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The Psychodynamics Of First Generation Italian-American Daughters

Lina Allocca

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The Psychodynamics of First Generation Italian-American Daughters

Their experiences, challenges, and achievements.

by

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May 2003

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CHAPTER 1
THE ITALIAN EXPERIENCE

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Italian-Americans are the fifth largest ethnic group. Italians migrated to the United States for most of the twentieth century bringing their old world traditions, values and customs with them.

Although America was their new home, the immigrants passionately held on to their heritage and culture. They even raised their children by ‘old world’ standards. This presented a huge identity challenge for their children, particularly for first-generation daughters of Italian immigrants. Their American born and bred sisters did not have the same cultural binds. First-generation daughters often find themselves conflicted by the two cultures. Is she Italian? Is she Italian-American? Is she American? To deny any nation, would be to deny a part of herself. Torn between the two cultures, daughters struggled to find a way to bridge the gap between the two, while maintaining the essence of both.

Traditionally, a daughter of Italian immigrants had her role in life pre-ordained at birth. As children, they were schooled for one sole purpose: to marry and have a family. She was taught the traditional obligations of a “good Italian girl” which was to cook, clean, nurture and take care of the family. Many would be surprised to know that daughters fought hard to rise above the stereotypical traditional female roles, many times encouraged by their mothers. They lived in a double-standard culture with different rules than their brothers. The boys in the same family were encouraged to be independent while the daughters weren’t allowed as many freedoms. Although liberal views vary from family to family, immigrant parents mostly adhere to conventional gender “rules”.
For instance, immigrant parents are very strict, especially with their daughters. Their views on romantic relationships are very traditional. If a boy wants to date his daughter, he better be sure he is “serious” about her. Having platonic boyfriends is just not allowed in most immigrant Italian household. There is no reason for a boy to keep calling if the goal isn’t marriage.

Immigrant parents vehemently oppose pre-marital sex. Pre-marital sex (especially by daughters) is considered scandalous and disgraceful. In the old days, a daughter would have been disowned if she became pregnant out of wedlock. Honor is very important to the family and any behavior dishonoring their name is highly criticized and averted. “What will people say?” is often heard spewing from an Italian mother’s mouth. Italian-American daughters are taught that “good girls” marry while “bad girls” are destined for a “mala fortuna” (bad fortune).

The Italian immigrant experience is that of hard work, tradition with strong moral and religious convictions. They impart this ethic to their children. The first-generation Italian-American daughter has a very solid, honest and loving upbringing. Family is stressed as the most important thing and a daughter has very solid family ties. Italian parents teach honor, respect, and the importance of a solid family unit. In fact, many jokes have been made about “la famiglia” but the Italians view the love for family as a sacred institution. Sometimes this becomes burdensome because the Italian daughter may want to find her independence outside of the home. The challenge arises when her parents do not understand her need for independence thus resulting in conflict.
Research Question

How does a daughter of Italian immigrants bridge the gap between the old world values of their Italian immigrant parents to the modern views of America without losing her identity AND establish her own place in American society? This analysis will investigate if growing up Italian in an American culture poses challenges that not only her parents can’t comprehend but also her American counterparts.

Subsidiary Questions

1. What effect does negative media attention have on the way Italian-American women are perceived?

2. Do Italian-American celebrity women accurately and proudly reflect the values of Italian women?

3. Did the language barrier of their parents inhibit first-generation daughters in any way?

4. Did familial traditions pressure first-generation daughters to follow a certain path in life?

5. Does the first-generation daughter celebrate her identity and identify with its traditions?

6. Did the first-generation daughter suffer from any bias or prejudices due to her heritage?

7. What frustrations are faced by first-generation daughter and how does she overcome them?

Purpose of the Study

Being born in Somma Vesuviano (a small town ten miles outside of Naples, Italy), the author migrated to the United States in the 1970s at the young age of four. Growing up in New Jersey, the author lived first-hand experiences of being “Italian” in America. Without knowing a single word of English, the author and her parents were thrown into American culture. Her
parents wanted to provide a better life for their daughter and were very proud to be in America. However, they still upheld their Italian beliefs, traditions, and customs and imparted this to the author. After all, although they left their country and family behind, they never let go of their passion and love for Italy and its heritage.

As a young girl, the author spoke fluent Italian at home and English everywhere else. In fact, her first experience with the American culture was upon entering nursery school without knowing English. The author felt confused and scared by these American strangers who could not communicate with her. Her parents had no knowledge of American culture and standards and struggled to learn the ways of America. Her parents’ lack of the English knowledge created responsibilities that were not faced by the average young American girl. She was writing checks, making doctors appointments, reading mail, and translating from the moment she could read and write English. Along with getting good grades in school (without help from her parents because they couldn’t speak or write English), her parents strictly enforced rules that she had to live by. She was expected to get good grades in school, help with chores and be a ‘good daughter’ (which meant staying out of trouble and by all means doing nothing to dishonor the family). Playing and recreational activities were only allowed after her chores and homework were completed. Friends included local neighborhood girls, but NOT boys. Any interaction with boys even platonic relationships, was strictly forbidden by her father.

As the years exposed her to American culture, the author realized her life was so different from her American friends. Only later in life, did she come to appreciate these differences as character building traits that made her a unique, complex and strong individual.

In the summer of 2002, the author returned back to her native land of Italy for the first time. It was an extremely cathartic and moving experience as she rediscovered her native land.
However, she did feel somewhat torn between the two cultures. Her Italian cousins referred to her as the “American” yet in the States she is the “Italian girl.” To her surprise, she found that her upbringing, values, and beliefs were exactly like her Italian born and bred cousins. The author faced a dynamic parallel in her worlds. She was brought up with the same traditions and roles as her Italian cousins but by being raised in America, her lifestyle and ideas were influenced by two very different worlds. The author felt stuck between the two. Was she Italian? American? Or Italian-American?

The author rediscovered her heritage. The house she was born in was still standing. She wondered how her life would have been completely different if her parents never came to America. She rediscovered her aunts and uncles who were passionate about her arrival. There were tears of joy from these strange faces that remembered her only as a child. In Italy, especially in the small villages, people come from all over town to get a glimpse of the “American”. Native Italians view America with awe, intrigue, and fascination. The author was inundated with questions about American life. With a new love for these people, the author realized she strongly identified with these passionate people. The author discovered that many dreamed of visiting America but would never relocate. “Americans live for work, we work to live, what kind of life is that?” was quoted as the reason. This motto is resonant of the culture: the love for life comes first and everything they do, whether good or bad is done with passion.

Native Italian women (especially common of small villages) do not value a career like American women. In small villages in Italy, being a good mother and wife still take precedence over any career aspirations. The author’s cousin expressed her desire to find a job that would enable her to help out around the house. There is a strong sense of duty to the family very much like the author’s. However, the author noted that her young cousins, 16 and 19 years old, were
more mature and self-assured than she was at that age. Their goals are simpler than author's
Perhaps because their options are limited) but they live a lifestyle that had the same traditions
and values as the author who grew up in New Jersey.

Upon returning from Italy, the author realized that her identity lie somewhere between
Napoli and New Jersey. Throughout her life, she has been bridging the gap between the two
worlds in one way or another. Her individual identity and independence was discovered through
her American education but her core beliefs and values resonate in Italian culture. The author’s
life and choices reflect her influences as first-generation daughter of Italian immigrants. She
prides herself with a strong respect for her family, cultural traditions and Italian customs.

Of course, the author’s attachment to this research is very subjective. Accurate
representation of an Italian-American woman, particularly first-generation is rare. With the
constant barrage of media images such as the bimbo, sex-kitten, or big-haired guidette, the
average American is less familiar with the lives of the truly inspiring Italian-American women
such as Geraldine Ferraro and Mother Cabrini.

Therefore, the purpose of this research is not only to uncover the challenges faced by
first-generation daughters of Italian immigrants but also to promote and acknowledge the
contributions of Italian-American women to our society.

Objectives

The intention of this analysis will be to explore the similarities in challenges faced by
first-generation daughters. The author will focus on three objectives during this research. The
first objective will be to demonstrate how Italian roles and customs have a huge impact on the
daughters' lifestyles and goals. What was ingrained from birth? Where do her loyalties lie? If family is so important, can she ever leave the nest?

The second objective will be to scrutinize the stereotypes and media attention given to Italian-American women and the impact it has on their image. Is there truth to these stereotypes? Does the media contribute positively or negatively? What can be done to stop the negative portrayal?

