G. 1995, Environmental psychology : A psychosocial introduction. London, Sage
- Bruner J. 1986, Actual minds, possible words. Cambridge, Harvard University Press
- Giuliani M.V. and R. Feldman. 1993. Place attachment in a developmental and cultural context. *Journal of Environmental Psychology* n. 13, pp. 267–274
- Gustafson P. 2001, Roots and Routes: Exploring the Relationship between Place Attachment and Mobility. *Environment and Behavior* 33: 667-686
- Iuliano B. 2006, Abitare i confini in “Borderlanders. Un approccio narrativo a prostituzione migrante e tratta”. PhD dissertation (unpublished), pp 4-7
- Iuliano B. 2007, Il corpo delle altre. Vittime di tratta, sex workers, prostitute migranti in *La Camera Blu – Rivista di Studi di Genere* - n. 2 (pp. 89-96). Napoli, Filema
- Kaplan, C. 1996, Questions of Travel. Postmodern Discourses of Displacements. Durham and London, Duke University Press
- Kofman, E. and Parvati R. 2006, Gender and Global Labour Migrations: Incorporating Skilled Workers. *Antipode*, 38, n. 2, 282-303
- Korpela K. M. 1989, Place-identity as a product of environmental self-regulation. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 9, 241-256.
- Moallem M. 2000, Genealogies of belonging in the Diaspora Space, paper presented at the ENSC
- Nanistova E. 1998. The dimensions of the attachment to birthplace and their verification after the 40 years following forced relocation. *Sociologica* n. 30 pp. 337–394
- Proshansky H. M. 1976, Comment on social and environmental psychology. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 2, 359-363
- Proshansky H., Fabian A. K., & Kaminoff R. 1983, Place-identity : Physical world socialization of the self. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 3, 57-83
- Rose G. 1996, Place and identity : A sense of place. In D. Massey & P. Jess (Eds.), *A place in the world?* (pp. 87-132). Oxford, Oxford University Press
- Sayad, A. 2002 trad. it *La doppia assenza*, Raffaello Cortina Editore, Milano
- Tuan Y.F. 1977, *Space and place: The perspective of experience*. Univ. of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis
- Tuan Y.F. 1980, Rootedness versus sense of place. *Landscape* n. 241, 3–8