

Cultures of education and rituals of transition from home to the infant toddler center.

Observing interactions and professional development

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Abstract

At the infant-toddler center, the rituals of transition that mark children's arrival and going home times offer interesting kaleidoscopes for the study of interactive dynamics with the associated meanings and implicit educational models. Numerous pedagogical studies have investigated the meanings of these events, for the most part drawing on the monocultural model of classical attachment theory to analyze interactions between adults and children. Far less research has approached these rituals using triadic, systemic and intercultural categories of analysis in order to explore not only educators' actions but also what is going on in their minds. In this paper, we discuss examples from a recent study on rituals of transition in the multicultural context of an infant toddler center, combining description of the timing, behaviors and interactive styles of children and adults, with analysis of the thoughts and representations of the educators.

Nel nido d'infanzia i rituali di transizione che scandiscono l'arrivo e uscita dal servizio rappresentano caleidoscopi interessanti per studiare le dinamiche interattive tenendo conto anche dei significati e dei modelli educativi impliciti. Sono numerosi gli studi pedagogici che si sono occupati di indagare i significati di questi eventi ispirandosi per lo più al modello monoculturale della teoria classica dell'attaccamento per l'analisi delle interazioni tra adulti e bambini. Meno diffuse sono invece ricerche che hanno studiato questi rituali adottando categorie di analisi di tipo triadico, sistemico e interculturale per leggere non solo ciò che accade

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nell'azione ma anche nella mente degli educatori. Nell'articolo discuteremo alcuni esempi emergenti da una recente ricerca che ha indagato i rituali di transizione nella realtà multiculturale di un nido d'infanzia, intrecciando la descrizione di tempi, modi e stili interattivi di bambini e adulti, con l'analisi dei pensieri e delle rappresentazioni degli educatori.

Keywords: Educational cultures, rituals of transition, observation, micro-analysis, training.

Parole chiave: Culture educative, rituali di transizione, osservazione, microanalisi, formazione.

Introduction: rites and rituals of *transition* at the infant toddler center

Rites use “coded systems [to express] a series of sequential actions [with specific implicit] roles, values, aims” (Riviére, 1995/1998, pp. 61-62, auth. trans.). They thus provide a vehicle for the values and functioning of a social community (Segalen, 1998), while the community vivifies its rites by collectively participating in ritual practices and sharing the associated meanings. Like all everyday events, rites are situated within a cultural context of which they are an expression, and at the same time they make visible the culture itself through the behaviors, actions and roles of the participants.

In the early childhood services, the rhythm of children's daily lives is given by a succession of rites that help them to construct and develop a sense of belonging to a community. The sequential nature of these rites means that they make a key contribution to the quality of the service, whose day to day functioning is generally repetitive, organized into “action schemas that tend to reproduce themselves” (Emiliani, 2002, p.50, auth. trans.) and enriched by social and cultural routines shared between adults and children. The maintenance of a routine, across educational offerings, play activities and the overall daily program, enables the day-by-day construction of a *meaningful microcosm* for the children and their adult carers. Within this microcosm, the child learns the group culture and its specific rules, roles, practices and customs, becoming an active partner in it. Over time, the various routines are transformed into rituals, “acquiring a particular meaning from a symbolic and affective point of view” (Id., p.56, auth. trans.); in other words, they become predictable shared sequences, whose meaning is mutually negotiated among the participants.

In this sense, the rituals of transition that daily mark children's arrival and going home times in the early childhood services are polyhedric phenomena of particular