Thirdly, the author will illustrate the contributions that Italian-American women have made throughout the years that aren't recognized by the average American. Who are the real Italian-American women heroes? Who do the Italians recognize and appreciate? What qualities do these women possess that are resonant of the culture?

Limitations

Although the author is has life experience as a daughter of Italian immigrants, it must be noted that traditions vary from region to region, from generation to generation and from parent to parent. First-generation daughters are now in their 20's, 30's and 40's with each decade having a difference in attitude, opinions, and lifestyles. There is also insufficient literature regarding the plight of the first-generation daughter. The information gathered and analyzed will consist mainly from first-hand interviews and surveys distributed by the author.
CHAPTER 2

CULTURE AND COMMUNICATION DYNAMICS

With the emigration of native Italians into the United States, the culture is rich in tradition, beliefs and values. Revered for their food, art, history and family-oriented culture, Italian Americans still face many stereotypes and prejudiced perceptions. Stereotypical images in the media continue to be a thorn in the side of Italian Americans. In constant negative media images, especially with the heightened popularity of The Sopranos, Italian-Americans are typified, once again, as mobsters, buffoons, bimbos and housewives. In actuality, The Sopranos is the only series airing today representing Italian-Americans. The often-glorified portrayal is immensely exaggerated with little reflection on the true dynamics of the Italian American woman. The true nature of Italian-American culture revolves around honesty, family, and hard work. Without accurate portrayals in the media, Italian-American women cannot rise above the stereotypes.

This research will focus mainly on the psychodynamics of the first-generation daughters of Italian immigrants. This generation is caught between two worlds of tradition as they are challenged to find their own identity. Between Old World traditions of their parents’ culture and the Americana way, the daughters find themselves conflicted by the two worlds.
ITALIAN FAMILY DYNAMICS: MORALS, VALUES, AND ETHICS

One of the most intermittent and resounding themes in Italian culture is their deep love of family. Even in such classic films as the “Godfather”, the line “Never tell anybody outside the family what you’re thinking again” is an infamous quote that relays the importance Italians place on family honor. Although that line has become quite a joke, it truly reflects the essence of the Italian family. Family is a predominant theme without exceptions. From their early days in the mainland to their days here in the States, family is still the most important foundation in Italian culture.

One cannot begin to understand the challenges the daughter of Italian-American immigrants faces without understanding her heritage and upbringing. Her immigrant parents left their homeland to venture into a mysterious brave new world. Without knowing the language, a new world represented hope for a better future. Yet Italians, like many immigrants, were perceived as being ignorant and dishonest. Their bravery and courage reflect their stamina to endure and establish a new life and rise above prejudices.

This culture has a confident self-perception enhanced by rich life experiences. Their common interests include raising their families, being good citizens, celebrating food and life (most often simultaneously). They find comfort in each other in times of need. With a love for storytelling, they gather to speak of old times in Italy as well as new experiences in America. Although exposed to Americana, the culture stays affiliated to their heritage by remembering Italy idealistically. Thus, dating back to 1905, many Italian-American clubs such as the Order Sons of Italy, National Italian American Foundation, and Fieri Organizations had been created to maintain a deep and solid connection to their roots.
The culture regards themselves as loving, happy and family-oriented people. They consider themselves strong, modest, hard working and moral. Italian immigrants honor decency. They have a very solid family sense with strong moral and religious beliefs. The Italian mothers, as loyal wives, bring old world traditions to America. If one was to base the image of the Italian mother based on media perception, one would be highly inaccurate. In fact, the Italian-American family is matriarchal at its core.

"Italian women came to America with a wide variety of experiences and memories that belie the stereotype of the Italian-American wife who suffers in silence, only shouting, 'Mangia, Mangia!'" (Mangione and Morreale, p. 335, 1992). The household, run by the mamma, is usually spotless and very tidy. Contrary to belief, Italian-American women run a tight ship. "If you were to closely examine the structure of the Italian family, you'll find that it is the quiet little lady doing the cooking who tells the husband what to say, what to do, and how to do it." (Cateura, p.110,1987). Of course, this is never done in public. An Italian-American woman would never disparage her husband in front of others. An immigrant Italian woman will voice her opinions in her own household but will always maintain acceptable appearances to the culture and community. Respect and honor are resonant themes in their culture.

While her husband is tending to the garden, a traditional immigrant Italian woman can be found in the kitchen. She values her knowledge of food and takes pride in her cooking. Food is a custom that is viewed as nourishment for the soul. Innate, her expertise in food is culturally and internationally respected. An Italian woman's meals symbolize love and devotion to her families and friends and recipes are carried down from generation to generation. The culture cherishes time with their family at the dinner table. In fact, on Sundays, traditional Italians, expect family time at the dinner table with no absences!
Immigrant women celebrate their culture by cherishing life’s special moments. Births, marriages and even deaths are seen as a time for renowned family gatherings. With traditional feasts, they are known for preparing colossal and delicious dinners. Cooking is not viewed as a tedious chore, but as an orchestrated medley of food, life, and love. This ritual demonstrates their love. With passion for music and dance, they hum along in the kitchen while preparing their traditional Sunday dinner consisting of pasta, meatballs and their husband’s homemade wine. When mamma yells, “A Mangiaral!” (time to eat), the family rushes to the table and embarks on a divine experience.

Italians take pride in their appearance. Considering Italy is the fashion capital of the world, this is logical. In early days, depending on their economic resources, many sewed their own clothing for themselves and their families. Immigrant women traditionally wear dresses because in the early days, it was deemed inappropriate and untraditional for women to wear pants.

There are certain traditions associated with attire. For example, it is traditional to dress all in black for a funeral. In fact, if an immediate member of the family died, it was not unusual for the immigrant woman to wear black for months and sometimes, even years. On a different note, brides were dressed in white to stress her virginal purity.

Italian immigrants are determined to maintain their integrity by staying true to their heritage and by averting scandal. Immigrant Italian parents have many rules. This rule appears again but “family comes first, ALWAYS.” The fathers are usually strict, work hard to support their family and expect their children to be respectful, kind, and upstanding citizens. It is very important that nothing brings shame to the family. Italians do not like to air their dirty laundry
and strive hard to maintain a sense of respect and honor from their family, friends and community.

Although "L'America" is their new home, Italians breathe and live the heritage with traditional convictions. Religion is very instrumental in the daily life of the immigrant Italian-American woman and her household. Every religious holiday is observed and celebrated with traditional foods associated with the holiday. For example, on Christmas Eve, it is folkloric to replace meat dishes with fish, like baccala (codfish).

As devout Catholics, the matriarch sets high standards for her family. In fact, her young children can be seen at every Sunday mass, immaculately dressed and well behaved. This weekly custom is an ongoing tribute to their religious convictions and their respect for God. These women find comfort and reassurance in their faith.

The immigrants deeply respect the Catholic Saints, who represent their icons. They often pray to a particular Saint for a special request. For example, one might pray to Saint Lucy for help with eye problems, to Saint Joseph for help with an illness, or to Saint Anthony for a miracle. They also honor them by re-creating and attending religious celebrations such as the Feast of San Gennaro in Manhattan's Little Italy.

Children of immigrant Italians could testify to the power of their non-verbal expressions. With just one look, a father or a mother could beam their feelings in a direct manner. The culture has are very passionate and commonly use their hands to express themselves (a truthful stereotype).

Since their first language originated from their homeland, they incorporated their own parlance into the States. Outside of their homes, they spoke "broken" English but continued to speak in their native tongue in their culture and community. Commonly used words such as
mangia!, poveri figli miei! (my poor child), amore mia (my love), ti vogli bene (I love you).

Angrier terms such as faccia di cane (dogface), diavolo (devil), and testa dura (hard head) have also been known to cross the lips of immigrant Italians. Of course, as time passed in the United States, their broken English created such stereotypical phrases as 'fohged-a-bad-it' and 'whaddya gonna do-a'.

Immigrant parents’ primary goals are to raise a healthy family with good, decent morals. Proud and determined, they encourage their children to excel. However, by accepting ‘old world’ values, different messages are sent to their sons than daughters. Parents may encourage sons to become independent while daughters are expected to live home until they are married. Although an archaic rule, it is still a strictly enforced custom in many immigrant Italian-American families. Still today, daughters are not allowed the same freedoms as their brothers.

Immigrant Italians value education, however, many, due to their economic resources, school was just not an option. Although Italians attended some school in the mainland, most girls never went on to high school. It was just conventional for a woman’s “place” to be in the home. “While men could pursue a variety of activities, women traditionally were limited primarily to housework and child care” (p. 337, Changing Images of Italian-Americans).

