

**Food as an “inter-cultural object”. A diversity experience among
immigrants in Italy**
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Abstract: The aim of the contribute is the presentation of a “diversity” experience in a small italian local context, characterised by recent immigration’s flows. In particular, we explore how food – and food habits, recipes, etc. – could become “mean of integration”, improving knowledge, mutual understanding and discovering both differences and similarities among people. In order to overcome prejudices and to stimulate discussion, the study underlines the key-role of popular culture and the importance of realistic opportunities to meet “diversity”.

Keywords: intercultural, diversity, food, migration

Introduction

In the last decades migratory flows toward Italy, a traditional land of emigration, has redefined the daily “diversity” experience. Migrants’ presence is getting more and more part of routine and it is visible in everyday spaces and territories: from the school to the hospital, from the supermarket to the workplace and it reveals the emergence of multiethnic societies where there weren’t. Although Italy is turning into a multicultural society, and natives are living side by side with immigrants, migrants and second (or third) generation immigrants, in big cities as in countryside, there is a shortage of exchange opportunities to improve mutual understanding and inclusion processes. To overcome stereotypes and reduce intergroup bias. Coexistence doesn’t mean interaction, as the studies on the relationship between multicultural and intercultural societies put in evidence, and this passage needs both an active design of policies targeting migrants social integration and the development of realistic integration opportunities and strategies from different actors: institutions, schools, no profit associations, companies, etc.. In fact,

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the achievement of an inclusive “we” perception, instead of many “us” and “them” also in local communities, needs a mutual knowledge and the discovering of intergroup attitudes and behaviors (Gaertner, Dovidio, Bachman 1996). This identification process in a “thick society” (Sorrentino 2008) is getting more and more intricate and it seems to be necessary a daily attitude to negotiate self and alter identities.

Multicultural societies don’t only mean a co-presence in the same social spaces or a sporadic “contact” with “diversity”: in order to reduce prejudices and overcome distrust between natives and no native people, it is important to place certain contact situations and take care to create cooperative experiences among different social groups and memberships (Allport 1954; Amir 1969).

The aim of this paper is to present an “action-research” project on intercultural integration, revolving around two different key-issues: 1) food social meanings and the importance of food culture in Self and Othering building processes; 2) revisiting a “contact hypothesis”, especially in youth contexts, and promote more positive intercultural practices to improve intergroup relations. In fact, how do people understand one another when they do not share a common cultural experience?

These two issues are here referred to one specific experience of interculturality, led by a no profit youth organization and some Italian local institutions, in order to stimulate local initiatives and social youth participation.

Food as a “cultural object”

Despite the fundamental role played by food and eating in every kind of societies, food habits are quite a recent sociological interest. As Sassatelli noted, sociologists didn’t miss the point that food and eating are important in social identities building processes, but they didn’t turn food into a proper object of research itself (Sassatelli, 2004a). Moreover, “food topic” should be expected to play a prominent role also in cultural and intercultural processes: through the analysis of its habits and consumption practices, it is possible to understand a series of meanings associated with the production of identities, the establishment and maintenance of social relationships, as the cultural changes in a society. When food is examined in a multicultural context, it is often seen through the “ethnicity” lens, which reveal traditions and customs: something to defense or to

negotiate with Others or against someone and subjected to globalization. In the last decade, the spread of food and cuisines across the world is considered a way to clarify economic and cultural processes of globalization (Locher 2003; Phillips 2006). Nowadays there is a wide scientific production about the food cultural dimension and its cultural meanings: every act of food consumption represents a cultural act. Even the most trivial consumption events, such as those related to eating, bring along a structure of meanings and practices through which identities and social relationships are shaped, maintained and negotiated. So the act of eating is usually used to establish an identity or define a certain group or person. Much more than a feeding substance, food represents manners, styles, origins involved in eating something, so a symbolic mechanism for identity formation and affirmation. The daily appropriation and consumption of foods is an important symbolic mechanism for identity formation. Personal identities, otherwise, could be narrated by food consumption: ingredients are dynamic, living products that create social bonds as they simultaneously mark off and maintains cultural differences.

