Children of Romanian Migrants between “Here” and “There”: Stories of Home Attachment

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ABSTRACT

By analysing interviews from a larger qualitative study conducted in a Romanian village (Vulturu, Vrancea County) from the South-East region of the country, this paper explores the ways Romanian migrants’ children who were born in the country of origin but migrated to Italy or the so-called 1.5 Generation (Rumbaut 2002; 2012) talk about their ties with the home country. In other words, is Romania presented as more – or something else – than the original homeland?

The study analyses the concept of home attachment in terms of transnationalism understood as affective ties (Huynh and Yiu 2012; Paraschivescu 2011). Based on evidence from interview data a typology of attachment to the home country is outlined and further discussed. The results point to the conclusion that the issue of attachment to the home country is discursively constructed by respondents both explicitly and implicitly by multiple references to the family migration project and their immigrant status at destination. Moreover, I argue that the different types of attachment identified in the interviewees’ discourses are mediated by the subjective assessment of the integration experience into the host country.

Introduction

A major issue in the broader debate concerning the integration of migrants at destination refers to the extent to which the ‘transnational’ attachments of

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the first generation are transferred to their children or, in other words, to what extent do they develop or maintain any links with the country of origin.

On the one hand, a widely vehiculated hypothesis in the second-generation studies is that the children of migrants will break all ties with the home country as they will be assimilated into the host society (Kivisto 2001). The main assumption behind this statement is that the descendants of migrants will adopt the culture of the host society as it is promoted by the educational system and more valued in the society (Levitt and Waters 2001).

On the other hand, other scholars argue that migrants’ attachment to the homeland can be transferred to their children. The contacts with the country of origin, no matter how limited they may be, and the exposure to transnational practices in the household or community plays an important role in the transmission of attachment to the country of origin (Levitt and Waters 2001; Levitt 2004; Fouron and Glick-Schiller 2002; Somerville 2008). Living in a household or community impregnated with the influences of the country of origin, migrant children are exposed to the homeland culture (Levitt 2004). Although their participation in transnational practices may be less intense and frequent than that of their parents, their connection with the home country can be experienced through affective and symbolic ties in the form of affiliation to a common ethnic identity (Vertovec 2003; Ehrkamp 2005).

Following this theoretical debate, the paper aims at exploring the ways Romanian migrants’ children who were born in the country of origin but migrated to Italy with their families or the so-called ‘1.5 Generation’ (Rumbaut 2002; 2012) relate to the country of origin. In other words, is Romania presented as more – or something else – than the original homeland? What are the forms of attachment to home country invoked in their discourses?

In an attempt to explore these issues, I will begin by introducing some background information about the migration from the community of origin to Italy and the process of family reunification at destination. I further
discuss the relationship between transnationalism and home attachment. In the methodology section, information about the sample, the interview guide and the analytical approach is provided. Based on extensive evidence from interviews, a typology of discourses of attachment to the home country divided into strong, ambivalent and low attachment is outlined and further discussed in relation to subjective assessment of the integration experience into the receiving country.

Background: Romanian migration to Italy and family reunification

Although Romania has a short history of emigration, the Romanian migration to Western countries has expanded significantly in the last two decades, some estimates going as high as 3 million Romanian citizens living and working abroad, of whom more than one million reside in Italy (OECD 2014).

The migration from the village where I conducted my research can be placed in the larger socio-economic national context. The emergence of Romanian migration is closely linked to the major socio-economic changes that took place after the fall of the communist regime such as the restructuring of the national industry (Anghel 2008). In the context of the economic decline following the transition from centrally planned to market economy, that led to high unemployment rates and low living standards, many Romanians chose the path of migration to Italy as a ‘life strategy’ (Sandu 2000; 2010) in order to financially support the household.

The gradually increasing flow of migrants to Italy was due not only to the consolidation of migrant networks, but also to the political and mobility...
regulations changes within the EU. In this sense, two key moments are to be noted: January 2002, the removal of visa requirements for Schengen area for Romanian citizens and January 2007, Romania’s adherence to the EU.