In the new world, children were encouraged to do well in school. Yet, many times sons are persuaded to obtain a higher education while daughters were expected to find a job until they find a husband. Especially in the early twentieth century, many immigrants reared their daughters for marriage and family, not towards higher learning. Of course, there were exceptions, albeit few, to this norm. Some liberated immigrants did encourage their daughters to excel in school.
Industrial values surfaced in low economic times. Although early immigrant women worked primarily in the garment industry, their daughters and granddaughters would make serious contributions to politics, music, and medicine. During the early part of the twentieth century, many immigrant women found employment outside the home for the first time. As stakeholders of their families, these women worked long hours for low pay. This became symbolic of the cultural changes these women were making to their ever-changing roles and responsibilities.

The working immigrant woman gained a new education in America, which challenged their old-fashioned ideas. They gained new skills such as learning to drive, a better knowledge of the English language, and interacting with people outside their culture. The stay-at-home mothers typically did not drive, interacted only with people within their own culture, and spoke limited English.

These new insights might have created dissonance and resentment as it divides the working mom and the stay at home mothers. For example, the working woman gained a sense of independence from her old lifestyle and was exposed to American ways and ideas. By being exposed to different cultures, she became more liberated and in turn, encouraged her daughters to do the same. The stay-at-home moms might not have understood this newfound autonomy. They remained in their traditional roles as housewife and mother.

Italian Immigrants demonstrated their affiliation to the culture by keeping generations of old customs. For example, the extremely superstitious culture believes in the supernatural. Handed down throughout generations, these beliefs are an eminent part of their culture. For example, spilling olive oil on the kitchen floor indicates very bad news. This legend originated
during World War I when a woman anxiously awaiting her husband’s return from the war, spilled olive oil and immediately heard of her husband’s death.

Similarly, dreams are very symbolic. There are countless symbolic interpretations connected to the dreams. One example is dreaming about losing one’s teeth, which foreshadows a death in the family. Superstitious Italians interpret dreams very seriously.

The culture also has strong beliefs in supernatural healing methods. An eccentric example of this is ‘malocchio’. Immigrant Italian-American women believe “a person falls victim to malocchio from either an envious compliment or just an “overlook” by someone with the power to cast a harmful spell” (Malpezzi and Clements, p. 118, 1992).

Typically, a person who has been given the malocchio or evil eye becomes suddenly ill and experiences a severe headache around the eyes. Other symptoms include a groggy/tired feeling, nausea or even fever. The healing of the malocchio is an eccentric tradition using oil and water passed down from generation to generation of Italian women. To heal the malocchio, the matriarch fills a plate with water, recites a prayer, and drips drops of oil fall into the plate. If the person has the malocchio, the oil disperses into the water and the victim soon feels relief. If the oil does not disperse, then the victim’s symptoms are due to natural causes.

However, this supernatural technique is scrutinized and looked upon as absurd by outsiders as well as younger Italian-American generations. There are still many Italian-Americans who fear the evil eye and rely on this technique. Believers view the Italian-American matriarch as a diagnostician and healer. Today, immigrant Italian women in the United States and in Italy still readily practice it.
STEREOTYPES AND THE MEDIA

In today’s world, Italian-American women are highly misrepresented due to the sensationalized stereotypes portrayed in media. The following are some stereotypes placed on Italian American women:

- A recent 2003 advertisement for Ragu tomato sauce featuring a group of fat older Italian women in peasant dresses dancing in a field
- Lucille Ball stomping grapes with her feet while on vacation in Italy
- Marisa Tomei in *My Cousin Vinny* as an East Coast guidette with big, hair and a thick regional accent
- Frustrated New Jersey mob housewife, Carmela Soprano
- Adriana, the dim-witted bimbo girlfriend featured in the *Sopranos*
- The sex-kitten Italian siren as seen in Sofia Loren films of the Fifties and Sixties

One cannot deny there is some truth to all stereotypes; however, they tend to be extremely exaggerated in films for entertainment purposes. The media is very limited in the representation of the true Italian-American women. The fifties and sixties portrayed Italian-American women, (albeit exclusively portrayed by Sofia Loren) as sexy, spirited, and intelligent. Today, the characters are pigeon holed as “East Coast” girls. The media does not depict Italian-American women in a wide range of images, perceptions and characters. Italian-American women cannot be stereotyped into one category for they are unique, strong, independent, smart and complex women.

The following group of Italian-American women exemplifies the diversity of such a dynamic culture:

- Geraldine Ferraro, Politician.
• Ann Bancroft (born Anna Maria Italiano), Writer, Director, Actress.
• Penny Marshall (born Carole Penny Marsciarelli), Writer, Director, Actress.
• Mother Cabrini, Saint
• Maria Montessori, Educator.
• Connie Selleca (born Concetta Sellecchia), Actress.
• Connie Francis (Constance Franconero), Singer.
• Miucci Prada, Designer.
• Donatella Versace, Designer.
• Helen Barolini, Writer.

These women, all of Italian heritage and descent, are highly successful and revered women in their chosen fields. Some had to change their names for Hollywood but the essence of their Italian spirit echoes throughout their accomplishments. This small, partial selection of women is a testimony to the successful contributions that Italian-American women have made to this country.

Lately, there has been much controversy regarding Italians in the media. With the highly rated and critically acclaimed series, "The Sopranos", many Italian-Americans are growing tired of the constant portrayal of Italian families with links to the Mafia. "The show, which depicts Italian-Americans as foul-mouthed, amoral criminals and adulterers, has received critical acclaim, but is treading lightly with the country's fifth largest ethnic population."

(http://www.osia.org/public/currentissues.htm)

"Negative stereotypes pervade our society, deeming those of Italian heritage as criminals and thugs. The truth is that Italians and Italian Americans are intelligent, creative, compassionate, law-abiding people whose contributions to the world are boundless."

(http://www.osia.org/public/currentissues.htm)
Society is also consistently being saturated with images of negative stereotypes of Italian women. Originally perceived as short, overweight subservient housewives (i.e., Mama Corleone of The Godfather), “films and television habitually still portray Italian women as fertile, overwrought, and preoccupied with cooking pasta” (Mangione and Morreale, p. 339, 1992).

From 1972’s Mama Corleone, to today’s Carmela Soprano, Italian-American women are still featured in the kitchen. Italian-American women in the media are still stereotyped as the good wife who cooks, cleans and takes care of her family. Despite a thirty-year difference in the making of each, Italian American women are still featured in the media as the “saints”, the “good wives” who cook, clean, and turn the other cheek to their husband’s infidelities.

Interestingly, “Godfather” author Mario Puzo, admits that the character of the “Don” was actually based on his mother. “Whenever the Godfather opened his mouth, in my own mind I heard the voice of my mother,” Puzo confessed, “I heard her wisdom, her ruthlessness, and her unconquerable love for her family and for life itself, qualities not valued in women at the time.”

Ironically, Puzo attributed those qualities to the men in his novels while characterizing the women as background showpieces either cooking in the kitchen or the bedroom. Perhaps this was the only acceptable place, at the time, that could feature Italian American women or it may have well been a testimony of how Puzo’s generation deemed all women, not just Italians.

It is true that many Italian-American women dote and take pride in their family life but she is far from just a cook and caretaker. Geraldine Ferraro is a crucial example. She was raised by an immigrant Italian mother but still overcame the boundaries of the “traditional role as housewife”. She rose above to become the first woman in history to be on the Democratic ticket for Vice Presidency and raised a family simultaneously.
Maria Montessori is another proud example of Italian woman. Born in Acona, Italy, Montessori was the first woman to attend medical school in Italy. Her ultimate fame was for her contributions to education to the United States. Montessori developed and implemented her method of teaching, the Montessori Method. This significant contribution is still widely used throughout schools today.

Ella Tambussi Grasso, a first-generation daughter of immigrant Italian parents, was the first woman in U.S. history elected to Governor. She was elected solely based on her political contributions to the State of Connecticut without having to ride the political coattails of her husband.

Rosa Ponselle, (born Rosa Ponzillo) to Italian immigrant parents, was an opera legend. Ponselle, discovered by Enrico Caruso, never had any vocal training is still considered one of the greatest voices of all time. She retired at the young age of 40 and spent the latter years of her life dedicated to launching the careers of young opera talent, including Placido Domingo and Beverly Sills. In 1997, the United States Post Office issued a commemorative stamp featuring the legend.

