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

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1

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

Rule-bound- disrespectful of rules/corrupt

"… 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)

12

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.

Hospitality warm/intrusive-hospitality cold/respect privacy

"…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 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, 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 hospitability

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 hospitability to the southern Italy hospitability….

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 hospitability…

Alessia: So, they let you have space but they don't take care of the guest…

Antonio: They respect their own autonomy…

Frenetic /governed by work - relaxed/take time for lunch

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 its 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.

31

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 muscial 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'.