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INTERCULTURAL STORIES FOR DECOLONIAL RESEARCH

ORIAS INTERCULTURALES PARA LA INVESTIGACIÓN DECOLONIAL

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ABSTRACT

In a decolonial research perspective and within the international debate, which calls for action to reduce inequalities and promote spaces for an equal dialogue in our complex societies by recognizing migration as an intrinsic factor of social development and change, our contribution discusses the methodological proposal of the research project "Women's voices, plural perspectives. Professional life stories in educational and intercultural contexts". This project aims at problematizing the identity and professional trajectories of some women with migrant backgrounds that are constructively engaged in Italian educational and social contexts. Starting from some professional life stories and in dialogue with intercultural and decolonial education, we give voice to these women in order to highlight how they bring their complex identities into play and weave their roles as women, members of a certain ethnic group and social class, and professionals engaged in care and education in a creative way, by bringing innovative insights and praxes into the work contexts in which they take part. In doing so, they invite us to overturn the usual perspective that often sees them as passive receivers of interventions and in need of outside help. Furthermore, they challenge us to decolonize pedagogical action and research and examine the implicit cultures of our institutions and their habitual power dynamics.

Keywords: professional life stories; decolonial research; intercultural education; women; migration.

RESUMEN

En una perspectiva de investigación descolonial y dentro del debate internacional, que llama a reducir las desigualdades y promover espacios para un diálogo igualitario en nuestras sociedades complejas reconociendo la migración como un factor intrínseco del desarrollo y cambio social, nuestra contribución analiza la propuesta metodológica del Proyecto de investigación "Voces de mujeres, perspectivas plurales. Historias de vida profesional en contextos educativos e interculturales". Este proyecto tiene como objetivo problematizar la identidad y las trayectorias profesionales de algunas mujeres de origen migrante que participan constructivamente en los contextos educativos y sociales

italianos. A partir de algunas historias de vida profesional y en diálogo con la educación intercultural y decolonial, damos voz a cómo estas mujeres ponen en juego sus complejas identidades y tejen sus roles como mujeres, miembros de una determinada etnia y clase social, y profesionales aportando, de una manera creativa y generativa, conocimientos y prácticas innovadoras a los contextos laborales en los que participan. Al hacerlo, nos invitan a cambiar la perspectiva habitual que los ve como receptores pasivos de intervenciones y necesitados de ayuda externa. Además, nos desafían a descolonizar la acción y la investigación pedagógicas y a examinar las culturas implícitas de nuestras instituciones y sus dinámicas de poder habituales.

Palabras Clave: historias de vida profesional; investigación descolonial; educación intercultural; mujer; migración.

HISTÓRIAS INTERCULTURAIS PARA PESQUISA DECOLONIAL

Resumo

Numa perspectiva de investigação decolonial e no âmbito do debate internacional, que apela à acção para reduzir as desigualdades e promover espaços de diálogo igualitário nas nossas sociedades complexas, reconhecendo a migração como fator intrínseco do desenvolvimento e da mudança social, a nossa contribuição discute a proposta metodológica do projeto de pesquisa "Vozes femininas, perspectivas plurais. Histórias de vida profissional em contextos educativos e interculturais". Este projeto visa problematizar a identidade e as trajetórias profissionais de algumas mulheres migrantes que estão construtivamente envolvidas em contextos educacionais e sociais italianos. A partir de vente histórias de vida profissional e em diálogo com a educação intercultural e decolonial, damos voz a estas mulheres para destacar como elas colocam em jogo as suas identidades complexas e tecem os seus papéis como mulheres, membros de um determinado grupo étnico e classe social, e profissionais, trazendo insights e práticas inovadoras para os contextos de trabalho em que participam. Ao fazê-lo, convidam-nos a inverter a perspectiva habitual que muitas vezes os vê como receptores passivos de intervenções e necessitados de ajuda externa. Além disso, desafiam-nos a descolonizar a ação pedagógica e a investigação e a examinar as culturas implícitas das nossas instituições e as suas dinâmicas de poder habituais.

Palavras-chave: histórias de vida profissional; pesquisa descolonial; educação intercultural; mulheres; migração.