With such accomplished female Italian role models, why do stereotypes in the media still exist? This question cannot be answered without addressing the impact Sopia Loren and Gina Lollobrigida had in the United States. Sophia Loren and Gina Lollobrigida represented a new image of the Italian woman – the sexy bombshell. Both women exploded on the scene with such great admiration for the beauty. In fact, Gina Lollobrigida was actually the first Italian woman to grace the cover of *Time Magazine* and *Life Magazine* in the Fifties.

These images of Fifties and Sixties propelled the Italian woman as a sexy goddess with a feisty, stubborn personality. Today, the Italian girl is no longer primarily featured as a “siren”
but as an East Coast girl with a feisty attitude, smart-mouthed, big hair, and thick “Noo Yawk” accents.

Two movies that support these images are the characters of Marisa Tomei in *My Cousin Vinny* (screenplay by Dale Launer) and Gina Davis in *Angie* (screenplay by Todd Graff). Marisa Tomei’s character is portrayed as tough, energetic and outspoken with a “biological clock that is ticking”. Gina Davis in *Angie* is also portrayed as a high school educated, street-smart girl with a thick Brooklyn accent. Surprisingly, neither *My Cousin Vinny* nor *Angie* was written by an Italian-American.

*Moonstruck*, starring Cher, is another movie featuring Italians. The representation of Italian life is more positive than other movies, however, it should also be noted that the film was written by John Patrick Shanley (of Irish descent) and directed by Norman Jewison (of Canadian descent).

In this movie, Italian-American women are featured in a more positive light. The characters are complex individuals brimming with comedy, passion, love, and intelligence. Cher’s character, Loretta Castorini, is a feisty yet unattractive widow who has “bad luck in love”. Her mother, Rose, (played by Olympia Dukakis), is seen cooking in some scenes, however, it’s her charismatic, no-nonsense personality that shines through. The male characters in *Moonstruck* are confused and misguided while the woman is seen as strong, complex, and magnetic.

Although *Moonstruck* portrays Italian-Americans without heavily relying on stereotypes, the majority of media images reflect the typical characterizations. So, how can Hollywood accurately portray Italian-American women when the writers/directors are not Italian?

Unfortunately, stereotypes are funny and funny equals money. Hollywood is about numbers and
dollar signs. Italian-American actresses' roles are limited to those of bimbos, uneducated mob wives, and outspoken East Coast girls. When great Italian roles do arise, most likely the actress that will bring in the most dollars wins the part, regardless of her Italian heritage.

For example, in *The Wedding Planner*, Jennifer Lopez's character, Maria Fiore, was Italian. Lopez, of Puerto Rican heritage, was cast as the Italian character, not because she looks Italian BUT because of her ability to bring in profits. In fact, it's important to acknowledge the only actress of Italian descent in the movies mentioned is Marisa Tomei. Why aren't more Italian-Americans cast in Italian roles? The only exception is *The Sopranos*, which hires actors of Italian descent. However, these critically acclaimed characters are foul-mouthed buffoons, bimbos, mobsters and frustrated housewives, which only propagate the stereotypes.

Joy Behar (born Josephina Victoria Occhiuto), Co-hostess of WABC's "The View" explains how these stereotypes were very limiting to her career. "In the theatre, I felt the impact of stereotyping. There were very few dramatic parts for Italian American actresses. And when advertisers like P&G hired for a commercial, they wanted WASPs. I might be allowed to be the one with the dirty wash, but sparkling clean stuff always went to Blondie."

(http://www.noiaw.com/NOIAW_Intl_Conf_Media.htm)

In an excerpt from writer, Claire Guadini's, "Of Cheese and Choices", the second-generation Italian-American writer recounts her experiences with her Italian heritage. She recounts, "I was always driven to achieve and knew I would have a profession, but it never occurred to me that I would not also cook, bake, iron, and sew. I remember feeling just as driven academically, as I was to continue traditions, to keep a well managed home, and maybe in those few years, to iron table linens and for a few years at least, my husband's boxer shorts. (p. 123)"
This excerpt encapsulates the true attitudes of Italian-American women. These complex women are driven by many external factors (social change, the feminist movement, modern American culture) but the “traditions” of being raised Italian are never lost or forgotten.

Gaudini acknowledges the impact her Italian upbringing had on her. She wrote “the stories of my family had as powerful an influence on me as those of my sisters in the [feminist] movement.” (Of Cheese and Choices, p, 123).

The media tends to focus on the negative exclusively, never exposing true images of the authentic Italian-American girl for who they really are - “successful business executives, high-ranking public officials, talented entertainers, and often the nurturing force behind tight-knit families,” John Dabbene, President, Commission for Social Justice. The truth is the culture is represented by a diverse and vibrant group of women. Unfortunately, the media categorizes this entire culture into a few stereotypes.

FIRST-GENERATION DAUGHTERS

The first-generation daughter faces challenges early in her life as she recognizes the differences in American and Italian customs. As a child, she was schooled for marriage by her parents’ cultural standards. This standard was set in their native country of Italy where it is expected for a daughter to marry and procreate.

In an article published in the Italian magazine, “Donna Moderna”, Italian Equal Opportunities Minister, Stefania Prestigiacomo listed ten steps to finding happiness for women. The first step is to “consider motherhood a value. It is the greatest, most important special
experience for a woman’ and also advices to not be “upset if your man does not notice that you have been to the hairdresser’.

The article, published in Italy on May 25, 2002, is significant. It is ingrained from birth that motherhood and finding a husband are essential to happiness. Oddly, Italy has one of the lowest birth rates in the world! In fact, in 2002, the Pope declared Italy’s declining birth rate an emergency and urged couples to start procreating!


Despite the modern times, first-generation daughters are still sometimes pressured by their parents’ to marry by a certain age. However, by being exposed to Americana from childhood, this generation is torn between Old World customs and the freedom Americana offers. No longer wanting to follow in their mothers’ footsteps, the daughters fight for their independence. Her sense of individuality, she stands up for her own dreams. Her strong ties to her family, however, present obstacles in her quest for freedom.

Growing up, she may have felt wedged between her parents’ culture and America. Her determination to find a bridge between the two cultures is a life long journey. She sets her standards by getting good grades, participating in social activities, and developing her own identity. Her knowledge is combined by the two worlds. Although she was taught the traditional chores such as cooking, cleaning, etc., she gains a new perspective in the American school system. This perspective gives her a look at her potential beyond the customary housewife.

It is not an easy task to separate herself from her parents’ culture. A daughter who does not abide by cultural principles often encounters dissonance. “Daughters are expected to conform far more than sons to standards of respectability....For example, one woman...disowned an adult daughter who moved in with her boyfriend because her daughter’s actions deeply
dishonored her status as a mother” (Danes, p. 2, 2000). This is extreme but not an unusual sentence for “defiant” daughters.

Immersed in the immigrant culture from birth, generational clashes are inevitable as with any culture. The customs taught by their parents seem unjust. Some of the customary traditions from her mother’s culture forbid boyfriends without parental approval, staying out late, and premarital sex.

Their brothers have much more freedom. Geraldine Ferraro, a daughter of an immigrant Italian-American mother, experienced this first-hand. She states, “Her [mother’s] concern was what people would say if I went away for a weekend at a college, what they would think was going on. In that way, I was treated differently [than her brother]. I was really restricted socially.” (Cateura, p. 258, 1987).

The first-generation Italian women encourage each other to contest archaic cultural rules. They are determined to find their own identities and become advocates for a new and different future than their mothers’. With new influences emerging, this subculture found new role models in Sophia Loren, Geraldine Ferraro and Madonna. To each generation of daughters, these women were catalysts in breaking the barriers of traditional cultural roles. Interestingly, even their choice of Italian role models differs from their immigrant parents.

During the 1950’s, Gina Lollobrigida was a huge role model to the immigrant population in the United States. As the first native Italian women to grace the cover of TIME, Lollobrigida symbolized the essence and beauty of an Italian woman. Although Sophia Loren became a bigger star in the States, the Italian immigrants identified more with Lollobrigida. Loren’s affair, with then-married Carlo Ponti was viewed as dishonorable and scandalous. Because of this, Sophia Loren lost respect with her Italian contemporaries. Since Lollobrigida was considered by
the culture to be a morally respectable woman, she became a huge heroine in the Italian immigrant community.

While their mothers disapproved of Sophia Loren's extra-marital affair, the daughters considered her a pioneer in sexuality. These new heroines represented life outside the confines of their culture. Enlightened, the daughters realized they could run for vice-president and be sexually liberated women.

Yet, they never completely denounce their mothers' culture for it contains their primary lessons in womanhood. Ironically, they crave acceptance and respect from their families before finding their place in society. The desire for respect and acceptance resonates throughout their generation.