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interest: as rites of passage (from the Latin *transitus*, passage or transition) they regulate children's exit from one situation/condition and entry to another, functioning as a "bridge" between the micro-systems (family and infant toddler center) to which they belong and allowing these very young children to daily experience and consolidate the broadening of their social network beyond the family circle (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 2005). The act of transition always implies a constant: passage or movement, which demands a change in position (a distancing or separation) but also the acquisition of new reference points and negotiation between known and novel schemas of action and thought (Bonica, 2010). In making the transition from the family context to the infant toddler center, or from one school setting to another (Kraft-Sayre & Pianta, 2000), children try out new roles and modify their activities and position within the social system. It is interesting to observe the rituality of these *passages*: every day at the same time children and parents (or other adult caregivers) cross the threshold of the infant toddler center, where they are received by peers and by the educator; the latter uses consolidated educational strategies and symbolic exchanges to facilitate the settling in of the child and the handover of educational responsibility between the adults. Similar scripts are followed in the evening when the parents come to pick up their children at the infant toddler center and actively participate in the ritual of reunion. These are social routines, or organized schemas of action and interaction corresponding to given rituals that are known to the participants and have the function of regulating their individual behavior: such rituals offer a format of action, language, positioning and organized behavioral sequences that ensure clarity and security to the children and adults involved.

The arrival and going home rituals (or moments of separation and reunion) are therefore *atypical routines* of particular interest for educational research on childhood: they exemplify the pedagogy of the childhood service, make visible the parental cultures vivified in the *grammar of interaction*, and provide educators with descriptive indicators for defining educational actions that are coherent and congruent with the needs and characteristics of the children and their families (Bove, 2007). From a research perspective, each ecological transition "is in effect a ready-made experiment of nature with a built-in before-after design" (Bronfenbrenner, 2005, p.46): the transition from home to infant toddler center (and vice versa) therefore comprehends the relationships between the two environmental contexts in which the child is growing up and learning to take an active part. These relationships are constructed over time through a history of interaction (Hinde, 1976) that is shaped on a daily basis, starting from the moments of transition from one context to the other; furthermore, all transitions, because they involve the individual in new activities and social structures, imply a series of actions (moving close to, being with, entering and exiting from relational configurations) with conse-

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quences for development. The overall framework places each part in relation to the other parts and to the whole (the system) in such a way that a change in even one part will set off a series of transformations across the whole system, in terms of the relationships making it up and the cultural orientations determining them (Bateson, 1972).

It is natural to enquire how these rituals of transition are modified when educators welcome immigrant children and parents, who are the bearers of action schemas and representations situated in other “niches of development” (Super & Harkness, 1986). What changes take place in patterns of interaction, dynamics of *passage* and processes of meaning attribution? What educational strategies facilitate this process and on the basis of what cultural frameworks are they defined? What is the role of educators in interactive contexts that are asymmetrical and increasingly culturally complex?

There is no doubt that the sociocultural transformations affecting childhood contexts are making educational systems and their relative pedagogies more dynamic. The entry to infant toddler centers of the children of immigrant parents introduces new action schemas, different theories about education, and alternative conceptions of educational responsibility, care and development; and this makes the practices and behaviors of all the subjects involved less of a given. Today, each gesture, activity or communicative exchange that may be observed in these situations is based on a different symbolic, communication and linguistic code expressing a different way of understanding relationships, proximity and distance, dependence and autonomy (LeVine, & New, 2008; Rogoff, 2003).

Rituals of transition are situated, that is to say, they have a specific cultural connotation and make visible one’s implicit underlying orientations; as rites of passage they bring to light the cultural roots of the scripts for interaction constituting them (Van Gennep, 1909). In some cultures, for example, it is believed that the passage to a higher stage of development must be ratified by a sort of *rite of initiation* marking a clean break with the past: individuals are called to autonomously weigh up their own resources, in order to “find for themselves their position within the new context” (Le Breton, 1991/1995, p.69, auth. trans.). In other cultural systems it is thought that the developmental change faced by the individual demands a collective taking on of responsibility by the social context, in order to prevent and mitigate potential internal crises in the developing subject. This is the rite of *margin* model (Van Gennep, 1909), where margin is defined as spaces/time-periods in which the child is accompanied from one context to another through a gradual transition founded on connection, dialogue and overlap. Thus, the organizational model determining the processes and structures of connection and interconnection varies across cultures: similar social groups will tend to have similar, and different social groups different, systems.

