

THE MEDITERRANEAN AS A POTENTIAL COMMUNITY. CROSS-CULTURAL SICILY-POLAND RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

The 1995 Euro-Mediterranean conference in Barcelona started a partnership policy to establish a Mediterranean area of free exchange that would encourage peace, stability and mutual recognition of cultural differences; it could be described as a basis for the construction of a Mediterranean community as a whole, which could be of great economical and political importance but that for now is still in a 'potential' state.

According to Gaertner (2007), the construction of a *Common Ingroup Identity* means the re-categorization of group belonging and appears to be feasible in terms of a *Dual Identity* (that is by no means automatic), that enables the new sense of belonging to co-exist with the original one.

The research on the hypothesis of 'contact', as formulated by Allport (1954), indicates that this in itself is not sufficient to reduce prejudicial thought; research on "reluctant racism" shows that the simple ideological option is no guarantee of discriminatory tendencies when the 'potential' contact becomes 'real'.

The data for this research seem to show that the social representation of the Mediterranean in terms of 'Potential community' and *Dual Identity* characterizes the group of Polish students moderately well ("potential contact") but not the Catania group ("real contact").

Key words: *Community, Contact, Self, Ingroup, Outgroup*

INTRODUCTION

The Mediterranean, object of different social representations (cradle of European culture and the three monotheistic religions: Matvejevic, 2001), and place of collective, often irreconcilable imaginations (Foucher, 2001), is an extremely complex and multiform reality whose contradictions can be summarized in the representation formulated by Braudel: "a set of maritime and land paths connected to each other and to cities that all hold hands, from the smallest to the medium-sized, to the largest, a *moving space* in which the relationships that have developed over different centuries, though not always peaceful, have nonetheless contributed to defining the identities of the different people that have lived here" (Braudel, 1985/1987, p. 51).

A Mediterranean, therefore, characterized by common origins but also by different cultural traditions, substantially definable in terms of *plural* complexity, source of possible enrichment but also pos-

sible threats to the equilibrium of the peoples (Livi Bacci & Veronesi, 1990).

This complexity can contribute to explaining the delays and difficulties in reaching the objectives fixed by the 1995 Euro-Mediterranean conference in Barcelona which established a new partnership policy for the realization of an area of peace, stability and prosperity between the different cultures (Meligrana, 2006). Regarding the third axis of the work program, it emphasizes recognition of the differences and similarities between the Mediterranean civilizations, with the aim of eliminating the tendencies towards cultural alienation, xenophobia and racism, promoting, instead, a multicultural society with common interests and values, though this does not mean its members should give up their own cultural specificity. These are objectives that, in general, seem propaedeutic for the construction of a Mediterranean Community, of great importance as a whole (though it only has 7% of the world's population, it provides about 16% of industrial production: Semplici & Troiani, 2000) but for now is in a 'potential' state.

Moreover, the Mediterranean question is situated in a more general context in which the new means of communication and transport, by determining a sort of compression of time and space and contributing to broadening contacts between cultures, have made the current situation a planetary theatre of integration processes of systems and of profound geo-demographic changes (Angelini, 2007).

Terrorism and the large migratory flows of recent years have created some obstacles; besides facilitating the emphasis on political, economical and cultural differences, they have contributed to making the process of uniting the different peoples seem excessively ambitious, in some ways even utopian (Rosenthal, 2005).

In effect, the migratory flows generate processes of acculturation that, though in different forms and ways (Bourhis, 2007; Wittig *et alii*, 2007), collaborate to re-defining the cultural bases of identity. Besides, the specialist literature shows that the relationships between peoples are characterized by phenomena of a psychosocial nature (behavioral and cognitive: Pettigrew, 1998; affective: Pettigrew & Tropp, 2000; anxiety-inducing: Voci & Hewstone, 2003; emotional: Brown & Cohen, 2007) that give substance to the complex of the *ingroup/outgroup* dynamics (Tajfel, 1981) and, besides attacking the roots of Identity, can have as a result (in some situations, for example, in the case of certain acts of terrorism), a refusal of the 'other' as belonging to the human species (Turner, 1987, p.65).

Moreover, research on reluctant racism (Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986) shows that in relationships between social groups, prejudicial thought can also categorize people who declare they are in favor of integration, and that the ideological option is no guarantee against the risk of assuming discriminatory tendencies, especially when the contact of 'potential' becomes 'real' (Silverman, 1974).

In this framework, the objective of civil cohabitation forms the real challenge of the politics of Mediterranean integration (Triandafyllidou, 2007, pp. 77/84); an objective, however, that does not appear to be attainable exclusively with tools of an economic type.