With the culture dictating marriage as their primary goal, the first-generation daughter subculture finds herself confused. While, many Italian-American daughters (as do many women) dream of the day they will be married, they want to establish new cultural norms such as careers and family. This is easier to achieve with the daughters of the working Italian mother. The daughter looks to her mother as the resistor role model because she did not fully adhere to traditional roles for Italian women. The working Italian mother actually encourages and somewhat supports her daughters liberated ideas (as long as they are not too radical).

The traditional stay-at-home Italian mother finds a career pointless and may discourage her daughters from enterprising ideas. Dissonance between the generations may result as daughters of become liberated and pursue a higher education. Those who do not pursue a higher education often follow traditional roles, often incognizant of other opportunities.

The daughters face different and new stereotypes than their mothers' culture. Now film and television portray her as a feisty girl with a thick regional accent, big hair, high heels and
long nails. Although exaggerated in the media, there is some truth to this image. As the subculture rebelled against their mothers' lifestyle, they established trendy styles of their own. Big hair, red lips, nails, short skirts and big jewelry became a huge trend in the eastern United States, particularly New York and New Jersey. Consequently, they were nicknamed 'Guidettes'. Even though this does not reflect the style of all daughters, in certain regional areas, it is a fairly accurate stereotype.

First-generation daughters are strong, honest and good-hearted. Their stubbornness reflects their unwillingness to conform. Although they appreciate and respect their heritage, they are proud of their accomplishments outside the cultural binds. With many daughters striving for higher education and careers, they cannot deny their heritage. Their parents' culture resonates in them. Surprisingly, many find themselves happily in traditional roles such as loyal wives and family-oriented mothers.

As the years passed, the daughters have exceeded expectations from old world traditions. Many Italian-American women are educated, well-adjusted and achieve success beyond their mother's wildest dreams. They represent the voiceless dreams of their parents' culture. They may have resented their old-fashioned rearing but cannot deny their devotion to such a strong, magnetic heritage. Their parents' pragmatism is a resounding lesson in life.

The stereotypes may remain but as generations follow, there is hope that, perhaps, the world will too discover the dynamic, magnetic personalities of this rich culture.
CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH AND SURVEY OBJECTIVES

Purpose of Research

The purpose of this survey was to document the experiences of first-generation Italian-American women. The author's intent was to find the common link between these women that is consistent with their heritage and ethnic values. The author wanted to document the challenges of bridging these two worlds.

Today, Italian-American women live very different experiences than their Italian immigrant parents. The question remains, "How do these women identify with and respect their Italian heritage while finding their freedom and personal interest as individuals?"

In order to gain a clear understanding of traditional roles and values of first-generation Italian-American women, the research was conducted with a survey and interviews with (but not limited to) first-generation Italian American women.

Survey

The survey included ten statements (see Appendix A) that were analyzed by using a five-point scale. The rating scaled ranged from strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree to strongly disagree. Each survey question was specifically designed with statements demonstrating cultural traditions, roles, and representation. The authors' intention was to evoke a positive or a negative reaction to the Italian American women experience.

The author anticipated the results to indicate that indeed Italian-American woman are extremely misrepresented in the media. Currently, the only images in the media that are
constant are Carmela Soprano and Madonna. Carmela Soprano is a fictional character exaggerated for storyline purposes while Madonna is a half Italian/half French Canadian singing giant who now practices the Kabbala. (Catholicism is the predominant religion practiced by Italians). These images do not capture the authentic Italian-American experience, especially of first-generation women. The author also wanted to determine whether other first-generation daughters had the same experiences, challenges, and frustrations as she had growing up. The experience of immigrant children of any culture has its dynamics but the author wanted to uncover the dynamics specific to Italian Americans.

Sample

The survey was distributed to at 22 Italian-American women especially targeting first-generation women. Each individual must have an Italian background, preferably with immigrant parents. The rationale behind these criteria was to attain a collection of women who were raised with the same Italian cultural and ethnic beliefs, values, and standards. Growing up in heavily populated Italian-American community, the author distributed the survey to friends and relatives who are living the experience. However, the author wanted to reach a wider range of Italian-American women in order to gain an impartial perspective. Therefore, the author posted her survey on several Italian websites including Virtuaitalia.com, Fierior.org.com, and NIAF.com (National Italian American Foundation). The author received numerous responses from this approach from first-generation Italian-American women throughout the country. The author also attended an event hosted by the North Jersey chapter of the Fieri Organization consisting of young, professional Italian Americans living in the NJ area. During the event, the author
distributed her survey to female members of the organization and received a great and enthusiastic response from the surveyors.

**Survey Statements**

1. **The media usually portrays Italian-American women accurately.**
   
   The author wanted to determine if Italian-American women feel they are represented in film, television, or any form of media authentically.

2. **Media “Italian Women” celebrities like Madonna, Isabella Rossellini and Geraldine Ferraro are accurate and proud reflections of Italian-American women.**
   
   The author wanted to determine if Italian-American women were proud to be associated with the women above. However, it must be noted, the author had a limited amount of recognized Italian-American women to choose from.

3. **Most Italian-American women are encouraged to attend college.**
   
   From the author’s individual experience, she was strongly encouraged to attend college, however, the author’s experience was different from her other friends. The author wanted to see if immigrant parents strongly encourage their daughters (as opposed to their sons) to attend college.
4. From a young age, you were assigned adult roles (taking care of bills, doctors appointments, reading mail, writing checks) due to your parents lack of knowledge for the English language.

This statement is from a specific experience in the author’s life. The author wanted to establish how first-generation Italian-American women had serious responsibilities unlike their American or even the second/third generation sisters.

5. I openly demonstrate my pride in my Italian heritage.

This statement was to determine how proud and connected these women feel to their Italian culture. Immigrant parents are extremely proud of their culture, is this inherited by their daughters?

6. My family exerted “traditional” pressure to be married and have children by a certain age.

In “traditional and old-fashioned” immigrant Italian homes, it is expected that daughters will marry and start their own family, and often this precedes (in the immigrant parent’s eyes) any need for college education and other dreams.

7. In a general sense, I feel a strong identification with Italy as a nation.

Does loyalty remain high with their mother nation? Immigrant parents speak often of the old country, despite their trials and tribulations, they refuse to renounce it. Do their daughters feel the same?
8. **In a general sense, I feel more “mainstream American” than “traditional Italian.”**

This statement was to answer the question: if a first-generation daughter grows up in America, who does she identify with more? Does her cultural upbringing determine who she is?

9. **The term “nice Italian girl” is relatively positive in my estimation.**

The author’s interpretation of this term has a negative connotation. When the author is referred to as such, she finds herself labeled and perceived by upholding a certain stereotype that nice Italian girls are “marriage bound” and will cook, clean, and do “what they are told.”

10. **For the most part, you feel that your family is the most important thing in your life.**

Immigrant parents enforce this value rigidly and strictly and passionately. The family always comes first. They teach this “rule” to their children upon birth. The author was curious to see if this became an innate and proud factor of being Italian.

**Demographics**

The survey also contained a demographic section broken down as follows: male or female, the level of education attained (high school, college, graduate school, +), the age range from 20-30, 31-40, 41-50, 51-60, 60+, the marital status (single, married, married w/ children or divorced) and their Italian generational status (first, second, third) and included American or other.
Interviews

The author intended to interview approximately 5-10 first-generation Italian-American women on their experiences, trials, and challenges, both positive and negative. In these interviews, the author hoped to reflect the common denominator that is exclusive to first-generation Italian American women. The author also wants to demonstrate how each individual rose above her challenges and how her dreams differed or were similar to that of her parents. The author would like to include personal stories of family obligations, love and lessons learned by these Italian American women.

The interviews will be held in person at the author's home. The author plans on videotaping these interviews (with the subject's approval) in order to include a visual image to when presenting her thesis. The author will also conduct interviews via email and phone.

Interview Questions and the Psychology

1. **What does it mean to you to be Italian?**
   The author wanted to document how first-generation daughters feel about their heritage and culture. Are they proud of their upbringing? Is there anything they would change?

2. **What main values did your parents teach you?**
   Do immigrant parents enforce strict rules and guidelines unlike their counterparts? How did this affect their socialization into American culture?

3. **When did you realize you were different from your American sisters?**
   The author wanted to exhibit major differences in childhood experiences that was exclusive to Italian American daughters.
4. **What did you and your parents disagree upon, if anything?**

The author’s intent was to see what exactly first-generation daughters fought for.

