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Intercultural learning context and acculturation strategies

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Abstract

The intercultural context that characterises our multicultural society demands thorough studies on intercultural relationships. The present work aims to explore adolescent's acculturation strategies in relation to their learning contexts with different ethnic class composition. The present research includes 241 adolescents attending schools in Italy. Our results show acculturation strategies significantly differ among the three groups in life domains. However, the acculturation process introduces a similar course for the three groups; nevertheless the Italian adolescents present a tendency for separation. Moreover, the results highlight that acculturation strategies differ in relation to the ethnic composition of the school class.

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1. Introduction

In recent decades, Italy has changed from a country of emigration into one of immigration and the number of migrants has significantly increased especially for preadolescents and adolescents. The immigration process has led to a reflection on culture as an outcome of the developmental process (Berry, Poortinga, Breugelmans, Chasiotis, & Sam, 2011) linked to the transmission of values and behaviours (O'Donnell & Tharp, 2012) and to the integration process (Berry, 1997; Rania, Migliorini, Cardinali, & Reborja, 2014). Defining culture is very difficult (Cohen, 2009) but, according to Matsumoto (2006), culture includes: visible artefacts, (food, clothing, tools, architecture and

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landscape), visible behaviours based on inferred rules or code systems, (language, social roles and rituals), and fundamental attitudes, beliefs and values, but also invisible and psychological aspects. The difficulties of specifying cultures are compounded within culture variations, for example, between genders, age groups, social classes, vocations, and through the different contexts in which persons are included.

According to the theoretical framework of developmental contextualism (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Jackson & Goossens, 2006) the school environment is one of the most relevant contexts in an adolescent's life, and this should be an environment of respect and integration for all members. The classroom can be understood as a community of exchange relating to issues of knowledge and content but also regarding the well-being of subjects, whereby such situations can have an impact on learning processes.

Immigrant adolescents must cope with double ecological transitions (Schimmenti, 2001; Villano & Zani, 2007): a psychosocial transition linked to their stage of development and a transition linked to their migration experience that provides new challenges between often distant worlds. Additionally, host adolescents must be in contact with adolescents from other countries. The interaction provokes changes in the behaviours and attitudes of members of the host population as well that can be analysed with the same approach (Dominguez & Maya-Jariego, 2008), because socialisation during adolescence is a key process in developing social skills and successful ways of adaptation (Karademas, Peppas, Fotiou, & Kokkevi, 2008; Van Ryzin, Gravely, & Roseth, 2009).

Ethnically diverse classrooms can be important contexts for intergroup contact because adolescents can work together with other-ethnic classmates while being supervised and supported by teachers. But children may also have negative contact experiences with out-group classmates leading to less positive out-group attitudes (Thijs, Verkuyten, & Grunzel, 2014). The school context provides adolescents with the opportunity to mix with people from different social and cultural backgrounds: this condition provides an opportunity for more occasions to develop and experience good inter-ethnic contact (Dejaeghere, Hooghe, & Claes, 2012).

In spite of the emphasis in the literature concerning the relevance of intercultural context learning in higher education (Gill, 2007; Gu, Schweisfurth, & Day, 2010; Ippolito, 2007), intercultural context in the junior high school setting has rarely been investigated. Kvernmo and Heyerdahl (2004) found significant relationships between the ethnic composition of school contexts, ethnic self-labelling and ethnic identity exploration among Native American adolescents and among multi-ethnic students in the United States. School contexts, dominated by the ethnic group or culture, strengthened the ethnic identity and ethnic labelling among the adolescents.

Unfortunately immigrants as adolescents in this phase of life must cope with the 'stress-adaptation-growth' intercultural learning process. The intercultural adaptation is in itself a process of intercultural learning, which has the potential to bring about profound changes in students, transforming their understanding of the learning experience, self-knowledge, awareness of the other, and values and worldview (Gill, 2007). This is a developmental period in which young people try to find answers to questions of identity and what social behaviour is appropriate in different social contexts (Ybrandt, 2008). This intercultural adaptation is conceptualised within the acculturation literature. According to the classical definition by Redfield, Linton, and Herskovitz (1936), acculturation is theorised as culture change that takes place when two cultural groups come into contact over an extended period of time; the process can change either or both groups. Psychological acculturation (Berry, 1980) describes the ways in which individuals, undergoing cultural transitions, incorporate the two cultures in their lives. Although numerous models on this process exist, it is increasingly accepted that acculturation is not a linear process but rather a multidimensional process that includes individuals' identification with both their own group and the larger society, and possibly with other ethnic groups. However, there is little research on how adolescents use acculturation strategies in a different context in which they are embedded.