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In the majority of Western societies, children's initial entry to the infant toddler centre is considered an important rite of passage that is accompanied and structured by time-frames and ritual gestures involving a range of adult figures as well as the peer group. For the parents, it represents their first experience of entrusting their child to an educational service with which they will share educational responsibility; for the child, it means going outside of the warm family circle and entering an unfamiliar public social system for the first time, thereby broadening its "social web" (Corsaro, 1997); for the service, the entry of each new child implies revising its relational system and constructing new interactional networks. It is therefore a particularly important transition amongst the various milestones of children's growth and development that marks a passage and a developmental stage and implies a change of role for the child, as well as modifying its expectations and ways of acting, behaving and being treated by others.

In the next section, we review research on rituals of transition at infant toddler centres, and discuss the challenges of studying the phenomenology of these events in intercultural contexts.

1. Observation of interactional dynamics during moments of transition. The research

The rituals accompanying the transition from home to infant toddler centre have a peculiar characteristic that has made them a particular focus for educational research and pedagogical reflection on the relations between childhood services and families: namely, they display a very strong link between the "micro" dimension of the interactions amongst adults and between adults and children on the one hand, and "macro" pedagogical reflection on the relationships between educational contexts in terms of reciprocal responsibilities, educational co-responsibility and so on (New & Mantovani, 1998; Milani, 2008) on the other. In Italian infant-toddler centers, arrival and going home times have always been considered paradigmatic events requiring investment in terms of research and training (Gandini & Edwards, 2000). Within the overall complexity of these transition events, the themes of separation, particularly the first separations of the child from its family caregivers, constituted a fertile area of study and interdisciplinary debate in the closing decades of the last century. Drawing on the pioneering work of Mary Ainsworth and colleagues (1978) on the links between children's attachment style and their exploration behaviors in a new environment with a adult who is a stranger to them, many scholars conducted observational research on the dynamics activated in these *strange situations* arising in natural contexts.

The infant toddler center acted as a laboratory for research on educational styles and adult-child interaction during the ritual moments of separation and transition, considered to offer unique potential for collecting a rich documentation on the

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behavior of child and parent, their attachment style and their various reactions (Lézine, 1964). In the following years and decades a body of research was conducted in which observation was extended from the child, to children with significant adults in the context of the infant toddler center. In Italy, for example, the studies of Barbieri, Angelini, and Adorni (1983) invited the scientific world to “a more detailed knowledge of the modalities with which the child passes from its mother to the institution” (Ivi, p.48, auth. trans.). Drawing on their corpus of systematic observations of arrival-episodes at infant toddler centers, these authors fine-tuned their analysis of the structures and characteristics of the transition phenomenon in children, broadening the debate on the possible educational outcomes of these moments. Using qualitative behavioral indices (such as direction of gaze, orientation of the child’s and parent’s bodies, verbal communication signals and to whom these are directed, etc.) as their tools of analysis, they identified a number of distinct but equally important phases in the structure of the observed events. There is a first moment, that of the *entrance*, in which child and parent frequently appear to be still bound together psychologically and/or physically; during the second moment, the *passage*, the child’s attention gradually shifts to the surrounding environment; finally, there is the moment of the *salute*, at which point the child appears to be “physically, as well as psychologically, in the institution” (Ivi, p.43, auth. trans.). In the rapidity and simultaneity of daily life these behavioral signals often “overlap”, and can be difficult to capture and identify; nonetheless attending to the details and the sequences making up the transition episode can be a resource for educators, enabling them to respond with enhanced awareness and relational synchrony to the interactive moves of their interlocutors.

In the same period, the work of Caccialupi and Stame (1983) on the processes involved in the separation of the child from its parent on arrival at the infant toddler center, made a further key contribution in terms of combining the observational dimension of the empirical enquiry with reflection on the training of the educators participating in the research. Through observation of a sample of mother-child dyads, these authors identified “typical” and more or less regular (constant) sequences in the parent-child pairs: they then used these observational descriptions to train educators in decoding key behaviors and planning more *ecological* modes of welcoming the children and their families.