Before 2002, due to their irregular status, Romanian migrants spent long periods of time apart from their families. Visits to the country of origin were rare and the channels of communication were limited. Following the process of regularisation carried out by the Italian state in 2002, when over 145,000 Romanians have benefited from this measure (Rossi and Botti 2010), migrants were able to legalize their status more easily and reunite their family at destination if they wished so. From now on, for some of the migrants the project of working abroad gradually changed from a temporary individual migration to family settlement at destination and the children left behind became a significant part of the movement between Romania and Italy.

In 2009, according to the ISTAT research ‘Households with foreign members: indicators of economic distress, 2009’ concerned with the living conditions of families with foreign members in Italy, 70% of the Romanian families residing in Italy (including single member families) comprised no minors, 27% comprised one (18.5%) or two (8.5%) minors, while only 2.6% comprised three or more minors (ISTAT 2011). Thus, almost one third of the Romanian families residing in Italy had at least one minor in their composition.

Although, the number of Romanian children who migrated to Italy in the last two decades is not precisely known, there are some data available that can help us make some estimates on the number of Romanian minors residing in Italy.

One source of data is the data recorded by the Italian Ministry of Public Instruction (MIUR) on the number of children with foreign citizenship by country of origin enrolled in an educational institution, ranging from nursery to secondary education. According to the Italian

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2 Although this data provides precious information, it must be noted that: (1) it does not include children less than 3 years old or children between 3 and 5 years old who are not
Ministry of Public Instruction the number of Romanian students increased continuously from only 1,408 in 1997/98 school year to 15,509 in 2002/03, 92,734 in 2007/08, and finally reached 154,605 in 2013/14 representing 19.26% of the total students with foreign citizenship (802,785) (source: MIUR data).

Another source of data is the data recorded by the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) concerning the births among foreign women by country of citizenship. The number of registered births among women with Romanian citizenship allows us to estimate the number of children who qualify as members of the second generation. According to ISTAT, between 2000 and 2013 were registered a total of approximately 132,000 births among women with Romanian citizenship, of which almost 58,000 in the last three years of the period of reference (2010 - 2013). In 2013, it was registered the highest number of births among women with Romanian citizenship, 19,492, representing almost 19% of the total births with at least one foreign parent (104,100) (source: ISTAT data).

Nonetheless, trying to make estimates about the children who migrated with their families we face two main challenges. Firstly, the available MIUR data does not allow a clear distinction between children born in Italy and those born in Romania who migrated to Italy with their parents. Secondly, the involvement of children in phenomena such as return and circular migration means that there are children (whether born in Romania or Italy) returning to the country of origin or moving between the two countries and their educational systems for short periods of time.

**Migration from Vulturu**

Vulturu, part of the commune with the same name, is located in Vrancea County, in the South-East region of the country. The region is characterized...
by high rates of migration, predominantly to Italy and developed on networks (based mainly on kinship ties) (Sandu 2006). The village, situated in the proximity (22 km distance) of the municipality town (Focșani), has a population of approximately 3,350 inhabitants (according to the last census conducted in 2011).

As stated by Vlase (2011, 2013) who conducted an extensive study in the same village between 2000 and 2010, the villagers’ migration to Italy began in the mid 90’s as a consequence of the economic decline the village and the neighbouring urban areas faced in the post-socialist period. The ‘typical’ project of migration in the studied community is a migration initiated as a result of material shortcomings, guided by economic goals and designed as temporary. At first, the migration was an irregular movement and mainly a ‘male process’. The first villagers to migrate left for Italy in risky conditions and with high costs. Most of them settled in Rome or its surrounding areas and, as a result of the established networks, many villagers are still residing in Rome (Vlase 2011; 2013).

According to my data, in the case of the migrants from Vulturu, family reunification at destination was gradually achieved several years after the departure of the first family member, the man. In the typical scenario, the man was first followed by his wife and only afterwards, after the couple achieved an economic stability at destination, they brought their children in Italy. By bringing the children at destination, the family original return plans changed, further deepening the uncertainties concerning the moment of return.

Affective transnationalism and home attachment

This study analyses home attachment in terms of transnationalism conceptualized as affective ties and thus, it embraces a broad understanding of transnationalism (Saucedo and Itzigsohn 2002) in contrast with the more restrictive definitions of the process such as the one proposed by Portes, Guarzino and Landolt (1999) who argue that ‘it is preferable to delimit the
concept of transnationalism to occupations and activities that require regular and sustained social contacts over time across national borders for their implementation’ (Portes, Guarnizo, and Landolt 1999, 219). In this article, transnationalism is viewed as comprising different types of linkages across borders that vary according to intensity and frequency, from concrete practices to virtual ties.

