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Construing the cultural other and the self: A Personal Construct analysis of English and Italian perceptions of national character

Abstract

How we perceive other cultures is arguably of increasing importance in contemporary society, impacting on realms such as international relations, business and tourism. The qualitative research reported in this paper was carried out in the UK and in Italy and adopted a Personal Construct Psychology approach. It aimed to explore intercultural perceptions in a sample of people who had some degree of experience with the 'other' culture, and a unique feature of the research is that it asked how those perceptions might be affected if people from both cultures are given access to each other's perceptions. There was considerable commonality in the perceptions of the English and Italian participants, and each culture envied some of the qualities of the other. However, they initially struggled to accommodate how they were seen by the other and endeavoured to resolve difference by construing at a more superordinate level. The findings also suggest that national identity is rooted in the construing of others' constructions, achieved through relationship and comparison.

Key words: Intercultural perceptions; Personal Construct Psychology; national stereotypes; national identity; national character; qualitative

Construing the cultural other and the self: A Personal Construct analysis of English and Italian perceptions of national character

1.0 Introduction

How we perceive other cultures is arguably of increasing importance in contemporary society, impacting on realms such as international relations, business and tourism. The qualitative research reported in this paper was carried out in the UK and in Italy, and aimed to explore intercultural perceptions in a sample of people who had some degree of experience with the 'other' culture. A unique feature of the research is that it asked how those perceptions might be affected if people from both cultures are given access to each other's perceptions.

Perceptions and stereotypes of people from different nations around the world have previously received a good deal of attention from researchers. For example, Linssen and Hagendoorn (1994) asked teenage students from seven western European countries to rate those nationalities on several trait dimensions. The results suggested that the more northern peoples, for example Germans and English, were perceived as more likely to have qualities such as 'efficient' and 'scientific' than southern European countries like Italy and France. The southern nationalities were rated as more emotional, enjoying life and more religious than northern nationalities. Italians were also seen as more empathic, helpful and friendly than the English. According to Lönnqvist, Yijälä, Jasinskaja-Lahti and Markku Verkasalo (2012), there has been very little research on the accuracy of national stereotypes and they call for more research in this area. What research there is seems to suggest that, in the absence of significant personal experience with the other culture, perceptions of national stereotypes tend to be inaccurate.

A number of research studies have additionally studied how people perceive other cultures compared to their own. For example, Suanet and Van de Vijver (2009) used rating scales to measure perceived cultural distance to understand acculturation in exchange students visiting Russia, with questions such as "How similar or different do you find the mentality in Russia and in your home country?" In the UK, Puddifoot (1996) studied adolescents' perceptions of other cultures and the degree of perceived 'intercultural distance' between them. Using free responses to photographs of several cultures (British, French, Asian, Gypsy, Chinese, Eskimo, African and American), participants ranked each culture on approximately 20 bipolar constructs. Measures of perceived distance between the cultures indicated that the participants saw those with the greatest similarity to the British to be Americans and French. Those perceived as having the greatest distance from the British were Africans, Gypsies and Asians.

Van Oudenhoven, Askevis-Leherpeaux, Hannover, Jaarsma and Dardenne (2002) and Van Oudenhoven, Selenko and Otten (2010) measured social distance (Bogardus, 1933) and liking for six European nations. Van Oudenhoven et al. (2002) asked over 400 students from France, Germany and the Netherlands to rate their liking for the other nations and to rate similarity to their own nation on traits such as 'friendly', 'tolerant', 'practical' and 'domineering', as well as measuring the degree of participants' contact with those nations. The aim of this research was to assess the usefulness of Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1978) over other hypotheses, namely the similarity-attraction hypothesis (Baron & Byrne, 2000) and the 'contact hypothesis' (Allport, 1954), in accounting for attitudes between nations. SIT states that in developing our own (in this case, national) identity we compare our nation to others and are motivated to see our own as distinctive and superior, and to stereotype others negatively by

comparison. Van Oudenhoven et al. (2002) argue SIT predicts that people from smaller nations will denigrate larger nations because the smaller nations will have more difficulty in constructing and maintaining a high-status identity. In line with SIT, they found that members of smaller nations (Belgium and the Netherlands) expressed less liking for larger nations such as France, Germany and Great Britain. There was some evidence that perceived similarity, but not degree of contact, was related to liking.

Existing research therefore suggests that people perceive varying degrees of 'distance' or similarity between their own nation and others and that perceived similarity may be one of a number of factors which play a part in our attitudes toward other nations. However, we appear to have little in-depth knowledge about these perceptions or about the value that may be attached to particular characteristics. Research into intercultural perceptions appears to have been predominantly quantitative. It has relied on ratings of prescribed lists of attributes with no check on the relevance of these dimensions in people's eyes. We do not know whether being, for example, 'emotional' or 'independent' is seen as desirable by different nationalities, or why. However, Peng (2012) explored how American and Chinese college students perceive and stereotype each other using free responses. The students were simply asked to write down as much as they knew about the other culture. A content analysis of their responses revealed low levels of awareness of Chinese culture among the American students, and popular in their perceptions of China were terms such as 'Communism' and 'overpopulated'. Common terms associated with America and Americans for the Chinese students were "freedom", "independence", and "open-mind". Peng's free-response method also provided some insight into the value judgements that students made about the qualities they saw in the other. For example, one Chinese student wrote "I do not like their [Americans'] attitude towards the family.

