

# My Parents Never Spent Time With Me! Migrants' Parents in Italy and Hegemonic Ideals of Competent Parenting

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## Abstract

Mothers who migrated from Morocco and Ecuador to northeast Italy are the subject for this article, which explores the way in which they observe Italian parenting and tend to negatively evaluate the care they received at home. They consider their settlement in Italy as an opportunity to acquire a “modern” style of parenting. They also access websites and books to seek advice on how to parent, mixing home-country and settlement-country sources of information. They do not perceive any contradiction between these different sources of information, which are considered “science,” and therefore as culture free. The article shows how parenting advice is more than just scientific or “cultural”: It is imbued with hegemonic political discourses. The appropriation of the hegemonic parenting discourses is, indeed, far from deterministic, being riddled with resistances and ambiguities. Through the dynamic entanglements of normative constraints and new resources offered by multiple parenting models, mothers contribute to the renegotiation of the terms of local, transnational, and global citizenship.

## Keywords

parenting, motherhood, childrearing, citizenship, media, hegemony

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## Introduction

This article explores how Moroccan and Ecuadorian immigrant parents in Italy build their parenting by observing Italians and accessing various information through media such as books, radio, television, and the Internet. The article analyzes how this matters in terms of migrants' parenting practices, discourses, and entitlement to citizenship. Given the precarious social positionality of most migrants in host countries, this case provides a good exemplar of how power matters in parenting. Hegemonic notions of parenting—accessed through media and the observation of Italian parents' behavior—enable us, as social scientists, to get inside the most intimate spheres of domesticity here. Migrant parents, however, also renegotiate hegemonic ideals of parenting and, in so doing, affirm their identity and citizenship. This is not a simple negotiation between host and home countries' knowledge and practices; rather, it entails a dynamic entanglement of local, transnational, and global dimensions.

“Competent parenting” in this article refers to an array of variously assorted parenting styles which, since the 1950s, have become normative in the global north, thanks to the growing literature of expert advice on how to properly take care of children (for an analysis, see Ehrenreich & English, 1979, Hardyment, 1983, Hays, 1996). In more recent years, the ideal of “intensive parenting” (Hays, 1996) has variously merged with other ideal-type parenting approaches, such as “attachment theory” (Bowlby, 1953), “tiger mothers” (Chua, 2011), and “helicopter parents.” All of these are intensive practices of parenting that exert a high degree of control on children, require expertise from the parents, and involve significant time–energy expenditure. I use the expression “competent parenting,” instead of the more commonly used “intensive parenting,” because I want to emphasize its normativity. Parenting is, indeed, a special site for hegemony to work: Gramsci has clearly illustrated that the degree to which power affects on people is linked to how much it enters unnoticed into routine and personal practices, thus becoming “second nature” (Pizza, 2012). Hegemonic knowledge and discourses break the division between public and private: hegemonic power is power that makes itself secular and colonizes the private spheres of life. It “sticks” to daily life, being thus more efficacious and invisible (Rose, 1999).

Family and parenting, therefore, have become important sites of negotiation in current democracies between the role of the individual and that of the state (Faircloth, Hoffman, & Layne, 2013; Gillies, 2005; Lee, 2006; Lee, Macvarish, & Bristow, 2010). Parenting has been analyzed as substantially different from the idea of childrearing (Faircloth & Lee, 2010), because the former implies a set of new meanings, political implications, responsibility, and accountability (Reece, 2006).

This article shows that migrant parents in the study observe with admiration—and get to know through media, including books, radio, websites, TV programs—parenting practices that appear somehow new to them. Much of the information consulted blends together local, transnational, and global dimensions and displaces cultural and power influences by linking them under the umbrella of “science.” This somehow contrasts with a desire to pass on values to their children, which are considered important in their culture of origin, but which are poorly accounted for in Italy and in ideals of competent parenting. They therefore assume a critical stance toward it by affirming their ethnic belonging. In so doing, they renegotiate the terms of citizenship, both locally, transnationally, and globally.

## **Method and Setting**

This article derives from a full-time research project (May 2010 to April 2013) conducted with Moroccan and Ecuadorian families living in Trentino, an Alpine region in northeast Italy. The study, which focuses on two—and quite different—groups, by comparing Moroccan and Ecuadorian parents, has been intentional because it forced me to think about parenting and migration beyond a narrow focus on ethnicity. This approach is particularly needed in a context of hyper (Noble, 2009) or superdiversity (Vertovec, 2007), where ethnic markers may be less important than other social differentiations. Nevertheless, to be a migrant still plays a role in determining processes of subjectification (Ong, 1999). The choice to compare two groups may, however, reduce some rigor regarding the applicability of some of the conclusions across both groups, which sometimes may fit neatly and other times more loosely, even if a general path is always present in both groups.