Abundant research was also carried out on the moment in which children are reunited with their parents after a long day spent at the infant toddler center. The work of Comotti and Varin (1988), for example, led to identification of the “negative reactions” (crying, ignoring, avoidance, aggressive behaviors) that children can display on the return of their parents. These behaviors are often distant from the optimistic expectations and representations most frequently held by parents with regard to how they will be received by their children when they come to pick them

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up them (smiles, hugs, kisses, etc.). This is because the moment of reunion, as later studies showed, engages the child in an overall reorganization of its psychological field (Varin, Riva Crugnola, Molina & Ripamonti, 1996). During the first three years of life, there are certain periods that are particularly “critical” or “sensitive” for the child’s development (6-11 months and 18-24 months), during which a number of competences develop at the same time and enter into conflict with one another. The impact of these “conflicts” on the child’s internal affective sphere leads to behaviors that are not always immediately clear or decipherable for adults. The body of observations collected by scholars in those years is still of interest today to those investigating the intricate dynamics making up the transition event, although the complexity of contemporary developmental contexts (both familial and extra-familial) demands broader theoretical and methodological paradigms. It is therefore of value to review the findings of more recent cross cultural research (Bornstein & Venuti, 2013) which has explored modes of parenting and the dynamics of adult-child interactions using theoretical constructs that go “beyond the dyadic model” (Shaffer, 1977) of attachment theory. Highly significant in this regard are recent studies showing the cultural variability of the “special bond” (or attachment) between parent and child (Van Ijzendoorn & Kroonenberg, 1988), and the existence of models of *multiple* caregiving (Tronick, Morelli & Winn, 2008), that is to say, the possibility that the child may be attached to a number of different affective figures, who are not necessarily or not exclusively its parents (Cas-sibba, 2003).

Equally relevant is recent empirical evidence reported by Fivaz-Depeursinge & Corboz-Warnery (1999), confirming (in line with other research findings including those of Trembleay-Leveau & Nadel, 1995 on sociality) that from an early age children display the ability to interact simultaneously with several partners. This line of enquiry has also contributed to extending the earlier theoretical models on the development of adult-child and peer interaction in very young children (Trev-arthen, 1979) by introducing new instruments and methodological approaches (visual and other) for the observation of interactional dynamics in complex situations. It has also led to a broadening of the dyadic perspective – in which the temporary separation of the child from the parent “may more easily take on the meaning of abandonment and emptiness” (Fruggeri, 2002, p.115, auth. trans.) – to view the mother-child separation within a systemic framework embracing the movements of other adults and peers and “the capacity to be in the relationship, be outside of it and interact with several partners at once” (Id., p.113, auth. trans.). Interesting behavioral indicators, informed by the work of the Losanne group, have been defined in recent studies of micro-transitions in the familial interactive context (Cigala, Venturelli & Fruggeri 2013). Specifically, the processes of *separation, entrusting, welcoming, involving* (Fruggeri, 2002) that characterize these events may be

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phenomenologically broken down into micro-processes (actions, retroactions, circular and/or secondary interactions), while also taking into account variability in the timing, modalities and styles with which these processes succeed one another and are acted out by participants. Observation of the rituals practiced in the triad reveals the “cerimonial observances” (Goffman, 1967) that regulates the interaction: gestures, looks, movements, positioning. And it is the observation and detailed description of these “external signs” (Ivi, p.1) that make visible the underlying cultural model: observing a triadic system in action allows us to capture the interactional schemas that represent the entry point for accessing the representations acted out by the protagonists (Fivaz-Depeursinge e Corboz-Warnery, 1999).

In light of this background, in the next section we outline some examples illustrating the training relevance of the interconnection between interactional schemas and the representations acted out by the protagonists at times of transition from home to infant toddler center and vice versa.

