

Perception and construction of “otherness” biased by fear

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ABSTRACT

With the progressive stabilization of migration in Europe, the perception of immigrants has changed over time. Due to distortion and generalization processes related to actual violent events, a broad sense of fear and threat has been activated.

In this paper we present the results of a preliminary empirical study based on both structured questionnaires and open interviews to Italians and immigrants in Italy. Questions aim to reveal the perception and construction of “self/WE” as opposed to “others/THEY”.

Among variables, we considered people’s attitude towards foreigners, different kinds of perceived threats, willingness to engage in inter-group contacts, relations with members of the out-group and the influence of mass media.

Data will be analyzed primarily within the framework of Social Identity Theory, Self-Categorization Theory, and Integrated Threat Theory. Moreover, it will be shown how specific linguistic devices and discourse structures directly anchor to people’s subjective interpretations and constructions of social reality, sometimes revealing more or less implicit prejudices.

In conclusion, possible strategies of attitude changes will be considered, mainly based on Contact Hypothesis Theory, promoting subjects’ psychological and discursive ability to create a common (hybrid?) in-group identity.

Key words: immigration, Muslims, threat, terrorist attacks, categorization, “otherness”, attitudes, discrimination, inter-group contact, discourse analysis

INTRODUCTION

With the progressive stabilization of migration in Europe, the perception of immigrants has changed over time. Due to distortion and generalization processes related to terrorist events since 2001, a broad sense of fear and threat has been activated, targeted towards the ‘other’ who is perceived as different.

A preliminary research is conducted aiming at observing intergroup attitudes towards immigrant outgroups and, on the other hand, the perception and (discursive) construction of *self* and *they* by immigrants themselves. We also focus on the discrimination experiences lived by the foreign population. The attempt of our work is to gather qualitative and quantitative data in order to deepen the understanding of the dynamics involved in the creation of the social identity for both the dominant majority group and the minority ones.

We will apply theoretical insights stemming from the Social Identity Theory, its variant, the Social Categorization Theory and the Integrated Threat Theory.

In the conclusion we will try to propose some ideas about ways to foster more positive intergroup attitudes and evaluations.

THE AFTERMATH OF THE TERRORIST ATTACKS

The terrorist attacks of September 11th, March 11th, 2004 in Spain, July 7th, 2005 in the UK and July 11, 2006 in India, were sudden traumatic events that left many consequences on directly and indirectly involved people. They created a collective atmosphere of hysteria, stimulated reactions and strategies to cope with the post-traumatic distress. Among these, anxiety and fear of the reoccurrence of terrorism, enhanced patriotic and nationalistic attachments, anger towards those who were judged responsible for the attacks, fear of and prejudice towards foreigners (PEW, 2001; Coryn, Beale, & Myers 2004). In order to protect the national image in the presence of an external threat, hostility and suspicion became generalized to more other outgroups, not only towards those who were perceived somehow associated with the events (Echebarria-Echabe, & Fernandez-Guede 2006).

IMMIGRATION IN ITALY

According to the Dossier Caritas Migrantes 2006, regular immigrants in Italy are estimated to be around 3 million (among a total population of 57 million) and of these 586.000 are under age children. Immigrant people so far constitute 5,2% of the entire population in Italy. As regards the countries of origin, 48,8% comes from Eastern Europe (principally from Romania, Albania and Ukraine), 23,1% from Africa (mainly Morocco), 17,4% from Asia and 10% from America.

In the decisional process of emigration both push and pull factors play an important role, such as the unbalance between the resources and the territory, poverty, unemployment, population explosion, political and social crisis, wars, natural catastrophes on the one part; needs for workforce, expectations for better life conditions, family reunions, search for new experiences on the other. EU Immigration is increasingly linked to economic needs (lack of workforce) and demographic ones (increasing depopulation).

Comparing the statistical data of the last few years, it comes out that immigration is progressively increasing and stabilizing in our territory. The rise of the permits for family reunion reveals a project for a long term staying in Italy. The substantial uniformity in the number of men and women among immigrants, and the high number of under age children further demonstrate such progressive stabilization of immigration in our country.

Immigration policies in Italy traditionally tend to functionalize immigrants to the job market, as it is in other Western countries¹, whereas such vast phenomenon is going to deeply affect the physiognomy of Italian society, having important consequences both for immigrants and for local people. The passage from a temporary staying to a permanent one should imply changes in the welcome policies and in the services offered to immigrant people to integrate into the territory.

Another characteristic of the Italian institutional approach was to consider immigration as a problem and as a matter of security and public order, rather than as a social one connected to socio-economic and political reasons to be explored.² This was the main peculiarity of the previous rightwing legislation, whereas the actual leftwing legislation is attempting to move from a logic of emergency to a logic of integration, where the immigrant is not seen exclusively as a worker but as a citizen and as such, as an active member of the society.

¹ In Germany immigrant workers were called *Gastarbeiter*, that is *host workers*, underlining the point of view of local institutions toward the migratory phenomenon.

² See www.migrationinformation.org.

MUSLIMS IN ITALY

According to the most recent statistics of Italian association Caritas, there are overall between 960,000 and 1,030,000 estimated³ (legal and illegal) Muslims in Italy. Most of them come from about thirty countries of Asia and Africa, that is from different ethnic-national cultures, social and religious backgrounds. North-African immigrants come mainly from Morocco (150 thousand). 50 thousand come from Tunisia. About 100 thousand are from Albania. To a lesser extent, there are Libyans, Egyptians, Pakistanis, Somalis, Bengalis, Middle Eastern Arabs and Kurds.

The Muslim population represents from 1.4% to 2% of the total Italian population, around 36% of the foreign residents and about 40% of Italy's illegal immigrants. About 40,000-50,000 (among them about 10,000 Christians who converted to Islam) are Italian citizens with their rights equal to the rest of Italians. Almost 55% of Muslims live in the North of Italy, 25% in the Centre, and only 20% in the South.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Self-Categorization Theory (SCT)

Categorization is an important process of our cognition that helps us simplify and organize stimuli perceived from our environment. According to SCT (see Abrams, Wetherell, Cochrane, Hogg, & Turner 1990), people can identify with a group as members, forming a sense of *we*, when they perceive some common characteristics with other people. Interestingly, the outgroup (*they*) is generally perceived as quite homogeneous, while within the ingroup more differentiations and subcategories can be noticed.

Moreover, it is not necessary neither to know these other people directly or to have some cooperative experience with them. We just need to be aware that we share some characteristics of any kind. The term *identity* refers directly to the semantic field of similarity and, consequently, of difference. It indicates the identification with someone on the basis of (stereotyped) specific observable elements and, at the same time, the differentiation from someone else who do not share such characteristics (Bucholtz, & Hall 2004). Similarities and differences, then, do not represent objective states, but derive from interaction. Through the net of social relations, one's own identity, and specifically ethnic one, is shaped, negotiated and constructed (Cornell, & Hartmann 1998). Similarities and differences are hierarchically built and organized within the social context and they generally relate to the normative system of reference, often in a relation of power based on it. Particularly, in the context of immigration in pluralistic societies, relations between local groups and different ethnic and cultural ones tend to be asymmetric (Demetrio, & Favaro 2004), where there is a dominant group and many dominated ones.

Seeking similarities is motivated by the need to establish a positive personal and social identity, appreciating our personal characteristics (see Brewer, 1991). Generally we prefer people who share some characteristics with us and belong to the same perceived ingroup to someone who does not, even if s/he is a stranger. Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, & Turner 1988) proposes that in order to protect and maintain a positive image of the ingroup and thus a positive self-esteem, people tend to negatively evaluate and downgrade the out-groups (Branscombe, & Wann 1994).

Integrated Threat Theory

Hostile intergroup attitudes can stem out from the perceived danger to one's group. "Integrated threat theory" (see Stephan, Ybarra, & Bachman 1999) identifies four types of threat as predictors of prejudice and hostility between groups: *symbolic threats* (threats to the in-group's values, beliefs, worldview, way of life, norms, language, religion, morality, attitudes); *realistic threats* (threats to the in-group's resources, political and economic power, status, physical wellbeing);

³ Italy does not ask for respondents' religion in census. Therefore, estimates are based on the assumption that people coming from certain countries are Muslims. Statistics on foreign residents can be found in: [//demo.istat.it/stra1/start.html](http://demo.istat.it/stra1/start.html); www.caritasroma.it/immigrazione; [//pers.mininterno.it/sista/int014.htm](http://pers.mininterno.it/sista/int014.htm)

intergroup anxiety (Stephan, & Stephan 1985; see also Islam & Hewstone, 1993)(the arousal derived from social interaction with members of the outgroup due to anticipation of negative consequences) and feelings of threat deriving from *negative stereotypes* of the outgroup.