Moreover, as Allport has already shown (1954), the contact between social groups forms a possible strategy to reduce prejudice; however, this requires some important conditions (equal status, institutional support, need for cooperation, sufficient time) that contribute to producing a positive influence on the process of reciprocal knowledge. In the wake of this hypothesis, various Authors have proposed different functioning models for the reduction of prejudicial thought in relationships between social groups. Among these, the one that seems particularly significant is the model that explains the possible construction of a new and more inclusive *superordinate in-group*, through the re-categorization of group belonging and in terms of a *Dual Identity* (Gaertner & Dovidio, 1999, p. 389) that allows for the coexistence of the new sense of belonging with the old one. However, the applications of this model to real contexts indicate that coexistence is by no means automatic, especially in situations in which cooperation is expected; therefore, the need has arisen to increase the conditions that can encourage the reduction of prejudicial thought.

Method

In this article, we aim to verify if the condition of "contact" (Allport, 1954) "real Vs potential", can

influence, in terms of *Dual Identity*, the social representation of the Mediterranean in terms of "potential community".

The data regards an initial comparison between the representation that young Sicilians have of the Mediterranean and the relationships between the people on its coasts; they are physically in the middle of the context (and therefore in a condition of 'real contact') and young Poles, who live in a Nation involved in the development of Euro-Mediterranean Partnership but geographically far from the shores of "Mare Nostrum" (they only have virtual contact).

Participants

The sample comprises N.38 students from Catania (Sex: 17 M; 21 F; Age: Range 17-19, Mean=18,11, Median=18) and N.28 students of the University of Cracow (Sex: 13 M; 15 F; Age: Range 19-28, Mean=22,39, Median= 22).

Materials and techniques

The data was obtained using:

A) a semi-structured questionnaire to explore the social representation of the Mediterranean: the adjectives and the people who mainly characterize it;

B) three "scales of judgement", structured with items of the Likert (range 1-7 and point of 'indifference'=4), in order to measure attitudes regarding:

1) the type of relationships that characterize the populations of the Mediterranean, *a) political agreements; b) trade; c) cultural relationships; d) economic-political conflicts; e) religious conflicts;*

2) the importance of preserving one's own identity and cultural characteristics: *a) yes, because in any case it is not right to abandon the path set out by our ancestors, whose wisdom should be the beam that illuminates our lives; b) yes, in as much as it is possible because cultural identity is at the basis of one's own personal identity; c) I have never really thought about it, d) I would say no, it doesn't seem to be so relevant to me; e) no, on the other contrary, it is important to make an effort to fit in with the other culture in order to limit problems of integration; f) Absolutely not; instead, it is important to create a universal culture on which to base the possibility of a civil cohabitation;*

3) the need to establish positive relationships with the peoples of the Mediterranean: *a) Yes, it is essential, to build together a pluralistic and authentically democratic society based on the wealth that only the contribution of different forces can guarantee; b) Yes, of course, because only reciprocal knowledge can enable the construction of a civil and tolerant relationship; c) Yes, as a means to limit conflict; d) No, I have never really thought about it e) I would say no, it doesn't seem to be so important; f) No, it is better to limit contact as much as possible in order to avoid conflict; g) Absolutely not, everyone should stay in his own place, this is the only way to avoid contamination (cultural, of race, etc.) and have a perfectly ordered society;*

C) 4 Semantic Differentials, each of 34 opposite pairs (Di Nuovo & Licciardello, 1997), relative to the representation of the Present *Self* (Me as I am now) and the Future *Self* (What I will be like), of the *Ingroup* (My fellow countrymen) of the *Outgroup* (The peoples of the Mediterranean).

Procedure

The data of this work was gathered with a sample of students N.38 students from Catania and 28 students of the University of Cracow. The Poles were interviewed by a researcher, directly in Cracow, during a visit in the context of an Erasmus project.

Results

The data analysis, at this level, was carried out with the support of the statistics package SPSS 15 for windows.

For the data of the semi-structured questionnaire, using content analysis, we calculated the frequencies and percentages of each category. For the Likert scales, we calculated the mean values. Regarding the Semantic Differentials: 1) we calculated the reliability through *Cronbach's alpha*: the Present *Self* ($\alpha=.7884$) and the Future *Self* ($\alpha=.8409$), the *Ingroup* ($\alpha=.8488$), the *Outgroup* ($\alpha=.8764$), that enables us to consider each one as a scale; 2) we considered each of the Semantic

Differentials as a scale, calculating the mean value of the sum of the scores of each opposite pair (for each one the score goes from -3, absolutely negative, to +3 absolutely positive; with point of indifference =0); *3*we proceeded to calculate the Euclidian Distances, using the following formula: e.g. for the Present *Self* and the Future *Self*. PS=Present *Self*, FS=Future *Self*, i= each pair of opposite adjectives in both Semantic Differentials.