They think if the children grow up, they should leave their home. I do not like that. I think family is important to us".

Furthermore, it may be argued that one nation's perception of another is only part of the picture we need to build if we are to more fully understand intercultural perceptions. In her study of young people in Brixton, UK, Howarth (2002) found that perceptions of self are intimately bound up with how we feel we are perceived by others. By extension, our perceptions of the other are also likely to be influenced by how we feel we are perceived by them. However there appears to be no research which has explored the significance for intercultural perceptions of one's becoming aware of the other's view of us and of themselves.

In this research we therefore intend to move away from an approach using measured attributes to a qualitative approach exploring the views that people hold about themselves and others, and their views on how they believe they are seen, and are actually seen, by the other.

1.1 Theoretical framework
Personal Construct Psychology (PCP) (Kelly, 1955) has a long and successful history of use in exploring people's perceptions of themselves and others, especially in clinical and organizational settings. We believe that its theoretical concepts are rich resources with which to understand issues of cross cultural perception. According to PCP, in making sense of our experience each of us employs a number of bi-polar dimensions (constructs). Very often we are not consciously aware of doing so, but nevertheless our conduct depends upon this 'construing'. For example, one person may approach a new acquaintance with the implicit question "Is s/he going to be a friend or a threat?" while another may ask "Will s/he be self-confident or needy? In

each case, friend vs threat and self-confident vs needy are constructs and could be expected to imbue the subsequent interaction with quite different qualities.

We asked how English and Italian people construe themselves and each other and what implications for potential change their construing holds. We were therefore interested in whether Italian and English people base their judgments of each other on similar issues (such as friendliness, work orientation, religiosity etc.), what Kelly terms 'commonality', to what extent they can understand and appreciate the other's outlook on the world ('sociality') and how they would feel about changing to become more like the other.

Commonality states that we are psychologically similar to others not because we share particular personality traits but because we use a similar constructs to them: "To the extent that one person employs a construction of experience which is similar to that employed by another, his processes are psychologically similar to those of the other person" (Kelly, 1955, p. 90). Sociality refers to the extent to which people appear to see the world through others' eyes, to appreciate their perspective on the world. Kelly described this as 'construing the constructions of the other'. According to Kelly, this is necessary if we are to have effective and meaningful interactions with each other: "To the extent that one person construes the construction processes of another he may play a role in a social process involving the other person" (Kelly, 1955, p. 95). Sociality is a more socially profound concept than commonality. It distinguishes between two possible ways of acting towards others. We may act instrumentally, ignoring their point of view, or we may act in the light of their personal constructions, taking account of what our action will mean to them. It is this latter style that Kelly termed role relationships. Hinkle (1970) reports Kelly as saying that we *ought* to take the position of others in our dealings with them; this was a covert moral imperative in the theory. Certainly our relationships with

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significant others need to be role relationships if they are to survive and prosper. In his discussion of guilt (Kelly, 1969a), Kelly defined sinning not in terms of deviation from societal norms, but in terms of dislodgement from central role relationships; we feel guilty when we become aware that we have failed to act towards others in a way that we feel is demanded by our role with respect to them for example as a parent or friend.

Kelly developed his concept of sociality from the work of George Mead (Mead, 1982; Joas, 1985; Butt, 2004). Mead saw this ability to 'take the role of the other' as unique to humankind and essential to the co-operation that enabled humans to establish their dominant position among species. Philosophers and contemporary cognitive scientists refer to this ability as 'Theory of Mind' (Baron-Cohen, Tager-Flusberg and Cohen, 2007; Carruthers and Smith, 1996). However, PCP recognises that truly appreciating the other's perspective can disturb one's own comfortable world-view, so understanding others can be threatening to our sense of self.

PCP has already been used as a theoretical framework with which to understand issues of culture and identity. Kelly himself (Kelly, 1962) wrote about cultural change and politics after travelling around Europe for a year, and humourously suggested that "Looking through glasses that are not your own can permanently affect your eyesight" (p90). More recently, a number of others have viewed cultural identity through a PCP lens, including national identity and international conflict (Stojnov, 1996; 2003), multiculturalism (Gemignani, 2003), citizenship (Kalekin-Fishman, 2009) and immigration (Mancuso, 2003). Walker (2000; 2003) has specifically discussed the impact on personal identity of foreign travel. She argues that travel is "an attempt to either extend or define our identities by entering into cultural stories that we are not currently centrally involved in" (Walker, 2003: 83) and that it is the contrast of the unfamiliar culture which actually allows us to 'see' taken-for-granted aspects of our own. McCoy (1983)

used repertory grids to document the changes in the construing of a migrant over a period of two years, however Scheer's (2003) overview suggests a general paucity of empirical research on cross-cultural construing using PCP theory and methods, and we have found no further research since that time.