2. A snapshot of transition processes at the infant-toddler centre: the educators’ actions and thoughts

The examples discussed here are drawn from a study that involved the educators (eight in all) at an infant toddler centre in a process of enquiry and critical reflection on the modes of interaction acted out and experienced in the course of “home-infant toddler center transition rituals”. The study combined microanalysis (Stern, 1974) of episodes of children arriving at the center and leaving to go home, with phenomenological exploration of these experiences and the meanings attributed to them by the educators (Tobin, Mantovani & Bove, 2010). More specifically, 100 home-infant toddler center transition episodes (50 arrival and 50 home-going; involving children aged between 12 and 36 months from different cultural backgrounds) were video-recorded; and all the educators were interviewed (following the microanalytical interview method developed by Stern: 1995), with the aim of prompting recall and mnemonic reconstruction of individual cases of welcoming/reunion with parents that the educators themselves judged particularly significant (positive or critical). Subsequently a sample of 40 video clips of reception episodes was selected and the verbal and non-verbal interactions (actions, positioning, proxemics) among all protagonists were transcribed. The micro-dynamics of transition in the parent-child-educator triad were identified, analyzed and coded using the theoretical constructs from the literature on micro-transitions in family contexts (Cigala et al. 2013) and the descriptive categories of educational styles from studies on the process of settling children into the infant toddler center (Mantovani, Saitta & Bove, 2000). Finally, four educators were invited to view video footage of transition episodes in which they themselves had participated, using the video-feedback method (Tochon, 2008): specifically they were guided to

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recognize forms and rituals of passage, by comparing the observational data (gestures, spaces, timing, modes of interaction and transition) with their own processes of mnemonic reconstruction of the events.

From the data collected it is possible to produce “visual and narrative snapshots” of moments of *passage* between the home and the infant toddler center. Amongst these, the most representative elements of the action modalities of the educators, and therefore of the culture of the childhood service were found to be: individual welcoming of each adult-child pair; observation of the interactive dynamics between parents and children; allowance of an adequate amount of time for the transition and separation processes (ideally gradual: not too brief, hurried or fast); organization of the spaces of transition to receive both the children and the adults accompanying them; activation of communication practices aimed at constructing positive interaction between parents and educators.

With regard to the parent-child dyad, recurrent action schemas were identified that varied across families. Specifically, the action schemas observed in families of Italian origin included: parent enters the classroom and stays for some time; parent uses the designated reception area; parent seeks opportunities for individual dialogue with the educator; parent and child engage in physical contact (hugs, kisses, caresses) and then separate, generally after the parent has handed over the child to the educator. This “ceremony” reflects the philosophy of gradual separation that has long underpinned Italian pedagogical debate on processes of settling in/*ambientation* (Bove, 2007). The immigrant families displayed an equally recurrent, but different, pattern of action schemas (though we are aware that it is not possible to generalize from this), that frequently included: parent and child disengage before their arrival in the classroom; parent does not use the designated internal space of transition; parent stays at the door; child enters the classroom independently of parent; overall separation-transition-handing over process takes a short time on average. The interviews with the educators yielded a fragmented and complex picture of their interactions with the children and their parents. In particular, a key feature of the transcribed texts was discourse about difficulty in welcoming the immigrant families, in relation to whom the educators displayed uncertainty and disorientation. Frequently the educators did not know how to relate to these families; were not familiar with the languages spoken by the parents and children; and found it difficult to understand the reasons for certain behaviors and to make themselves understood. Their discursive productions conveyed some rigidly stereotyped images of the immigrant family that were dichotomous/polarized on an *us-them* (natives-immigrants) axis. This was reflected in utterances such as ‘*we expect [immigrants] to behave like us, but [they] have different ways*’. The key element of this polarized distinction is the contrast between the behaviors of immigrant parents in these situations and the model (characteristics) that the

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educators believe to constitute a *good* home-infant toddler center transition. For example one of the educators expressed this as follows:

We generally have expectations when we bring our children to the infant toddler center, [...] they on the other hand say: I'm leaving you my child, I'm putting him in with you - rather I'm sticking him in with you! - I'll salute you, but I won't stay [...], and the same thing happens when they come back – it seems as though they vacuum them out from outside, even though you try to pull them in.

If it is true that words express the individual's often unconsciously held thinking and perspectives, which in turn echos and gives voice to the thinking of a group (Bachtin, 1975), then we may conclude that these educators' interpretation of the transition ceremony is somewhat stereotyped, denoting a low level of awareness of the cultural and intercultural factors at work in contemporary developmental contexts.