Was it their identity? Did they fight for their American status?

5. **Who was the pillar of strength in your family?**

The author expected the answer to be my “mother”. The Italian family is matriarchal by nature and the author hoped to verify this.

6. **What did your mother teach you about being a woman?**

Were first-generation daughters taught by their mothers to be subservient, good cooks, and traditional wives? Was this experience exclusive to Italian American girls? Or did their mothers teach them about strength, courage and convictions? The author wanted to document the differences in experiences.

7. **Did you ever feel overwhelmed by your sense of duty to your family?**

The first generation daughter is usually assigned a lot of responsibilities within the family. Does she feel limited, confined or trapped by the expectations of her family’s culture?

8. **What was your most memorable experience growing up?**

The author wanted to document poignant experiences that demonstrate the essence of the Italian family.

9. **If you had brothers, were you treated differently?**

Traditionally, boys of Italian families are allowed many more freedoms than their sisters. Did it inhibit their experiences or challenge them at times?

10. **What Italian media icon do you most relate to and why?**
Who did these women identify with? The author hoped to prove that the media does not accurately portray Italian American women and that the roles models are very limited.

11. **What is your favorite Italian movie?**

Was there a specific movie that actually documents the Italian experience accurately? The author’s intent was to prove that first-generation daughters do not relate to any movie that features Italian-American women in an honest and true reflection.

These questions were psychological in nature. The author’s intent was to document and exhibit the experiences first-generation daughters have unlike any other of their peers (Italian or non-Italian). There are certain traits exclusive to Italian culture and heritage and these questions were a catalyst to uncover those truths.

The in-house interviews were conducted as an open forum. These questions are a guide to initiate a glimpse into the lives of these women. The author hopes to prove that these women are extraordinary, smart, funny, witty and passionate about who they are, how they got there, and what they have learned along the way.
CHAPTER 4

SURVEY RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Analyzing the Results of the Survey

In two months, the author collected 22 responses from individuals who answered all ten statements of the survey. The surveys were gathered via email, in person interviews and by telephone. The author posted the survey on various Italian-American websites as well as attending Italian-American events. Once all the surveys were collected, the author tallied the responses in percentages. Below are the results of the tally.

1. The media usually portrays Italian-American women accurately.

   Of the first-generation respondents, six (55 percent) disagreed while five (45 percent) remained neutral to the above statement. Of the second/third generation respondents, four disagreed (36 percent), four strongly disagreed (36 percent), one agreed (10 percent) and two (18 percent) remained neutral. There were zero respondents that strongly agreed.

   Since the majority of the respondents (63 percent) either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the above statement the author concludes that Italian-American women feel they are not accurately portrayed in the media.

   A second-generation respondent wrote:

   “I feel that, generally, the media portrays Italian-American women as poorly educated servants to their husbands. More disturbing, I feel that this stereotype is almost glorified, or looked
on as a good thing."

2. Media "Italian Women" celebrities like Madonna, Isabella Rossellini and Geraldine Ferraro are accurate and proud reflections of Italian-American women.

In evaluating this statement, three first-generation respondents (27 percent) Italian American women disagreed, one (9 percent) strongly disagreed, four (36 percent) remained neutral, one strongly agreed (9 percent) and one (9 percent) agreed. One person did not respond to this question.

Of the second/third generation respondents two (18 percent) agreed, five (45 percent) were neutral, three (27 percent) disagreed with one (9 percent) strongly disagreeing.

The respondents were predominately neutral (40 percent) in this representation with 27 percent strongly disagreeing or disagreed. A total of four (18 percent) actually agreed (3) or strongly agreed (1) with this statement.

In concluding the results of this statement, the author determined the women featured in the statement represented too wide of a range of Italian-American women (from a successful politician to a media giant to a model) which may have not been an effective selection. However, media images of authentic Italian-American women are very limited.

3. Most Italian-American women are encouraged to attend college.

Respondents in the first-generation women were more diverse than those of the second/third generation. Of the first-generation women, four (36 percent) strong
disagreed, three (27 percent) were neutral, two (18 percent) strongly agreed and one (9 percent) agreed. There were zero responses in the disagree category.

The second/third generation responded with seven (63 percent) strongly agreeing and five (45 percent) as neutral.

In analyzing these results, it is clear that as generations were born, they were more likely to be encouraged to attend college while the first-generation born women were more likely to be encouraged to remain “traditional” in their roles.

In fact, one of the first-generation daughters wrote on her survey that she has “not had a lot of support to be independent and pursue a career in my field of choice.”

4. **From a young age, you were assigned adult roles (taking care of bills, doctors appointments, reading mail, writing checks) due to your parents lack of knowledge for the English language.**

There were major differences in the first-generation category as opposed to the second/third generations. Of the first-generation group, eight (73 percent) strongly agreed, one (9 percent) agreed, and one (9 percent) strongly disagreed with this statement. There were zero responses in the disagree or neutral category.

In the second/third generation group, five (45 percent) strongly disagreed, three (27 percent) disagreed and three (27 percent) remained neutral. There were zero responses in either the agree or strongly agree category.

These results conclude that first-generation daughters were given more household and care-taking responsibilities from a young age while the second/third generation girls
were not assigned the same roles.

5. I openly demonstrate my pride in my Italian heritage.

The response to this category was overwhelmingly positive. The first-generation women responded with seven (64 percent) strongly agree and three (27 percent) agreed. There were zero responses in the neutral, disagree or strongly disagree category.

The second/third generation women responded with six (55 percent) as strongly agree, three (27 percent) agreed while two (18 percent) remained neutral. There were zero responses in the disagree or strongly disagree answers.

These results conclude that the majority (86 percent) of all Italian-American women take pride in their culture.

6. My family exerted "traditional" pressure to be married and have children by a certain age.

Five (45 percent) of the first-generation group responded with strongly agree with two (18 percent) agreeing, two (18 percent) neutral, and one (9 percent) disagreeing. There were zero strong disagree responses.

The second/third generation group split down the middle. Four (36 percent) responded with strongly disagree, two (18 percent) disagreed while three (27 percent) agreed, one (9 percent) agreed, and one remained neutral.

The differences between the first-generation and second/third generation responses were clear. The first-generation was clearly more pressured (63 percent) to follow the traditional route and get married while 54 percent of the second/third generation were not as pressured.
7. **In a general sense, I feel a strong identification with Italy as a nation.**

   The first-generation group clearly felt more a strong connection to Italy with four (36 percent) agreeing, three (27 percent) strongly agreeing and three (27 percent) feeling neutral. There were zero responses that chose disagree or strongly disagree.

   The second/third generations responded with two (18 percent) strongly agreeing, one (9 percent) agreeing, six (55 percent) remaining neutral and two (18 percent) strongly disagreeing.

   The results indicate that first-generation hold a strong identification with the motherland while the second and third generations were predominately neutral in their response.

8. **In a general sense, I feel more “mainstream American” than “traditional Italian.”**

   In evaluating this statement, five (45 percent) of the first-generation women agreed with this statement while three (27 percent) disagreed, one (9 percent) was neutral and one (9 percent) strongly disagreed.

   Four (36 percent) of the second/third generation of women responded with strongly agree, four (36 percent) agreed, one (9 percent) was neutral, one (9 percent) disagreed, and one (9 percent) strongly disagreed.

   These results indicate that the first-generation group consider themselves as Italian first and foremost with the culture and traditions as a strong presence in their lives. The second and third generation group feels more “American”.
9. The term “nice Italian girl” is relatively positive in my estimation.

The first-generation group was split. Two (18 percent) strongly agreed with the term, two (18 percent) agreed while three (27 percent) disagreed, one (9 percent) disagreed, and two (18 percent) were neutral.

The second/third generation tallied as follows: two (18 percent) strongly agreed, two (18 percent) agreed, three (27 percent) were neutral, three (27 percent) disagreed, and one (9 percent) strongly disagreed.

The results were similar in both groups. Out of eight strong opinions, four (36 percent) of the women felt “nice Italian” to be a positive term while the other four found it to be disagreeable.

One respondent wrote:

“I find this term to be awful. When someone refers to me as a “nice Italian girl”, it makes me cringe. To me the term indicates that a nice Italian girl is expected to cook, clean and be subservient to her husband.”

10. For the most part, you feel that your family is the most important thing in your life.

The results to this were unanimously positive across the board. Of the first-generation group, nine (82 percent) strongly agreed with one (9 percent) agreeing. The second/third generation group were equally positive with eight (73 percent) strongly agreeing and three (27 percent) agreeing. There were zero responses in the neutral, disagree or strongly disagree category. These results indicate that generation after
generation, Italian-American women still view family as a major force in their lives.