1.2 Research questions

We aimed to explore and compare perceptions of the other in English and Italian people who had some direct, personal experience of the other nation. We adopted a qualitative methodology in order to gain a rich insight into those perceptions without limiting responses to previously determined characteristics. Further key features of our rationale included a focus on what characteristics are valued by each culture and why, and an exploration of how Italian and English people feel they are perceived by the other.

Our central research question was: How do Italian and English people construe themselves and each other? Within this general question we identified several specific questions:

1. What characteristics do we construe ourselves and the other as possessing, and what value do we place on these characteristics?

2. Do people from the other culture see these same characteristics in us and in their own personality or national character, and how do they value these?

3. How do we imagine we are seen by the other?

4. What does a person feel he or she would need to do, and how would they need to change or reconstrue in order to become more like the cultural other?

5. What do we feel we would lose if we were to become more like the other?

6. How do both Italian and English people feel about how they are seen by the other?

2.0 Design and methodology

Our research was conducted in two stages. The aim of Stage 1 was to answer our questions 1-5, and Stage 2 (carried out a few months later) aimed to answer the final question. In Stage 1 we explored English and Italian people's perceptions of themselves and each other. In Stage 2 we presented our research participants with a summary of the findings from the 'other' culture and explored their responses to this information.

2.1 Methodological approach

Since its inception in the 1950s, those working within PCP have developed a wide range of techniques designed to access and articulate peoples' construing, many of them qualitative (see Burr et al., 2012). A widely used and well known technique for the exploration of a person's construing is the repertory grid. This was developed by Kelly in a clinical context and has since been adapted by others to form numerous variations for specific clinical and research purposes. The repertory grid is very often used to generate quantitative data, analysed with a range of statistical computer software packages. Identity Structure Analysis (ISA) (Weinreich, 2003) is a theoretical framework and methodology for understanding identity (including ethnic identities) and employs a technique similar to the repertory grid (an 'identity instrument') in order to map a person's identity in all its many aspects. ISA's theoretical framework draws heavily upon PCP, in particular the use of bi-polar constructs; individuals rate themselves and others on a number of supplied constructs and the resulting data are analysed using a computer package.

However, our research was not aimed at investigating identity per se (although identity is of course implicated in how people perceive others) or measuring its various aspects; further, ISA depends upon the use of constructs that have been previously identified through, for example, qualitative interviews. In order to gain the rich, 'thick' descriptions (Geertz, 1973) of experience

and perceptions that we felt were needed in order to answer our research questions we opted for a qualitative interview method grounded in the use of contrast and comparison, conceptual tools which are at the heart of PCP.

2.2 Sampling and recruitment

We wanted to recruit participants who would be able to reflect on their experience and talk about it in depth and to ensure that they had at least a minimal level of direct experience of people from the 'other' culture and not just popular stereotypes. We therefore invited individuals (staff and postgraduate students) from our respective institutions to take part, and used snowball sampling to recruit further participants where necessary. We asked for participants who had visited the other country or who had first hand experience of its people.

3.0 Stage 1

3.1 Method

We interviewed participants in focus groups in order to explore their perceptions as productively as possible and to gain insight into the construing process. There were 4 groups (two Italian groups of 7 and 5 participants and two English groups of 5 and 4 participants). The interviews were audio recorded and lasted between one and two hours each.

The interview schedule comprised the following questions. For clarity, we present here only the schedule used for the English participants:

1. What comes to mind when you think of someone as 'typically Italian'?

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

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

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

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

6. What do you think Italian people imagine when they think of someone as being 'typically English'?

7. Imagine now that you are an Italian person. Put yourself in their shoes and think 'If an English person was to become more like me, they would have to do this' (we asked participants to suggest three answers to this question).

In order to help participants reflect on their experiences, we suggested that they think about these questions in relation to emotions, behaviours, speech and language, appearance and body movement, social and family life, and attitudes. These proved to be useful starting points for the discussions, which then often encompassed further dimensions such as culture, climate and social organization.

During the focus group discussion, a flip-chart was used to record constructs as they emerged. And the interviewers continually used probes to explore participants' meanings. Very often participants spontaneously drew contrasts between English and Italian people and culture, but when they did not do this we asked them to consider the 'contrast' to the characteristics they perceived. For example, when English participants were asked about characteristics of Italian people, they suggested that Italians have a 'musical, expressive language'. They were then asked 'as opposed to what? How are English people by contrast?' and they suggested 'loud and raucous'. Recording constructs from semi-structured interview data, particularly in a group context, means that the constructs identified are often not as orderly and well-defined as they may be in an individual, structured context (in using a repertory grid, for example). A number of constructs appeared to overlap, or to have no identified contrast pole or more than one.

Therefore, at the end of the session the interviewers discussed with the group all the responses in the flip chart, clarifying the constructs and in particular their contrast poles. Care was taken to use construct labels that all participants in the group felt comfortable with and that they felt represented the range of views expressed.