Focusing our attention on the affective dimension of the process is essential to understanding migrants’ transnational ties. The intensity of attachment to the country of origin could be the answer to the question why some migrants engage in transnational activities and others do not, and even the driving force behind diasporas.

From a certain point of view, transnational practices can be understood as a behavioural expression of multiple attachments. Nevertheless, the meanings the migrants attribute to transnational practices can be more important than the actual involvement in concrete practices, since engagement in various activities across borders can be a result of community norms or family obligations (Levitt and Waters 2001). In this sense, the distinction between ‘ways of being’ and ‘ways of belonging’ proposed by Glick Schiller and Levitt (2004) is useful for understanding the ways migrants engage in transnational spaces. While ways of being refers to ‘the actual social relations and practices that individuals engage in rather than to the identities associated with their actions’, ways of belonging refers to ‘practices that signal or enact an identity which demonstrates a conscious connection to a particular group (...) they combine action and an awareness of the kind of identity that action signifies’ (Glick Shiller and Levitt 2004, 1010).

The affective dimension of transnationalism is a less explored facet of this process, transnationalism usually being conceptualized in terms of concrete practices (whether economic, political or socio-cultural). However, as stressed by Burrell (2003), ‘transnational connections do not have to be visible or tangible in order to exist. Memories and emotions can be the most powerful links to the homeland; the strongest transnational connections are
sometimes those that are rarely acted out, voiced or expressed, but simply felt’ (Burrell 2003, 333).

According to Huynh and Yiu (2012) transnationalism understood as affective ties refers to ‘the lived experiences and connections – real or imagined – that immigrants maintain with the homeland’ (Huynh and Yiu 2012, 21). In other words, whether or not migrants are involved in concrete transnational practices, they often experience the ties with the country of origin on an emotional level ‘through memory, nostalgia or imagination’ (Glick Shiller and Levitt 2004).

Along the same line, Paraschivescu (2011) argues that for a better understanding of transnational links, we need to focus on the subjective experience of migrants. In her study conducted on Romanian migrants living in UK and Canada, the author distinguishes between the material and the emotional dimension of transnationalism. While the material dimension refers to concrete transnational practices, the affective dimension concerns the inbetweenness status of the migrant caught between two societies and transformations the self undergoes through the migration process (Paraschivescu 2011).

Therefore, the attachment to the country of origin can manifest itself at a material level through the frequency of transnational practices, and on an emotional level through the way the ties with the homeland are experienced.

**Methodology**

The analysed interviews are part of a larger qualitative study conducted in Vulturu village (Vrancea County). In the summer of 2013 and 2014 I conducted 40 semi-structured interviews with adult migrants (30) and their children (10) with different periods of living abroad during the family holiday spent in the home village.

This paper focuses on the children of migrant villagers who can be considered as being part of the 1.5 Generation. Basically, the 1.5 Generation refers to those who have migrated to another country during childhood or
early adolescence. Being socialized in both spaces, members of the 1.5 Generation are different from both the first and second generation of migrants. On the one hand, these young people retain the memory of the country of origin, since early socialization took place in the country of origin. On the other hand, their socialization process continues in the new country.

Hence, the members of the 1.5 Generation adapt more easily than the first generation to the culture of the receiving society, but they still have to make efforts to conciliate the double cultural standards and deal with the stigma associated to the immigrant status (Portes and Rumbaut 2005; Rumbaut 2002; 2004; 2012).

All the youngsters interviewed left Romania to join their parents in Italy before adolescence, after they had been for several years in the care of their grandparents. Their age at departure varied from 7 to 13 years old. At the time of the interview, all respondents were living with their parents in the family household and were still attending an educational institution (high school, college or vocational courses). Their age varied from 15 to 22 years.

Regarding their family background, the first member of the family to migrate - the father, left the home country during the 90’s. All the parents had secondary education (high school or vocational school) and almost all of them shared a similar occupational status at destination differentiated by gender - the father was employed as worker in the construction sector and the mother in the domestic sector. Amongst the parents of those interviewed there were also two couples (Veronica and Elena’s parents) who at some point left Rome and moved in other regions of the country where they found new jobs as factory workers.