Parents in my study migrated to Trentino, a region that counts around 48,000 migrants, amounting to 9.2% of the provincial population (Ambrosini, Boccagni, & Piovesan, 2011). They lived in small villages (from 800 to about 17,000 inhabitants) settled along Val Rendena and the basin of Garda Lake (an area about 70 km long). Despite the substantial geographical isolation of Trentino, it is a destination for migrants because it has a history of significant political and economic autonomy, quite high living standards, and employment opportunities. I interviewed 18 Ecuadorian families and 21 Moroccan families who had migrated to Trentino. Selection of the families was based on one of the parents’ country of birth (Ecuador or Morocco) and their having at least one child aged 6 years or younger. Participating parents were aged between 20 and 46 years, with a mean age of 26 years.

A series of strategies were employed to ensure diversity in the recruitment of families, including the promotion of the study at local family health and

social services, local multicultural associations, and through my personal networks from living in Val Rendena myself. Initial participant contact was complemented by snowball recruitment as primary research participants promoted the study through their own family and social networks.

Initial contact with families typically commenced with mothers, as they typically saw themselves as better able to discuss family issues. Moreover, it was more difficult to involve the fathers because of their paid work commitments. Once these contacts had been established, and the participant observations had commenced, opportunities arose to interview fathers. Interviews were conducted in Italian, French, and Spanish, as interviewees preferred. A full participant information and consent protocol was administered prior to the commencement of all research activities.

Early contact with migrant women created opportunities for more extensive participant observation. Accompanied by my own preschool daughter, I often met migrant mothers and their children at local playgrounds or in their houses. Following these initial encounters, I was invited to attend weekend community gatherings and to various parties and community celebrations. I also attended public meetings organized by a multicultural association and did volunteer work as an Italian teacher for an association offering Italian language classes to newly arrived migrants. Interviews and field notes were analyzed thematically, with analytic categories emerging to inform the development of further coding variables. Citations reported from data below were all translated from Italian/Spanish/French to English, and translation may be at times inaccurate: mothers spoke about giving a good/bad *educazione* (Italian), *educación* (Spanish), *éducation* (French). In this article, these expressions have been translated to mean “good education.” In English language, though, “education” mainly tends to be interpreted as applying only to the institutional sphere of school. In Italian, French, and Spanish, instead, this term is more comprehensive: it refers to how well-educated a child is and can refer to the child’s manners. Educating can refer not only to the parental job of disciplining the child, but to the process of shaping the child’s overall behavior and disposition.

A last note about my own positioning not only as a researcher, but also a mother, which informs this analysis: I started writing this article as a result of my and my partner’s frustration at being parents. More than once we found ourselves staring tired and hopeless at TV programs, such as SOS Tata, an Italian TV popular reality show on how to educate children. I have, as many other parents, desperately searched books and websites about how to make my child to cry less, to sleep more, or to be less aggressive. This has provoked mixed feelings in myself: relief as mother at discovering new “tricks” to tame my child, but also the recognition as researcher of the intrusiveness

and normative tone of such advice. Parenting, thus, became for me a template for thinking through issues of hegemony, belonging, and citizenship.

### **“Learning to Live” by Observing Italian Parenting**

One main way for mothers in this study to interact with hegemonic ideals of parenting was through the observations of the parenting work of Italian parents and carers. Participants observed Italian parents and compared them with their style of parenting or the way they have been educated. Victoria, 33 years, from Ecuador and with one child aged 2 years, compared the rigid discipline she received in Ecuador with the more affectionate attitude of Italian parents:

I would like to change this: I would like to be an affectionate mother because my mother was not affectionate when I was small. She was very hard. We had everything but it was not enough . . . she could have said “come here, I hug you, I kiss you.” In Italy, mothers are more emotional, they are *chiocce* [*they have a protective and caring attitude*], and I like this.

Diana, 23 years, in Italy for 6 years and with two children (one left in Ecuador) confirmed this opinion by giving a possible rational explanation to this difference: “Here children are more taken care of, and better. In South America, instead, there are many children and every single child has less care.”