The test of statistical meaning was carried out using: *Chi square*, *Manova*, *Test of Within*, "*t*" of Student and *One test*.

Area 1: general representation of Mediterranean

On the whole, the Mediterranean is represented by the students of Cracow mainly in terms of "Emotional Resonance" (60,7%), while in the case of the Catania students, aspects referring to 'possibility' and 'wealth' prevail (86,8%); besides, for most of the first group (71,4%), Italians are emblematically the most representative people of the Mediterranean spirit.

Area 2: Likert scales average values

The Polish students consider the relationships between the Mediterranean peoples to be particularly categorized by 'cultural relationships' ($X= 5.75$) and partly by 'trade' ($X=4.64$); below the point of indifference the scores regarding the political agreements and conflicts (*Test of Within*, $df=4$, $F= 28.324$, $p < .0001$).

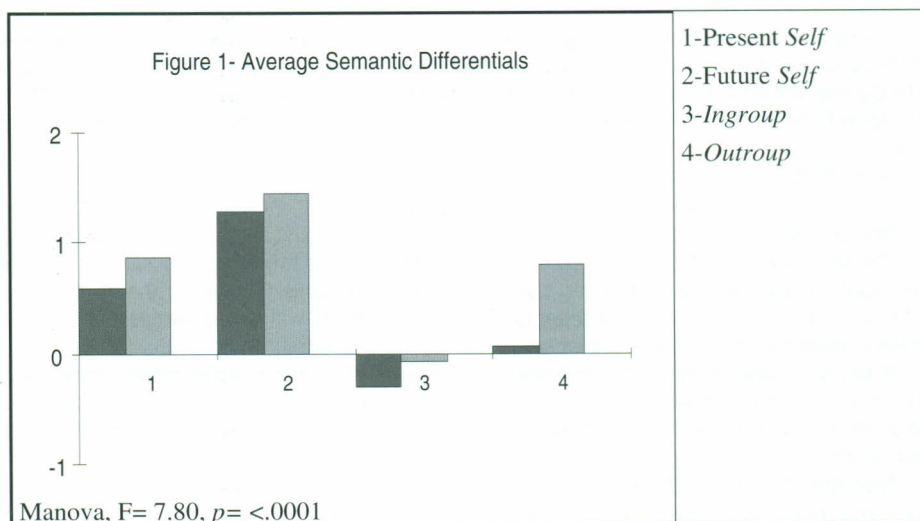
The Catania students, on the other hand, barely consider the existence of 'cultural relationships' ($X=4.18$), placing 'trade' quite highly ($X=5.13$) and attributing scores below the point of indifference to other options (*Test of Within*, $df=4$, $F= 9.464$, $p < .0001$).

The Poles and the Catania people attribute (89,3% Vs 84,25) considerable importance to the need to preserve one's own identity and cultural aspects in relation to the fact that "cultural identity is at the base of personal identity" (Poles: $X=5.43$ Vs Cat.: $X=5.05$; "*t*" n.s.).

At the same time, however, almost all the Poles (96,4%) and most of the Catania people (71,1%) ($X^2= 6.97$, $p=.007$) consider that it is important to establish positive relationships with other Mediterranean peoples because, according to the reasons they gave "only mutual knowledge will allow a civil, tolerant relationship" (Pol. $X=5,89$ Vs Cat. $X= 5,34$; "*t*" n.s.); it is "indispensable to build together a pluralist and authentically democratic society based on wealth that only the contribution of different forces can guarantee." (Pol. $X=5,82$ Vs Cat. $X= 5,21$; "*t*" n.s.); besides, "as a means of limiting conflict" (Pol. $X=5,21$ Vs Cat. $X= 5,26$; "*t*" n.s.). Confirming this picture, options with a different orientation are decidedly rejected. (*Test of Within*: Poles $df=6$, $F= 92,306$, $p < .0001$; Catania people: $df=6$, $F= 75,196$, $p < .0001$).