Mass Media and Anxiety

Newspapers, radio, television and internet are in general important sources of information and knowledge. Yet, mass media not only provide information, but also influence behaviours and feelings, sensitising the public opinion and guiding common perception. On one hand, it was demonstrated that the perception of threat and anxiety enhances attention to information (Marcus, & MacKuen, 2001). On the other hand, Slone (2000) found that mass media presentations of events related to terrorism had a significant impact on anxiety in Israeli adults. Furthermore, it was also documented (Khalema, & Wannas-Jones, 2003, cited by Coryn, 2004) that the media contributed to a negative view of Muslims and to the common distorted conception that all Muslims are terrorists. According to a theory proposed by Stan Cohen in the 70s, the media, with the sensationalism of their stories focused on problems and crimes, can create and fuel “moral panics”, that is, a false or exaggerated idea that the behaviours of some groups, labelled “folk devils”, are unwanted “other” – “not us”, deviant in such a way to posit a threat to societal values and thus defined as a security issue.

Van Dijk (2005c, 2006b) underlines the responsibility of the press to diffuse biased news, generally adopting the strategy of positive (western) self-presentation and negative other-presentation.

The Role of Language and Discourse

The process of construction of self depends on a continuous dynamics between self definition and definition by others within a hierarchical structure. This is particularly complex when different ethnic and cultural groups come into contact. It is interesting to observe how individuals manage their own social role in the context where they live and act. Such *agency* (Duranti, 2004) has to do with the way in which people relate or are forced to relate towards the others in the social context, ‘where the identities of the more powerful group become less recognizable as identities; instead, this group constitutes itself as the norm from which all others diverge. [...]’ (Bucholtz, & Hall 2004: 372).

Language in general, and discourse in particular, play a fundamental role in conveying the hierarchical norm and habitual referential patterns imposed by the dominant social group:

Within linguistics, the hierarchical structuring of difference has been termed *markedness* ... the process whereby some social categories gain a special, default [unmarked] status that contrasts with the identities of other groups, which are usually highly recognizable [marked]. [...] Marked identities are also ideologically associated with marked language: linguistic structures or practices that differ from the norm (Bucholtz, & Hall, 2004:372).

Specifically, critical discourse analysis is ‘interested in the reproduction of power and power abuse’ (Van Dijk, 2006a), and in exploring how the organization of meanings interacts with social order (Mantovani, 2003). Habitualized discourses, in fact, convey ideologies and stereotypical elements of the dominant social group, dangerous in that they are not easily recognizable and unconsciously absorbed and transmitted, being treated as natural and unquestionable referential elements of its contextual social world (Gotsbachner, 2002). In particular, studies on the so called *xenophobic discourse* show how immigrants are discursively represented by autochthons in interaction, in political discourses and through the mass media (Gotsbachner, 2001 and 2002; Van Dijk, 1993a and b, 2004, 2005a; Verkuyten, 2001). Consequences of such practice are stereotypes and prejudiced discourse where ‘statements about persons are made in a levelling, generalizing, essentializing and eternalizing manner, in which groups of social actors are presupposed to be homogeneous and are

selectively ascribed a specific, allegedly shared feature, trait, mentality and so on' (Reisigl, & Wodak, 2001: 63).

As it emerges from previous studies, semantic fields of such discriminatory patterns are related to a systematic ascription of 'deviant mentality', so that in interaction autochthons depict immigrant people as lazy, work-shy, uneducated, criminals, 'living from our assets'. Discursive attempts for equality by people considered different are systematically downplayed through rhetoric means and absorbed in prejudiced discourses (Gotsbachner, 2002). Again, Verkuyten (2001) shows that argumentation on immigrants are often presented as (undeniable) facts and that *their* 'abnormality' is basically created through three discursive strategies, that is making contrast, formulating extreme cases and referring to basic human values. Generally, at all level of discourse (meaning, lexicon, syntax, rhetorical structures) there is the tendency to continuously create a polarization between US and THEM, emphasizing *our* good things and de-emphasizing *our* bad things, emphasizing *their* bad things and de-emphasizing *their* good things (Van Dijk, 2004, 2005).

Focusing on discursive approach after 9/11, studies on political discourses on immigration show an increasing connection between immigration, crime and security issues, on the one part; Islamic presence and post 9/11 security concern on the other (Buonfino, 2004).

METHOD

Participants

28 Italian citizens agreed to participate in the pre-test survey answering and commenting with the researchers the semi-structured questionnaire they received on the topics of immigration. Moreover, further 4 foreign citizens gave permission for an audio-taped open interview.

Materials and Procedure

a) Discourse analysis of the INTERVIEWS to IMMIGRANTS

b) Descriptive analysis of the QUESTIONNAIRES to ITALIANS

a) OPEN INTERVIEWS TO IMMIGRANTS⁴

In the light of what has been investigated by now, we propose here the discursive analysis of some excerpts from interviews to four immigrant people of different origins living and working in Italy⁵. People interviewed are not fully representative of the immigrant person come in Italy basically for economic reasons and for search of better conditions of life. Rather, they came for choice, or arrived here 20-25 years ago and have now reached high social and economic level through autonomous activities, such as 'ethnic' shops or restaurants. Since one of them has a shop, one runs a restaurant, two of them are members of an institutional organism at the regional level, their visibility is such that it was easy to contact them for sharing with us their experience as immigrants in Italy. For the interviews we did not follow a precise set of questions but, once suggested the main topics (perception of discrimination and the situation for immigrant people after 9/11, opinion on the role of media in transmitting specific images about immigrants and immigration) informants were free to express themselves and our intervention was as limited as possible.

The aim is to give some examples of how the above described prejudiced perception of *otherness* is interiorized by immigrants themselves and how it is negotiated through (marked) discursive practices. We want to observe here discursive strategies employed in narrating self-experience and

⁴ Transcription conventions (see appendix) are taken from Ochs, E. and Capps, L. *Living Narrative: Creating Lives in Everyday Storytelling*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. However, a simplified version is here satisfactory for our purposes. One line corresponds to one information unit. Underlining indicates some form of emphasis. (.) indicates a generic pause (its exact length is not taken into consideration here). A dot indicates falling intonation. A dash generally refers to a repair.

⁵ Interviews lasted from 30 to 50 minutes.

different perspectives for discourse on immigrant and immigration. Main topics emerged are negotiation of identity between self-definition and definition by (western) others, perception of the role of mass media in conveying information on immigration, perception of discrimination, categorization and over-generalization, discourse of knowledge and empathy, proposals for (better) integration in Italy.

Negotiation of social positioning and perception of discrimination

Analyzing the discursive construction of self in specific situations by the interviewee, it comes out that the process of negotiation of their identity is often limited by the norm imposed by the dominant out-group, based on 'objective' elements (objective from the out-group's point of view), such as a foreign name, the skin color, the limited knowledge of the local language. The data reveal an asymmetry between the two groups based on a power relation where the dominant in-group imposes over the dominated out-groups. In such a dynamics, there is a limited possibility for the negotiation of self for the out-groups' members.

• Excerpt 1

After having narrated an episode our Ecuadorian informant witnessed, where an African boy selling objects on the road was insulted by a white boy he had approached, she complained that she did not intervene to defend him:

- 1 *Ed io dopo mi sono pentita di non difendere questo ragazzo, no?*
and then I regretted I did not defend this boy, right?
- 2 *Già era tardi quando mi sono buttata a difendere-perché anch'io=anch'io ho avuto paura,*
it was too late when I threw myself into defending-because me too=I was scared too
- 3 *perché ho detto (.) questo mi vede straniera anche a me (.)*
because I said to myself (.) this guy sees me as a foreigner too(.)
- 4 *mi dirà "ma guarda, un'altra straniera che non parla bene",*
he'll tell me "look, another foreigner who doesn't speak well",
- 5 *non so: (...) "e poi già donna"(...)*
don't know (...) "and even a woman" (...)
- 6 *Guarda, non ti dico tutto quello che gli aveva detto*
look, you have no idea what he said to him

In order to underline the truthfulness of her narration she uses some *factualizing* strategies such as detailed descriptions and the use of quotes, reporting events that actually occurred (Verkuyten, 2001). Through reported speech, in fact, she gives metapragmatic strength to her account. Presenting things as facts are typical features adopted by autochthons in discriminatory discourse. Such rhetoric means have been interiorized by our informants themselves who are able to use them at will for their purposes.

In witnessing the episodes the interviewee creates an indirect relation with the white boy, since she shares some 'marked' characteristics with the African one (having a different skin color and, consequently being a foreigner too, see line 3). This relation, then, is asymmetric in that she possesses those 'objective' characteristics used by the dominant group to underline specific differences and creating in-group and out-group membership. Such traits are 'marked' (Bucholtz and Hall, 2004) and 'abnormal' (Verkuyten, 2001) and equality cannot be negotiated. Because of this situation, she seems to feel vulnerable and scared and unable to act at the same level of the white boy, and this prevents her from intervening. Interestingly, she does not have a direct exchange with the white guy but she presupposes it on the basis of her experience in the (Italian) social network and she reports such presupposition as a direct speech by the white guy himself (lines 3-5). In her mind the discriminatory model on the basis of specific elements is very clear, being a sort of common knowledge shared by other people:⁶

- 3 because I said to myself (.) this guy **sees me as a foreigner** too(.)