3.2 Stage 1 analysis

The four interviews were transcribed and, in the case of the Italian groups, translated into English. The flip-chart responses from both focus groups in each culture were considered as a single data set and a provisional total list of constructs drawn up. The interview transcripts were then used to check for any constructs or meanings that had been missed during the interview itself, and the list of constructs adjusted accordingly. Using the construct poles as a-priori codes, the transcripts were additionally analysed thematically and a number of substantive issues identified such as hospitality, attitudes to rules and family bonds. We therefore were able to identify a range of dimensions of meaning (constructs) used by our participants to make sense of their own and the other's culture as well as to identify the character and lifestyle issues that appeared to be significant to them.

In order to identify instances of 'commonality' (where both Italian and English participants seemed to be using similar construct dimensions) and of sociality (where Italian and English participants showed a good understanding of each other's views) the constructs from both cultures were entered into a Perceiver-Element Grid (PEG) (Procter, 2005) (see Table 1).

_____

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

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The PEG is an adaptation of the repertory grid which allows the self-other perceptions of two people or groups to be compared. How one party (the 'perceiver') views both themselves and the other (the 'elements') can be compared with the perceptions of the other person. Thus, in the case of two individuals or groups (A and B) it is used to address the following questions:

1.How does A(B) perceive A(B)?

2.How does A (B) perceive B (A)?

3.How does A (B) think B (A) perceives A(B)?

4.How does A(B) think B(A) perceives B(A)?

The present research addressed the first three of these (in other words, we did not ask how the English participants think Italians perceive themselves and vice versa). In order for these comparisons to be made, each construct is split into its two poles and these are each entered into the appropriate cell of the PEG. We did this with each of the bi-polar dimensions representing 'Italian' and 'English' respectively. So, for example, 'drinking to get drunk vs alcohol in moderation, as part of social events' was a construct that, for the English participants, represented one difference between English and Italian culture, and the two poles of this construct were respectively listed under "How did the English participants perceive English people?" and "How did the English participants perceive Italian people?"

3.3 Stage 1 findings

3.3.1 Commonality

Firstly, by comparing the constructs emerging from the English and Italian focus groups we were able to gain a sense of the extent to which both cultures used a shared set of constructs for perceiving themselves and the other. There appeared to be a high degree of commonality

between the Italian and English groups, in that the contrasts used to make sense of behaviour, emotional life, attitudes etc were similar. Both English and Italians used contrasts around, for example, appearing scruffy vs stylish, being controlled or repressed vs warm and relaxed, being hospitable and 'giving of oneself' to strangers vs being detached and valuing privacy, and being family-centred vs being independent from family.

Both Italian and English participants tended to see Italian people as family-centred, nepotistic, warmly hospitable, disorganized, emotionally expressive and living a less pressured lifestyle; the English were regarded by both as more likely to drink to excess, to be somewhat arrogant and nationalistic, to be non-conformist and rebellious, to do things 'by the book', to value their own and other's privacy and to be self-controlled or even repressed. Below, we illustrate this alignment of views with extracts from the interviews:

Rules

Here, Alex talks about the English adherence to rules and regulations, and contrasts this with what he sees as the Italian way:

> "... 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."

Italians Davide and Enrica note a similar contrast:

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.

Hospitality

The English participants remarked on the warmth of Italian hospitality and by contrast saw English hospitality as falling short of this:

...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 ...

Peter went on to contrast this with how, on a visit to England by Italian colleagues, they were not treated with the same warm hospitality. The Italians, although they were reluctant to label the English as inhospitable, saw English people as having a detached kindness and respect for privacy. This seems to reflect what our English participants expressed in their desire for autonomy (rather than being having all their time organized by their hosts). Italians saw English people as possibly no less hospitable, but in a different, less warm manner:

Maria: I think of their respect for privacy…respect for privacy, both their privacy and others....

…

Antonio: It's because they have a different conception of hospitability. 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 hospitability... 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 hospitability

Lifestyle

Italian and English participants agreed on this contrast between the two cultures:

Davide: …they live the experience of the meal like "Ok, now I have to stop for half an hour because I can't go on"... For Italians the idea of lunch is almost sacred instead, at least to me.

Valentina: … they have absurd rhythms of life, at least in my experience…

…

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…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...

3.3.2 Sociality

By comparing responses in cells 1 and 2 with those in cells 4 and 5 we were able to examine the extent to which each culture's perception of the other was consistent with the other's view of themselves. On a number of constructs clustered around issues of public, social and interpersonal life both Italian and English participants saw the other as the other saw themselves. There is an indication of a shared world view here; they agreed about which end of the dimension they and the cultural 'other' occupied.

