Walking like an Italian, speaking like an English person: Construing the cultural other and the self

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Background

Where did the idea come from?

Walking like an Italian...

...speaking like an English person
Method

4 focus groups (2 Italian, 2 English)

4-6 people in each group

Direct experience of the ‘other’ culture

Interviews lasted approx 1-2 hours
Method

7 Questions:

1. What comes to mind when you think of someone as ‘typically Italian’ (‘typically English’)?

2. If you are in a foreign country, can you sometimes identify other English (Italian) people in a crowd? What are the cues you are using?

3. In what respects might you want to be more like an Italian (English) person?

4. In what respects might you want to be less like an English (Italian) person?
Method

5. What would be the benefits/drawbacks of changing it that way?

6. What do you think Italians (English) imagine when they think of someone as being ‘typically English’ (‘typically Italian’)?

7. Imagine now that you are an Italian (English) person. Put yourself in their shoes and think “If an English (Italian) person were to become more like me, they would have to do this” (ask for three answers).
Method

Explored in relation to:

Emotions
Behaviours
Speech and language
Appearance and body movement
Social and family life
Attitudes
Method

Constructs emerging during the interviews were recorded on a flip-chart.

Responses from both English and both Italian groups were combined for analysis.
Theoretical framework

Commonality:

To the extent that one person employs a construction of experience which is similar to that employed by another, his [sic] processes are psychologically similar to those of the other person.
Theoretical framework

Sociality:

To the extent that one person construes the construction processes of another he [sic] may play a role in a social process involving the other person.
Theoretical framework

Change:

Change is a ‘package deal’ - we often do not anticipate the consequences of our desired change.
Findings: Commonality and sociality

Warm/effusive- cold/detached
Expressive/- restrained/controlled
Tolerant/helpful to foreigners - Intolerant of those who do not speak your language
(Not) - nationalistic/war-mongering
Disorganised - organised/efficient
Relaxed/take time for lunch- frenetic /governed by work schedules
Not tolerant- respectful/tolerant of others/difference
Nepotism/corruption- meritocracy
Patriarchal family- more equal gender roles
Hospitality warm/intrusive- hospitality cold/respect privacy
Family centred- independent
Eating as a social event- eating for necessity
“... it’s something that we’ve had a wonderful experience of with the house we’ve got in Como, is that we are often considered to be slightly odd because we tend to go and try and see the local official to discuss planning changes, building things, and we tend to try and apply things to regulations and the general consideration of the local population is that we are deeply British in our adherence to rules and regulations in a way which the Italian people tend to try and avoid.” (Alex)
Rule-bound- disrespectful of rules/corrupt

Davide: I also noticed it when I was in England two or three times that I have been there. I saw much respect for unwritten rules, like the queue, in the subway...

Enrica: ... everybody is on the same side. If you go to Milan instead...

Davide: Everybody keeps to the right. If we were in Milan it wouldn’t happen.
“...when I went to Italy [on business], they would make sure that I was looked after from the minute I got there to the minute I left in every sense, you know that my hotel room was ok, that I’d slept well that night, they would take me out for meals, they would often introduce me to other family members and in the course of an evening or over two or three days, I would maybe even go to their home and have a meal with them in their own home ... I used to be so embarrassed because they would pay my hotel bill sometimes and I’d think oh dear, what am I going to do, and then a few weeks later they were coming to Huddersfield to do business and I would meet them and I would try and have one night out with them and there would be people saying “don’t bother, they’ll be all right” you know, “what do you mean they’ll be all right?” you know, they looked after me, so shall we go out and have a meal with them tonight and tomorrow night, and it would be “they’re all right, leave them.” (Peter)
Hospitality warm/intrusive-
hospitality cold/respect privacy

Maria: I think of their respect for privacy. The sense I had of this was very strong. Respect for privacy, both their privacy and others....
Hospitality warm/intrusive-hospitality cold/respect privacy

Antonio: It’s because they have a different conception of hospitality. Here the guest has to be attended; there instead the guest is free. I was free to open the fridge, to prepare a meal... it was something that makes me feel comfortable...

Lucia: Maybe you were already a friend...

Piero: No, it’s a different hospitality, it’s true. A person I knew told me “Come, come!” but there was no contact between me and him... I could go to his house without problem whenever he told me to go. But it’s a formal hospitality

Lucia: Little warmth...

