



Childcare and Relationship of Trust. The Au Pair Experience as a Case of Transnational Collaborative Collective Action

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Abstract: *In 1969, the Council of Europe defined the Au Pair program: “the temporary reception by families, in exchange for certain services, of young foreigners who come to improve their linguistic and possibly professional knowledge as well as their general culture by acquiring a better knowledge of the country where they are received (Stubberud 2015:39)”. An aspect of this form of collaborative collective action (Tejerina 2010) particularly interesting to highlight is the relationship of trust that develops within the experience. In fact, in this case, trust– as an expectation of positive experiences for the actor, matured under conditions of uncertainty, but in the presence of a cognitive and / or emotional load so as to outbalance the threshold of mere hope (Mutti 1998:42) – is created in a very special process in which such a large number of elements cross each other that it is not possible to reduce the definition of its incentives only to extrinsic means.*

The research that - through two focus groups - focuses on the experiences of 5 mothers and 5 girls who participated in the au pair program, on the one hand aims to reconstruct the different phases that the protagonists have lived and on the other hand has the purpose of stimulating the construction of the meaning of trust.

First of all, the Au Pair program operates, to a certain degree, as a “second primary socialization” where trust is continually negotiated on the line of interaction, privacy and “almost coercive prejudice” (Simmel in Mutti 1998: 48) “which is reflected in the fact that the subject who receives trust does not betray it because he has to show that he is worthy of the trust granted.

Furthermore, if, at the level of generalized trust, confidence, tolerance and curiosity are the prerequisites for the protagonist’s ability to have positive expectations towards strangers even in conditions of uncertainty; at the level of focused trust, the factors that determine the choice of partners are: on the side of mothers, personality, age, experience on childcare, language skills, degree of confidentiality, class and culture of the au pair girl and, on the side of the girls, mentality, age and number of children of the host family.

Lastly, as regards the means to be relied upon to participate in the program, referrals and specific websites are the preferred options. With regard to the agencies, it appears that the high cost is not adequately rewarded nor does it allow direct confrontation in case of problems, particularly since it is difficult for the Agency to be neutral when there is a different hierarchical relationship with girls and families.

Keywords: *Trust, social capital, family, relationship, social cohesion*

1. Introduction

Beyond the needs derived from work or other reasons related to lifestyle, the behaviour of families who use the help of strangers to care for their children comes from a concept that is the

basis of everyday life: trust. As Simmel (1984:263) points out, in fact: “society would disintegrate in the absence of trust between people. There are very few relationships that are really based on what one knows of the other in a verifiable way, very few relationships would last beyond a certain time if the trust was not so strong or sometimes even stronger than logical and even ocular checks.”

Often - already after the first months of a child's life - families turn to what is called an intentionally constructed organization - such as day care - which, however, providing incentives only through extrinsic means such as the payment of a salary, has the problem of not being able to give certainty on how to produce altruistic interest in those who receive incentives (Coleman 2005). In this case, it can be assumed that mothers probably trust these organizations as they have the expectation that there will be “predictable, correct and cooperative behaviour, based on commonly shared norms, by its members (Fukuyama 1996:40)” within the community.

In any case, there are many alternatives to the classic organizations or figures that take care of the children, and among these a possibility is to join the Au Pair Program. Typically, these are tasks such as childcare and help in carrying out some household chores in exchange for a small reward: jobs that, often coming to be attributed to the female gender, mean that in most cases they are young people, unmarried women and without children (Øien 2009 and Stubberud 2015).

2. Theoretical Framework

According to Mutti (1998:42), trust is: “an expectation of positive experiences for the actor, matured under conditions of uncertainty, but in the presence of a cognitive and / or emotional load so as to outbalance the threshold of mere hope.”

With regard to this definition, it should be noted that, at the moment when this threshold is exceeded, hope is not cancelled but maintains a dialectical relationship with trust and, in fact, through the hopeful trust one is able to give reason to trust in those risky contexts characterized by the absence of knowledge of others' reliability (Mc Geer 2008). In this regard, Brundia (2012:21): “hope does not imply the inability to recognize oneself as limited beings, quite the opposite: to hope implies recognizing the limit of each agent and recognizing at the same time in relationships with others, the origin of new possibilities of existence”.