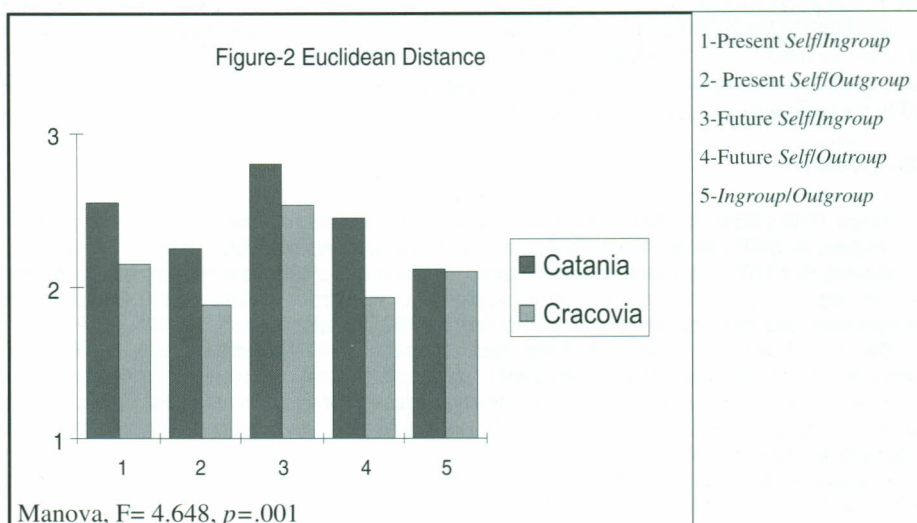
Area 3: Semantic Differentials average values

The data gathered through the Semantic Differentials (Figure 1) show (Manova, $F= 7.80$, $p < .0001$) that the *Ingroup* is barely appreciated by both groups, with ratings that can be overlap on the "point of indifference" (-0.08, in the case of the Poles) or significantly inferior (in the case of the Catania people: -0.31, one sample test, $t= -2.472$, $p= .018$). Significant differences concern the Mediterranean Outgroup ($F=27.588$, $p < .0001$), that the Cracow students value positively and on the same rate as their Present *Self* (+ 0,80), while the Catania students give it scores overlapping to the "indifference point" (+0.05).



Area 4: Euclidean distances

The analysis of the Euclidean Distances (Figure 2) confirm the tendency earlier revealed: the students of Catania, compared to the students of Cracow (Manova, $F= 4.648, p=.001$), rate: a) their present *Self* as more distant both from the *Ingroup* ($F=6.638, p=.012$) and the Mediterranean *Outgroup* ($F=7.80, p=.007$); b) their Future *Self* as more distant from the Mediterranean *Outgroup* ($F=8.842, p=.004$).



DISCUSSION

The results show that the social representation of the Mediterranean and the relationships between the peoples who live on its shores appear better among young Poles than among the young people from Catania. While the former tend to privilege the aesthetic aspects and cultural relationships, the latter appear to be prevalently oriented towards the economic aspects and relationships of a commercial nature.

Both groups, in an equal manner, consider the protection of their own cultural identity to be absolutely essential. They believe it is important to establish positive relationships with other Mediterranean peoples: this need is considered to be essential by almost all Poles and the majority of Catania people.

The data obtained through Semantic Differentials show that the two groups appear similar in their low rating of the *Ingroup*, but differ significantly regarding consideration of the Mediterranean Outgroup: in fact, the Poles assess it better than the Catania people, with scores that can be overlapped on the Present *Self*, and in a less distant way from their Future *Self*.

In terms of *Dual Identity* this would seem to categorize the group of Poles better; for them, the Mediterranean dimension would actually be superior to that concerning the *Ingroup* and a sort of aspiration for the future, rather than for the Catania group, who, however, gave a low rating to the both the *Ingroup* and the *Outgroup*, keeping their distance from them.

Therefore, it would appear that the condition of 'potential contact' (of the Poles) influences the representation of the Mediterranean as 'Potential Community' more positively than the condition of 'real contact' (of the Catania people).

CONCLUSIONS

The data of this study would seem to favor the hypothesis that a minor direct involvement (in the case of greater physical distance) contributes to determining a better representation of the Mediterranean as 'Potential Community' and also in terms of the *Dual Identity*.

Therefore, we can confirm what has been shown in specific studies regarding the need to consider the complexities that characterize the relationships between culturally different social groups, and also the need to focus attention on conditions of 'contact' that can be useful to reduce prejudicial thought.

Considering the importance that the establishment of the Mediterranean area as a Community may assume, we need to ask ourselves about the opportunity to reshape the type of interventions for this aim, in which the European Community is investing considerable resources. The results (though limited to the sample used) seem very interesting and deserve further study.

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Fecha de recepción: 28 febrero 2009

Fecha de admisión: 19 marzo 2009