⁶ In another moment of the interview she reports three episodes of discrimination on the basis of the skin color occurred to herself, to her sister and to her niece.

Using the verb *to see*, she implies the presence of (marked) visible indexes for diversity, even without a direct exchange, that in this context can acquire discriminatory meaning (that is her South-American physical traits). A direct exchange, then, can bring to the a second index for diversity and foreignness which is speaking with an accent:

4 he'll tell me "look, **another foreigner who doesn't speak well**",

Moreover, she possesses another evident trait that can be a further index of diversity and consequently of discrimination, particularly marked when added to the previous ones, that is to be a woman:

5 don't know (...) "**and even a woman**" (...)

In the above hypothetical interaction with the white guy, then, since marked traits are seen as fixed and non negotiable, the interviewee can not have any control over individual agency, that is 'the subjective control over social positioning' (Kang and Lo, 2003). Soon after, though, there is an intervention of the interviewer, stimulating the reaction of the informant:

... ..
 1 **Secondo te aveva ragione?**
Do you think he was right?
 2 Assolutamente no: (.) pazzo: (.)pazzo
 Absolutely not (.) crazy (.) crazy
 3 era questo pazzo che se l'è presa con questo povero: (.) perché era (.) nero
 it was this crazy boy treating harshly this poor (.) because he was (.) black

Discriminatory patterns such as those reported in lines 1-6 are ascribed to people having a macroscopic xenophobic approach. Such behavior is judged as wrong and abnormal when the informant shares this experience with us, who are clearly empathic. In the context of 'emancipatory discourse' (where there is the 'recognition of equality in rights and diversity in culture' Gotsbachner, 2001:739), equality is set and she can feel free to define the white guy *crazy*, emphasized through the repetition, where the abnormal behavior is that of the white guy rather than hers.

- **Excerpt 2**

In another interview to a Colombian woman when asked about her personal experience in Italy she underlines that situations are different and can not be generalize. She affirms that it very much depends on individual people and behavior, so she met both very nice and hospitable people, and very aggressive and racist ones. Similarly to the Ecuadorian girl above, she narrates an episode she witnessed, where a group of Italian sellers started to insult an African girl speaking on the mobile because she was speaking a different language (her African mother tongue) and she decided to defend this African girl:

... ..
 1 e io mi sono messa a difendere la ragazza (.)
 and I started to defend the girl (.)
 2 e loro (.)mi hanno chiesto (.) >e io sono rimasta< (.)
 and they (.) asked me (.) and I got (surprised) (.)
 3 e lei chi è, anche lei non è (di qui) (.) ((gridando))
and who are you, you also are not (from here) (.) ((shouting))
 4 e io gli ho tirato fuori la mia carta d'identità (.) cittadina italiana (.)
 and I showed them my ID (.) Italian citizen (.)
 5 e loro hanno detto (.) oh: chissà quanti cammelli hanno dato per comprarla [...]
 and they said (.)oh: goodness knows how many camels they gave to buy you [...]

As can be seen, the structure of this narration is very similar to the previous one, and again the lady directly reports quotations of what exactly happened in order to give strength to her account, but here the encounter actually occurred.

When the lady intervenes she is also attacked, once the sellers perceive probably through physical traits and her Spanish accent that she should be a foreigner too. Through the question '*who are you*' (line 3), emphasized in pitch, they seem to refuse her as a member of their in-group, as further

underlined by the following sentence ‘*you also are not (from here)*’. An asymmetric relation is thus created and in order to negotiate equality the lady exhibits her identity card, to show that she is Italian too (line 4). At this point, the sellers do not accept her ‘emancipatory discourse’ that would cause her to be similar to them, rather they challenge it with a highly discriminatory sentence in line 5, ‘*oh: goodness knows how many camels they gave to buy you*’, discrediting her Italian citizenship through considering her as a sort of slave woman paid with camels. Here again, ‘language is considered as a rhetoric instrument, used to weaken or reinforce a position’ (Mantovani, 2003: 39).

• **Excerpt 3**

The interview to a Somali man reveals a further marked index for diversity. At the beginning he illustrates the situation for Muslim people after 9/11 and the role of media in conveying precise images of Muslims as directly connected to terrorist acts. He goes on specifying the power of TV in doing so, and then he illustrates the consequences of these practices on his own person when relating with Italian people:

-
- 1 *quindi è chiaro che dopo magari (.) anche io qui mi trovo benissimo*
so it's clear that then maybe (.) here **I feel** very comfortable
 - 2 *mi sento parte integrante della società quindi non mi sento più straniero (.)*
I feel as an integrating part of the society, so I don't feel a foreigner anymore (.)
 - 3 *oltre che ho: la cittadinanza italiana e così via*
besides the fact that I have the Italian citizenship and so on
 - 4 **però** a volte mi trovo a disagio
but, sometimes I feel uncomfortable
 - 5 *(.)mi trovo a disagio perché: quando sentono proprio:*
(.) I feel uncomfortable because when they hear specifically
 - 6 *(...) perché prima quando ti **vedono** non si accorgono che sei musulmano*
(...) because when they first **see** you, they do not perceive you are Muslim
 - 7 *poi quando sentono il nome tuo: (.)Ahmed per esempio: (.)*
then, when they **hear** your name (.) Ahmed for example (.)
 - 8 *allora per questo motivo la gente comincia (.) ma da che area provieni: (.)*
then for this reason people start to (.) which area are you coming from (.)
 - 9 *fanno delle domande, no?*
they ask questions, right?
 - 10 *da quanto tempo sei qui?*
how long have you been here?
 - 11 *e così, proprio vedi che hanno come questo timore. questa cosa che:*
and so, you can really feel that there is like this fear. this thing that (.)
 - 12 *la paura c'è comunque*
they are scared anyway

What it's interesting here is his perception to *feel* as opposed to *be* part of the society. As a consequence of a general negative visibility of Muslim people after the terrorist attacks, something changes in his own perception of feeling part of the Italian society. He surely feels part of it for both subjective and objective factors (such as the Italian citizenship), so that he does not feel a foreigner (line 2). Nevertheless, there is something that makes him be uncomfortable in front of people (as the disclaimer introduced by *but*, in line 4, signals), where he has to negotiate with local people his *feeling* part of the society compared with his *actual being* part of it. In such a situation being black is not a salient index for diversity anymore (contrary to examples above), since there is a more marked one, that is to have a Muslim name. It is worthy to notice the use he makes of some verbs of perception: something happens when people *see* him and *hear* his name. Peculiar seen and heard elements acquire a distinctive meaning and convey a specific message (of fear). Being immediate, what is heard and seen tend to prevail over the thought and become cognitive referential framework for the (sometimes distorted) understanding of specific situations bringing to processes of overgeneralization. Questions are linked to fear and suspicion, consequently asked in order not to better know, rather to investigate.

Mass media

As regards the mass media's role in conveying discriminatory patterns toward immigrants, researches show that media's *agenda* (that is the levels of attention given to the different topics) are linked to the hierarchies of importance attributed by people. The agenda of the press becomes the

agenda of the readers (Corte, 2002). A 2002 report⁷ reveals the tendency of media to select and insist on negative events, creating fixed and misleading recurrent repertoires and, in so doing, disseminating alarmism and panics. A study on immigrants and mass media in Italy (Corte, 2002) illustrates as recurring prejudiced elements a continuous sharp categorization (*we vs they*); most attention toward irregular immigration, while regular immigration is hardly taken into consideration; the preference for news items based on specific (negative) events, whereas positive events regarding immigrant people are rarely reported and treated as an exception; the lack of widened inquiries and of commentary and interviews of immigrant people themselves; the preference for short stigmatizing articles. From a linguistic point of view, it is observed that in newspapers negative semantic fields are prevalent and principally related to crime, emergency, tragedy, invasion, disembarkations, shipwrecks, scholastic failure, disease, menace; charity, poverty, needs, misery, compassion, pity. Semantic field related to successful integration, courage, strength, multiculturalism, cultural resources, friendship, are nearly absent. Similarly, humane attitudes toward immigrants and the semantic field of affection, solidarity, equality are rare in newspapers reports.

Our respondents themselves consider mass media to have high responsibility in homogenizing and fixing the discourse on immigrants and immigration. Being conscious of it and being able to express its main (western) topics, they treat such discourse as highly marked. That is, what is unmarked (natural) from *our* point of view is marked from *their* point of view.