According with Wendy Griswold's studies on culture, we argue that food is a "cultural object": a socially, meaningful expression, visible and tangible and, most of all, food "tells" a story. (Griswold 2008). Arranging these key-words in Griswold's shape of a diamond, food is a cultural object which reflects a part of creator's personal identity and history. In order to understand the cultural object, attention needs to be given to its creators, receivers, the social context and to the connections among those elements. Griswold explains: "...one may set the cultural object – shared meaning embodied in form – at any level, from Piemonte cuisine in general to some specific food in particular, or one might identify the cultural object as an individual recipe, a book of recipes, a memoir, a travel guide, a city promotion, a restaurant, a television cooking program, and so forth ... We could regard the creators of the cuisine as chefs, housewives, travel writers, editors, farmers, people in the food business; the receivers would be cooks, diners, family members, readers, tv viewers or travelers." (Griswold 2008: 155)

Kondito: the diversity experience

The case study is a project entitled "Kondito" and it was created to overcome negative stereotypes among young people, improving knowledge and mutual understanding in a

specific social context. As a matter of fact, “Kondito” takes place in Mugello, a countryside 40 km far from Florence in the center of Italy (but the same lab was previously created in Puglia, in the south of Italy), in order to develop intercultural communication around food consumption and “cooking style”. It was designed by a no profit association, “Kontatto”, which has long been involved in youth issues and policies; the project is one young volunteers’ brainchild, because interested in “diversity” issues, and they asked to learn more about immigrant presence in society, especially increased since 2008.

“Kondito” – that in Italian language means “seasoned”, “flavored” – consists in monthly workshop (from January 2014 to March 2015) planned by the project leader, Monika Zoulova², and 8 young volunteers, from sixteen to thirty years old, recently coming from an international volunteering experience – sponsored by a EU Program - in Turkey and Greece. In Kondito young people are not the major target of different activities: they are directly involved in the activities planning and implementation: so it is not a project built “for”, but a project built and managed “with” and “by” them. Another Kondito key-person is the linguistic and intercultural mediator, Hamdan Al-zeqri³ who facilitates communication among participants and he gives some important advice to young volunteers, as concerns the immigrant guests management: he usually prepare the monthly meeting program with volunteers and highlights what in the first contact a single nationality and culture pays attention to.

Each workshop starts with a sort of a “migrant’s call” – during one or two weeks before the meeting – using a diversified “communication mix” (i.e. leaflets, web site, Facebook, words of mouth, etc.) and visiting those places all around the countryside and in Florence, where usually immigrants meet (i.e. city squares, public gardens, bar, aggregation’s centers, train station, etc.). This moment is a topic one, because young volunteers ask themselves where strangers and immigrants live, where “diversity” is, how to contact migrants and establish a relation. So, starting from those strangers and migrant families who live in the same local communities, with whom they previously had a

² Special thanks to Monika Zoulova, EU project manager and Kondito team leader, who let me participate to meetings and give us informations about the entire project. She is 35 years old, Czech, married an italian man and mother. Her family take part to the workshops and to the organization.

³ Hamdan Al-zeqri is a professional mediator and comes from Ethiopia.

“contact” – i.e. schoolmates, neighbors, shopkeepers - after 2-3 meetings young volunteers improve their “call methods”, becoming more enterprising and inviting unknown people. The first call, written on the invitation cards too, give a clear message: “come to dinner, enjoy with us and bring an ingredient with you, that reflects your culture and identity”. It could be an ingredient connected to the past, to the country of origin, a childhood memory, but also a food met during the migratory experience or related to the new environment of settlement. The meeting point often changes (social clubs, no profit associations’ houses in the countryside, etc.), but it is important that there is an available, well-furnished and equipped kitchen. Each meeting is attended by 10 people at least (to 25-30 at most) and in Kondito experience they came from England, Germany, Romania, Ukraine, France, Greece, Albania, Morocco, Tunisia, Turkey, Senegal, Kenya, Chile, Argentine, Egypt. The meeting has a main “menu”, a broadly program so composed:

- I. Welcome activities: all participants – immigrants, organizers and volunteers, play together with an “icebreaker game”, to facilitate the process of incoming. Those activities are often related to the different mother tongues, ethnic traditions such as folksongs and dances, doggerels and so on.
- II. Presentations: each participant introduces himself through the ingredient, a meal or food somehow connected with his personal story. He or she tells how that food symbolizes his or her own life experience, his/her cultural background or migratory experience. The atmosphere often changes, also in the same meeting event: from a funny story to a sad one, from a deep and self-conscious storyteller to a shy and introverted one and all these different aspects together contribute to define the “meeting frame” and clime.
- III. Cooking time: participants are divided into teams and each team creates a recipe, using their own ingredients. They cook together and mixed the ingredient to create a new – and maybe never experimented before! – meal. This phase has many symbolic meanings: participants – guests and volunteers together – interact and share something of them one to each other. They explain to the other members how that ingredient is usually prepared in their own country of origin; everyone gives his contribute, but at the same time everyone has to be open to redefine the ingredient use and preparation because it will be mixed with other

ingredients. Mixing ingredients together the participants experiment something new: a new “food” is coming out and all of them contribute to an innovative – and often unusual - recipe. Further of this, kitchen is lived as a “sociable space”, where actors share opinions, ideas and joke.

- IV. Let’s have dinner: after the preparation, all participants have dinner together. During the convivial meal the teams explain dishes and tell their cooking experience. This is a very spontaneous meeting moment, during which a lot of ethnic attitudes about cooking or having dinner usually emerge. As a matter of fact, dinners usually last long and end late in the night.
- V. To be continue...: after each meeting, participant often ask to keep in touch and repeat the experience. It is possible to take part twice, but then the no profit Association proposes two alternative paths: let each participant decide to share personal addresses, phone numbers, etc. and cultivate the relationships privately or become an organization’s partner. The participants could be part of organization team in the next workshops and become an active volunteer. This transformation aims firstly to incorporate the immigrants in the project but also create a lasting relationship and plan together many other intercultural actions and projects.

From the researchers’ active participation to the workshop and the collection of the identity narrations during the meetings, we collected data and thanks to a qualitative analysis we can here identify some research outcomes that are the recurrent meanings and experience’s evaluation, just below detailed.

Food meanings and self representations

Food is not the priority in Kondito project. It represents an “escamotage”, a pretext to discuss about ethnicity, migration experiences and self identities. The researchers’ attention, in particular, is paid to subjective life trajectories and to the different subjectivity involved – young, Italians, migrants, strangers, professionals, etc. - and we can evince some peculiar meanings given to the ingredients during the meetings. They represent possible self-narration paths and a diverse, but common field where meet other people. There is a deep difference between what a food represents in a singular culture or

Country – rice, sugar, potatoes, coffee, tomatoes, beans, salt, eggs, etc. – and what it means for each participant, what is its role in his/her life experience, as he/she tells during the self presentation. In this case study food, as a cultural object, reflects a part of creator's personal identity, but also a connection with different "social worlds": the micro social context and environment where the creator lives and the context from which he comes or from which he has gone through. From the collection of meanings, we can evince that food usually deals with:

- Migrants' traditions and rituals: food reveals familiar habits and marks religious events, such as Christmas, Easter, Thanksgiving Day, etc. Narrators speak about their domestic tradition and in which extraordinary consumption occasions they prepare those meals. Someone tells about celebrations, like anniversaries, weddings, carnival, etc.; some other how he misses that food since he lives abroad.
- Nostalgic memories: food is a linkage with the past. When we taste something we can remember a specific situations, an event connected with the childhood or the youth, a special moment in which we tasted it before: the smell and the taste wake past memories that narrator, at the present, works out again and negotiates with new conditions and feelings. The self narration is here often described as "something lost", definitively and the narrator highlights the pleasure assured by that food years before. Sharing an ingredient, so important in one's biography, with other people – mostly unknown – has a symbolic and deep meaning that suggests a great availability and openness to others (Clarke 2008).
- Nutritional habits: food represents people's guarantee of survival and it is responsible for fulfilling the most basic needs of the human being. During the workshops we noticed two different attitudes: narrators explain one ingredient's role in their consumer behaviors and societies, much more connected with particular social contexts and problems, such as poverty, dearth, lack of food, but this attitude was uncommon, because even coming from poor countries migrants prefers in Kondito workshops amusing stories, instead of sad and tragic ones. In our opinion, this is connected to a specific way and need to present the self: as Goffman argues, any actor performs a role; performances are not only realized but also idealized, shown in the best possible light to conform to cultural and societal

norms. Where this is so, cultural identities are often idealizations that are set in opposition to stigmatized identities (Goffman, 1968). Secondly, narrators told about nutritional aspects in association with specific diets, intolerances, diseases or fitness needs and food is seen as something make feel better – i.e. oranges, chocolate, tea, etc.