However, we were able to further examine sociality between the English and Italian participants by comparing how they *believed* they were perceived by the other with the other's actual perception of them. By comparing cells 3 and 6 with cells 1 and 5 in the PEG, we examined the extent to which each culture had an understanding of the perspective of the other. Interestingly, in this comparison each group's perception of how the other perceived them only partially matched the other's actual perception. In the case of the English participants one might argue that they imagined, correctly, that Italians would see them as scruffy in their dress, drinking to excess, having qualities that can be summed up as the 'English gentleman' with a 'stiff upper lip' (having self-control, being emotionally unexpressive, being cold and detached, being rigid in body movements and rather repressed), being Anglo-centric and impatient with foreigners, and with a tendency to anger/aggression. But other qualities they imagined the Italians saw in them (being uncultured, known for shoplifting and poor cooking, and being overweight) were not mentioned by the Italian participants. Furthermore, the English participants failed to mention several other characteristics that the Italians saw in them, characteristics that the English saw in themselves. These included being emotionally inhospitable, rebellious, respecting rules and privacy, being independent from the family and having a more pressured rhythm of life. It is interesting that the majority of the qualities the English participants imagined the Italians saw in

them could be regarded as negative. In reality, the Italians did see many of these negative qualities in them, but in addition saw in them a number of the more positive characteristics that the English also saw in themselves. So the English participants underestimated the degree of insight shown by the Italians, particularly with regard to positive qualities, and they therefore displayed only a modest level of sociality. The Italian participants also perceived in the English a number of further positive qualities that the English themselves did not necessarily see in themselves, such as being meritocratic, tolerant of other ethnic groups, open minded, and being organized, effective and efficient.

This modest level of sociality was also shown by the Italian participants. They correctly imagined that the English saw them as fashionable and good to look at, warmly giving of themselves, having strong family bonds, leading a relaxed lifestyle, and having a lovely sound to their language. But there were a number of other characteristics where, although they appeared in both how the English saw Italians and how the Italians thought they were perceived by the English, these characteristics were construed in a more positive or negative way by each culture. For example, the English saw Italians as admirably 'child-oriented', whereas the Italians felt they would be seen as 'mummy's boys'; the English saw Italians as having a disregard for rules, but the Italians imagined a harsher estimation of them as artful and dishonest; while the English saw Italians as gesticulating a lot, being expressive and lively, the Italians imagined they would be seen as gesticulating *too much*, and speaking too much. Like the English participants, there were other qualities the Italians imagined the English saw in them but which were not mentioned by the English participants at all, such as being disorderly, being loud and coarse, being disrespectful of others and the environment, being narrow-minded and being intolerant of 'difference'. In the case of both Italian and English participants, their estimation of how they would be seen by the other was considerably more negative than how they were actually seen.

4.0 Stage 2

In Stage 2, our aim was to find out what happens when people are given the opportunity to find out about how they are perceived by the other and about how the other perceives themselves.

4.1 Method

We asked our original participants to take part in a further focus group discussion. In the event, some people were not able to take part and only two focus groups, one English and one Italian (6 people in each group), participated. One week in advance, we sent participants the PEG which we had used in the Stage 1 analysis and a written summary of the findings. Our interview questions were as follows. For clarity, we present only the schedule used for the Italian participants:

1. What do you think about how the English participants perceive Italians and themselves?
2. What do you think about how the Italian participants see the English and themselves?
3. How accurate do they think all these perceptions are?
4. Thinking about what you imagined the English focus groups would say, what was similar to and different from what you expected? What were you surprised by?
5. What do you think are the main similarities and differences in the way Italians and the English see each other?
6. Where do you think all these perceptions originate?

The discussions were again audio recorded and later transcribed (the Italian transcript also being translated into English as before).

4.2 Analysis and Findings

The transcripts were analysed thematically and the coding and themes checked for 'trustworthiness' (Guba and Lincoln, 1981) by the other two researchers. Themes relating to sociality and stereotyping are presented below.

4.2.1 Failures of sociality

In both Italian and English focus groups, there was some evidence of a lack of sympathy between perceptions of self and other's perception. This may be understood as a lack of sociality; to some degree neither group was able to understand the other's perception.

The Italian participants challenged some of the English perceptions of Italy. For example, Maria (despite her own perception of Italy as sexist and patriarchal) disagreed with the English perception of Italy as having traditional gender roles: "…it's the part of gender roles, so defined… I don't find that at all, that is, it seems that there are very strong family links, it can be true, but the issue of so clear gender differentiation, I don't find it at all…" Maria and Franco also challenged the idea that Italian children are integrated into family life and are well-behaved in public: "Also the fact they say that in restaurants children behave well… I would like to know what sample they used…" (Franco). The Italian group devoted much time to discussion of the fact that the English groups had spoken enviously of the Italian way of life. While they offered several possible explanations for this, they were reluctant to believe that the English comments expressed a genuine valuing of Italy and Italian people.

Although the English Stage 1 discussions had featured a strong sense of envy for the Italian way of life and a sense of regret for aspects of Englishness, their response to the Italians'

perceptions of the English was initially an inability to understand these or to challenge them. For example, Derek describes his difficulty in reconciling what appeared to him to be incompatible views:

> …well, they say we're tolerant of other ethnic groups, but then they say we're extreme and have no middle way, I can't make extreme and tolerant work in the same thing. And they say we drink to excess and we're rebellious, but they also say we have respect for rules and privacy and I can't make those things work together.