These preliminary ethnographic reflections were further developed and refined in the course of the research, on the assumption that a more detailed, microanalytical, recursive and systemic reading of the same events and implicit ideas about educational processes (the narratives) would lead to a gradual broadening, if not to a modification, of some of the educators' horizons of meaning. Specifically, it was hypothesized that inviting them to observe actions and behaviors (their own, the parents', the childrens') and analyze the component processes in a triadic perspective, combined with phenomenological reflection on their own "interpretative networks" (Caronia, 2011) or frameworks of meaning, would promote reflective shifts in the educators' thinking. We now examine two detailed examples of this process of observation, categorization and critical revision of assumptions, mediated by the video feedback process. The first case described (transcribed from the video footage) is an episode of arrival at the infant toddler center involving a child (Patrick, 32 months) and his mother, of Filipino origin.

It is 8.30 a.m. In the classroom, the educator is seated on a mat with a small group of five children, reading a picture book and showing the illustrations. The classroom door is opened from the outside; Patrick appears on the threshold, followed by his mother. The educator, stops reading, looks up, turning her head towards the them and exclaiming: "Oh, look who's arrived. Good morning. Come in!" Patrick takes some steps inside the classroom, with his upper-body and gaze directed towards the educator, while the mother stays outside, on the threshold, following her son with her gaze. Once the child has entered the room, he turns towards two classmates who are playing at the back of the room (in the opposite corner to the educator) and, skipping, goes towards them, turning his back to the educator, whose upper-body is turned towards him. The mother, remaining on the threshold, leans against the doorpost; she does not enter the room, but follows her son's movements with her head and gaze. When the child has

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reached his playmates, the mother smiles, stands away from the doorpost, turns her head towards the educator -who has straightened her upper body but continues to observe the child - and raising a hand in salute, steps back, closing the door behind her, and leaves.

The scene just described is a representative example of a transition ritual that is recognizable and relatively straightforward, although composed of a complex set of micro-movements. Patrick arrives at the infant toddler center already physically disengaged from his mother and precedes his mother in the *passage*: it is the child who enters the classroom, while the mother follows. When Patrick comes in, the educator prepares to receive the child-mother dyad and the mother stays at the door, outside of the boundary zone (or overlap between family and childhood service) dedicated to transition rituals at the infant toddler center. Patrick's attention is attracted by the other children, the peer group, and as soon as he enters, he turns towards them and joins them. The mother observes from the door, salutes, draws back and leaves.

The child-parent-educator dynamic seems clear: each of the actors moves in the space as though well familiar with the script of the ceremony. There are no signs of uncertainty. Patrick is secure in his movements as he makes the transition from one context to another, taking the initiative and guiding the action. The mother participates at a distance, while the educator supports the movements of the dyad. Nevertheless, the educator, when invited during the research to recall a transition episode that was particularly difficult and critical, had chosen Patrick's arrival, describing the mother's attitude as *rushed*. '*She arrives in the morning – she commented – puts him inside, passes him to me from the door, and never comes into the classroom*'. Differently to what might be suggested by the observation transcript, the educator did not use any terms denoting security, independence, fluidity of relational movements; the unsaid here was that separation should take place gradually, unhurriedly and through the mediation of an adult who enters the spaces of transition with the child and spends time there. However, symbolically, a mother's choice to stop outside of the physical space of the classroom could indicate not only "her haste to be gone", but also a form of "respect" (Sayad, 1999), or a way of staying in the background (Goffman, 1959) in relation to the "stage" represented by the space of the classroom, in which the protagonists are the children and the educators. The mother that arrives at the threshold already ready to hand her child over to the new context appears to be implementing a code of "vigilance from afar", rather than of "physical proximity", thus allowing her child the autonomy it requires to manage its own transition.

As we know, interpretations vary as a function of one's perspective and of the degree of attention paid to the micro-elements of which events are composed: this is

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what happened during the current study when the same educator (who had defined the mother's departure as *rushed*), when invited to view the video a second time, progressively softened and perhaps broadened her own interpretative frameworks.