Secondly, Mutti (1998:42) points out that trust lies, cognitively, in an intermediate zone between complete knowledge and complete ignorance because, as pointed out by Simmel (1989:299), “whoever knows completely does not need to trust, those who do not know at all can not reasonably trust”. The fiduciary expectation intervenes - therefore - on the uncertainty replacing the missing information, or reducing the complexity from excess of information, with a form of “internal certainty” that has the value of positive reassurance with respect to contingent events and experiences.

The *au pair* experience represents a form of collaborative collective action (Tejerina, 2010): “the group of practices and formal and informal interactions that take place among individuals, collectives or associations that share a sense of belonging or common interests, that



collaborate and are in conflict with others, and that have the intent of producing or precluding social change through the mobilization of certain social sectors.” In this type of actions trust between subjects is at the center of the experience and, given the impossibility of developing the complete knowledge of the actors present, families adopt a fiduciary behaviour towards the au pairs on the basis of different factors (Brundia 2012): the traits of their personality (dispositional trust), the probabilistic calculation (knowledge-based trust), the convergence of interests (encapsulated trust). However, a hypothesis could be that families and girls who rely on the Au Pair Program are equipped, first of all, with the generalized trust that allows them to have positive expectations towards strangers even under conditions of uncertainty. And, what generalized interpersonal trust is?

Interpersonal trust is defined “as the expectation of *ego* that *alter* will not manipulate communication or, more specifically, that will provide an authentic representation, not partial or mendacious, of one’s own role behaviour and identity (Mutti 1998:40).” At this juncture, we are in risk situations in the strict sense in which, unlike the situations of danger, the actor perceives that his actions may be responsible for positive, but also negative effects: indeed, these are situations in which there are the possibility of exit from the relationship and at least there exists the perception of being able to influence, with its own behaviour, on the events (Luhmann 1989). This seems to happen in the *au pair* experience: in fact, if *host families* can affect the situation through the rules that they establish, *au pairs* can influence through their own behaviour.

Furthermore, some researches point out that the people who say “most people are trustworthy” are basically optimists and their optimism is composed of various elements: a good level of self-esteem and self-confidence; the conviction of being able to control one’s own environment and one’s own future; an inclusive vision of the society according to which strangers appear trustworthy (Mutti 1998 and Pelligra 2007). In other words, we are within that social capital of reciprocity of acting according to conscience that derives from the circle of ethical recognition of the family (Mutti 1998 and Pizzorno 2001). However, Mutti (1998) wishes to clarify that even the socialization experiences subsequent to the primary one count.

In almost all cases, the relationship between families and au pairs does not develop directly but there is a third party that, in addition to relating them, often guarantees the reliability of both. The need for a third party is well pointed out by Coleman (2005), who recognizes the need for a third-party intermediary to allow the necessary closure so that “trust reaches the level corresponding to the reliability of the people on whom one must rely.” For this reason, the so-called *spreaders of trust* (Mutti 1998) were developed. They are individuals and institutions, private or public, such as Au Pair agencies or specialized websites.

3. A Trusted Person. From Selecting the Partner to Building the Relationship of Trust

O’Neil (2003:31) writes: “To trust oneself does not mean to put oneself in the hands of others without criteria, but to believe or not to believe someone for valid reasons.” But what are these good reasons to trust? Mutti (1998:47) points out that some concern the characteristics of the receiver and the one who grants trust and others the nature and extent (content and space-

time) of what trust relies on. Regarding the ascribed characteristics of the *au pairs*, some families look for young women of similar social classes who can offer the same level of education that the host family (Geserick 2012:52) while others rely on members of ethnic groups because they recognize them special gifts of caregiving (Macdonald 2012).