HISTOIRES INTERCULTURELLES POUR LA RECHERCHE DÉCOLONIALE

Résumé

Dans une perspective de recherche décoloniale et dans le débat international qui appelle à des actions pour réduire les inégalités et promouvoir des espaces de dialogue égalitaire dans nos sociétés complexes en reconnaissant la migration comme un facteur intrinsèque de développement et de

changement social, notre contribution discute de la proposition méthodologique du projet de recherche « Voix de femmes, perspectives plurielles. Récits de vie professionnelle dans des contextes éducatifs et interculturels ». Ce projet vise à problématiser l'identité et les trajectoires professionnelles de vingt femmes, d'origine immigrée, engagées de manière constructive dans les contextes éducatifs et sociaux italiens. À partir de leurs récits de vie professionnelle et en dialogue avec l'éducation interculturelle et décoloniale, nous donnons la parole à ces femmes afin de mettre en évidence comment elles mettent en jeu leurs identités complexes et tissent leurs rôles de femmes, membres d'une certaine ethnie et d'une certaine classe sociale, et des professionnels en apportant, de manière créative et générative, des idées et des pratiques innovantes dans les contextes de travail auxquels ils participent. Ce faisant, ils nous invitent à renverser la perspective habituelle qui les considère souvent comme des récepteurs passifs d'interventions et ayant besoin d'une aide extérieure. En outre, ils nous mettent au défi de décoloniser l'action pédagogique et la recherche et d'examiner les cultures implicites de nos institutions et leurs dynamiques de pouvoir habituelles.

Mots-clés : récits de vie professionnelle ; recherche décoloniale ; éducation interculturelle ; femmes ; migration.

INTRODUCTION

Our paper presents the theme of coloniality in education and academic system and a methodological proposal in an intercultural research project with women with migrant backgrounds (Pescarmona & Gozzelino, 2023). To approach the topic, it is appropriate to first distinguish the terms 'colonialism' and 'coloniality'.

Colonialism is a policy of control over people and areas, often through establishing colonies, with the aim of economic dominance. Colonialism is underpinned by coloniality: a subject conceptualised for the first time by Latin American thinkers, including Anibal Quijano and Walter Mignolo. Coloniality functions through systems of racialised hierarchies, dominance of Eurocentric knowledges, and cultural systems which naturalise colonialism, making it seem inevitable (Maldonado-Torres, 2016).

Following Borghi (2020):

> "We lived with the illusion of having overcome colonialism the very moment all countries became politically independent, when the process commonly called decolonization began. But this has nothing to do with people's material life. Nor has it anything to do with the decolonization of thought, with the erasure of hierarchies between individuals" (p. 33).

Decolonisation involves reckoning with the world that colonialism created, which means reckoning with coloniality. Education and research played a key role in creating the colonial world by providing the justification and tools for colonisation, and that they themselves were built by colonisation. As educators and researcher, we should be aware of the coloniality of knowledge

production, in order to address and overcome the power dynamics apparent in our own research process.

University, research and coloniality

With a look at European academic history, universities provided the justification for colonisation. They are key sites where colonial knowledge is produced, consecrated, and naturalised.

> "It was here that the justification for colonization was generated, particularly through the development of theories of racism which provided the ethical and intellectual grounds for colonization" (Bhambra, Gebrial and Nişancıoğlu, 2018, p.5).

Following this perspective, the racialization of people and the construction of hierarchies of race were used to argue that Indigenous people lacked the knowledge and the ability to do certain things like manage land, use rational thinking, manage administrative and criminal justice, and create institutions. The representation of 'Other' places through academic writing and literature was a form of colonisation.

Edward Said (1978) showed how imaginative geographies of the Orient, which compared the rational and mature 'West' against an irrational, abnormal and backwards 'East', didn't just reflect colonial expansion but also inspired it. In the same way, European thought has contrasted North and South and racist knowledge construction justified 'civilising missions', which were argued to be necessary to spread Christianity and European ideals and bring order to 'uncivilised' places.

The use of academic knowledge in past colonisation raises important questions about how our work relates to, and represents, people and places today. Decoloniality in research is a context-specific endeavor which involves not only actively unlearning and dismantling dominant Euro-American centric ways of thinking and understanding the world, but also rebuilding and re-worlding forms of knowledge-making that exist outside these dominant epistemic norms (Mignolo, 2017).

Thinking about the coloniality of research means ask ourself what is the history of our academic disciplines and how are our epistemologies and research questions generated. Our research must take care to welcome input from target communities must considered alternative ways of learning, knowing, and doing.

As researchers, we need to discuss how we collect data and how we engage research participants and partners. We can choose critical, participatory, advocacy methodologies that consider the contributions of minorities and the co-production of knowledge throughout the research process.

Furthermore, we can ask ourselves questions about who we quote, and we cite in writing, considering work in other languages, cultures, and mediums from non-elite Global North institutions. Finally, a reflection on research funds and the ethics of these funding sources is essential.