- **Excerpt 4**

- QUESTION: Which is your perception of the message on immigration conveyed by the mass media?**
- 1 *Pessimo* (.) *pessimo*
Very bad (.) very bad
 - 2 *basta vedere* quando sbarcano gli immigranti nei gommoni
it's enough to **see** when immigrants disembarks from rubber boats
 - 3 *tutta la polizia:(.)la croce rossa e tutti quanti con maschere e guanti*
all the police (.) the red cross and all with masks and gloves
 - 4 *hh:: appetati (.) trasmissori di tutti i mali*
hh:: **infected people** (.) **passing all the ills**
 - 5 *già questo è una cosa che ti entra per gli occhi, no?*
this is already **something that goes through your eyes**, doesn't it?
 - 6 *Il messaggio non è subliminale-è chiaro.*
The message isn't subliminal at all-is clear.
 - 7 *E dopo come usano-oggi (.)*
And then as they use-today (.)
 - 8 *Oggi sentivo (.) uno extra-comunitario ha ammazzato-in-macchina-drogato*
Today I was listening (.) an non-communitarian has killed-with a car-drugged
 - 9 *non dicono mai (.) un italiano. no? quando succede agli italiani*
they never say (.) an Italian. do they? when it happens to Italians
 - 10 *quindi stigmatizzano molto (.)*
so they stigmatize a lot (.)
 - 11 *questo è molto (.) la responsabilità dei mass media nell'odio razziale <è una cosa (.) chiara>*
 - 12 *this is very (.) the responsibility of the mass media for racial hate <is something (.) clear>*
-

In the above excerpt, the interviewee reports some of the most common images shown through the TV and the press, that often depict immigrants as invaders and plague-spreaders (line 3-4), and as criminals (line 8). She has very clear in mind the discriminatory power of such immediate messages focusing on specific selected elements (immigrants entering our territory through airplanes or buses are never taken into consideration). It is interesting to underline the common use of the term *extra-comunitario* (meaning *non-communitarian* person), which originally indicates people coming from

⁷ *RACISM AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN THE MASS MEDIA*. An overview of research and examples of good practice in the EU Member States, 1995-2000 on behalf of the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia, Vienna (EUMC) by European Research Centre on Migration and Ethnic Relations (ERCOMER) Edited by Jessika ter Wal.

extra EU's countries, but has increasingly acquired a negative and stigmatizing connotation (nobody would call a North-American citizen or a Swiss one 'extra-comunitario').

As already underlined in the previous example, events filtered through eyes and hears are hardly removed and easily stigmatized in people's mind. Consequently, these become the stereotyped referential images autochthons have when they directly or indirectly relate to immigrants. In her narration she reports the most common negative discourse structures used by mass media such as those which emphasize the negative characteristics of the ethnic outgroup, or underline the ethnic origins of the people who committed the crime, whereas bad actions of the white in-group (see line 9) are mitigated (Van Dijk, 2006). Thus, she demonstrates to be aware of such structures of reporting and showing news and their stigmatizing power (line 10), differently from local people who just absorb them. In describing such images she is able to deconstruct them and render them abnormal and marked, foregrounding the mass media responsibility of diffusing xenophobia.

• **Excerpt 5**

QUESTION: In your opinion, which kind of image on foreigners do television, radio, internet, the press transmit?

- 1 *Ovviamente i giornali devono fare sensazionalismo,*
obviously, newspapers have to create sensationalism
- 2 *allora se hanno delle notizie brutte sugli stranieri,*
so, if they have bad news on foreign people
- 3 *che non so (.) che hanno ammazzato qualcuno, che rubano (.)*
don't know (.) that they have killed someone, that they steal (.)
- 4 *ovviamente devono pubblicare le sue notizie (.)*
obviously they have to publish their news (.)
- 5 *allora hai una cattiva-brutta immagine degli stranieri*
so you have a bad image of foreign people
- 6 *sì, magari nascosta però (.)*
yeah, perhaps a hidden one, though (.)
- 7 *se cominci a leggere, ad informarti*
if you start to read, to get informed
- 8 *ti rovina l'immagine anche quello*
that spoils the image you have too

Again, there is here the perception of a distorted notion about foreign people as murders and robbers conveyed by the press. Such image can be *hidden*, not easily recognizable but easily diffused. As a consequence, to read and to get informed, that is normally something good, is here seen as something negative that gives an incorrect and overgeneralized perspective on immigrants. Discourse on immigrants is perceived by foreign people themselves as homogenized and homogenizing the manifold stories of migrant people. To know individual stories is perceived as something exceptional, since the diffused idea is that local people tend to wish to avoid contacts with foreign ones.

From discourse of generalization to discourse of knowledge⁸

In their accounts our four informants demonstrate to be very sensitive toward the constant process of generalization they undergo, mainly linked, in their opinion, to the lack of direct knowledge. Non-knowledge, moreover, is related to the perception of fear toward what is foreign, particularly after 9/11. The logic beyond 'discourse of knowledge' is very simple and summarized by our Ecuadorian respondent: '*if you start to know you can not generalize anymore, otherwise this would be ignorance*'.

Generalizations are necessary to sustain the ideology of the dominant group and to give sense to the *we/they* dynamics. Nevertheless, as seen above, it is very difficult to challenge the *we/they* perspective, above all when differences are institutionalized. To accept the logic of knowledge, in fact, could mean for the dominant group a possible threat to their position. The

⁸ Excerpts in this section have been modified a little bit from the exact original version in order to facilitate a general understanding. We tried to be as accurate as possible in order to preserve the meaning of our respondents' account. We gave above same examples of detailed discourse analysis. We are adopting now a more simplified type of analysis satisfactory to our purposes.

endeavor of knowing the Others, in fact, would bring to the acceptance of *them* as peers. This point is interestingly stated by our Colombian informant: “*when, as an immigrant who enters their life, you are something strange, people are curious and they welcome you, they help you and everything is going well. Even because, generally, they think that you come here empty and your history is built here, where you arrive (...). But when you show to have a personality, a criterion, an opinion, and you express it very strongly, then things that they accept from a compatriot (...) they can not accept from the foreigner (...) this is not possible*”. This behavior is, according to the Colombian lady, a historical heritage related to imperialism and due to a sense of superiority inherited from colonialism.

As pointed out by our Somali informant, the process of knowing poses people to an equal level, where they all have to strive to listen and to gather real and correct information. “*It’s also a matter of ignorance, about the religion too. Who says that for the religion one has to fight, this is not written anywhere. All this is a manipulation, it’s a political thing*”. “**A generalization?**” “*A generalization. Islamic religion per se is a religion of peace, (it should be so) but it’s not perceived this way. It’s a religion of terrorism*” “**In people’s opinion?**” “*In others’ opinion, because someone (mis)uses it. I have seen too, that some Muslims (mis)use it, interpreted by themselves. Some Muslims themselves don’t know their religion well and so of course the other Western people too, who know only what they hear from television. And this is what is lacking too, more culture. Islamic culture needs to be taught, people should at least learn, read books*” “**Get informed?**” “*Get informed a little bit. This is the only way to fight ignorance. So, in my opinion, in order to improve the situation, the ideal solution would be that each of us strives to get informed*”.

To embrace the logic of knowledge, moreover, means to abandon the logic of emphasizing differences (reducing fear) and focusing on concepts such as culture and identity as fixed and unchangeable. generally, in the opinion of our informants, these are the premises for a new referential pattern focusing on the single individual.

Again, it comes out from interviews that to diffuse a ‘*discourse of knowledge*’ means to overcome the generalized and stigmatized vision of immigration as a problem related to security issue, and it leads to the consideration of all aspects of immigration (social, economic, political, personal) together with all dimensions of the host country.

From knowledge to empathy, from empathy to integration

What emerges from the interviews and can be exemplar in order to modify (negative) discursive patterns on immigration is discourse of empathy. The Ecuadorian informant defines herself as an atypical immigrant, since she had the economic means to decide to migrate and she knew exactly where to go and what to do. She knows to be different from those immigrants who leave their countries for need. She reports an image of immigrant people very different from that we are accustomed to. She gives an accurate account of what can mean for them to leave their country, their perhaps small town they never left before, to take an airplane, to arrive somewhere without knowing the language and the places. She underlines their value, their courage in leaving their homes to search for better life conditions, defining them as heroes, and specifying that “*I could never do it*”. She goes on trying to understand how difficult can be to afford everyday loneliness and discrimination: “*it’s something really sad if you say hallo and they don’t say hallo back*”.

Going on with the examples of different approaches in relating to immigrants, our Tunisian informant makes an interesting reflection on the concept of integration. He states that “*People have to be helped to integration, have to be integrated (...)*Here in Italy they say ‘*integrate!*’, but this is not easy, people need help and friendship (...)*To integrate means first of all to acquire duties but, consequently, also rights, in particular the right of equality (...)*”. The verb *to integrate* is both a transitive and an intransitive one. Specifically in Italian the intransitive form is reflexive. When referring to immigrants, common perception is that they have to integrate (note the imperative form used in the excerpt). Normally, the intransitive form is the most used, meaning that the action of integrating is one-way and fully ascribed to the agent himself. Contrarily, such verb is used here also in its transitive form conveying the idea that integration is bidirectional, involving both the

host society and the immigrant (they need help in order to integrate). Moreover, it is pointed out that in order to integrate of course they have to stay within specific duties, but once they do so, logically they should acquire also specific rights, first of all that of negotiating equality. However, this is not always guaranteed (let us think of the right to vote, negated to immigrants). For this reason, even if he feels to be part of a common *we* in the city where he lives, he speaks of *you*, excluding himself, when the institutional level is involved.

b) QUESTIONNAIRES TO ITALIANS

For the purposes of this research we created a semi-structured questionnaire administered in a printed booklet. Some measures used were inspired by scales developed by other researches (like Phinney and Stephan) and used in previous surveys, like the European Social Survey and the Eurobarometer.