Sometimes – she stated – I used to feel ill at ease with this mother, because for me the classroom is a space for welcoming [...], whereas she always had this thing of being rushed [...] and I didn't like that situation, I always said to myself: a child needs more time [...] but maybe for him it was fine like that too.

Changing perspective, applying a more selective focus of attention and engaging in a process of explaining to others, may all contribute to a shift in one's overall interpretation of a given event and therefore of the dynamics making up this relational experience. The scene remains the same, but the possible inferences about the interactional dynamics of which it is made up are modified. The next example concerns the arrival of a mother-child dyad (Luigi, 30 months and his mother) of Italian origin.

It is 8.35 a.m. when Luigi's mother appears at the threshold of the classroom, and with a hand resting on her son's back, pushes him to enter. The educator gets up (leaving the small group of children with whom she has been sitting on the mat), goes over to the dyad and greets them. The mother, handing the child's sweatshirt to the educator, stands near her and begins to ask questions about that afternoon's meeting. While the adults are speaking, Luigi, who had come into the room, goes back out into the corridor. His mother and the educator continue to converse. Suddenly, the mother turns her head towards the door and throwing a glance at her son, exhorts him to come back in: "Come on!", she exclaims. Luigi, head down, comes back to the door, remaining at the threshold. His mother then takes him by the shoulder and, pushing him into the classroom, says: "don't stay outside, come on". The educator leans her upper body towards Luigi and, looking towards him, smiles at him. The child comes into the classroom and sits down on the floor. The educator squats down beside him and asks him: "Hey, what's going on?" Luigi throws his soft toy on the floor, pushing it away from him with one hand. "See you this afternoon then?", his mother asks, addressing the educator. Melissa nods, stands up and says goodbye to the mother who returns the salute and, directing her gaze at her son says: "Bye Cookie". "Bye", replies the educator, as she leans her head towards the child. Other children, meanwhile, have come up to the door and, waving at the mother, close the door.

Breaking down the event, we can identify elements of rituality: the mother and child's entrance to the space of the transition (the "border zone" between the family and service: Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2004) and physical contact in the dyad that lasts from the moment they enter until the final moment of separation between mother and child. As soon as the pair arrive, the educator initiates an individual-

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ized reception: she greets them, gets up, goes over to them, makes herself available to interact with them, going on to pay particular attention to the parent with whom she has a long verbal exchange. Before the mother leaves and therefore before the effective passage of the child to the classroom, the child is recovered by the mother, after which the educator moves close to him, leaning over the child to elicit his involvement.

This sequence of actions formed a model of transition centred for the most part on the weaving of a dialogical exchange between the adults (educator-parent), to the extent that when the child (almost immediately) left the classroom, they appeared not to notice. The child's entry was mediated by the parent, while the educator followed the parent's lead. It was the mother who physically urged on the child (pushing him into the classroom both the first and the second time), asked the educator questions, spoke to her and maintained physical contact with the child.

The mother – commented the educator as she recalled the scene and reaffirmed her own action schemas – needed attention and a listening ear and I tried to cater for that.

As in the first case, in this second example the educator's interpretation changed when she was asked to view the images again while focusing on the micro-transitions and the *systemic* dynamics making up the total event. The words of the educator suggested the beginning of new ways of looking at the event and new processes of meaning attribution.

Before – she commented during the guided viewing – I would have been inclined to only look at Luigi's mother [...] to see if I had succeeded in reassuring her, [...] but now I have noticed other things: first of all I have realized that my welcome was more for the mother than for the child [...] I wasn't really there for him: I was totally taken up with the mother and I completely lost sight of the child.

The educator appeared to see herself as excessively oriented toward the adult or, we could say, with an over-emphasis on the educator-parent relational axis, dominated by concern for the parent (which could almost be interpreted as a paradoxical effect of the philosophy of participation). When the educator shifted her perspective, she was able to recompose the system and realize, as she herself commented, that she had “totally lost sight of the child, because [...] taken up with reassuring the mother”. “Never again should there be a scene like that” she concluded self-critically, putting back together the pieces of the puzzle and the dynamics of the interrelationships made visible by the video.