Schools, education and coloniality

In the same direction, the education system is to be considered an integral part of the colonial system; Education has been central in the imposition of colonial regimes and in educational systems around the world. The colonial policy in Africa, Asia and America, as well as the policy of oppression of multiple political regimes at all latitudes, has led to the development of a process of forced deconstruction of the mentalities of the local communities and of the autochthonous systems of thought, affecting languages, cultures, traditions and schools of thought sometimes even thousands of years old (Gozzelino, 2020).

In many countries that have suffered the colonial expropriation of the land, the violence of the conquest has been accompanied by the destruction of traditional cultural models and the imposition of a language, a culture, and a system of domination. The educational project accompanied the political and military project of colonialism and oppression (Freire, 1970) so that the pedagogical models, languages, religion, literature and even the arts of the oppressors supported and made the atrocities of colonialism possible.

Thus, 60 years after the great independence movements, mechanisms of domination and oppression, privilege and racism survive in training and educational paths all over the world: the educational system still needs to activate decolonial processes.

What does it mean to promote a decolonial education? Decolonising education means rebuilding a school system that supports all students, staff and teachers without reproducing hierarchies, privileges and consequent discrimination: a system that considers the particular needs of each child (Massey-Jones, 2019).

Analyzing our educational systems and our schools, we must ask:

- Who is included and who is excluded?
- Which cultures are valued?
- Who has the right to speak?
- Which disparities remain in the educational processes?
- What obstacles hinder equal access to all levels of education for the most vulnerable?
- Who are the marginalised and underrepresented people in our education system (Hooks, 1990)?

A decolonial practice that crosses research and education

Researchers are encouraged to be critical and reflexive throughout the research process and question the standpoints and power relations. Decolonial research practice reminds scholars that many assumptions about knowledge, truth and rationality are drawn from literature and practice developed at a particular time and place and through unequal and unjust power and knowledge relations.

We believe it is necessary to encourage educational and academic projects that fight against stereotypes, highlighting the importance of research methods which thread up and cross intersectionality and marginalization factors, considering and problematizing the complexity of stories and contexts. Researchers and educators can ease places for dialogue and co-build workspaces oriented towards social justice cutting down discrimination and inequality.

Our intercultural and feminist research works in the direction of decoloniality, trying to elaborate a complex and intersectional understanding of socio-educational work realities (Fiorucci, 2020; Zoletto, 2022; Portera, 2022) and a dynamic and intercultural dialogue (Council of Europe, 2008; Adichie, 2009; Ngugi, 1986).

Women's voices, plural perspectives. The research project

The research project "*Women's voices, plural perspectives. Professional life stories in educational and intercultural contexts*" (Pescarmona and Gozzelino, 2023) wanted to take up the challenge of decolonial research, by investigating a dimension usually less explored in the intercultural educational discourse.

The project was carried out under an agreement between the Associazione Donne dell'Africa Subsahariana e II generazioni [Association of Sub-Saharan African Women and Generation II] and the Philosophy and Education Sciences Department of the University of Turin (Italy), with the specific aim of presenting women with a migrant background as active constructors of positive actions and relationships in the family, educational and social contexts in the communities where they live, by overturning some stereotypes and prejudices that often describe them as passive recipients of interventions, in need of outside help, or otherwise relegated to definitions and roles given by others for them.

This project was designed to collect, interpreted and make known the professional stories of women emigrated from their countries of origin and also born and grow in Italy that creatively rework their different cultural background in their working contexts, in order to enhance their heritage on the host country and recognize the importance of their social, economic and labour integration for sustainable development (United Nations, 2015 – Goal 10).

The research purpose, in fact, was making visible the contribution of these women in terms of countering discrimination and violence based on gender, ethnicity or social status, and of innovating professional roles, understanding and practices in our multicultural socio-educational contexts.

Within the current international debate that calls for promoting equal dialogue in our complex societies (Besley and Peters, 2012; Council of Europe, 2008) and according to critical, feminist and decolonial educational studies (Ngũgĩ, 1986; Hook, 1990; Adichie, 2009), the project intended to promote safe meeting spaces where to encourage storytelling and recognize the educational value of these women's experience, by fostering the processes of speaking out, so that they can tell their side of the story and define their own identity.

By crossing their stories, the project would like to recognise the crucial role of racialised women in the changing process of Italian educational contexts and promote equality, gender equality, non-discrimination, intercultural sensitivity and inclusiveness in the social system.