Piero: Not human...
Hospitality warm/intrusive- hospitality cold/respect privacy

Antonio: I have been in the South of Italy and they took my life...
Piero: I should compare the English hospitality to the southern Italy hospitality....
Antonio: I prefer the English one!
Piero: The English let you... is hospitable, let you enter his home, let you do whatever you want but in the human side maybe... he seems to be more present in the material things, in the lending...
Roberto: Yes, it’s as if they can leave you the keys of their house but they don’t make you feel at home...
Piero: ... they leave their car for you the day after you meet them, but it’s not a human hospitality...
Alessia: So, they let you have space but they don’t take care of the guest...
Antonio: They respect their own autonomy...
Davide: I found out this difference, that they live the experience of the meal like “Ok, now I have to stop for half an hour because I can’t go on”. Obviously it’s a stereotype, but the main idea remains the same. For Italians the idea of lunch is almost sacred instead, at least to me. And also dinner…

Valentina: …they have absurd rhythms of life, at least regarding my experience. That is the student that goes to gymnasium at six in the morning, then goes to work at 8 and half or nine, goes straight until six p.m. or seven or even after dinner. …except on Fridays. On Friday at 5 o’clock you stop working and you directly go to pub, but only on Fridays. The other days of the week they have a very stressful life…
Frenetic /governed by work - relaxed/take time for lunch

Alex: I just think there’s less of a formal structure, rigidity to the way in which the working and the actual, the social day, is framed...I think it's also just the fact the way in which people are prepared to sort of make time for themselves in a way, which we possibly don’t.

Clare: ...if I’m working, the last thing I’d think is oh I’m thirsty, I’ll stop in this café and have a drink, you know, I’ll carry on being thirsty probably, or I’ll have water with me in my car when I’m driving, which is interesting, when you know, you say that they make time for it, because often they are stopping in cafes having coffees or... they go home and have lunch. I wouldn’t dream of going home and having lunch...
Findings: change

The English participants want:
Stylish and cool
Self-presentation skills; social confidence, articulate
Considerate, command respect
Eye for high quality goods
Culinary flair
Relaxed attitude, slower pace of life, better work/life balance
Child-oriented culture
Expressive
Hospitable; closeness in relationships
Findings: change

And to be less...
Rude
Uptight, faltering and unsure of themselves
Constrained by work pressures
Colonial, militaristic, war-mongering
Self-important; Anglo-centric
Findings: change

The Italian participants want:
Kind, in a less evident but more extended way
Tidy in the way of dressing
Respectful of rules
Independent from the family unit, autonomy from family
Organizational spirit; practical, effective and efficient
Public spirit
Meritocratic
Tolerant of differences
To let people be – to let people do
Satisfied and not looking for something more
Using forms of language that express a concept with more impartiality
Synthesis in building sentences
Attention to the level of the interlocutor when choosing communication style
Flexible abroad
Findings: change

And be less...

Coarse
Oppressive, intrusive
Gesticulating
Nepotism, patronage
Conspiratorial
Admiring artful people
Using fewer stereotypes
Landing on one’s feet to the detriment of others and rules
Superficial
Resigned
Cynical
Mummy’s boys
Sexist
Caring less about other’s opinion
Findings: change

What do they see as the benefits and drawbacks of this change?
Findings

Drawbacks for the English participants:
Freedom of expression may entail loss of self-control
Hospitality can be intrusive—want to preserve autonomy; maybe warmth isn’t genuine
May lose progress in gender roles
Local, family businesses may be unfair
Looking good might require too much effort
Having children around may not be pleasant
Findings: change

Clare: I’m just thinking from my own perspective actually, when I go out for a meal in the evening, I don’t want a hoard of children!
Susan: I agree Clare!
Clare: I think it looks nice, but actually I’m not so sure I want it.
Findings: change

**Drawbacks for the Italian participants:**

Enrica: The efficacy and the efficiency, that is that everything works perfectly, everything is on time. Maybe the cost of life is higher but you have something back.

Enrica: The disadvantages maybe are effort and sweat... I was thinking of effort and sweat because we were talking about the short cuts and the minimum effort...

Francesca: An English person might say that in order to become more similar to him an Italian would not have to eat in such a good way...
Findings: change

Lucia: But also the independence. We stay in the family home for years...
Antonio: Who said that it’s bad? You have somebody to wash and iron for you for free...

Antonio admitted that ‘I like being Italian’, however he later agreed with the rest of his group that a move toward a less sexist society would be beneficial.

... 
Antonio: ... if you live in a more disciplined context there are some advantages but also lots of disadvantages, so I prefer to remain in this situation...
Findings: change

Anna: So, more respectful?
Piero: yes.
Alessia: yes.
Moderator: More public spirit, more respect for rules?
Antonio: But if you are more respectful... then you have to pay taxes...