Respondents were informed that the study would be exploring attitudes towards immigrants in Italy. Following the provision of informed consent, participants proceeded to fill out the questionnaire, which took approximately from 30 to 45 minutes to be completed.

About 100 questionnaires were distributed, but a significant number of participants contacted or receiving the questionnaire were not willing to answer it, mainly due to its length. Some of the questionnaires returned completed too late in order to be considered for this analysis.

Upon completing the questionnaire and sometimes during the completion itself, participants were asked to comment the questions and the provided response format, in order to be able in future to adjust and ameliorate them.

Since the sample for the preliminary analysis is very low, we calculated only some descriptive statistics for every measure.

Measures and results

Gender

The respondent's sex was sometimes found to have a negative effect on the level of ethnic intolerance. Among the Italian participants that constitute our sample, 10 were males (36%) and 18 females (64%).

Age

We asked participants to state their year of birth to control the effects of age since in many researches older people showed more prejudicial attitudes. The majority of our respondents (11 people) indicated their age was between 28 and 35, 5 of them were between 20 and 25 years old 6 were aged 37-44, 3 indicated an age range of 52-54, and 3 were between 65 and 69 years old.

Level of Education

Researchers have often found that a higher educational level is negatively related to prejudice, since increased knowledge may help refute stereotypes created out of generalization and simplification (Coenders and Scheepers 2003).

Level of education was assessed with six levels describing years of completed education (5, 8, 10, 13, 14-16, 17-18 years of education). The majority of our respondents (16), completed 17-18 or more years of education.

Occupation

Respondents were asked to indicate their employment status and their current profession or the job they did before retirement. Professions were very varied. 5 were teachers/professors, 4 were researchers, 1 was retired from an educational area, 3 university students, 2 lawyers, 1 legal advisor, 2 engineers, 2 entrepreneurs, 2 secretaries, 1 clerk, 1 cultural mediator, 1 worker, 1 dealer, 1 housewife, 1 musician. 1 person did not answer the question about job/employment status.

Identification with the Ingroup

Group

When asked with what ethnic group or ingroup in general they mostly identify, 12 replied they identified with the Italian group. 4 identified themselves as Europeans/European – Caucasian, 1 expressed belongingness to the Slovene minority in Italy, 1 used the label Western, 1 chose the group of graduated students to define the ingroup, 1 identified as citizen resident in Trieste, 2 explicitly said they did not identify themselves with any group, the other 6 people left the answer blank.

Importance

11 participants rated the statement about the importance of the membership to their ingroup between 1 (not at all important) and 5, other 16 between 6 and 10 (definitely important). The mean score on this item was overall 5,2 (SD 2,5).

Strength

For 13 people the force of identification with the ingroup was not very strong, ranging from 1 to 5, while for another 14 people the evaluation of the strength of their sense of belonging to the group was higher than 6. The mean score overall was 4,9 (SD 2,5).

Religious Observance

The effects of religiosity on prejudice in literature are mixed, showing positive and negative correlations. In her sample Slone (2000) also noticed that women and more religious participants reported increased levels of anxiety. We tried to keep religiosity in consideration, asking participants to evaluate on a 10-point scale how much they considered themselves practising believers, regardless of the creed they hold. 10 participants said they are not practising believers at all. 11 ranked themselves from 2 to 5. 5 people evaluated themselves as practising believers, regardless of the religion observed, with the points 7 and 8. Only one participant defined him/herself as definitely practising believer. The overall mean was 3,19 with a SD of 2,7.

Area of Residence

16 participants identified their place of residence as city/town, 2 lived in the outskirts of the city, while 10 said they lived in a village. 6 perceive the place where they live as an area with people mostly or exclusively Italian, 12 described their place of living as an area with a small percentage of people with a different ethnic or cultural background. 10 identified their home place as a mixed environment with a high percentage of people of a different ethnic or cultural background.

Intergroup Contact

- a) **Number of friends, acquaintances, colleagues**
- b) **Quantity (frequency) of contact**
- c) **Quality of contact**
- d) **Description of an experience of positive or negative contact**

We assessed intergroup contact asking participants by means of some open questions how many friends, acquaintances and eventually colleagues they had among immigrants in general and if they had any Muslim friend. Moreover, we asked them to evaluate the quantity (frequency) and the quality of the contact they had with members of the considered outgroups. With the first pair of questions they had to express how frequently they were in contact with immigrants in general and then with Muslim immigrants (4-point response from 1-no contact- to 4- very frequent contact). With the second question they had to rate how pleasant such a contact was, using a 10-point scale from 1 (labelled not pleasant at all) to 10 (definitely pleasant). We also had another open question, in which we requested participants to describe briefly an episode (positive or negative) of interaction with an immigrant. Experience of negative contacts with the outgroup is expected to be

related to more feelings of threat and to greater negative attitude towards the outgroup. Positive outgroup contact, instead, should show the opposite pattern.

Out of 28 people, 11 answered the open question where they were asked to describe briefly an episode (positive or negative) occurred to them having to do with an immigrant. Of these 11 respondents, 9 reported a positive experience of contact in work/school environment which, as one person stated, helped to better understand the disadvantaged reality of some immigrants. Another person stated that the immigrants involved in the contact were of high cultural level, being wealthy and privileged. Other people reported good cooperative neighbourhood relationship, help by an immigrant person in house moving, help with luggage, offered seat in bus in respect to the pregnant status.

Contact with immigrants in general

Most of the respondents (17) have no colleagues coming to live and work in Italy from a neo- or extra-communitarian country, a quarter of them (7) have some, and 4 people reported to have lots of immigrant colleagues. 43% of participants have also no friends coming to live here from other neo- or extra-communitarian countries, the others vary from 2 to 5. When asked about the number of acquaintances, about a quarter of the participants reported 10 as number, but the answers ranged from 0 to about 100. The higher number of acquaintances was reported by those whose work implies a contact with immigrants. Only 4 people said they have no contact with immigrants at all, even though approximately a half of the respondents stated their contact was not very frequent. Encounters are quite frequent for 9 participants and very frequent for just 3 of them.

Contact with Muslim immigrants

More than half of the participants (17) said they have no Muslim friend. 5 people reported to have only 1 Muslim friend. Other respondents have from 2 to 4 Muslim friends. 1 person wrote to have 30 Muslim friends. 32% of participants said they have, generally speaking, no contact at all with Muslim immigrants. 11 people reported a not very frequent contact with them, while 6 respondents said they have a quite frequent contact with Muslims. 2 have very frequent contact with members of this outgroup. The quality of the contacts experienced varies a lot. 4 defined the contacts occurred definitely unpleasant, while 2 evaluated them as definitely pleasant.

Cooperation with NGOs and intercultural associations

6 Italian participants out of 28 said they cooperated with some Non Governmental Organizations or intercultural associations.

Personal experience of discrimination

We asked participants whether and how often they have ever felt discriminated on the basis of their cultural hinterland, religion or spiritual views, nationality, gender, North/South or anything else. Other kinds of possible discrimination (e.g. skin colour, juridical status, lack of sufficient knowledge of Italian language) were taken into consideration only in the questionnaire administered to foreign people. The most relevant appeared to be for religion/spirituality and for gender.

Personal estimation of the number of immigrants

More than a half, that is 16 participants, agreed at various levels with the statement saying that immigrants in Italy are too many, while the other 12 disagreed with it. We also asked them to evaluate the number of immigrants in Italy. The answers are shown in the table below.

| According to Your own opinion, how many () are there in Italy? | around 1 million | around 3 million | around 5 million | around 8 million |
|--|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| REGULAR immigrants | 14 (50 %) | 9 (32 %) | 4 (14 %) | |
| IRREGULAR immigrants | 8 (29 %) | 13 (46 %) | 4 (14 %) | 2 (7 %) |

Media exposure

The table below reports the answers to the question: “On an average weekday, how much of your time is spent listening to and watching news or programmes about politics and current affairs and reading newspapers?”

| | Frequency | Percent |
|-------------------------|-----------|-------------|
| no time at all (0) | 1 | 3,6 |
| Less than 30 min | 5 | 17,9 |
| 30 min - 1 hour | 14 | 50,0 |
| 1 hour - 1h 30 minutes | 7 | 25,0 |
| 2 hours - 2h 30 minutes | 1 | 3,6 |
| Total | 28 | 100,0 |

Mass media evaluation

We asked participants to estimate neutrality, reliability and completion of the information given by four different types of media (TV, newspapers, radio and internet) and also to evaluate the power of influence they had on the perceived sense of threat related to immigrants in general and to Muslim immigrants. Answers were on a 10-point scale format ranging from 1 (not at all) to 10 (definitely). Below the table with the mean score for each answer.

| | Neutrality of information | Reliability of information | Completion of information | Influence on perceived threat towards Muslims | Influence on perceived threat towards immigrants |
|-------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|---|--|
| TV | 3,54 | 4,5 | 3,68 | 8,11 | 7,64 |
| newspapers | 3,93 | 4,79 | 4,64 | 7,32 | 7 |
| radio | 4,44 | 4,81 | 3,96 | 6,48 | 6,41 |
| internet | 5,21 | 5,11 | 5,36 | 6,78 | 6,63 |

The cognitive level of people and their active and critical understanding of meanings is very important in determining the effects of the received information (Earley, & Ang, 2003).