The importance of providing children with the feeling of being loved is a recurrent theme in both Ecuadorian and Moroccan mothers’ accounts. Probably many mothers around the world would subscribe to this idea, but what makes this statement special among the women I met is the meaning they give to love. Love, indeed, was not missing in their own history as a child. Carla, for example, grew up in Ecuador with her grandparents and recalled,

My grandpa was a peasant. It was fun because I was always with animals, with cows, beasts, we had bananas and cacao plantations [*pause, she is recalling*]. We were living very well when I was little, we did not miss anything. [. . .] Grandma had a little food shop and I was always playing with adults, I was pretending to . . . almost all grandchildren have been raised by grandma. Grandpa was sweet: when he returned home in the evening, he was always hugging us. We had hammocks, because it is warm there, and we went to sleep on his breast.

Rosa, 24 years, with two children and who had been in Italy since 2008, criticized Italian parents because they devote little time to their children, compared with parents in Ecuador:

What I do not like of Italian parents is that they spend little time with children, they work too much. They park their children in the kindergarten all day. In Ecuador, it is different. Most people do not work and the school . . . well, there is school, but, there, it has not such a strict time schedule as here. Therefore, you have plenty of time to stay with your mother, let's say: *you are always with your mother*.

Much later on in the interview, however, Rosa said that spending time with the child is not enough for giving love and creating emotional attachment:

I do not want to do as my mother did: she was always busy with cleaning the kitchen, gardening, doing stuff in the house. *She never spent time with us*, she never talked to us, telling us how much she loved us and so on.

To my ears, this last statement contradicted Rosa's earlier affirmation of the fact that in Ecuador she was "always" with her mother. To Rosa, however, there was no contradiction: in the latter statement, she indeed referred to "quality time" (even if she was not using this label). "Quality time" is one of the most popular inventions that come with contemporary notions of parenting. Quality time is time that is set aside for paying full and undivided attention to the person; that time has to be special in some way. Quality time appeared to Rosa as the only means through which love and care can be expressed. This became apparent to me as Rosa put lots of effort into explaining how it was important to invest energies into building a strong emotive bond with children, through listening to their needs and calmly explaining to them what is right and what is wrong, as she observed Italian parents do: "Here people are more reasonable, they explain things to children. In Ecuador if you do not obey, they just beat you. Either you obey or you are smashed." Rosa formed her ideas about the right way to express love by observing Italian parents. This is not simply spending time with children, but it is also to take care of your child as a rational individual, taking time to explain things. Lubna, 30 years, from Morocco, in Italy for 7 years and pregnant and with two children, said,

Yes, they [*Italian parents*] have patience, they have rules, I like it very much. Once at the playground, I have seen a mother who was speaking with a newborn. Initially I thought she was crazy, but then, reading books and watching television, I understood that it was right. [...] I have started to learn many things that I did not know before: how to deal with a child, why he cries, that even a 6 months-old child knows how to speak using whining. I have started to understand that even if the child is little, his brain works.

Baby talk revealed to her that even newborn can be rational agents, and taking care of this feature is a sign of love. Moreover, what Lubna meant with “rules” was not related to giving rules *to children*, but rules *to parents*. She appreciated the existence, in Italy, of an explicit discourse about how to take of children and about parenting. Her esteem of Italian parenting extended to other issues, such as time management and diet:

Also rules, timing, are important. At midday, I still have to cook. They [*Italian parents*] do not behave this way: they wake up early, go to shopping, go back home and take care of everything. They use their time properly and this is good for children, it is a good example. [ . . . ] Also food; I love Italian dishes. Our dishes have to cook for 2 to 2 hr and half. Italian dishes are lighter. We have diverse food all together, a lot of fat. When I was at the hospital, I decided that I have to cook as they do, lighter. Our food, sometimes we have to do it, it is good but . . . .[*pause*]. Many things preached by the religion [*Islam*] are not accomplished at home [*Morocco*]. Instead, here, they are accomplished: Italians behave well, even if they do not know Islam.

Italian parenting was perceived by Lubna as virtuous, hence morally healthy. This drove her to the captivating conclusion that some Italian parents are potentially better Muslims than some real Muslims. Similarly, Nadia, a nice blond woman in her 40s from Morocco, who had two children and had been in Italy for 10 years, emphasized her appreciation for rules for parents:

To have rules, I am learning from them [*Italians*]. Italians and Europeans are better than us, we do not have these rules. If you go to the playground, you can see how Italian children behave well. Instead, you can see that foreign children behave badly, because they imitate those of their country, who are savages. In Morocco it is not like in Italy [ . . . where] what the pediatrician says is repeated by the mum, by the father, by the grandfather, by the grandmother, by the aunt, all follow the same rules. Instead, for us, anyone says what they like, and this is not correct, I do not like it. My children are like Italians and I do not want them to play with foreigners because I am afraid these will give them a kick, a scratch, bad words and mothers stay silent. [ . . . ] I taught them Italian rules; I am very happy of this, because they are correct.