Based on the accounts and assessments of the interviewees, I concluded that various transnational practices (e.g. media consumption from the country of origin, practicing traditions, celebrating Romanian holidays, communicating with relatives at home, visits to the home village) were being maintained at the household level. Therefore, the respondents were exposed to and to some extent engaged in transnational practices at the
household level. Although they may not be transnational migrants in the strict sense of the word, the children of migrants can be regarded, as suggested by Levitt (2009), as potential transnational migrants since they have the ‘social skills and competencies’ to engage in transnational practices on their own as adults (Levitt 2009, 1226).

The respondents were selected using the snowball method and resorting to the help of key informants and the person who offered me accommodation during my stay in the village. It must be noted that there are some limitations that stem from the method of selection and the sample size and composition. First of all, since the interviews were conducted at origin, the sample comprised only youngsters who join their parents on their summer holiday in the home village (presumably there are youngsters who refuse to spend their holiday in Romania with their families or there are entire families who are not interested in spending their holiday in the country of origin). Secondly, the study draws on a small sample since those who qualify as members of the 1.5 Generation represent a small category of migrants and, as a consequence, the target respondents were hard to recruit. Finally, because of the disproportionate sampling by gender (8 females, 2 males), we cannot examine gender patterns in the respondents’ discourses.

The interview guide was structured around several major themes that allow the pursuit of the interviewee’s personal history: the family’s history of migration, the period spent in the care of grandparents, the departure to Italy, the period of accommodation at destination: learning the language, the adjustment at school, interactions inside and outside the migrant network: interactions with other villagers, co-ethnics, and natives at destination, communication at home, description of neighbourhood area: distribution of nationalities, the existence of Romanian grocery stores and other establishments in the residential area, experiences of discrimination, maintaining socio-cultural transnational practices: visits to the home country, media consumption from the country of origin, practicing traditions, celebrating Romanian holidays, parish attendance, consumption of Romanian products, the use of mother tongue in everyday conversations,
return plans and home attachment. In addition to the explicit questions concerning the attachment to the country of origin and destination (‘To what extent do you feel attached to Romania or Italy?’ or ‘Where do you feel more at home?’), the questions concerning socio-cultural transnational practices were very useful in exploring the studied issue, since this type of activities are ‘more affective and less instrumental’ than political or economic activities (Saucedo and Itzigsohn 2002, 768).

Concerning the approach used to analyse the interview data, my analysis examines both the way the interviewees narrate their own experiences and the ‘small stories’ (Georgakopoulou 2006) they tell about other Romanian migrants. What are these small stories? The term can be understood literally as it designates short stories, but also metaphorically, marking both the orientation towards the micro-experiences of the social actors and the thematic concern for small talk. In such stories the protagonist can be either the narrator himself or other characters and that what is said do not necessarily follow a chronological order.

Results

Although the respondents’ direct contacts with the country of origin are limited, they retain some memories preceding migration or memories of the holidays spent in the home village and a picture of Romania assembled from their parents or other relatives’ stories, but also from culturally available discourses (whether dominant or alternative).

We can even say that, to some extent, the country of origin is an ‘imagined construct’ for the interviewees, in a sense similar to Anderson’s view of nations as ‘imagined communities’ (Anderson 1991). This idea is underlined by Fouron and Glick Schiller (2002), who state that migrants ‘often dream of a homeland non-existent in real memories’ (Fouron and Glick-Schiller 2002, 168).

Strong attachment. Some of the respondents’ discourses reveal a strong attachment to Romania. They invoke strong emotions when talking
about their links with the country of origin. The main expressions of attachment to the country are the longing for the country and the association of the concept of ‘home’ with the country of origin.

At the same time, respondents’ attachment to the home country becomes obvious through the language they use - the use of terms such as ‘home’ and ‘my country’ to refer to Romania and structures of self-identification such as ‘we, Romanians’, ‘my fellow Romanians’ that suggest a collective notion of belonging and the affiliation to the Romanian migrant community in Italy.