- Laughable situations in the host Country: food is a medium to establish relationships, both of equality and diversity. When different social worlds get in touch, funny situations could arise. “I’ll never forget that time...”: so begins the story and narrators create an amusing atmosphere, giving some advices about his own point of view on the host community.
- The “right” recipe: sometimes food is not the main issue, while its preparation. Narrator compares different recipes and suggests the “right” one, starting from his personal experience. For example, how “couscous” should be prepared or seasoned is often a debate issue among North Africans, as coffee among Italian, American or Turkish people. The “right” recipe could be also a controversial issue between different generations and in this case, narrator makes a comparison between herself and her mother, grandmother or mother-in-law. In any case, narrators seem to be proud of their roots and interested in saving their family’s recipes.

Telling the ingredients’ stories, participants represent themselves, even if they describe real or fictive events. In any case they are trying to search a personal way to be (and to feel) part of the group, to take part to the activity, sketching a believable story.

In this sense, food and feed habits are “inter-cultural objects”, because they “objectify” the self representation: they are the metaphoric lens through which creators could construct and negotiate the “sameness” and the “otherness” in a multicultural context. The uses of the ingredients put in the culture of origin or in the past is reviewed and its new functions in the culture of reception are identified. Food acts as a bridge back into the narrator’s past and toward the present.

Project’s findings

At the project’s end, researchers collected volunteers points of view and opinions about this intercultural experience; a sort of a final evaluation, underlining the most

important aspects they noticed, which contribute a “diversity” personal definition. Generally, we can say that Kondito has represented an opportunity for deepening migrants presence in local communities and an appropriate occasion to broaden young volunteers’ horizons. In particular, project leader and volunteers together, few months later the project’s end, reflected on what could be the project’s main outcomes. Using their own words and expressions, we have them shortly here summarized:

“We improved a new approach to diversity”: during the meetings each participants, Italian volunteers too, shared their own diversity: age, gender, qualifications, attitudes, work conditions, family situations, not only nationality or ethnicity. There were many differences present at each workshop and ethnic origins or nationality was one of many. Young people admitted that when some meeting’s problems emerged, they were much more related to personal attitudes – for example, people too much inclined to talk, contentious or lazy people, etc. - than ethnic dimension. Despite this hopeful result, volunteer perceived also that Kondito is a project, with predetermined goals and a temporary duration, and they considered social integration and inclusion something different and a far goal to achieve.

“How many invisible prejudices we have!”: at the beginning, during the project plan meetings, young people defined themselves much more open minded then they really were at the end and they realize that they have not an absolute openness to others. During the interactions with migrants, cooking or eating together with them, they noticed how many prejudices they had, related to many attitudes, lifestyles, way of dressing and so on. At the end of the workshops, after living closer with diversity, volunteers looked at themselves in a different manner: everyone appeared a little more “diverse”, but also a little more “like” others. In the intercultural experiences, it is important to bring out diversities so much as possible and not only those related to ethnicity, improving an open attitude to include them. So the traditional ethnic markers become part of a wide asset of personal peculiarities, on which narrators redefine the self and other perception, as well as they represent an active part of the “foreignness” definition.

“*Everyone likes playing!*”: differently from other intercultural projects, Kondito reveals the “amusing side of integration”. In any meeting, there were some rules to respect, but each participant became a player. They socialize on the same playground, discussing, laughing and joking together. Especially in youth contexts, it seems necessary furthering innovative approaches to intercultural policies and we assume that in Italian local contexts, no profit organizations could have a more active role to design them.

In conclusion, in the paper we have presented one intercultural experiment that reveal the utility of a “contact hypothesis” strategy, as a framework for reducing intergroup bias. What emerged at the end is that young volunteers reach gradually more favorable impressions of “outgroup” members. But, as they declared, intercultural society is something else and it requires a daily personal and social work. Everyday multiculturalism (Wise and Velayutham 2009) is a situated approach to understanding the everyday dimensions of multiculturalism as it is lived. As opposed to policy-oriented, multiculturalism focused on group based rights, service provision and legislation, the everyday multiculturalism perspective explores how cultural diversity is experienced and negotiated on the ground in everyday situations such as neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces, and how social relations and social actors’ identities are shaped and reshaped in the process.

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