Intercultural Life Stories of Women in Education

This research project required the choice of a methodological approach that was sensitive to the encounter with otherness and capable of unhinging an ethno-centric research perspective, by adopting a non-binary and non-static vision of identities. The guiding idea was to allow the researchers to enter into an equal dialogue with the voices of the women involved and give back to them the right and the power to narrate their version of individual and collective stories.

Thus, a qualitative research approach based on professional life history (Goodson & Sikes, 2001) was developed as a core method.

As already experimented in other research (Scheffler 1991, Riessman, 2008; Wolcott, 1994), the emphasis on narratives and stories is a fruitful and respectful way for accessing to how people understand themselves, develop and interpret events in their professional and personal lives, and express their point of view. This research methodology finds its ground in sociology of deviance, the feminist movement, and anthropology of education, which are moved by the concepts of agency and social protagonist and recognized in narrative methods the opportunity of rendering justice, legitimacy and dignity to often unspoken realities, like racial, social and gender discrimination.

The choice of life stories has also found reflection in the current pedagogical research that aims to study migratory trajectories, the formation of (inter)cultural identities and the construction of paths for social integration, precisely because of the capacity of this method to create a space in which to give meaning and share one's own professional and personal history (Bruner, 1997; Gobbo, 2004, 2017; González Monteagudo, 2011).

This methodological choice is relevant to develop decolonial discourse for at least two reasons. The first one is that, by recognizing others as *competent inter-locutors* (Bhatti et al., 2007; Pescarmona, 2021), it is possible to build a discourse from the social field and do justice and legitimacy to experiences and voices which are usually less heard or silenced. Life histories privilege the construction of a discourse from the lived social context that gives centrality to a *situated* meaning (Pole and Morrison, 2003), but also gives rise to an *alternative* view of the relationship between collective and individual history (Sartore, 2014), which is capable of questioning the usual categories on identity and diversity and discussing the broader issues of social inclusion and identity transformation in our complex societies.

The second reason is that this methodology implies the presence of listeners (the two researchers in our case), who are those who trigger the narrative and propose their own interpretation, but they are also persons who have experienced their own story, which is not neutral and comes into play in the process of knowledge co-construction, and thus must be taken into account in the research

process. Kvale (1994) emphasizes how it is precisely in the breakdown of the term interviews (*Inter-Views*) that the interdependence between human interaction and knowledge generation is expressed, and how the interview is indeed the outcome of a shared construction of meaning.

Starting from these assumptions, about twenty in-depth interviews were conducted over the course of one year, from February 2021 to December 2022, involving and selecting women with a migration background, belonging to different migrant generations, and actively engaged in different educational contexts in Turin and the surrounding area, in the north of Italy. For example, these women worked as teachers in school, cultural mediators, project managers of extracurricular projects, educators in advocacy activities for other women, and some of them were also journalists and writers committed to educational social justice issue.

The in-depth interviews investigated some thematic areas, such as: the motivations, underlying values and objectives of these women professional project; the transformation of their own professional educational, social and political role; the stereotypes, prejudices and discriminations that emerged in their own work contexts and the strategies they implemented to deal with those; and finally, how and to what extent their own experience as women came into play at the intersection of ethnic group belonging, personal stories and professional role.

The interviews were analyzed for recurring themes and patterns, according to the principles of Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss, 2017), by taking care to identify the singularity and uniqueness of each personal voice and professional path.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, listening and entering into dialogue with these women became a unique way to build meaningful conversations that had a *pedagogical value* for all those involved.

The women interviewed had the opportunity to re-construct their professional identities, by bringing their different identity dimensions into dialogue in a creative way. Starting from their experience "on the margins" (Hooks, 1990) as women, mothers, members of a certain ethnic group and social class, professionals engaged in care and education, they put themselves back "at the centre" by becoming promoters of educational and social innovations. In doing so, they took back their right to *imagine themselves* differently (Appiah, 1996) and offer an unprecedented position from which to articulate knowledge and disrupt (at least a little) a predetermined social and political order.

At the same time, these women challenged also educational research to go beyond dominant discourses and called on the researchers to *re-position themselves* as women, educational professionals, and activists, by questioning their own pre-conceptions, biases and ways of doing research. In other words, being involved in these women's stories prompted the researchers themselves to an educational reflection. It required the latter to problematize what they took for granted in multicultural research contexts; what role they gave to research subjects in data collection and interpretation; and, how they managed the different power between those who do research and

those who participate in it (Griffiths, 1998; Grant, 1999).

Thus, this project based on narratives and life stories became a way of creating a *space for intercultural and decolonial conversation* between these women, the researchers and the communities they worked in, in which to co-construct new personal and collective stories capable of transforming the status-quo in a more equal way.

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