Nadia quotation strongly expresses the idealization of Italian parenting and behavior and the internalization of negative self-image as Moroccan, which she takes pains to distance herself from. Rules, according to her, are firstly formulated by an expert—the pediatrician—and then faithfully reproduced by parents and relatives. Rules, moreover, appear to not only produce good parents, but also good children (civilized *vs* “savage.”). Despite Nadia being a quite extreme example of admiration of Italian parenting and

socialization, her case expresses well a pattern that is present, in various degrees, in mothers participating in my study.

As for Lubna, other mothers extended rules for parenting to rules for good living. Maria, 44 years, who arrived 9 years earlier from Ecuador and mother of two children, said,

Here there are also playgrounds: this is a good thing. There [*in Ecuador*], there are some playgrounds but they are unkempt. People do not take care of them, they destroy them, they even steal the flowers. They do not take care of these things; this [*to take care of things*] is something good that we are learning living here. Children in Italy do not touch flowers: this is a positive thing. We have to *inculcate* these things to our children. For example, if you eat something you do not have to throw the paper away. *Here we have learned to live.*

Again, rules concerning parenting and living overlap. Maria's use of the term *inculcate* is particularly interesting, signaling the social pressure she experienced and internalized in "adapting" to mainstream values and behavior. The migratory experience is a stimulus for parents to become "competent parents," observing Italians. In this way, the mothers in my study felt they had to become a better person and a better parent.

## Searching Advice on How to Become a Good Mum

The observation of a different way of relating to children and the existence of rules and explicit discourses about parenting, together with the condition of being parents "in transition" between two cultural contexts and following a migratory path, made mothers eager and in need to know more about what counts as proper parenting. Therefore, they accessed a number of media to gather information.

In some cases, their story of migration may be at odds with mothering. For example, Lubna had many ambitions when living in Morocco and so moved to Italy to work. However, soon after arriving in Italy, she married a Moroccan man she had met in Italy and become pregnant:

With my first child, I found myself to be a mum. The child has arrived with no planning. I still felt as a girl, with friends, here in Italy for work: one of those young Moroccans who dreamed to go to Europe to work, to have a house, to have more . . . instead I found myself to be a mum, responsible for a child. To take care of children is not an easy task. I am a nervous person, I do not know how to deal with children. Fortunately my husband is great: he helps me, he takes care of the child. With his help, I have slowly learned too.



Contrary to some views, popular in Italy and biased by the fascination with migrant mothers as exotic and therefore “archetypal mothers,”<sup>1</sup> Lubna expressed her distress about being a mother. She slowly realized that being a mother entails learning many new skills. Initially she lacked patience in dealing with her children; with the help of books and TV programs, she changed this attitude:

When they are little, we do not think about those things [education], but when they start to speak you have to think of their education because the child imitates the mother and the father, especially here in Italy because there is only mum and dad, there is no grandpa, grandma, aunt . . . .If you are nervous, they become like you. They immediately imitate what you say. Before I did not read books, I only watched Arabic telenovelas or, sometimes, the news. Then, I started to watch television to understand how to take care of my children. I watch *Shariqa* channel, a program entitled the “Family’s encyclopedia.”

Lubna felt she and her husband bore the sole responsibility for their children’s education, lacking the social support granted in Morocco. This compelled her to switch her passion for telenovelas to Arabic programs that instruct parents. Moreover, she started to read books, especially one given by a friend at the mosque titled, “How to deal with children in Islam.” Lubna explained that the book is tailored to Muslim families’ needs, so helping them to reproduce Muslim values and practices, even if living in Italy.