Then, one of the first steps in building the relationship of trust is the definition of rules within the houses and this happens because, as underlined by Mutti (1998:47), “the level of uncertainty characteristic of the relationship of trust depends not only on the existence of social contexts without regulatory structures, but also by the possibility of interpretative manipulation of the existing system of rules”.

Cox (2010), in particular, has analysed the rules that are established by the English families regarding the *au pairs*’ guests noting that 89% of *au pairs* can receive visits from friends, but the quota is considerably reduced if they are boyfriends (59%).

Eventually, we must ask ourselves what are the good reasons for not betraying the trust of those who have granted it.

In addition to instrumental reasons such as the presence of sanctions if the rules are not respected or that *enforceable trust* (Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993) for which the two subjects internalize rules for the instrumental purpose of maintaining a good reputation with a third party (feedbacks); there may be reasons that derive from the ethical recognition of the person, so therefore one would no longer recognize himself if he did otherwise (Pizzorno 2001). Then “the trust we receive, underlines Simmel, must be honoured because it contains an almost compulsive prejudice, and disappointing it requires a positive malice (Mutti 1998:48).”

4. Findings. Generalized Trust

Starting from the *Focus Groups*, one of the most evident aspects in people who choose to participate in the *Au Pair Program* is the ability to have positive expectations in conditions of uncertainty: often the girls leave without ever having spoken via *Skype* with the families, the latter often do not have systems of stable control of the trust granted. Furthermore, they consider this experience as a possibility to work on their own limits by developing tolerance in diversity:

“[Mother E] And then she shows you your limits, because in practice I open and welcome in my house... but allowing the aupair to enter my intimacy I have to tolerate the its faults too.”

“[Mother B] We took it to F. (son) to teach him tolerance and the ability to learn from people of different cultures [...]. The fact that there are different people, with different habits and for us it is important that F. learn respect for others ... the other does not mean bad but something to learn from ...”

Secondly, while on the one hand the hypothesis that this optimistic view derives from primary socialization seems to be confirmed, on the other hand there is no evidence of a link with the



networks of relationships in which host mums are immersed, Mother D clearly says she is seen as a sore thumb by strangers to his family.

Thirdly, both from the point of view of host mums and au pairs, knowing new 'worlds' and new cultures through this experience is central. An interesting aspect that I noticed in the focus groups is the relationship that the linguistic exchange takes with respect to cultural exchange. In fact, for some host mums and au pairs the linguistic exchange is the center of the experience while for others the language is only part of the experience of cultural exchange. As Mother B points out: "A beautiful thing about the language, at least I saw with F. (the son), the nice thing is that he does not live the language as he could be at school but he really lives the culture."

Fourthly, the role of au pairs in the home is crucial. In fact, if, on the one hand, some mothers consider the girl hosted as their own daughter, on the other side other families recognize an adult role or at least try to assign it (Mother C says that she allows the au pair to reward her daughter).

But how do the girls live this role? There are those who feel oppressed by the host mum that, considering themselves as real mothers, invade their privacy and who instead, says that in her case the family has asked what rules he wanted to have respect for her personal space.

5. Findings – The Spreaders of Trust

In the two focus groups, with regard to the means to be used to participate in the program, the option to rely on word of mouth, websites and specialized Facebook groups are the preferred options. Indeed, according to them, it turns out that the high cost that involves the use of au pairs agencies is not adequately rewarded (the agencies are not useful in testing the feeling) or allows you to deal directly in case of problems.

In any case, the girl B claims instead that the high cost of resorting to the agency was rewarded by the tranquility of her parents in entrusting to a person with whom they could interact face to face, even if she then pointed out that in the moment of difficulty within the host family she did not receive any help. All this demonstrates that the spreader of confidence to be a neutral mediator should not have a different hierarchical relationship with au pairs and host families.