An illustrative case is Veronica’s discourse, aged 20 at the time of the interview in 2013. She joined her parents in Italy at the age of 13, in 2006, after her father left in 1995 and her mother, five years later, in 2000. Since she left the country of origin in early adolescence, after a prolonged socialization process in the home country, migration meant for her parting from a familiar environment and loved ones (grandparents, classmates, and friends) and also a difficult time of adjusting to a new environment. During the interview, she expressed the desire to return to Romania, to live in the home village and to pursue a post-secondary school for nurses in the nearby town, Focșani. At the time of the interview, Veronica lived with her family in Regione delle Marche (Central Italy), in a neighbourhood with a low concentration of Romanians. For Veronica, the attachment to the home country became stringent under the influence of migration:

‘[...] Many of my [Romanian] friends who went to college, many want to leave the country, because of the level of wages, because, as they say themselves, you are not appreciated... Instead, we, who have left Romania, we feel homesick... You don’t think that much about money, I mean you start thinking about your own family...’

At the time of the interview Veronica was still studying and she had no actual work experience except the school summer practice as a playground supervisor. Most likely, her assertion reflects the way she views

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3 All the respondents have received fictitious names in order to ensure their anonymity.
4 The assessment low or high concentration of Romanians in the living area was made by the respondents.
her parents’ work experience at destination. In 2011, when her mother lost her job, her family underwent a period of financial hardship and they had to live for almost a year on just one income, the father’s salary:

‘My father had to work Saturdays and Sundays, doing other work on the side, because it was not easy to live on one salary.’

Her attachment is also expressed through the preference for the company of Romanians. She understands living in an area with a low concentration of Romanian migrants as a lack of familiarity:

‘[...] When I was in Rome I felt like was in Romania! There were whole apartment buildings full with Romanian neighbours! Maybe you weren’t so accepted, but if spent your everyday next to a Romanian and tie a friendship, you would have felt better... I cried when I left Rome, I spent only a week there and I felt almost at home.’

Talking about her short visit to Rome, Veronica outlines what a familiar environment means to her: the company of co-ethnics appears as a condition for feeling at home. Also, she presents the relationships she developed with the natives at destination as being unsatisfactory due to cultural differences between the two societies in terms of intimacy and familiarity of friendship and neighbourly relations. Moreover, for her being a stranger was a constant obstacle in establishing strong relationships with native schoolmates.

The preference for the company of co-ethnics is underlined by other respondents too, including Laura:

‘I feel more at ease talking with Romanians ... I have nothing against Italians in the end we all live there... but... I do not know, I feel more at ease hanging out with fellow Romanians.’

Laura (f., 20) joined her parents in Italy in 2003 at the age of 10 years after her father left in 1994 and her mother two years later, in 1996. At the time of the interview she was living with her parents in Rome, in a neighbourhood with a high concentration of immigrants, including Romanians, together with a part of her extended family. Despite the presence of a large part of her family at the destination, she says she does not feel at home in Italy. For her, the notion of ‘home’ corresponds to a
single space, that of the country of origin. Even after living for ten years in Italy and spending her adolescence in this country, she confesses that he does not feel ‘at home’ in the host country:

‘I do not feel at home ... I’m not saying no, yes, we have a good living, or sort of... maybe here is worse, I do not know, but ... I do not feel at home [there]! So when I come home, when I come to Romania, I’m ready to ... I say I will remain here! We live with the hope that we will come back...’

The strong orientation to the country of origin is located at an emotional level: ‘On the one hand, you’re trying to get used to it, on the other your heart tells you not to stay any longer’. And, at the centre of her attachment lies the notion of belonging and origin understood in terms of root and the territory of the country:

I: ‘So what draws you here?’
R: ‘The old parental house. Here I grew up ... I do not know, I said, I just feel at home here. Wherever I am, I think that even if I was in Cluj, if someone would send me there, even if I don’t know anyone there, but I’m still in Romania! I know I can get along with the other person, because he is a fellow Romanian... we may have the same mentality...’

As argued by Burrell (2003) the territory continues to exercise a powerful influence in the process of migrants’ identity construction, providing strong links with the country of origin. According to the author, the territory ‘remains at the heart of the transnational equation, with the homeland as the physical and emotional focus of emigrant transnationalism’ (p. 323), being ‘an embodiment of national identity’ (Burrell 2003).