Our respondents seem to be pretty much aware of the mass media control of our perception of the reality, evaluating them as not being very neutral, reliable and complete in conveying the information.

They also show a very high awareness of the power of the media, particularly TV, to influence the perceived threat towards immigrants, especially the Muslim ones. It is widely documented that images associated with news reports are generally related to negative episodes (e.g. honour killings, oppression of women and domestic violence..), which, even though not representative of the entire group become more present in the eyes of the information receivers. Extended generalizations are used for descriptions, mixing different things associated to terrorism and to immigrant Muslim populations (Allievi, 2003) The construct of ‘moral panic’⁹ was also used to describe how media’s reporting of ‘Islamic terrorism’ and ‘fundamental violent Muslims’ helped spreading Islamophobia and the misconception about Muslim people in general, generalizing ‘the war against terror’ to a war against Islam.

⁹ 'Moral Panic' and the Muslim" by Rahma Bavelaar, IslamOnline, September 21, 2005.

Attitudes towards the outgroups

Attitudes toward out-group members were assessed through affective reactions in interactions and contacts with out-group members and also by social distance scale. A general outgroup orientation (without any specific outgroup being mentioned) was also measured. Emotions expressed may be related to previous positive (or negative) experiences of contact, to the prejudiced and stereotyped views and to perceived threats stemming from the outgroup. Moreover, it is likely that they would also be influenced by media portrayal of immigrants. In a study focusing on content analysis of newspapers in Southern Italy, it was demonstrated that the association of immigration to crime is widely conveyed through media. It turned out that 78% of the articles on immigration were related to crime, while another study revealed that 57% of television reports on immigration were connected with crime.¹⁰

Attitudes toward minorities in the European Union have been recently investigated through the European Social Survey (ESS) and the Eurobarometer, both promoted by the EU's Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia.¹¹ Questions aimed at observing possible different aspects of 'ethnic exclusionism'. In the Eurobarometer survey they used different dimensions of ethnic exclusionism asking questions related to resistance to multicultural society, limits to multicultural society, opposition to civil rights for legal migrants, favour repatriation policies for legal migrants. In the ESS questions asked were concerning resistance to diversity, resistance to immigrants, resistance to asylum seekers, favour ethnic distance, perceived collective ethnic threat. Some of our questions are taken from these sources.

Summarizing, as general findings widespread stances for ethnic exclusionism were discovered, commonly linked to a diffused perception of collective ethnic threat. Resistance to immigrants and to cultural and religious diversity were shared by half of the people interviewed, whereas resistance to asylum seekers was supported by approximately one out of three people. About one out of five people wished to have no social interaction with migrants and minorities; lots of them (two out of three) agreed with repatriation of immigrants who committed serious crimes.¹² Similarly, 2000 General Social Survey aimed at measuring attitudes toward immigration in the United States. In analyzing the perception of the equation between immigrants and crime, it turned out that 73% of people interviewed believed that immigration was causally related to more crime; moreover, such belief is shared at the international level.¹³

General Outgroup Orientation

To assess general outgroup orientation participants were asked to state their level of agreement or disagreement with 6 statements derived from a scale created by Phinney (Phinney, 1992). The items (e.g. "I am happy to be among people from ethnic groups other than my own", "I sometimes feel it would be better if different ethnic groups didn't try to mix together" – reverse coded) were a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). A higher score indicates more openness towards different groups. The overall mean score revealing acceptance and positive outgroup orientation was quite high (2,94). It gives us the idea that our respondents show a quite positive orientation to outgroups in general.

¹⁰ Rumbaut, R., Gonzales, R., Komaie, and Morgan, C. (2006) *Debunking the Myth of Immigrant Criminality: Imprisonment among First- and Second-Generation Young Men*. Available at www.migrationinformation.org.

¹¹ Reports on the Eurobarometer's and the ESS' results are available at www.eumc.eu.int.

¹² See Report 4: V-VII.

¹³ Rumbaut, R., Gonzales, R., Komaie, and Morgan, C. (2006) *Debunking the Myth of Immigrant Criminality: Imprisonment among First- and Second-Generation Young Men*. Available at www.migrationinformation.org.

Bogardus Social Distance Scale

Social distance is negatively related to (positive) out-group evaluation and attitudes: greater is the distance, more likely is the negative evaluation of the out-group (e.g., Pettigrew, 1998).

| | Slovene minority | Immigrants in General | Muslim immigrants |
|--|-------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1) I would like to have <i>nothing</i> to do with them | 3,6% (1) | 3,6% (1) | 7,1% (2) |
| 2) I would accept them maximum as <i>neighbours</i> | | | |
| 3) I would accept them maximum as <i>colleagues</i> | | | 7,1% (2) |
| 4) I would accept them maximum as <i>friends</i> | 32,1% (9) | 50% (14) | 53,6 (15) |
| 5) I would have no problem to <i>marry</i> one of them | 53,6% (15) | 32,1% (9) | 17,9% (5) |
| NA | 10,7% (3) | 14,3% (4) | 14,3% (4) |

It is interesting to point out that some of the participants commented the reply format with criticism and verbally expressed that the fact they would be ready to have a relationship of friendship or an immigrant colleague did not necessarily imply they would also accept them as neighbours. They stated, in fact, they would not like to have some immigrants, especially Muslim ones, as neighbours living near them, though some relationships might be possible otherwise. Upon responding to other similar questions, three quarters of them said they would easily accept that a member of their family would like to marry a person from a different cultural or ethnic background. Nearly all of them would accept to have a colleague from a different cultural or ethnic hinterland. They report also they would be at easy and not worried if their children would have best friends from a different cultural or religious background attending their homes.

Attitudes towards immigrants in general

We asked participants how they feel at the idea of a contact/interaction with immigrants, using as possible answers 26 words for different emotional reactions to be rated on a 5-point scale from 1 (labelled Not at all) to 5 (labelled Definitely).

Among the terms scoring at least 3 and up to 5 in most of the respondents' answers were curiosity (72%), tranquillity (71%), relaxation (68%). Our participants say they feel generally at easy and happy to interact with an immigrant, even though sometimes a sense of compassion for their situation, powerlessness and sadness is present. Sentiments of worry, fear, bother and uneasiness are reported only by very few of them.

Perceived change of personal attitudes towards immigrants after 9/11

Initially we evaluated the perceived change in personal attitudes towards immigrants in general and more specifically towards Muslim immigrants after the terrorist attacks through two items ranging from 1 (labelled Not changed at all) to 10 (labelled Definitely changed). Approximately half of the respondents (13) said their attitude towards immigrants in general did not change at all, while only 5 reported no change towards Muslim immigrants after the episodes related to terrorism from 2001 onward. Comparing the mean scores, we notice a higher one, of 4,81, for the evaluated change in attitudes towards Muslims, while the mean score evaluating the intensity of change towards all immigrants is only 3,04.

Moreover, about a quarter of the sample in some other questions admitted to be in general more diffident towards a Muslim immigrant rather than to other immigrants. 6 people stated they have become more diffident towards Muslim immigrants after the episodes of 9/11 and other terrorist

attacks. 18 (69%) people agreed that they do not see substantial difference between Muslim and non-Muslim immigrants, but only if they integrate to Italian culture and rules.

To assess the change in attitudes towards Muslim immigrants in particular, participants ranked the terms created to describe emotional reactions in contact with immigrants in general, with a reply format from -5 (definitely decreased) through the mid-point 0 (labelled Unchanged) to +5 (definitely increased). Calculating the mean scores obtained this way, the results which can be more interesting are as follows: security (-0.88), relaxation (-0.5), tranquillity (-0.5), indifference (-0.46), compassion (-0.42), happiness (-0.37), worry (1.63), insecurity (1.63), anxiety (1.15), fear (1.15), anger (0.65), irritation (0.54), stress (0.42), hostility (0.38), curiosity (0.38), bother (0.38), uneasiness (0.27).