Focused Trust

At the level of focused trust, in the focus group with the host mums, I found 7 characteristics that prevail in the choice:

- The age of girls (linked to the concept of independence): mothers choose more adult girls when they have babies or live in the countryside.
- Linguistic skills: there are cases in which the ability to interact and teach a new language is equated with the factor of experience but, usually, the latter prevails.
- The degree of confidentiality: mothers seem to prefer more extrovert girls.
- Culture and social class considered similar: if, on the one hand, the concern to choose girls

very far from their different culture and / or class is expressed in the doubt that they participate for other reasons beyond the cultural exchange (as, for example, reasons for immigration). On the other hand, there is the concern of the difficulty of integration (Mother D) within a “Catholic country where there is a lot of racism.”

Moreover, the country of origin also influences: one of the host moms says that it would be difficult to host a girl from the same country from which another girl with whom she had had a bad experience comes from.

Eventually, the aesthetic profile. For example, Mother A says: “Ahahah I have always beautiful that the other moms at the park ask me how I do ... no ... really I maybe with a very nice au pair some problem I would have, that is having a model at home... and it would be impossible not to worry about my husband...”

As for au pairs, the criteria are:

- The age and the number of children: almost all seem to agree on preferring a reduced number of children, while in terms of age there are those who prefer younger children and those who are older.
- The presence of smokers in the family: only one person is indifferent to this aspect.
- The place of residence and the availability of a vehicle: girls tend to prefer being able to stay in the central areas of the city, but the availability of a vehicle seems to be even more important.
- Open-mindedness: two girls emphasize preferring a family where religion does not influence their choice.

The Construction of the Relationship

At the beginning of the experience both girls and mothers show that the tasks and norms are defined in a climate of mediation and mutual interest in deepening the knowledge of the other, in particular the girl E says: “I believe that to earn the trust of the family, it takes a bit ‘of time ... I think that when you start the experience, it is important in the first weeks to invest in the family rather than in social life outside the home.”

Regarding the rules in particular, the girls emphasize the importance of privacy: there are those who particularly appreciate parents who discourage children in drawing the attention of the au pair outside of work hours and those who instead feel invaded by his privacy when a family member enters his room.

The mothers are divided into the choice whether or not to enter the girl’s room: In fact, if the mother C says they prefer to have the room managed independently by the au pair, mother B claims to consider the room as a part of the house and therefore have the room checked by the domestic assistant.

Furthermore, the mothers question two other rules: the use of the mobile phone and the visits of guests inside the house.



With respect to the first point, some point out that during the hours dedicated to babysitting the rule must be “hands free and eyes on the child (mother C)”, mother A emphasizes that she always has the opposite problem: often the au pairs they keep the phone at the back of the bag and they never respond even when it would be essential for them to communicate with them.

As for the reception of guests, mothers - apart from one exception - agree on allowing people to be accommodated. However, there are discrepancies on the host's absence and if the guests are the boyfriends of the girls: Mother D prefers that the girl's boyfriend does not stay in his house while Mother C agrees on having already known the boy.

Betray Trust

From the first focus group it emerges that mothers do not systematically check whether girls betray the trust they have given them.

The betrayal by the girls is configured in terms of lies but also in the violation of established rules without recognizing the error:

[Mother C] “I arrive at the park ... the girl with the cell phone and G. in my hand and on the other side of the field my daughter ... then G. sees me and does all the field to hug me and the girl was still there chatting ... and I expected that at least she would have got up, not seeing the baby anymore ... that means you betrayed your trust...”

It is also interesting to note that if mother C says: “however, we all take into account that at the beginning they can betray our trust a little bit”, mother A disagrees. This perspective seems to be linked to the concept of generalized trust: because if it is true that we can trust that others do not betray our trust, we can also have confidence that, to a small extent, everyone can betray our trust.

Compared to au pair girls, however, a substantial part says they never had the feeling that the family betrayed his trust, but the girl A shows that even the omission of information such as eating habits of the family or the serious condition of psychological distress of one of the children can be considered a betrayal of trust.

Eventually, as previously described, the au pair say that there are good reasons for them not to betray trust: for example, because the one who receives trust (themselves) does not betray it because it must show that it is worthy of the trust granted. It is the case of the mother C who, assigning the au pair the task of rewarding her daughter, grants her authority greater than that which the au pair would expect and, in this way, discourages her to betray the trust granted.