Migrant mothers in the study tried to keep traditional values well-alive, but they balanced this with information gathered in Italy. Basma, 23 years, in Italy for 4 years with a child of 2½ years, asked her mother and her husband’s cousin (also living in Italy) for advice on how to educate her child. She also used Google when she had a specific doubt, typing her question in Arabic and so accessing Arabic sources of information. But, despite speaking very little Italian, she also resorted to SOS Tata (<http://www.sostata.tv/>). This, instead of being “typically Italian,” is the Italian version of American and British programs, such as *Nanny 911*, *Supernanny*, and *Little Angels*. She also watched the Arabic version of SOS Tata on an Arabic channel. In Basma’s search for information, Arabic, Italian, and global-north information merged and overlapped. The use of Google is sometimes more strategic, as Iman, 22 years, living in Italy for 3 years and mother of two children, who, depending on the nature of her question, used Google in Arabic or in Italian. If the results of her initial search were not satisfactory, she changed language. Another implication of these various overlaps is that the reason why local channels of information are consulted—their “cultural authenticity”—fades away into global discourses, but mothers are not very aware of this.

### *Any Difference? “No, It Is Science!”*

Most mothers in my study did not perceive that the various sources of information might have different political and cultural agendas. Safia, 35 years, with four children and in Italy for 14 years, told me that she used both Italian and Arabic sources for advice on how to take care of her children. When I asked if she found any differences between the two sources of information, she replied straightforwardly, and quite surprised at my—in her eyes—stupid question: “No, they all are books of doctors: *it is science!*.” Her surprise at my question made clear her implicit assumption that information on baby care and education is “science”: a truth that is beyond ideological or cultural preconceptions.

I received similar reactions from other mothers, among whom I count Laila, a cultural mediator of 34 years with two children and who has lived in Italy since 1998, when she migrated from Morocco. She said to watch SOS Tata because “It is fun [*she laughs*], there are different types of situations and you can always identify yourself with one of those,” but she also read a lot: “I feel it is needed, we cannot educate our children in the same way we have been educated. Time passes by very quickly and there are many changes.” She read books of a Muslim psychologist, Maamon Mobayaed, who now lives in Iceland, and of Mustafa Abou Saad, a Moroccan psychologist who has lived in Italy for 9 years. She listened to the radio program of an Italian pedagogue, Pietro Lombardo (<http://www.radioevolution-online.com/index.php?page=pietro-lombardo-2> anche radio), who founded a radio station and a study center through which he disseminates his teachings and offers seminars and workshops. She also watched the Arabic TV channel *Al Sharjah*, which broadcasts a TV program, *Ibrahim Ikhelifi*, which gives a lot of useful tips on how to educate children. Laila’s sources of information spanned Morocco, Italy, Iceland, and Arabia, including different media such as books, TV, Internet, and radio, which blend together local, transnational, and global dimensions. Despite this variety, at my question regarding whether these sources of information are somehow different, her face—similar to that of Safia—disclosed surprise and a bit of hilarity. Similar to Safia, she said that: “There is no difference because all of them have studied in Western countries. And, anyway, it is all science. The basis of education and childcare are all the same.”

Both these two women had a good level of education: Laila had a degree in social sciences and Safia had attended high school. Their answer was not caused by poor education but says something about their positioning in relation to neocolonial ideas of science as a solely Western enterprise. Retrospectively, my question might have even sounded as a way that cast

doubt on the value of Arabic sources. Interestingly enough, however, their esteem of the quality of Arabic medicine is built on the same assumption they might want to challenge: Arabic medicine gains legitimacy when it is guaranteed by a Western referent. For example, when I asked Sara, 29 years, if Moroccan doctors are good, she firmly replied, "Sure, they are very good! They have studied in France, Great Britain . . .!" Science is taken as both a common currency and a multitasking resource able to erase cultural difference, while, at the same time, unproblematically fitting specific discourses, as that of Muslim education.

### *Competent Parenting as Hegemonic Knowledge*

Parenting norms present in various media are not so much dependent on "science" or the specific cultural location (Morocco, Italy, or Ecuador) as they are on power. Knowledge about parenting—the so-called "scientific truths"—take specific configurations according to power geometries. Participants' lack of reflection about the possible discrepancy between sources of information is also caused by the fact that local advice—as Arabic websites and TV programs—do indeed reproduce global-north—hegemonic—views about parenting.

Let's take as an example, Jawhara.me, Iman's favourite website for parenting advice. It displays various thematic sections: "Fashion," "Health & Beauty," "Food," "Relationship," "Entertainment," and "Travel." The homepage displays gossip about international stars (e.g., Eva Longoria, Tom Cruise, Kate Hudson), a link to international cuisine (e.g., Thai, Japanese, Chinese), and one to international fashion firms (e.g., Versace, D&G, Hilfiger). If one goes to the "Parent and Pregnancy" section, there are thematic tags that give advice on how to best take care of your child during pregnancy and in the following months/years. Arabic mothers find advice on how to breastfeed and for how long, what to give children to eat, how to communicate with them, how to detect anxiety in their child, and so on . . . The men and women portrayed in these thematic sections are an international ambiguous prototype in which blondeness and olive skin mixes with dark hair and very white skin. All of them have pure white Scandinavian-style kitchens and are unveiled, dressing in a global-north style. Women are described as very busy career women, which affords a high standard of living and consumption. For example, they are illustrated as terribly busy finding the last designer clothes for their child or the last baby gourmet shop.