Realistic Threats

Realistic threats may concern life safety in a possible terrorist attack, loss of resources and possessions, reduced physical and psychological well-being, instability of economy, loss of jobs related to immigration. The measure we used reflecting realistic threats comprised 14 items on a 5-point scale (1 – definitely disagree; 5 – definitely agree). Participants responded to such items as, “I would feel secure walking alone in the city at night in an area with a lot of immigrants” (reverse coded), “Immigrants who come to work in Italy take the jobs away to Italian people”, “Criminality and immigration are nearly always linked”, “Immigrants coming to live and work in Italy, make this Country a worse place where to live”. Higher scores indicate higher perceived threat and an assumed more negative attitude towards immigration. We will report here the results of the descriptive analysis to other questions not included in the measure of realistic threat as well since they were used to try to understand better the view of the participants.

A significant part of our sample (17 people), agreed at different levels that they were worried for a new terrorist attack. Half of the participants then expressed that immigrants are a threat to public order and people’s safety.

Anyway, 21 out of 28 respondents refused with more or less strong disagreement the idea that Muslim immigrants constitute a greater threat to safety in Italian cities. Nearly everyone in our sample agrees at high levels that a good integration of the immigrants in Italy is also a guarantee of safety for local citizens. A little percentage (14% somehow agree, 3 people strongly or definitely agree) says that immigrants make Italy a worse place where to live. The majority (21 people) does not share this idea. Nevertheless, 20 out of 28 people agree with the statement that the majority of Italians is diffident towards immigrants because of worry for personal physical life safety. Again nearly all of our subjects agree that criminal acts should be judged singularly and not ascribed to an entire religious or ethnic group by generalization. Yet, about half of our respondents expressed the opinion that criminality and immigration are nearly always linked. Statistics report that fourteen percent of Italy’s prison population is Muslim, 98 percent of whom are foreign nationals¹⁴. Some of the associations might have been reflecting real troubles in the local environment, yet there tend to be massive distortions and misperceptions as we have already pointed out elsewhere.

A split in the sample can be seen among those who believe (13) or not (14) that all the countries get some benefits if people can move in the countries where their competences are in demand. Something less than a quarter of the respondents think that if a Country wants to reduce tensions, it has to stop immigration. The other 22 people, that is the majority, do not agree with this. Quite clearly those who answered our questions do not think that immigrants posit a threat for jobs, that they take away jobs to Italians. Neither they share the idea that the average salaries are lower due to immigration.

¹⁴ Source: www.istat.it, 2005 World Prison Population List.

Civil rights

Opposition to the granting of civil rights to legal migrants may be seen as a tendency toward social exclusion of migrants, which then may lead to social non-integration. Moreover, not being willing to grant rights to immigrants may be related to greater perceived threats posed by them. In our measure (10 items on a 5-point scale from definitely disagree to definitely agree), a higher score indicates more readiness to grant civil rights to immigrants.

Most of our respondents strongly or definitely agree to grant regularization to immigrants without permit of staying when they find a job. Only 13 said that right of non-communitarian immigrants should be increased. 25 out of 28 participants stated that immigrants living and working in Italy should have the same rights as everyone else. There is a general enough high agreement that to give Italian citizenship at proper time contributes to integration. It is moreover common agreement of three quarters of the participants that it is right that a regular immigrant obtains Italian citizenship after at least 10 years of residence in Italy. This is nowadays a particularly felt topic, since in August 2006 the Minister of Interior Giuliano Amato proposed a bill aiming at reducing the time of legal residency to five years and give access to Italian citizenship to the children of immigrants born in Italy.¹⁵ According to the opinion of this group, children, who were born and grown up in Italy from regular immigrants, should be considered entirely Italian citizens immediately, but, on the other hand, there is mixed opinion on how to consider immigrant parents who became or are irregular and who have children born and grown up in our country. 14 people (half of the respondents) said they should be regularized and remain in Italy, while the other half does not think so.

Symbolic Threats

To assess perceived symbolic threats participants were first asked to rate their agreement with 10 statements on a 5-point scale from “definitely disagree” to “definitely agree”. Examples of statements used: “The majority of immigrants living here comes from a different culture which is very difficult to integrate with Italian culture”, “I feel that my religious identity is significantly altered in the contact with people from a different group”, “Nowadays I feel the integrity of my ethnic group identity threatened by the presence of immigrants in the territory”.

Half of the participants stated that the majority of immigrants come from a different culture which cannot easily integrate with Italian culture. From some other questions, we discover that 24 out of 28 participants share the opinion that the majority of Muslims does not recognize some rights that are basic for others. Yet, more than a half of the respondents say that to come in contact with a different religion like Islam stimulates openness. Three quarters of the participants definitely do not feel their religious identity altered by the encounter with members of groups different than their owns. Reading this data, anyway, we have to keep in mind that the overall mean of religious observance of our subjects was predominantly quite low. Thus, the low perceived threat concerning religious identity most likely reflects this. It is interesting, however, that neither cultural identity is felt to be prone to alteration by contact with different groups (79% disagree about felt perturbation). Whether present, the perception of Muslims as a threat to the in-group and the enhanced negative attitudes derived may be explained with the Integrated Threat Theory. Symbolic threats in this case may be perceived, since Muslim immigrants may challenge and threaten Catholic beliefs of the dominant group. Moreover, values, cultural traditions and ways of life observed by some Muslims (e.g., arranged marriages, polygamy, headscarves or total veils for women, sex-segregated worship in mosques) may be different and thus being perceived as danger, something against the morality and culture predominant in a society (Wilson, 2001).

¹⁵ Cittadinanza per gli immigrati, LA REPUBBLICA, 5 August 2006, at 2-3.

Similarity with Muslim immigrants

We also assessed symbolic threats related to Muslim immigrants, considering perceived similarities in 10 different aspects (norms of behaviour, fundamental values, way of life, loyalty to the ingroup, mentality, keeping of cultural traditions, children education, family system, basic needs, individual freedoms), ranging from 1 (not similar at all) to 10 (definitely similar).

A quarter of our respondents expressed total difference (the lowest score of similarity) in norms of behaviours, with Muslim immigrants. Some of them stated to feel not at all similar (that is, different) from them in fundamental values. The way of life and mentality are also perceived completely dissimilar for approximately a quarter of the participants. High distance is also felt for the way of raising children and their education (29% rating similarity with 1 – not at all similar), family system (25% for the score 1), and individual freedoms (18% chose the lowest score).

Taking into consideration the overall mean scores for similarities in the 10 before mentioned aspects, we could display them (in brackets the mean score) from the lowest (less similar) to the highest (more similar) as follows: individual freedoms (M 2,67), mentality (2,88), fundamental needs (2,98), family system (3), children education and upbringing (3,23), norms of behaviour (3,35), way of life (3,46), keeping of cultural traditions (3,85), fundamental values (4,04), loyalty to the ethnic ingroup (4,17). It emerges that our participants' evaluation of the level of similarity with Muslim immigrants is quite low. These aspects of perceived similarities/differences between "us/them" are important to consider, since scholars following the 'similarity-attraction hypothesis' found that perceived intergroup similarity is related to major willingness to associate with out-group members.

Some of the perceived differences might be due to misconceptions, often linked to insufficient knowledge and lack of contact.

OSI's report on the situation of Muslims in Italy indicates that Muslim immigrants in particular face obstacles to integration mainly due to the predominant negative public perception of Islam, fueled by media-generated stereotypes. Some political representatives also posited the idea that immigrants (and specifically Muslims) represent a threat to the national identity and to public security, suggesting difficulties for integration in the society (Ferrari, Corbetta, & Paroli, 2003).

Recently, Italy's Interior Minister, Giuliano Amato, proposed a "Charter of Values, Citizenship and Immigration"¹⁶ for religious minorities. It is a 7-page document referring to European values and those stated in the Italian constitution that should help "consolidate Italian Islam", promoting integration. It encourages the "monogamous family and it wants to prevent women from experiencing humiliation and polygamy. It also enshrines the right to religious freedom and equality between man and woman" and offers guidance for immigrants requesting Italian citizenship, saying they should speak Italian and know "the essential elements of the national history and culture".

Multicultural attitude and awareness of the difficulty of being an immigrant in Italy

Most of our participants believe the majority of Italians does not accept diversity with openness and curiosity. Only about a quarter of them thinks that the majority of Italians is warmer and more respectful than other nationalities. Nearly all of them share the idea that most of the Italians are scared of immigrants due to news given on TV. More than a half (64%) agreed that Italians tend to see the foreigner as an enemy, while $\frac{3}{4}$ of our participants say that most of the local Italian population perceives the immigrant with a sense of threat. On the other hand, most of them seem to show reasonably high levels of openness towards diversity. Nearly all agree that it is positive that children come in contact with different cultures (93%).

The great majority of our respondents believes integration is something that involves the dominant

¹⁶ For articles related to the Charter of Values, proposed in April 24, 2007, see <http://www.wluml.org/english/newsfulltxt.shtml?cmd%5B157%5D=x-157-552806>
<http://www.metimes.com/storyview.php?StoryID=20070424-073413-3978r>
<http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=34859>

group as well and not only the migrants. Generally they acknowledge that emigration from the Country of origin for most of the immigrants is an act needed to improve life conditions. But what is seen as important in deciding whether a person, born and raised up in a different Country, is able to live in Italy?