6. Conclusions

What emerges from the focus groups is the desire and ability of mothers and girls to question themselves. Personally, I had the impression that trust can in this sense become a channel that allows the two subjects to know each other and confront themselves as if there could

exist a “second primary socialization”: in fact, it affects the enormous self-critical capacity and tolerance that both sides describe in their daily interaction. Furthermore, mutual trust and the possibilities offered by the web of an almost ‘face-to-face’ confrontation between host mum and au pairs means that the agencies - traditional spreaders of trust - lose importance as mediators and this also happens because the relationship between the agency-host family and the agency-au pairs is often unbalanced in favor of the host family.

It is important, however, not to overestimate the desire and trust in hosting and being hosted by “someone different”: hosting a person from another country that still comes from a similar social class sometimes means staying within that social class global (post-globalization) that does not present great heterogeneity.

Regarding the possible future developments of the research, it emerged several times from the conversations of the focus groups that the point of view of dad hosts could be different and therefore interesting in terms of heterogeneity of opinions.

Eventually, it would be interesting to evaluate in a subsequent research (through an ethnography) the relationship of trust that is established between the au pair and the children with whom they come into contact as well as to compare the au aupair experience with others in the field of sharing economy (for example: workaway).

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8. Methodological Appendix

Since trust derives from a set of emotional and rational components (Mutti 1998) I have chosen the qualitative method for its ability to grasp also the deep motivations that retroact to the fiduciary act. Indeed, attitudes to domestic space are subtler and more complex than dichotomies would suggest (Sibley e Lowe 1992).

Regarding the technique, I have chosen to organize two *Focus Groups* in Milan, of which one with a group of 5 mothers belonging to *au pair* local families and a second with a group of 5 *au pair* girls who have been welcomed by local families as well. I chose this technique because the interaction between the participants could provide information on the meaning of trust that each has and builds in relation to others: in fact, the group acts as "enhancer" and therefore allows to express opinions that may be previously at a level implicit (Corrao 2000).

In defining the empirical context, I decided to focus on two specific groups - mothers and au pairs - for several reasons:

- as regards the choice of mothers as representatives of host parents, one reason is linked to the fact that *au pairs* are predominantly managed by women in families (Pelechova 2015). In fact, it is important to clarify that, as Cox (2007) points out, there may be several reasons why *host dads* are induced to refrain from interacting with *au pairs*: often *au pair girls* are represented medially as strongly sexualized, and then as a threat to host mums and possible source of pleasure for *hosts dads* (Cox, 2007). *Host dads* may refrain from interacting due to nervousness due to being close to a young woman at home (Búriková and Miller, 2010).
- as regards the choice of girls rather than boys, my choice is more than anything related to a technical reason: I was not able to find any boy on the lists from which I drew.

In addition, I wanted to organize two separate focus groups to avoid the risk that the hierarchy relationships that live the subjects within the experience can reproduce within the focus group by inhibiting the interaction (Corrao 2000).

Eventually, regarding the sampling plan:

- in the case of mothers, I chose an intermediate mode between the nomination and the snowball sampling: after having contacted the administrator of a Facebook group of families who host *au pairs*, I asked her to show me people with the profile that I was looking for (between 35 and 50 years, with heterogeneous profiles), active in the group but strangers to each other.
- in the case of girls, after being admitted to a closed Facebook group of *au pair* who are doing their experience in Milan, I got in touch with some of them and I invited to participate in the focus group those had the profile I was looking for (between 18 and 26 years, with heterogeneous profiles).

9. Biographical note

With a background working as journalist (for more than 6 years), graduate in Political and Social Sciences at University of Turin and now a postgraduate student at MA in Sociology of the University of Milan-Bicocca, Giorgia Riconda had two study experiences abroad at the University of Seville in 2014 and Central European University in Budapest in 2018, where she further deepened her interests. Her research interests centre around: Sociology of Culture, Sociology of Education, Cultural Studies, Postcolonial and Decolonial Approach, Multiculturalism, Tourism, Race and Class.