Antonio: But also efficiency is a double-edged sword... because if there was a more efficient State corps and Interior Minister, there would be trouble. While this way...
Findings: change

Lucia: But here we are describing the ideal Italian, I don’t know. I don’t know how we would recognize ourselves in this description in reality...
Conclusion

- High degree of commonality and sociality
- High degree of desire to adopt the perceived positive qualities of the ‘other’
- Cultural identity achieved through relationship and comparison.
- Cultural system of constructs: people belong to the same culture to the extent they construe experiences similarly.
- Change is a package deal.
The next stage

We will re-convene the focus groups and ask them to discuss our findings:

What do they think about how the cultural ‘other’ perceives them? What did they anticipate/not anticipate?
Findings

How were Italian people perceived by the English participants?
Findings

Appearance and self-presentation
Smart in appearance, fashionable clothes
Well-groomed and chic, and generally good to look at
Self-assured
But also...
The Italian mother, who is short and round, wears black and cooks pasta.
Typically dark-skinned (‘Mediterranean’ complexion), dark-haired and short.
Their language is very ‘musical’; they can be loud, but in a musical way.
Findings

Emotions and attitudes
Prone to emotional outbursts (child-like, straightforward and open).
They express their emotions immediately (but this is transient).
They are expressive, lively, vibrant and energetic.
They gesticulate a lot in speech.
They have a disregard for rules and regulations, and avoid engagement with the State.
Findings

**Family and social life**
- Strong family bonds with clear gender roles and identities
- The family exerts strong pressure on family members
- Value personal, family and life
- Live their lives more outside the home in public spaces
- Meal times as social occasions; drinking as part of social context
- Children and young people integrated into family and social life
- Children are well-behaved
Findings

To become more like an Italian they would have to:
Be more considerate, helpful to and respectful of others
Be more engaged in national cultural life and politics
Value family and community and respect older people
Visit their father’s grave
Become more ‘laid back’
Become warmer, more effusive, hug more
Be more hospitable
Encourage people to get closer to them
Dress better
Findings

How did Italian people perceive themselves?

Exuberant, exaggerate and excessive, they are considered to express emotions in an evident way
Warm, they tend to interact
They always stay in groups and are apprehensive and protective toward the other members of the family, above all toward the sons
Style in the way of dressing, they wear colorful clothes and all dress in the same way.
Hyper-gestures, they gesticulate too much
Relaxed
They make noise, they speak loud, they even scream, using vocal emphasis. They don’t speak foreign languages, or they are very approximate in doing it.
They show little respect for the others and for the environment
Unorganized and disorderly
Findings

How were English people perceived by the Italian participants?
Findings

Appearance and self-presentation
They are dressed either in a scruffy or elegant way, sometimes extravagant in their way of dressing. They are also considered aesthetically disturbing.
They don’t gesticulate
They show little expressivity in gesture, also in the way they move their mouths while talking.
Composed and rigid, static
But...
After five beers they loose their rigidity.
Findings

Emotions and attitudes
They show a detached tolerance, that is to say that they have an attitude toward the ‘other’ but with reserve.
They show cultural (ethnic) superiority, and they are nationalists.
They are also considered pragmatic, open to different possibilities.
Finally, some consider them laics and pugnacious.
They show aplomb and self-control. They are calm
But...
There are some contexts where it’s not possible to see these characteristics, like for example in the pubs on Friday nights or in some cases at the stadium, among the hooligans.
They are cold and it’s hard to understand their feelings.
The anger they show is considered to be without gradient:
Findings

Franco: I would talk about explosive anger rather than anger. I mean that I don’t find any gradient. It seems to be very low and suddenly explodes, becomes high. I don’t have the feeling of the presence of a gradient. This is what I have in my mind...
Findings

How did English people perceive themselves?
Findings

Scruffy appearance; not ‘at home’ in their bodies’
Controlled, repressed, rule-followers
‘Brit’ culture
Loud, raucous behaviour, rude
Nationalistic behaviour (shown in dress)
Drunkenness, misbehaviour; drinking to get drunk
Speaking only English (loudly)
Arrogant disregard for local norms of behaviour
‘culture addicts’
Rebellious, independent of family
Lives taken over by work
Live their lives in private, within the home and garden
Findings

How English participants believe Italians perceive them

Scruffy, Lacking style
Drunk; the ‘Brits abroad’ (working class stereotype)
Uncultured
Loud and aggressive
Stiff upper lip (the upper class stereotype)
Shoplifting (“English shopping”)
Bad cooking
Overweight
No effort to speak other languages; lazy and arrogant
Findings

How Italian participants believe the English perceive them

Passionate and romantics
Warm
Likeable and cheerful
Good lovers
Sensual and seductive
Artists, talented, studious and theoretical
Creative
Pleasure-lovers/gourmet.
They are beautiful/ handsome

BUT also...
Findings

Without laws,
Not really active from the point of view of citizenship
Too much tolerant in the political sense
Clever and artful
Individualist.
They also have a high sense of family, but Italians think they are considered ‘mummy’s boys’.