In Stage 1 there was a clear perception from our English participants that the English are Anglocentric and intolerant of those who do not speak their language, a view, which was echoed in some respects by the Italian participants. Yet in Stage 2 the English participants challenged this:

Clare: …we accept all sorts of people living here, who don't speak English and we go to great lengths actually to accommodate them, to provide things in different languages. So to say that we're intolerant of non-English speakers, I don't feel comfortable with…I think we are very tolerant of people who don't speak English very well…

It is possible that these disagreements partly reflect the common social norm that a person may criticise themselves but it is not acceptable for others to make the same criticism. Nevertheless, there appears to be an additional failure to construe the constructions of the other.

4.2.2 Achieving sociality

Despite the above examples, both Italian and English groups showed evidence of trying to achieve sociality. Our participants remarked on the issues upon which the other group had chosen to make comparisons and often puzzled over why they had barely mentioned characteristics that had been key features of their own perceptions. For example, Clare pointed out the lack of discussion of politics in the English groups and Vittorio expressed surprise that the English focus groups did not mention their own open-mindedness or independence, two qualities that the Italian participants clearly perceived in the English. However, they made great efforts to explain differences and to understand them from the perspective of the other. For example, Maria tries to make sense of the absence of the issue of 'independence' in the English discussions by suggesting that similar experiences are construed in different ways by each culture:

> …instead of talking about independence/dependence, they talk about integration…We read it like "we are dependent, they are independent", but for them this is not a matter of independence, but it's a matter of integration or not in the family unit…

When Fiona expressed surprise that the Italians perceived that trains arrive on time in England, Derek tries to understand and explain this: "…you kind of view other people from where you're positioned yourself, so, like, we notice their moderation about alcohol because we don't have it…" He goes on to tell a story about train disruption in Italy and concludes: "So it might be that their trains are so extremely bad in certain areas that they think ours that are moderately good are better than the Germans..."

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The English group had an extensive debate over the Italian perception that England is a meritocracy. But, again, the views of Italians and English were reconciled by participants through appealing to the relativity of experience; in response to the argument that England has become less meritocratic than previously, Diane says: "I agree, but I still think compared to some countries maybe, and maybe like what they're [the Italian group] saying, you've still got that, the chance is there if you really want it." Likewise, the Italian group had a protracted discussion about whether children in Italy are in fact as integrated into social life as perceived by the English, and the matter was resolved in similar fashion:

Vittorio: Maybe it depends on the comparison they made with themselves…

Maria: Yes, absolutely yes. It can be understood that they see it as "you are able to do so, while we are not"…

In our view, our participants have made an important point here. When describing others we focus on issues that are of importance or relevance to *us*; we do not mention characteristics that we 'take for granted' in ourselves and we point out in the other qualities that we would like to see in ourselves. Davide noted that both Italians and English made numerous (largely positive, perhaps envious) comments about the other culture in contrast to the relatively fewer (and more negative) comments about their own culture. He goes on to say: "…what doesn't belong to us is seen more positively…" and Franco comments: "…when you look at others you wear rose tinted glasses, while when you look at yourself… maybe you emphasize the aspects you are annoyed about…" We argue that our perceptions of the other begin with and are intimately tied to our perceptions of ourselves; for example, the Italian participants' perception of England as a meritocracy began with their own experience and perception of Italy as a place where opportunity depends upon social networks. Vittorio also says this about the absence of talk about 'independence' in the English groups: "…the issue of independence seems to be so automatic that it doesn't enter the description…" Furthermore, our construal of the other is relative to our construal of ourselves; we perceive the other as having a particular quality only because they appear to have *relatively* more of it than we do ourselves. Thus our construal of the other is profoundly rooted in our construal of ourselves.

Both English and Italian participants noted and were surprised by the degree to which both cultures perceived the other as they perceived themselves, and in the English group there was evidence that participants were exploring ways of 'resolving difference', accounting for and minimising it. For example, Clare had pointed out that the Italian focus groups talked about political life whereas the English groups had not mentioned this. Rick suggested that this may be due to the English unwritten social rule that one does not discuss religion or politics, and Derek pointed to Italy's political history and its (then) current political problems. The group

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returned many times to issues of difference, on each occasion resolving these by construing the two cultures at a more superordinate level where they could be seen as similar. Personal Construct psychology sees constructs as hierarchically organised, with more 'concrete' and context-specific constructs lower down the hierarchy which are subsumed by the more generic, value- laden 'superordinate' constructs. Participants often overcame apparent differences and achieved sociality by invoking the idea that cultural differences (more 'concrete and culture-bound) are a superficial layer masking an essentially common humanity (a more superordinate concept):

 I just think whatever culture people are, people are people and we do all still have the same… culture's like an extra layer on top isn't it? (Diane)