Advice about parenting is sometimes given by Arabic doctors and psychologists ("Dr Samineh I Shaheem, Assistant Professor of Psychology" is often mentioned); at other times, advice might well be copied and pasted

from global-north media.<sup>2</sup> Quite conventionally, tips on how take care of children and educate them are expressed in scientific terms.

Jawhara appears as a “mediascape” (Appadurai, 1996) in which global and local influences crucially converge. Jawhara website is under the .me domain, which is the Internet country codetop-level domain (ccTLD) for Montenegro, but it is occasionally used by individuals and some companies as an acronym for “Middle East.” Jawhara is a product of Linkonline, the leading company in Middle East and North Africa for the management and development of a wide range of portals (see <http://www.linkonlinecorp.com/aboutus.aspx>). It was founded in 2002 and it is owned by OTVentures, an Orascom Telecom subsidiary with commercial connections worldwide. Linkonline webpage describes Jawhara with these words:

Jawhara will be the first of its kind in the Middle East to cater to women of all ages, nationalities and positions, in all that matters. Readers will be able to say: “That is exactly what I was thinking and feeling, and the way I would have expressed it myself, and that is what I was looking for.”<sup>3</sup>

These words appear as a not-so-much covert attempt to construct a Middle-East culture of femininity, reflecting hegemonic knowledge and consumerist interests. Parenting is therefore dragged into efforts to produce an ideal type of consumer and citizen.

## Creating One’s Child

In mothers’ narratives, admiration for Italian and hegemonic parenting is blended with some ambivalence, criticism, and resistance toward some of its aspects. Maria told how she became somehow scared to think at her child growing up in Italy because she feared that “he will become like Italian children, who have no respect for authorities, who base [*their judgment/behavior*] on appearances, and who think that money arrives easily.” Moroccan and Ecuadorian mothers shared the impression that Italian children are spoilt, and that they do not respect elderly people and hierarchies. Quite contrary to Lubna’s quotation reported earlier (equating Italians to good Muslim), most Moroccan mothers were especially worried about the lack of religious values in Italian society:

Even if they [*Italians*] are Christian, they are not really religious: they do not go to the church, they do not pray, they do whatever they wish. They say a lot of curses, that’s not good, it is not good example for children. They do not teach them [*children*] to be religious. (Sara, 29, two children)

Sara explained to me that it is important to say “no” to children and to give them rules to follow, even using force and imposition, because “to be strict is a way to express your love.” To impose discipline and respect through coercion can also arrive to bodily punishment (such as smacking). Usually, this aspect was not overtly stressed to me, this being a condemned behavior in Italy.

In some instances, instead, mothers were particularly proud in recounting how they achieved respect through bodily punishment, as in the case of Andrea, who arrived in Italy from Ecuador when she was eight. At the time of interview, she was 21 years, with a child of 3 years. With a fierce smile, she shared with me some of her most sophisticated techniques. She told me that some time ago, her daughter told a bad word to her; she was shocked and reacted by screaming, “How did you dare to say that to your mum?! Your mum, who gave life to you!” She then took a nettle stem and twisted it around a stick. With this, she started to heavily beat her daughter. Once she finished, she immersed her daughter in cold water, to make her feel the burning sensation even more. She assured me that her child never ever addressed her with bad words again (and I believe it).

Andrea’s behavior can be rendered meaningful as the reproduction of a cultural identity. Bodily punishment takes enhanced meaning in Italy because it transgresses Italian rules: It is an affirmation of Andrea’s multiple identity, as both Italian and Ecuadorian. Mothers in my study stayed very precariously on the edge between uncritical compliance of Italian parenting norms and fierce resistance in their attempt to educate their children in a way that fit both Italian and their original culture’s norms and values. Safia found being a mother in Italy was “hard, really hard” because she would like

to educate them according to my original culture. Here is another environment. You feel responsible for giving them an identity, *creating the children one wishes for*. Here . . . here many things are not important, once parents have given food and clothes to their children, they feel ok, there is nothing to add.