Participants evaluated 7 possible aspects on a 10-point scale ranging from 1 (not important at all) to 10 (definitely important). The answers, listed in descending order are: to accept and be committed to the Italian way of life (M 7,5), to have suitable work skills that Italy needs (M 7,46), to be able to speak Italian (M 7,2), to have good educational qualifications and/or professional titles (M 6,04); to have close family living here (M 5,82); to be wealthy (M 4,18); to come from a Christian background (M 3,29).

Furthermore, stepping mentally into the shoes of a Muslim immigrant in Italy, participants were asked to evaluate some aspects attributing values from 1 (not present at all) to 10 (definitely present). The mean scores in descending order for the items were: network of support from the community of belonging (M 6,42), acceptance from local citizens (M 5,96), support from authorities (M 4,35), easiness of integration (M 4,3), possibility of participation in social life (M 4,26), support from Italian community (M 3,65).

Proposals for improving intergroup relations

With very high level of agreement our respondents say knowledge of foreign cultures would help to diminish the fear of diversity, finding it true that what is unknown and out of considered normality in a certain society is lived as uncomfortable. There is unanimity in agreeing very strongly that fostering mutual understanding and education on equality in diversity are strategies to be implemented against discrimination in favour of the acceptance of differences. It is present among all (except one) the belief that the local community and the community of migrants have lots to offer one to another through exchange, getting to know each other and learning from one another. Most of the respondents further agree that from the encounter of cultures we should try to create new cultural forms in which we could recognize ourselves, focusing more on similarities and reducing differences between perceived groups.

Conclusion

As reported in Gotsbachner (2001: 730), discourses are defined “as recurrent and recognizable ‘patterns of meaning which organize the various symbolic systems human beings inhabit, and which are necessary for us to make sense of each other’ ”.¹⁷

In relating to immigrants there is the tendency to use specific habitualized discursive structures that homogenize and stabilize as a norm peculiar traits, invisibly creating a common (prejudiced) social knowledge within the dominant group.

Through the analysis of some excerpts of interviews to four immigrant people our aim was to present perspectives in the discourse on immigration different from those (often discriminatory) we are normally exposed to.

In narrating their experience and points of view respondents show to be conscious of discriminatory discursive patterns of diversity, where *we* (the dominant in-group) is opposed to *they* (the dominated out-group). They show to negotiate social positioning from the models imposed by the dominant group, but they hardly manage to challenge socially shared dominant discourse through an ‘emancipatory’ one, highly marked and not institutionally recognized.

It emerges from our analysis interviewees’ wish to enlarge the borders of referential framework for a new in-group perspective, basically encouraging mutual knowledge.

Immigrant interviewees express new topics for immigrant discourse, the dominant group usually does not take into consideration, marked themes that should be increasingly normalized through good practices.

¹⁷ Parker I. (ed.) (1999) *Critical Textwork. An introduction to Varieties of Discourse and Analysis*. London: Routledge. (Page 3)

From the questionnaires, responses to items from the realistic and symbolic threat scales in our sample suggest an average rate of perceived threat from immigrants, which increases considering Muslim immigrants specifically. Concerns raise about perceived similarities with Muslims. Respondents rated them quite low, being pretty much extreme in the perceived differences. Difference in norms, behaviour, mentality, values are felt to be accentuated. It must be kept in mind that the data reported here are not representative of the broader population. The size of the sample used in the initial descriptive analysis is very low and including a lot of young participant with very high level of education. Higher educated individuals were found to hold less negative attitude. It may appear that with a larger sample more negative attitudes towards immigrants would pop out. Social desirability may have also affected our respondents. Nevertheless, the data gathered offered us several reflections and insights on which to base our future work. The measures used to assess realistic and symbolic threats, considered separately also the favouring of civil rights for legal migrants and similarities to Muslims, may be highly inter-related, examining the same or similar construct. This might be valid for some other variables of the preliminary version of the questionnaire used. Thus, continuing the research we will have to revisit our measures.

The results obtained so far, anyway, can provide information on the plausibility of the theoretical and methodological approaches used and support the idea that it is reasonable to explore the practical implications of these findings. Even though our sample is very limited, the quantity and quality of the information and the stimuli in general we have received are richer than expected.

Many of our respondents reveal somehow openness to meet and to better know the other. However, as it appears from both the questionnaires and the open interviews, it seems there would be a need for more opportunities of institutionally supported encounter to fight lack of knowledge and misconceptions about each other. According to the Contact Hypothesis (see Pettigrew 1998), a systematic intergroup contact can indeed be successful in reducing stereotypes, prejudices and negative attitudes (Gaertner, Dovidio, Nier, Ward, & Banker, 1999; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2000; Islam & Hewstone, 1993). It is confirmed that the quantity and quality of contact are related to greater perceived out-group variability and more positive attitudes, promoting a challenge of the preconceived views, the acquisition of knowledge of the out-group, the discovery of similar attributes leading to “similarity-attraction hypothesis” (Byrne 1971). In order to be effective, other requisites, like institutional support, equal status of the groups and a superordinate goal are also needed (Pettigrew, 1998).

Intergroup programs may be very helpful in fostering awareness raising and interaction, acknowledgement of differences but also of shared values and overall similarities. Promoting relationship and cooperation with members of different groups, working towards a common goal, may help reducing the perception of the different kinds of threats, anxiety and negative emotional reactions, providing an opportunity to improve intergroup relations among the dominant and migrant community.

Our hope is that the ‘European Year of Intercultural Dialogue 2008’ will create more of such possibilities of intergroup encounters where participants would not perceive and treat each other as (potential) enemies but as equal parts willing to mutual enrichment.

SUMMARY Table with the main composite measures (number of respondents, mean, standard deviation)

| | N | M | SD |
|---|----------|----------|-----------|
| General Out-Group Orientation (Positive attitude towards diversity) (M 6 items) (1 strongly disagree – 4 strongly agree) | 27 | 2,94 | 0,56 |
| Negative emotional reaction in contact/interaction with immigrants (M 20 items) (1 not present -10 definitely present) | 25 | 1,6 | 0,43 |
| Perceived change in negative emotions towards Muslims after 9/11 (M 14 items) (-5 decreased 0 unchanged +5 increased) | 26 | 0,6 | 0,81 |
| Perceived realistic threats (M 14 items) (1 not present; 5 definitely present) | 26 | 2,74 | 0,48 |
| In favour of civil rights for legal migrants (Realistic threats Rev.) (M 10 items) (1 definitely disagree -5 definitely agree) | 27 | 2,95 | 0,55 |
| Perceived symbolic threats (M 10 items) (1 not present - 5 definitely present) | 25 | 2,64 | 0,41 |
| Similarity with Muslim immigrants (Symbolic threats) (M 10 items) (1 not similar at all; 10 definitely similar) | 24 | 3,79 | 1,71 |
| Negative view of Islam (Prejudiced view, subscale) (M 11 items) (1 not present -10 definitely present) | 25 | 5,26 | 1,89 |
| Positive view of Islam (M 16 items) (1 not present -10 definitely present) | 26 | 4,4 | 1,52 |

APPENDIX
TRANSCRIPTION CONVENTIONS

(Taken from Ochs and Capps, 2001)

1. . The period indicates a falling, or final, intonation contour, not necessarily the end of a sentence.
2. ? The question mark indicates rising intonation, not necessarily a question.
3. , The comma indicates "continuing" intonation, not necessarily a clause boundary.
4. ::: Colons indicates stretching of the preceding sound, proportional to the numbers of colons.
5. - A hyphen after a word or a part of a word indicates a cut-off or self interruption.
6. word Underlining indicates some form of stress or emphasis on the underlined item.
7. WO Upper case indicates loudness.
8. ° ° The degrees signs indicate the segments of talk which are markedly quiet or soft.
9. > < The combination of "more than" and "less than" symbols indicates that the talk between them is compressed or rushed.
10. < > In the reverse order, they indicate that a stretch of talk is markedly slower.
11. = An equal sign indicates no break or delay between the words thereby connected.
12. (()) Double parentheses enclose descriptions of conduct.
13. (word) When all or part of an utterance is in parentheses, this indicates uncertainty on the transcriber's part.
14. () Empty parentheses indicate that something is being said, but the transcriber could not hear it.
15. (1.2) Numbers in parentheses indicate silence in tenths of seconds.
16. (.) A dot in parentheses indicates a "micropause"; hearable, but not readily measurable, ordinarily less than two tenths of a second.
17. [Separate left square brackets, one above the other on two successive lines with utterances by different speakers, indicates a point of overlap onset.
18. hhh The letter "h" indicates hearable aspiration.
19. → The arrow in the margin indicates the lines of the transcript relevant to the point being made in the text.
20. **word** Boldface indicates forms relevant to the point being made in the text.

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