… ok, superficially there would be things that make us different, but actually we're probably not that different underneath… whether you eat pasta and cook spaghetti and play the mandolin, you know, is sort of not really what makes you you, is it? (Clare)

Clare went on to draw on the Stage 1 findings to suggest ways in which English and Italian people could be seen as more similar than might be supposed; she drew together the notions of Italian superstition and the English 'stiff upper lip', suggesting that these could both be forms of 'tradition' expressed in different ways. 'Tradition' was therefore invoked as a more superordinate concept, subsuming both Italian 'superstition' and the English 'stiff upper lip'. Rick, while maintaining that there are real differences between English and Italians in their behaviour ("they start to enjoy the night at the time when we're ready for putting our slippers on") was keen to describe such differences as superficial. He saw such behaviours as shaped by the environment (such as the weather), suggesting that, even where difference exists, it cannot be

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attributed to some essential national character and can therefore be regarded as relatively unimportant.

The English participants seemed to move between emphasising similarity and emphasising difference several times during the discussion. Attempts to resolve difference were also, interestingly, made through construing both English and Italian people as members of a superordinate group. Derek introduced this idea saying: "we might have presented the stereotype of Englishness in a different way had we been in a Chinese focus group" and followed this up with his experiences living abroad: "I lived in Germany for twenty odd years and if it taught me anything, it taught me that the Germans are almost identical to the British." Rick reported a news item suggesting that today in the UK many more people than previously see themselves as, say, 'English' or 'Scottish' rather than 'British' or 'European'. He went on to describe his work recruiting International students, explaining that he is conscious that, from the outside, England is often equated with London and he sees the nature of the Yorkshire region (where Huddersfield is located) as very different. In the Italian group, Davide made a similar point: "For English people, going to Tuscany means Italy. To them, Italy is that. As we do, for example, we go to Manchester or London…"

This discussion suggests a system of hierarchical constructs where perceived similarity and difference depend upon how 'local' or 'global are the contrasts being made on any particular occasion, an idea to which we return later in this chapter. Within 'English', more 'local' contrasts may be drawn between regions; at a more superordinate level, English may be contrasted with Welsh, Irish or Scottish, or at a more superordinate level still, with other European nationalities (such as Italian), revealing various similarities and differences.

Both Italian and English groups discussed stereotypes and inaccurate perceptions at some length. There was a strong feeling that direct experience and familiarity with another culture is important in maintaining or challenging stereotypes and misconceptions. The Italian group saw these as more or less inevitable products of one's more detailed familiarity with one's own culture. For example, Maria says: "…I see them, the English people, as more homogeneous than us. Here I can see regional differences, provincial differences…"

Both English and Italian participants remarked that visiting a country as a tourist is not enough to gain an accurate perception of a culture, and the Italians cautioned that visiting another country can lead us to overestimate our own degree of understanding, which is likely to be based on very limited experiences. Both groups felt that direct experience with the other can challenge stereotypes and preconceptions, and offered personal stories in support of this.

The English group evidently felt some discomfort at being asked to describe 'Italian people' (although, interestingly they did not show this reluctance when characterising the English), and often qualified their answers so as not to give the impression that they were making unwarranted generalisations. When reflecting on what the English groups had said about the English, they were keen to distinguish between the English as a national group and themselves as individuals. Although they readily portrayed the English as drunken, arrogant, nationalistic and Anglocentric, they tended to distance themselves from these characteristics as individuals.

Derek helped to resolve this tension by seeing a stereotype as a kind of 'composite' picture combining many features that an individual might display at different points in their life. Rick

agreed: "…as Derek said, you can look at all of these and say at one point, at some point, in my life I have been rebellious and then another time I have been conformist..."

At the end of the discussion, we asked our participants whether taking part in the research had affected their perceptions of the other in some way. There was general agreement that, in variety of ways, they experienced participation in the research as beneficial and thought-provoking. It had revived old memories, enriched and broadened individuals' vision of the other, challenged their personal perceptions and enabled them to see themselves through others' eyes.

5.0 Discussion

We found considerable commonality between the English and Italian participants: they often used the same construct dimensions to describe both themselves and the other and agreed about which pole of the construct they and the other occupied, and these findings were consistent with previous research (Linssen and Hagendoorn, 1994). However, commonality itself does not necessarily imply having the same view of the world. Two people may use the same construct, for example accommodating vs rigid, but disagree about which pole of the construct each occupies. Moreover, in two different cultural groups the implications of each pole of a construct can imply choices between different alternatives (Stojnov, Frances and Giliberto, 2010). For instance, for one group 'being hospitable' could imply 'closeness' while for another group it could infer 'intrusiveness', and there was some evidence that this was the case with our participants. Nevertheless, our Stage 1 findings suggest that participants' perceptions were seen as accurate; in many respects both groups perceived themselves as they were perceived by the other. According to Lönnqvist et al (2012), the perceptions of bi-cultural 'experts' are more accurate than those of non-experts. To the extent that our participants'

experience with the other culture renders them 'experts', our findings are therefore consistent with those of Lönnqvist et al.