I then asked her what she would add to Italian parenting, and she replied,

Create an healthy person, who knows how to live, who knows how to live here with different origins. [ . . . ] In order to feel normal despite the difference one has to work, work hard. There are many problems because we are different: I would wish to liberate them [*her children*] from this feeling.

What Safia would add to Italian norms about parenting is the competence to raise children who belong to more cultural contexts, including values that

are not mainstream in the place of settlement. Safia recognized that this is not offered by normative ideals of parenting, which refer to static and global-north families, assumed as the universal prototype.

### *Negotiating Citizenship*

The degree of criticism and resistance against hegemonic ideals of parenting varied with the age of the parents, their educational level and social class, the date of their arrival in Italy, the number of children, and preliminary experiences of caring for children. The internalization of negative social attitudes about their own image as immigrants, however, is a common characteristic of the migratory experience (Chang, 2000; Gálvez, 2011; Gutiérrez, 2008; Pease Chock, 1996), Italy's sociopolitical context being a particularly fertile ground for the flourishing of such negative self-images. The arrival in Italy of a high number of international immigrants occurred relatively late compared with other European countries because of Italy's lack of colonial ties and by traditionally being a country of emigration (Baldassar & Raffaetà, 2012). Therefore, Italy lacks a well-developed politics of difference that entails a legitimate space for the public discourse about the recognition and management of difference (Grillo & Pratt, 2002). Moroccan mothers were indeed less critical of hegemonic parenting and this may be explained by the greater discrimination Muslim women experienced in Italy (Salih, 2003), in comparison with Ecuadorian women, being Catholic, and dressing, socializing, and speaking in a way very similar to Italians. The perceived difference of Moroccan women—and related discrimination—has certainly been aggravated by paranoid global-north reactions to 9/11 (Maira, 2009; Poynting, Noble, Tabar, & Collins, 2004; Shaheen, 2008).

The concern over discipline and respect was common across the two groups and is recurrent among parents who migrate from the global south to the global north (Beishon Modood, & Virdee, 1998; Sims & Omaji, 1999). This concern, however, should not be interpreted as a simple repetition of home country's patterns of education, but as a political engagement of migrant parents as such. Parenting practices not only produce and "reproduce the state" (Stevens, 1999) but also ethnicity (Balibar, 1991, p. 103) and collective identities (Gedalof, 2009; Hill Collins, 2005; Hooks, 1991; Reynolds, 2005). Migrant mothers, criticizing the relaxed attitudes of Italian parents, comply with a "culture work" (Kershaw as cited in Umut, 2011), which "instill a sense of ethnically based cultural difference in their children. This contains elements of both affirming and contesting dominant representations of "good mothering" as an integral element of "good citizenship" (Umut, 2011, p. 701). In both adhering to and resisting some features of the home

country, host country, and global parenting attitudes, Ecuadorian and Moroccan mothers renegotiate their relationship with both Italy and their country of origin. They affirm new values of citizenship (Gedalof, 2009; Umut, 2011) and a rereading of “modernity” (see also Menin, 2011), thus de-facto challenging “white fantasies” of universalistic citizenship (Hage, 2000; Ong, 1999).

This does not simply happen by mothers “juggling between two worlds” (Gedalof, 2009, pp. 87-88). Migrant parents’ affirmation of their citizenship does not consist of adding host country values to Italian ones; rather, is *the process as such*, through which they put into dialogue diverse parenting practices and knowledge that counts. In the dynamic entanglements of normative constraint and the opening up of new resources offered by multiple (local, transnational, and global) parenting models, they create a sense of belonging and citizenship to both places of residency and to the world.

## Conclusion

Living in Italy, the migrant mothers in the study observed that Italian parents behaved in a way different from how they have been raised. Italian parents appeared to them as the living example and realization of what they perceived as the “modern” way to parent, which they also learned from books, TV, radio, and the Internet. The often marginal social position of migrant families within host society and their distance—in time and space—from original models of parenting made Moroccan and Ecuadorian mothers particularly anxious and active in searching for advice on how to parent. In this process, they were subjected to a global, transnational, and local flow of information that instill models of competent parenting drawing from a hegemonic ideal that gains authority and credibility because it is delivered as “scientific”—biomedical—knowledge. The internalization of negative self-images made them more easily victims of the normative tone of hegemonic parenting advice. They strived to comply with hegemonic childrearing practices of competent parenting. These, however, left untouched a series of open issues. One example is given by the idea of “quality time”: hegemonic understanding of parenting supports the ideal of the busy working mother who, regardless, has great “quality time” with her child. This model encourages women to be productive actors in society, concealing, however, the need for more structural intervention into family policy planning to not only reserve “quality time” for parenting but also and more simply, time. Through a nonjudgmental attitude, the lack of punishment, and the continual praise of children, ideals of democracy, meritocracy, and egalitarianism are also reproduced. This is a very good thing; however, these ideals—in many instances

