Post-national approaches to Cultural Identity: Italian Academics in London's HE

This paper draws on recent studies in migration contexts fostering post-national views about identity issues (Zappettini, 2019; Cacciatore & Pepe, 2018) to expand investigations on the workplace as an area for intercultural interactions (Angouri & Marra, 2011). The professional setting analysed is the academic workplace in London's Higher Education (HE) with particular attention given to the experience of academic professionals of Italian background in relation to their cultural identities (Zhu Hua, 2019; Hall, 1990). Cultural Identities are considered as a combination of different layers (profession, religion, ethnicity, gender, age, nationality) constantly engaged in a never-ending process of Identity production, positionings and performances. According to such interpretations, Cultural identities change all the time and are enacted under particular circumstances because they reflect ideologies and personal positionings with regards to cultural, political and historical discourses. Within such a paradigm, it is essential to elucidate the word 'Culture.' Here culture is understood as 'small culture', an interpretative orientation that focuses on any small emergent groupings where individuals develop cohesive behaviours independently from their cultural backgrounds (Holliday, 1999: p.241). Such a paradigm appears relevant to explore identity issues in multicultural academic environments in super-diverse London.

Most research on the Italian diaspora to English-speaking countries tends to identify such a group as a homogenous minority with a solid ethnic identity and static linguistic repertoires (Cervi, 1991; Haller, 1987; De Fina, 2007). This paper, on the other hand, attempts to deconstruct such an assumption by relying on qualitative data showing how nationhood and ethnicity are restrictive labels to grasp the experience of recent professional migrants. Thus, European Identity or European-ness seem more appropriate categories to scrutinise the linguistic practices of mobile individuals in super-diverse environments (Zappettini, 2019; Vertovec, 2006; Comanaru, 2014; Kohli, 2000). Comanaru defines European Identity as a hybrid, collective form of identity, which is highly compatible with nationhood and is enhanced by multilingualism. It is claimed, therefore, that European Identity is a truly 'transnational Identity.' Transnational Identities are those identities that are constructed in mobility contexts, where individuals experience a high level of deterritorialisation of linguistic practices. Such dislocation leads to the use of translanguaged practices and the creation of new ideologies (Li Wei & Zhu Hua, 2013; De Fina & Perrino, 2013). Another scholar who highlights the transnational quality of European-ness is Zappettini. He provides a 'thin' understanding of European Identity that deconstructs the centrality of nationhood and defines it in post-national and interactional terms. These views are in line with recent scholarship on identity studies where hybridity and fluidity are the core of the research (Serra, 2017; Fellin, 2014).

The methodology relies on narrative data elicited through unstructured interviews, with six participants including officers, postdoctoral researchers and PhD students and collected during a master dissertation project as a scoping excercise. Further interactional data will be obtained for a doctoral project by focusing on small talk interactions among a group of academic professional who interact during lunch breaks and engage in apparently futile conversations. The research questions revolve around how stereotypes and disciplinary conventions interfere

with professional communication in a migratory environment. Specifically, the aim is to frame cultural identity attitudes, map out strategies of language use and communication styles by connecting fine-grain linguistic data with the macro-social environment. The analysis will be carried out through Interactional Sociolinguistics (Gumperz, 2003), with Linguistic Ethnography as the overarching framework (Creese, 2010). The findings reported here are based on the initial scoping project.

The findings indicate that the participants embrace cosmopolitan stances (Hawkins, 2018) about identity that transcend traditionally essentialised views of nationhood and ethnicities. In fact, they show attachments to an all-inclusive, shared 'European-ness' by denationalising stereotypes and emphasising their multilingual repertoires. This emerges from the labelling of any 'local' practice as restrictive in contrast to positive elements, such as language mixing, transnational bondings and post-national views about cultural identity. Further doctoral investigations are currently being carried out to understand better their experience as academic migrants.

Such preliminary findings are particularly timely given the heightened rhetoric around European identity in the UK connected to recent social phenomena, such as Brexit and Euroscepticism. With further research, this study may have potential lessons for diversity training in super-diverse work teams where traditionally essentialist approaches are to be overcome.

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