But more surprising was the apparent envy that both English and Italian participants expressed; there was much that participants envied in each other's culture and wanted to adopt either for themselves or for their countrymen, and a considerable degree of criticism of their own culture. We found that both English and Italians imagine that the other sees them negatively. Both groups were surprised by the other's perceptions in this regard, and also by the other's failure to mention what they see as prominent characteristics of their own national group. In agreement with SIT, we believe that group identities are formed through processes of comparison. However, we would argue for a more relational notion of identity than seems to be implicit in SIT. Our model of the social world is one where relationships and interactions with others are key. Kelly wrote: "People belong to the same cultural group, not merely because they behave alike, nor because they expect the same things of others, but especially because they construe their experience in the same way" (1955, p.54). This shared construing constitutes our social (and in this case, 'national') identity. Following Dewey and Mead, Kelly did not consider individuals to be social atoms who begin by inhabiting private worlds and later form society; an individual person may be described as a system of interconnected constructs, developed by virtue of being embedded in social relationships. We achieve selfhood through our constant construal of self and other; 'personality' is not an individual and separate structure but 'lives' between people. A cultural community can also be seen in this way. National identity is therefore deeply rooted in the construing of others' constructions, achieved through relationship and comparison. Our construction of self is always made in relation to and comparison with relevant others. SIT can explain negative perceptions of the other well, especially where there is competition for desired resources, but it is less able to account for our findings. Our findings

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suggest that we construe the other in terms of the issues that are prominent in our own experience of self- in this case, in what we see as negative in ourselves and, by contrast, positive in the other. Identity is always constructed in relation to 'the other' but its starting point is not necessarily the (motivated) perceived qualities of the other. Our PCP model of identity suggests that comparison and contrast are fundamental processes in self-construction, as Walker (2003) argues.

We want to emphasise that difference and similarity must be regarded as two sides of the same coin. The PCP concept of superordination is again helpful here. For instance, we can compare 'apples' with 'pears' and see them as similar because we consider both as 'fruits', or 'apples' with 'people' because we consider both 'living things. In each case, 'fruit' and 'living things' are the more 'superordinate' concepts. And, analogously, we can compare English with Italians and find them similar because they both belong to the categories 'human being' or 'western cultures'. At the same time, this similarity invokes further difference, for example 'western cultures vs eastern cultures'. Similarity and difference are therefore complementary alternative, and in our research findings alternating, outcomes of the comparison process, dependent upon the 'level' at which comparisons are made. As Kelly (1955, p. 35) wrote: "Both similarity and contrast are inherent in the same construct." Paraphrasing Kelly, we can say that both exclusion and inclusion are inherent in the same social identity. Our English participants particularly showed evidence of this movement between similarity and difference, seeing similarity rather than difference when they viewed themselves and Italians through more superordinate constructs. This is consistent with the Common Ingroup Identity Model of Gaertner, Dovidio, Nier, Banker, Ward, Houlette and Loux (2000), who state that inter-group bias and conflict are reduced "by factors that transform participants' representations of memberships from two or more groups to one, more inclusive group." Likewise, Van Oudenhoven et al. (2002) conclude:

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"Enhancing contact between nations does not seem to be a great contribution to improving international understanding...One obvious aim would be to create a superordinate or common group, such as 'We are all Europeans' or 'We democratic nations'".

One of the features of our research was the inclusion criterion that participants must have had direct experience of the other culture. In their comments, our participants gave credence to the 'contact hypothesis' in their own understanding of the role of direct experience with the other. However, Eller, Abrams and Gomez (2012) found that, in the absence of significant direct contact with the other culture, 'indirect contact' (in their case, awareness that ingroup members have outgroup friends) improved relations with the outgroup. We would argue that providing people with access to the perceptions of the other culture, as we did in this research, is another form of indirect contact. Our participants certainly saw direct contact as providing opportunities to understand the other's perspective, to increase sociality in PCP terms. However, we argue that providing an opportunity to access the other's perceptions of both cultures could be a very fruitful way of increasing sociality. The Stage 2 discussions in both English and Italian groups showed that participants worked hard to achieve sociality, to really understand the other's perspective, and they reported that taking part in the research had enlarged their understanding. It may be that opportunities to reflect on others' perceptions may be at least as effective as direct contact in fostering sociality. Arguably, increased sociality fosters improved intercultural relations, and this therefore seems an important focus for future research.

However, we acknowledge that the nature of our sample inevitably imposes limitations on the conclusions that may be drawn from the study. Our participants all worked or studied within an academic context. Their views, and how they chose to talk about these, are therefore necessarily informed by academic, middle class discourses. We

explicitly chose to interview those who have first-hand experience people of the other community and their views can therefore be expected to differ in some ways from people who have no such experience. Perceptions can be expected to vary with not only the person's socio-economic position but also their age and other culture-relevant experience such as working abroad, migration or service in the armed forces. Future research into intercultural sociality, and the extent to which it may be increased by the kinds of techniques we have used in this study, should therefore aim to examine the significance of some of these social variables.

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