and in the lives of a number of people (including migrants)—remain just an illusion, a predicament that is not realized into society's functioning. Gillies (2005, p. 842) advances this same criticism with reference to working and lower class parents, showing how "intensive parenting" comes out of "middle-class ideals of parental investment in education and democratic childrearing styles" and does not take into consideration working-class parents' concerns that have more to do with ensuring "the skills and the strength to be able to cope with the instability, injustice, and hardship that will most likely characterize their lives." Moreover, the intense emphasis given to communication, understanding, and emotions in ideals of competent parenting mirrors global-north importance accorded to intentionality, rationality, and individuality as basic features of human beings, ignoring others' conceptualizations of what is a child and child-parents interaction.

As a consequence, admiration of competent parenting merged with some criticism and resistance. In particular, mothers participating in the study judged Italian parents negatively for their lack of strength in imposing discipline and respect. In criticizing Italian parenting, while affirming their view of parenting, mothers revived their cultural belonging and negotiated their space in Italian society and in "modernity." Traditionally, issues of citizenship are thought as a male domain and care issues as a female one (Werbner & Yuval-Davies, 1999). Counterbalancing this binary opposition, the choices and understanding of these mothers regarding how to parent show that the two issues are not separate and that citizenship is not just a political and formal requirement but is intimately linked with care (Hage, 2003, p. 1). Consequently, to take the "birthing body" as an ideal of citizen body (Bacchi & Beasley, 2002; Gedolf, 2011) would give a more realistic account of the leaky interconnections and porous transformations of both bodies, cultures and citizenship.

Despite this article being focused on contemporaneity, hegemonic influences on parenting are not a new issue: feminist historians as Nancy Hunt (1988) and Carol Summers (1991) give striking evidence of it in colonial times. Processes of "intimate colonialism" (Summers, 1991) and of "biomedicalization of domesticity" (Lock & van Nguyen, 2010, p. 160) emerge well in both colonized and migrant parents. Both are examples of "marginal" parents, in which the link between normative parenting and power emerge powerfully. For this reason, the stories of Moroccan and Ecuadorian mothers in this article remain a salutary challenge to hegemonic and biomedicalized attempts at normalizing and controlling parenting and also have a message for nonmigrant mothers. They induce reflection on how the normativity of competent parenting changes according to power geometries and about the need to be critical of what enter into our most intimate spaces. I am not arguing that to engage in dialogue with children, to communicate our emotions to them, and to try to



render them aware of their emotions is a negative endeavor or mere propaganda. What I am arguing, however, is that hegemonic parenting norms and how they enter into our more intimate spheres should be subject to a critical appraisal. They can be partly adopted as useful tools, as sources of inspiration to complement what we think are the right things to do for our children and for us. As writer Tom Hodgkinson illustrated in his brilliant and hilarious book, *The Idle Parent* (2009), parenting also has to be a pleasure, a space protected as much as possible from hegemonic rhetoric of any kind.

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### Notes

1. This view is well summarized in this statement contained in an Italian book about migrant parenting: “the direct knowledge of a mothering role model which has been learned, constantly verified and interiorized allows the migrant mother [ . . . ] to consult less often to manuals about infancy or to the use of the paediatrician than Italian mothers do” (Martini, 2002, p. 174). The perceived exoticism of migrants makes them closer to an ideal “state of nature,” perceived to be lost to Italian mothers. As long as motherly practices, such as breastfeeding and childrearing are imagined as natural processes, migrant mothers are thought to be better mothers than Italian ones.
2. Just the section “Relationship” is peculiar. Men are vividly described as the kings of the house, and women are instructed on how to please him at best. See, for example, <http://www.jawhara.me/en/d/know-my-quiet-time/?seg=/category/d/> in which the tip of the week is: “A man’s home is his kingdom too; keep it tidy, relaxing, comfy and warm and he will thank you in an indirect way later.” The website is not accessible in English anymore, for the Arabic version see <http://www.arabia.com/women/>
3. <http://www.linkonlinecorp.com/products/Jawhara.aspx>

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