These examples, only two of the many collected in the course of the research, help us to focus on the complex phenomenology of the rituals involved in the transi-

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tion from home to infant toddler center. While the behaviors described above illustrate the cultural nature of the educational interactions acted out in emotionally complex situations, they oblige us to consciously rethink the role, positioning and interconnectedness of all the protagonists (educators, parents and children) in the complex spaces of co-participation and overlap between different educational spheres (familial-institutional). This becomes extremely critical in the current scenario of intercultural transition, which tends to highlight even more clearly than in the past the issue of synchrony or congruence between action-schemas and educational interpretations/orientations. For example, while parents and children are entering the infant toddler centre and getting ready to separate for the day, incomprehension and misunderstanding may arise, often due to the different cultural models underlying mutual expectations and the dividing out of time, spaces, roles and responsibilities, focus of attention, etc.

Anthropological research has shown that rituals become powerful when their deeper meanings are recognized by a given collectivity. Acquiring awareness of one's own implicit reference models and those of others, while learning to question what one had previously considered well-established from an educational viewpoint, is therefore the first step in designing educational actions that are mindful, rather than automatic, and truly intercultural.

Conclusions

The examples analyzed above suggest some final considerations. First, it is clear that the phenomenon of the home-infant toddler center *transition* exemplifies a broader issue of dialogue among cultures and social groups that requires educators – often the ideal (if not the only) interlocutors for parents in situations of fragmentation and educational uncertainty – to adopt behaviors that are sensitive to the cultural nature of developmental goals and the corresponding educational actions. Breaking down rituals into their component micro-processes can bring to light the meanings of the interactional exchanges, thereby allowing educators to identify new and more situated criteria for the development of truly intercultural behaviors. Second, the combined microanalysis of interactions (by observing and describing behaviors and actions) and of acted out representations (by explicitly stating the implicit underlying pedagogies) appears to offer further potential as a training method. The experience of breaking down from the inside the processes and phenomenology of highly consolidated rituals (both by viewing video footage of the actions, and through narrative reconstruction) facilitates work on both the interactional processes implemented by all the protagonists-actors in the event (children, parents, educators together) and the cultural visions underpinning ways of understanding, interpreting and acting out the passage of handing over and taking on responsibility for the child.

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The ultimate aim is to challenge habitual actions from an inside perspective, transforming the *border zone* between the family and the institution into a zone of intercultural *contact* and coeducation. This may imply reconsidering the spaces devoted to receiving the children and their families, time-frames and processes of disengagement-separation-handover-reunion, but also broader pedagogical themes such as autonomy, interdependence and sociality. Analyzing interactions at different levels (observational and representational), and from different points of view (i.e. taking into account the different educational cultures), can help transform even the most consolidated, sometimes quasi-automatic, rites into opportunities for intercultural negotiation, reciprocal observation and change. When these rituals are seen from an insider perspective they are often taken as part of daily life, preventing the participants from having a detailed and precise view of the situation. Immersion in the context and active participation in familiar events makes it difficult to critically decompose them and to view them clearly: it is harder to distinguish between what actually happened and what one thinks happened, and easier to confuse actions with intentions, experiences and interpretations. When the same rituals are seen from an outside perspective, or through the eyes of an *outsider*, they become recognizable indicators of educational styles following a script that makes them meaningful for a given community, but at the same time interesting or (alternatively) bizarre or unusual for the representatives of other communities. Nonetheless it is not easy to be aware of all this while actively participating in the “traffic of social interaction” (Goffmann, 1967, p.3) that characterizes daily life in complex social contexts, such as the early childhood services, in which emotions, pedagogies, expectations and the individual histories of the protagonists are interwoven and overlapping, giving rise, time and again, to new and unpredictable ecological configurations. Video-analysis of interactions is therefore a promising training method, because it reduces the distance between what we do and what we think we are doing or have done in a given situation, narrowing the gap between intentions and behaviors. When accompanied by critical reconstruction of one’s own interpretative models regarding the characteristics of a good interaction and a good *transition*, it opens up interesting spaces for intervention in terms of training from an intercultural perspective, as well pointing up the potential training benefits of conducting participatory research with early childhood educators.

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