Laura, like Veronica, confesses that she thought many times to return alone in Romania, but the scenario of an eventual separation from her parents stopped her from making this step:

‘I think we would make a living here too, if we were to return ... And I told my mom: Let me leave and if it doesn’t work out I will return back to you! I know where to return... she said: Suit yourself !, But I’ve stayed without them and now I don’t know if my heart will let me stay apart from them again.’

Laura’s desire to return to the country, on the one hand, and to be with her
parents, on the other hand, creates uncertainty about the future course of action.

Ambivalent attachment. Ana’s (aged 16 at the time of the interview) discourse concerning the country of origin and destination reveals an ambivalent attachment as a negotiated belonging to both societies. She joined her parents in Italy (Rome) at the age of 7 in 2004 after her father left in 1999 and her mother one year later. Although she did not spend an extensive period of socialization in the home country and left for Italy before joining school, she maintained strong ties at origin. Unlike Veronica and Laura for whom the notion of ‘home’ corresponds to a single space, that of the country of origin, Ana elaborates on the notion of home stating that she also feels connected to the Italian city (Rome) and the neighbourhood she lives in:

‘[...] There (in Rome) is also as if is my home, because I have been living there for 8 years, but ... I do not know, it's better in my country ... I have my own house, my grandparents by my side ... I do not know ... I’m surrounded by all of them! ... Because here I leave some behind and it's very hard to leave them. And over there I leave a few anyway!’

Discussing a possible scenario in which Ana could return to Romania to enrol to university, I followed up on the subject:

I: ‘Do you think you would miss Italy when you were to come to live in Romania?’

A: ‘Yes, yes, yes! I really miss it! [...]In the summer, even if staying two months, I think that I miss going to the park ... the park where I grew up, to say so ... I spent my entire childhood in the park and in the area surrounding... sometimes I miss the park because... when I’m sad or when I want to be alone I go to the park. Here when I am sad ... I’m sitting on the stairs! Aha, yes! And ... yes! I miss the neighbourhood! The areas where I hang out, the centre of Rome, because I hang out there very often, I take walks through the town centre ... hanging out in the park, with all the fresh air ... Yeah, I think I would miss Italy!’

The way Ana speaks about the notion of home and attachment to one country or another is an example of belonging negotiated in relation to both societies, showing that transnational links are not mutually exclusive. The
way she speaks of ‘here’ and ‘there’ shows that migrants can develop multiple attachments in the form of a sense of belonging to both spaces, but also the ambivalent nature of this attachment.

The nostalgia and emotional ties are maintained through the visits to the country of origin, which allow her to maintain strong connections with those who stay behind. For example, the departure at the end of summer holidays is a ‘difficult’ moment for Ana because she still maintains close relations at home:

‘When I leave Vulturu... it is really hard to leave! So I don’t want to leave because I leave behind my grandparents, cousins, I have friends and ... I’m thinking I will not see them for a year and it is likely I will stay just one month in the summer here and it is really hard! And that’s why I said that ... I want to move to Romania!’

As suggested by Culic (2013), the oscillation between here and there is often translated into a state of ambivalence and implies the emotional efforts of migrants caught between two worlds (Culic 2013). For Ana, this double attachment is also a conflicting one. Those who are part of the network of contacts, family and loved ones are divided between two spaces, and this deepens the dilemma of belonging.

Motivating her desire to return, Ana highlights the difficulties posed by migration to another country. The life in Italy is not cheap and her parents have to work long hours, especially since the migration project is guided by economic goals. The return appears as the discursive solution to the difficulties of life in Italy:

‘[...] For me, I do not know, I’m thinking also about them [my parents]. I think about them often ... because it is very hard for me and my parents! And I do not ... I do not know ... I want to move here both for them and for me, but for them in the sense that they will not struggle anymore, even if they no longer have a job, they will not struggle to make money ... and so ... it would be better if we came back here. They have their home... yet they will manage to make a living. There you have to pay the rent, if you don’t have money you’re gonna be kicked out...’

Thus, the desire to return to Romania appears differently in the
analysed interviews. While for Veronica and Laura the desire return is fuelled by the feeling of being a stranger in another country or the lack of familiarity, for Ana the return appears as a solution to the difficulties experienced by their parents and attributed to migration. In her case the ‘dream of returning home’ is practically a family project, not an individual one.