Conclusion

All respondents enthusiastically welcomed this survey. In fact, even Italian males were interested in the survey and its results. The author noticed a profound sense of pride to his or her Italian heritage with every respondent. The first-generation women were very interested in seeing the similarities amongst themselves, their upbringing and their individual dreams. Even the second and third generation group of women were very proud to take part of this survey. One common thread between all is the love and respect each has for her Italian heritage. There were many findings from these studies that clearly distinguish the differences in roles and pressures between the first-generation and second/third generation. This was the authors’ intent.

One major difference that distinguished the difference pressures a first-generation daughter had to face was the fourth statement of the survey. First-generation daughters strongly agreed and agreed that their experience was different because of the language barriers. While their parents were limited in the English capabilities, they assigned adult roles to the daughters who were being schooled in America.

To this day, the author is solely responsible for handling her parents’ bills, writing checks, making doctors appointments, handling insurance claims, as are many first-generation daughters. The second and third generation daughters obviously weren’t given the same responsibilities because of their parents being fluent in English.

The first-generation daughters also seem to have more pressure to follow to marry by a certain age (statement six) while the second and third generation daughters feel less pressure and are more encouraged to attend college.
A fascinating outcome was that regardless of generation, age, college education, or marital status, all of the Italian-American respondents testified that family is the most important thing in their life. As seen in statement ten, this testimony is carried on from generation to generation. Italians are known for the deep sense of family and the importance of maintaining the family unit with closeness, respect, and love resonates throughout generations. In fact, one of the respondents, a 31-year-old graduate student states, “being Italian gives me a sense of pride and strength. My family is very important to me.”

Note, seven out of eleven first-generation daughters attended college and/or graduate school. Despite not being encouraged to attend college and pressured to get married, the first-generation daughters pursued higher education to better themselves and to expand their opportunities. This definitely defies the stereotype of the uneducated subservient housewife.

All eleven of the second/generation group attended college and/or graduate school. This contradicts the media stereotype that Italian girls are uneducated.

Lastly, of the eleven first-generation daughters, four were single women in the 31-40-age range, two were single women in the 21-30 category and four were married with children in the 41-50 category. The majority of the respondents were single.

**Interview Results and Analysis**

The interview sessions were conducted in a roundtable setting as an open forum. Six first-generation daughters, all of immigrant parents, came to the author’s home to speak about their experiences. The six women were all in their thirties (five out of six were single). There are all college graduates, two have attended graduate programs and one is a doctor. Their professions range from Benefits Administrator to Retail Manager to Chiropractor.
Although the author opened the forum with the first question, the discussion spiraled into a variety of topics and experiences. All intended questions were not asked, however, the questions became a catalyst that provided an introspective look into the lives of these women. This was much more than the author had hoped or expected. The women were completely honest, open and vocal about their experiences.

Upon asking the women, "What is meant to them to be Italian?", there was a strong sense of pride in their heritage. Here are some quotes:

- "Being Italian to me means having a strong sense of family"
- "I feel that the values I was taught was different than of other nationalities"
- "I wouldn’t want to be anything but Italian"
- "Knowing that your family is there for you at all times is the best feeling in the world"
- "There is nothing my family wouldn’t do for me and vice versa"
- "Being Italian means being social"
- "When my mother was in the hospital, I had to take a semester off from school because I couldn’t imagine not being by her side if something happened to her. Yet, her hospital roommate, who was in the hospital for weeks, said that her children had only visited her once. That was incomprehensible to me but then again, I’m Italian."

It was obvious these women had strong bonds to their family and were very proud of their culture. The quotes illustrate the importance of family and the unshakable bond is the foundation of the Italian family dynamic.
The author asked the women when they realized they were different from their American peers. This question resulted in much laughter as the women recalled their childhood memories and experiences. These experiences definitely distinguished them from other girls in the neighborhood. One said she knew was different from day one.

The group all concurred that their parent’s lack of knowledge of the English language had a huge impact on their lives. The following quotes exemplify the differences:

- "Even in my neighborhood which was predominately, Italian, albeit second and third generations, from the moment we started playing with the other kids on the block, I just knew we were different for me. It was amazing how different it was."
- "I had to write my own notes to school because my parents didn’t write English"
- "At a young age, I was writing checks and making doctors appointments from the minute I learned how to read and write,"
- "The only reason why I got to join the “Brownies” was because it was close to my home but I wasn’t allowed to do anything after school, really."
- "I was doing their bills at the age of six."
- "I wasn’t allowed to wear makeup in high school. My dad would check my face before I left the house, he felt that makeup was only worn by “bad” girls"
- "I knew I was different at lunch in the school cafeteria when everyone else was eating peanut and butter jelly sandwiches and my mom would give me homemade bread with prosciutto. It was embarrassing!"
- "If I didn’t want to do something for my mother, she’d say, “I’ll get a stranger to help me and she put me, right on that guilt trip.”"
• "I wasn’t allowed to go to sleepovers. If you want a sleepover, make them come here, my father would say.”

• "Every Sunday, no matter what, we had to be at the dinner table for pasta. No exceptions.”

• "Let’s face it, our lives revolve around food!”

• "Being Italian is a social thing, someone dies, you eat, someone gets married you eat, someone has a baby you eat.”

• "Ours was the only house on the block with smoke coming from the garage because my father was making sausage. The firefighter would come to the house and my father would ask him if he wanted a glass of wine! I used to hide inside [from embarrassment].”

• "My garage was used as a slaughterhouse for live animals. I learned not to get attached to the lambs, pigs, chickens and rabbits because I knew they were going to be dinner. I refused to eat it, it was barbaric and embarrassing!! What our neighbors must have thought!”

Upon discussing their experiences in the public school system, the topic of school lunches arose. One said while everyone else was eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, her mom packed her lunchbox with pasta and peas (an Italian dish). Another recalled her infamous lunches consisted of Nutella (an Italian chocolate spread) over Italian bread. The non-Italian students teased them. One said, “all I wanted was some Wonder Bread and bologna but I’d get these fat sandwiches with Italian deli meat!”
The next question presented to the group was, “what did you and your parents disagree upon.” Here are some testimonies:

- “Just about everything”
- “How much time do you have?”
- “I wanted to know why we had to eat pasta every Sunday and we couldn’t have hamburgers like everyone else!”

The women also voiced their frustrations about the double standards set in their respective homes. Brothers were allowed more freedoms, encouraged to be more independent, and were assigned fewer responsibilities. One recalled how her parents would not allow her to vacation with her friends because she was a “girl”. They were not allowed to date. There was no such thing as platonic boy friends. Boyfriends had to pass the “father test” and better have good intentions. One respondent mentioned how her father would sit her boyfriends down at the table and interrogate them before he allowed her to date. She found this experience to be extremely old-fashioned.

When asked what Italian media icon the women related to, surprisingly, there was none. The women did not feel there was an authentic representation in the media today. The group liked Madonna but did not relate to her as an Italian-American. Immigrant parents did not raise Madonna so they felt her experience was different. In fact, Madonna’s heritage is half Italian and half French Canadian. Therefore, Madonna could not have the same experiences as those with immigrant parents and cannot be an authentic role model to first generation daughters.

Moreover, the interviewees expressed their grievances of constantly seeing the same old stereotypes featured on film. Usually featured as bimbos, uneducated but street-smart or housewives, the stereotypes become a consistent standard in Hollywood.
In a discussion about *The Sopranos*, they agreed the show is entertaining but felt it is not an accurate reflection of an Italian home. The authentic Italian family are hard working, law-abiding citizens with high moral standards. Unfortunately, mafia stereotypes are based on shallow truths. The media consistently sensationalizes these images, thus portraying them to the public as glorified icons rather than fictional characters.

“Although the Sopranos does cast predominately actors of Italian descent, their roles are limited to crooks, thieves, adulterers, and bimbos - that is all we have. That is all we have on television right now”, said one.

They agreed there were few, if any, movies made about the true Italian-American experience. Currently, a new reality television game series, “The Family” features an Italian-American family competing for a million dollars. Once again, the family featured by this series focuses on the negative stereotypes. The family is criticized on television for having no manners, being ignorant and classless. One of the interviewees said, “They are ‘fake’ Italians who misrepresent the authentic Italians. They are on national television representing Italian-Americans but they can’t even articulate or pronounce Italian words. It’s disgraceful!”