**Low attachment.** The discourses of some of the respondents, such as Iulian and Elena are disengaged when talking about the country of origin, revealing a low attachment towards the country of origin. The first respondent, Iulian (m, 20 years old) joined his parents in Italy at the age of 9, in 2004, after his father left in 1993 and her mother in 1996. At the time of the interview he was living with his family in Rome, in an area with a high concentration of Romanians and attended a technical university. The second respondent, Elena (f., 22 years old) joined her parents in Italy at the age of 10, after her father left in 1993 and her mother in 1997. At the time of the interview, she lived with her family near Venice, in an area with a low concentration of Romanians and attended a law school.

For them, Romania is only the original homeland where they could never imagine returning to live their lives. The two interviewees discursively claimed a successful integration in Italy, along with a certain distancing from Romania. This distancing is expressed by rejecting the parental model of relating to Romania, by rejecting certain transnational practices (e.g. media consumption, the use of Romanian language in everyday conversations) or by refusing to socialize in groups composed (only) of co-ethnics.

For example, Elena, unlike her parents, rejects the idea of establishing relations based on common ethnic origin:

‘[…] I have no sympathy if one is Romanian or Italian or something... Yet they [my parents] yes, they do have. It seems that when they speak only Romanian they feel more comfortable than when they speak Italian, so... well I understand them, of course.’

Thus, she distances herself from the way in which her parents relate to their ethnic origin. Her relationship with language also marks a distancing
from the country of origin, given that the use of native language is a central element in the promotion and preservation of ethnic identity. Transnational migrants prefer to use their mother tongue family or friends even if they are fluent in the host society’s language in search of a sense of familiarity (Lu 2011). Both Iulian and Elena emphasized the ease of communicating in Italian rather than in Romanian. Although this is an inherently consequence of the enrolment in the Italian national educational system, it also indicates a distancing from the culture of the country of origin.

Elena makes a distinction between the way she and her father experience their ties with Romania, bringing into discussion the way they relate with the mother tongue. While for her father the use of Romanian language is almost a part of his identity – ‘you can better see his personality when he speaks in Romanian’, because he can express better in Romanian, for Elena communication becomes difficult when she must speak exclusively in Romanian:

‘[…] So, well... my father speaks Italian very well, especially my father, but ... he communicates better in Romanian, so as to speak ... you can better see his personality when he speaks in Romanian. But not in my case... as I said... sometimes I can’t find my words and I’m stuck... I cannot say what I want to say...’

Moreover, the obligation to speak only Romanian during the summer holidays spent in the country is seen as a constraint:

‘When you tell me to speak Romanian! That I must control myself somehow.... It sucks! I feel constrained, I feel that I cannot talk at ease ... maybe I speak Romanian many times, but I say something in Italian too...’

Both interviewees confessed that when visiting Romania they often feel like foreigners, being faced to a lifestyle different from that of the host society. While Veronica and Ana present the alternative of living in Romania as preferable to the life in Italy and the holidays in Romania as a long-awaited moment, Iulian and Elena’s discourses bring forward the projection of their life in Italy. For example, during the interview Iulian repeatedly emphasized that ‘his life is in Italy’:
My life is there, you know? My life! If I were to come back here... When I come here in the summer if I don’t have anything to do, I immediately become bored. There [in Italy] I don’t know... there is no boredom. Over there is my life, you know?’

For Iulian returning to Romania is not an option that he would take it into consideration, regardless of any decision his parents would make concerning the return to the country of origin because his life is strongly anchored in Italy.

Claiming a successful integration into the Italian society is a form of distinction, in contrast with other Romanian migrants in Italy. This distinction is reinforced by portraying migrants as having a deviant or conspicuous behaviour. Moreover, they repeatedly refer to migrants Romanians in Italy as a group to which they did not belong. For example, Iulian, although he is living in a Romanian neighbourhood and he has been working since the age of 14 as a DJ in a Romanian discotheque in Rome, he rejects the idea of establishing relations with Romanians:

‘In Rome, there, I do not like to enter into conversation with Romanians’. [I: ‘Why?’]

‘Uh ... They are not highly regarded, you know? And... I talk only with those who are honest... who have been living there [in Italy] for a long time and they are attending a school and other stuff. The people who are working... who are in Italy for work... I do not like them so I do not enter in conversation with them.’