The only character they mildly related to was Cher in “Moonstruck”. They felt her character somewhat captured the complex and dynamic essence of the Italian-American woman but not fully. There was a solid consensus that the media has never portrayed Italian immigrants and their families accurately.

**Conclusion**

Upon sharing these common stories, the group would break into heavy laughter. It was apparent they were, at times, embarrassed and frustrated by their immigrant parents but nonetheless were extremely proud of their culture and upbringing.
Growing up in their households was complex at times. Challenged by the clashing of American and Italian traditions and standards, they strove to become individuals. It was inevitable they would assimilate into American society but their Italian heritage always took precedence.

These women grew up in different sections of New Jersey with immigrant parents from different regions of Italy. Yet, they were all raised with the same standards, rules, and expectations. Their experiences were uniquely similar. They lived in America but once they entered their front door, they were first and foremost Italian. The open forum illustrated the uniquely different and complex lives of these first-generation women. Despite their trials and tribulations, being Italian is a point of pride for these women.
CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Like all immigrants, Italians came to this country for unlimited opportunities not available to them in their homeland. They worked hard and honestly persevered to achieve the American dream. Most were successful beyond their wildest dreams. They raised healthy, law-abiding, and loving children with many of their children making serious contributions to history.

Their daughters (first-generation women) were presented with clashing worlds. Parented to be “nice” Italian girls with traditional roles enforced from birth, they strive to find their own identity and goals beyond the traditional “Italian” expectations. The research has proven that although traditionally reared, many first-generation daughters want to achieve a higher social status via education and careers. For example, the author is the first woman in her family to attend college and achieve a Master’s degree.

The author was extremely pleased with the response and results from the research. As a first-generation daughter of immigrant parents, she often wondered if other women with the same background faced the same challenges. It was clear to the author that, indeed, they do. This was definitely a labor of love for the author. The author is very passionate about her upbringing and strongly identifies with the Italian culture yet does not deny the opportunities America has offered her and her family. Like most first-generation daughters, loyalties lie, first and foremost with her family. With these strong loyalties, she does not stray too far away from her family (geographically or emotionally).

The interviews featured in the previous chapter accurately depict the experiences of first-generation Italian-American woman. Although they were vehemently proud of being Italian, they were sometimes embarrassed by the distinct cultural differences. Like most immigrants,
they even faced prejudices at times. They were assigned responsibilities at a young age due to their parents’ lack of English knowledge. At early as the age of six, these women were responsible for writing bills and taking care of household business. This became a serious and sometimes burdensome responsibility assigned solely to the daughters. The daughters had more household responsibilities than their brothers.

First-generation women matured earlier than their American counterparts. They were schooled in the traditions of Italian culture and heritage and found it, at times, difficult and challenging while growing up. They were often not allowed to attend after-school events, date in high school, go to boy/girl dances, or participate in activities that were part of the social American experience. Their immigrant parents had strict rules deemed “appropriate” behavior for girls. Daughters were expected to get good grades and come straight home after school. School was not considered a setting for socializing.

All of the first-generation women had strict parenting and were expected to achieve a high moral and ethical standing within the home, community and society. From the author’s experience, her parents were very strict and expected the best from her. Her parents were tenacious and hardworking. The author’s parents came to this country with no money in their bank account. They came to this country with a dream for a better life for themselves and their daughter. Therefore, if they had to work hard to achieve a better life, they certainly expected their daughter to do the same. The author’s parents had no tolerance for disrespect for family, society or the community. They reared her to transcend above and beyond the American dream. Like all parents, they expected her to make them proud with no room for misbehavior.

While her American peers were allowed much more freedoms, the author was constricted to the binds of her culture. In fact, most first-generation women felt pressured to be married by a
certain age but pursued their own interests regardless. Their parents and culture had a strong influence on them and could not be denied. However, they were able to find their own voice while staying true to their ethnic roots. Despite the clashing with their parents’ traditional expectations, first-generation daughters are very proud to carry on the tradition of their culture.

Family always comes first but they find a balance between their careers and family. Their parents continue to be a strong influence in their lives. They are still responsible for handling their personal and business affairs along with their own. This is a lifelong responsibility assigned to them. It can be frustrating and demanding at times, but the first-generation daughter has no other choice. Her family is her life, this is ingrained from birth but she wouldn’t have it any other way.

The first-generation daughters that were interviewed stated that despite the old-fashioned mandates, they respected their parent’s methods of upbringing. They are proud of who they are and where they come from. Although the stories they shared were sometimes barbaric and shocking, they are not ashamed of their parents or their culture. These daughters are a group of strong and unique women.

This analysis illustrates the first-generation daughters very differently than the images seen in the media. The stereotypes in the media classify them as uneducated, subservient and ignorant when, in fact, they are mostly educated, intelligent, and proud woman. Unfortunately, the media consistently portrays them in the same confining roles.

*The Sopranos* is the most current reminder of how the media takes an ounce of truth and distorts the Italian-American experience. The Italian-American women featured are either good “wives” or “hot” pieces of meat. The impact of the media is highly underrated. With constant negative and inappropriate images being consistently portrayed, how can stereotypes be erased?
The unfortunate effect of stereotypes is mass perception. A constant image creates an imprint, a stamped perception of Italian-American women.

First-generation daughters expressed their frustration at having to shatter mass prejudices and perceptions of their culture. Of course, one cannot solely blame The Sopranos for the negative images in the media. For the past thirty years, the stereotypes have been constant.

The author does not refute that there is truth to stereotypes. A small percentage of Italians are criminals lacking moral standards but this is true of all cultures. Every culture faces stereotypes and tries to defy them. Perhaps, the only way to rise above these stereotypes is for more Italian-American writers, directors, and actors to document the Italian-American experience in a positive and accurate way.

Unfortunately, as long as mass culture remains fascinated with the “mob” movies, Hollywood will continue to portray Italian-Americans in the same light. The critics and the masses may love a great mafia story about greed, lust, and murder but authentic Italian-Americans become the real victims. The author is not trying to undermine the entertainment value of “mob” movies. Undoubtedly, they are fascinating and highly entertaining. The problem lies in the fact that they only capture a small percentage of the Italian American experience. In reality, the author can confirm that neither she nor any of the first-generation women interviewed actually know a mobster! The real problem is the lack of accurate images in media featuring Italian-Americans in a positive light. The author believes more positive images could possibly counteract the effects of the infamous yet inaccurate stereotypes.

The author would like to see the biographies of the first-generation Italian-American woman such as Maria Montessori or Geraldine Ferraro in the media. These great and intriguing stories are representative of the true Italian-American woman. They are passionate, honest,
funny, smart, lively, and full of life. The time for accurate Italian images to surface is long overdue.

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Italian women given secret of happiness
Published in Donna Moderna, Italy
Saturday May 25, 2002

Barred from top jobs by a sexist elite, belittled and patronized by the media, Italian women were offered solace yesterday by the equal opportunities minister's "10 commandments for happiness".

Frustrated at home? Unable to find a job? Stalled on the career ladder? Follow this advice and banish those blues, said Stefania Prestigiadomo.

First commandment: consider motherhood a value; it is the greatest, most important, special experience for a woman.

Two: follow your childhood dream, be it writing a book, landing on Mars, being a good mother or making your beloved happy.

Three: keep falling in love, with people, ideas, books, films, songs, sunsets, the gleam of jewels, whatever.

Four: buy something useless once in a while, something you like but do not need.

Five: take pride in your beauty in the world, different from all the others.

Published yesterday in a women’s magazine, Donna Moderna, the list unleashed a minor political squall. Ms Prestigiadomo, 36, a recent mother and a member of Silvio Berlusconi’s conservative Forza Italia party, was accused of reinforcing the stereotypes which marginalise women.

"I don’t know whether to laugh or cry," said Gloria Buflo, a leftwing opposition deputy. "For a minister who is supposed to promote equality between men and women, it does not seem like a great result."

The list goes on:

Six: do not be upset if your man does not notice that you have been to the hairdresser. It is him who loses, not you.

Seven: do not be too envious of important people, such as government ministers, since they, too, often spend evenings just watching television.

Ms Prestigiadomo, once dubbed Miss Parliament for her striking Sicilian looks, and one of only two women in the cabinet, said her accusers could not distinguish between government policy and ironic answers to a magazine which solicited her advice on how to improve women’s lives.

But Livia Turca, a minister in the previous government, was not appeased. "It is the list of a spoilt girl," she said. "The only thing missing is the cake of Marie Antoinette."

The minister’s final three commandments:
Travel to broaden your mind; defend other women; smile.