For him, interactions with Romanian migrants are to be avoided. In choosing the Romanians with whom he would be willing to socialize, Iulian operates a distinction between those who migrated for work and those who live in Italy, experiencing the Italian lifestyle:

‘In contrast, the Romanians who came to Italy think only about money, right? To make money! This is why they go there, they do not go to live there. Instead, I’m going to live there, I’m not going there to make money.’

This precaution is motivated by attributing a deviant behaviour to other Romanian migrants:

‘You can meet any kind of person, you see them at the disco, but they
may be someone who steals or a girl on the street and you cannot know that…’

In Elena’s view, Romanian migrants are easily recognizable in public space due to a conspicuous consumption. She categorizes migrants’ cars as tasteless:

[About migrants’ cars] ‘Uh more expensive, but ... peasant like, so to speak, you know? For example, they have tinted windows, stuff like that. You see them all around Italy and they have Romanian names attached! Now this is the latest fashion, the fashion to take the car for a ride...’

Unlike the other respondents, Iulian and Elena do not identify themselves as being part of the Romanian migrant community in Italy. On the contrary, in their discourses we can observe a distancing from the ‘typical’ Romanian migrant in Italy.

**Conclusions and discussion**

The paper aimed to explore the way in which the issue of home attachment is raised in interviews by Romanian 1.5 Generation members (Rumbaut, 2002; 2012). Based on the interviewees’ discourses I constructed a typology of ways of relating to home country divided into strong, ambivalent and low attachment to the home country. Strong attachment to the home country is expressed through the longing for the country, by a projected return to Romania and the preference for the company of co-ethnics. Ambivalent attachment consists of a negotiated belonging to both societies as a result of the strong links developed at both origin and destination. Low attachment to the home country is highlighted by projecting future plans in the host country, by rejecting the parental model of relating to Romania, the lack of interest in transnational practices or the refusal to socialize in groups of co-ethnics.

Although all the youngsters interviewed were exposed to various transnational practices in the household and they were to some extent engaged in some of these practices (e.g. communicating with relatives left
behind, using mother tongue at home, visits at origin, celebrating Romanian holidays, etc.), their discourses about what these practices and the country of origin mean to them varied according to their attachment to the country of origin. The fact that transnational practices are not always the behavioural expression of a strong attachment to the home country suggests that the concept of attachment could provide the key to better understand the meanings migrants attribute to transnational practices and their linkages to the homeland.

The results of this inquiry lead to the conclusion that attachment to the home country is constructed discursively by multiple references to the immigrant status and by a subjective assessment of the integration experience at destination.

First of all, home attachment appears in the interviews closely linked with the migration episode and the immigrant status in the host country, with implications on how the experience of alterity is understood. While those with strong home attachment identify themselves with the Romanian migrant community in Italy, the lack of identification with the group of Romanian migrants in Italy reinforces the distancing from the home country for those with low attachment.

Secondly, the various forms of attachment are mediated by different subjective assessments of the integration experience at destination. Those with a low attachment to their country of origin position themselves as being well integrated into the host society and as being different from the ‘typical’ Romanian migrant in Italy. In the case of those with a strong orientation towards the home country, we noticed a negative subjective evaluation of the integration experience at destination, understood in terms of lack of a sense of belonging and familiarity, and a perceived rejection by the wider society.

Therefore, the way the experience of incorporation to the new country is subjectively assessed seems to have shaped belongingness to the country of origin and destination for the interviewees. These findings are corroborated by other scholars who suggested that transnational ties are the
result of the negative experiences of incorporation in the host society and a
negative context of reception such as a hostile attitude towards immigrants
and actual experiences of discrimination (Rumbaut 2008; Diehl and Schnell
2006).

Nonetheless, these results bear some limitations inherent to the
research method and data analysis. The paper focused on the variations
between respondents’ discourses that revealed a pattern between the
assessments of the experience of incorporation into the host country and the
way attachment is expressed. Other factors explaining why the children of
migrants develop ties with the country of origin that have been emphasized
in the migration literature, such as the role of family and migrant
community in preserving the culture of the country of origin and
encouraging children to engage in transnational activities (Levitt & Waters,
2001) or the impact of the life stage on attitudes towards transnational
engagement (Levitt 2004; Levitt and Jaworsky 2007), are to be explored in
future research.

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