Social psychology has placed much value on human diversity including social class, gender and ethnicity (Kral et al., 2011), and has framed the relationship between immigrant minorities and host communities within the concept of acculturation. Different researchers (Berry, 1997; Birman, 1994; Tajfel, 1981) have offered models to understand individual and community responses to intergroup contact. Acculturation to one culture could increase with acculturation to the other, but if the two cultures are in conflict, acculturating individuals cannot easily combine aspects of both cultures in their lives and thus feel forced to choose between acculturation to one or the other. Culture maintenance does not have to be in opposition to cultural adaptation. It is possible that these are two relatively independent, non-conflicting and integrated processes, which might result in bi-cultural positions. Members of ethnic minority groups not only belong to their own ethnic group, but they also have to deal daily with the majority group of the society in which they live. Hence, for these adolescents it is often difficult to conceive of culture maintenance and cultural adaptation as mutually exclusive matters.

Acculturation literature (Berry, 1990) has explored the relationship between psychological well-being and the ways in which members of ethnic groups relate to other groups and to the larger society. Successful acculturation has been defined in terms of mental and physical health, psychological satisfaction, high self-esteem and good performance in school (Liebkind, 2001). Acculturation attitudes that favour positive relationships with other groups as well as maintenance of one's own culture, that is, attitudes that support integration, are related to better adjustment. Acculturation strategies models by domain are based on the assumption that an individual's preference for adaptation and cultural maintenance may vary across life domains (Arends-Tóth & van de Vijver, 2004; Birman, Trickett, & Vinokurov, 2002). The authors found that two broad domains constitute the first superordinate level: the public and the private domain while the second, ordinate level of domain specificity is formed by specific life domains (e.g., education and language, which belong to the public domain, and child-rearing and marriage, which belong to the private domain). The subordinate level refers to specific situations; an individual's preference for adaptation and maintenance may vary across specific situations (Arends-Tóth & van de Vijver, 2003). Taking into account this framework, the present work aims to investigate the following research questions:

- Are there any differences in acculturation strategies by domains for immigrants, Italians and double heritage adolescents?
- Is there a relationship between strategies of acculturation and intercultural context?
- Does intercultural context learning affect academic performance?

2. Methods

2.1. Participant, measures and procedures

241 adolescents, attending schools in Genoa, took part in this study. The mean age was 12.57 years. Participants included 80 Italians (37 boys, 43 girls), 71 immigrants (43 boys, 28 girls) and 90 double heritage subjects (45 boys, 45 girls). The ethnic identity category for each parent, as reported by the adolescent, was used to determine group membership. The immigrants were from South America, East Europe and Africa. A large number of the adolescent immigrants lived in Italy between 3-6 years (41.2%), while most dual heritage adolescents lived in Italy since birth (75%).

Measures:

- Demographic variables (age, gender, ethnic identity category for each parent, academic performance self-assessed using a Likert-type scale ranging from 1= insufficient to 4= very well).

- Questionnaire that measured psychological acculturation modified from the Psychological Acculturation Scale (Tropp, Erkut, Coll, Alarcon, & Garcia, 1999) to assess the psychological components of acculturation and individuals' psychological negotiation considering different domains: school, free time, friendship, family, food, religion, how to deal with different problems. The questionnaire consisted of 14 items; item responses were scored on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*only my ethnic group*) to 7 (*only other group*). The lower score corresponded to separation strategies, the medium score corresponded to biculturalism and the higher score corresponded to assimilation strategies.

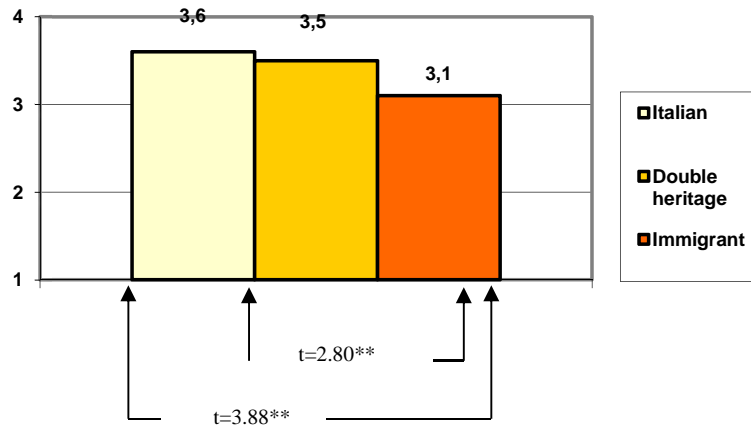
- Intercultural learning context evaluation: the class group was considered according to the density of immigrant and double heritage students as compared with majority students divided into four categories: very low density, low density, medium density and high density.

Procedure: the questionnaires were administered in the classroom by the researcher with the teacher of the classroom present; participation was subject to parental consent. The data collection procedures fully complied with the research ethical code of the Italian Association of Psychology. All the data were stored in a computerised database and analysed with the aid of the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS ver. 16.0.2; 2008).

3. Results

The immigrant students have significantly lower academic performance compared to the group of Italian students and to double heritage students groups (Fig. 1), however the immigrant students have quite good academic performance.

Fig. 1 Italian, double heritage and immigrant academic performance.



The acculturation strategies, as shown in Table 1, are significantly different ($p < .001$) between the three groups. The acculturation strategy used more by Italian students is separation, while immigrant groups prefer assimilation strategy.

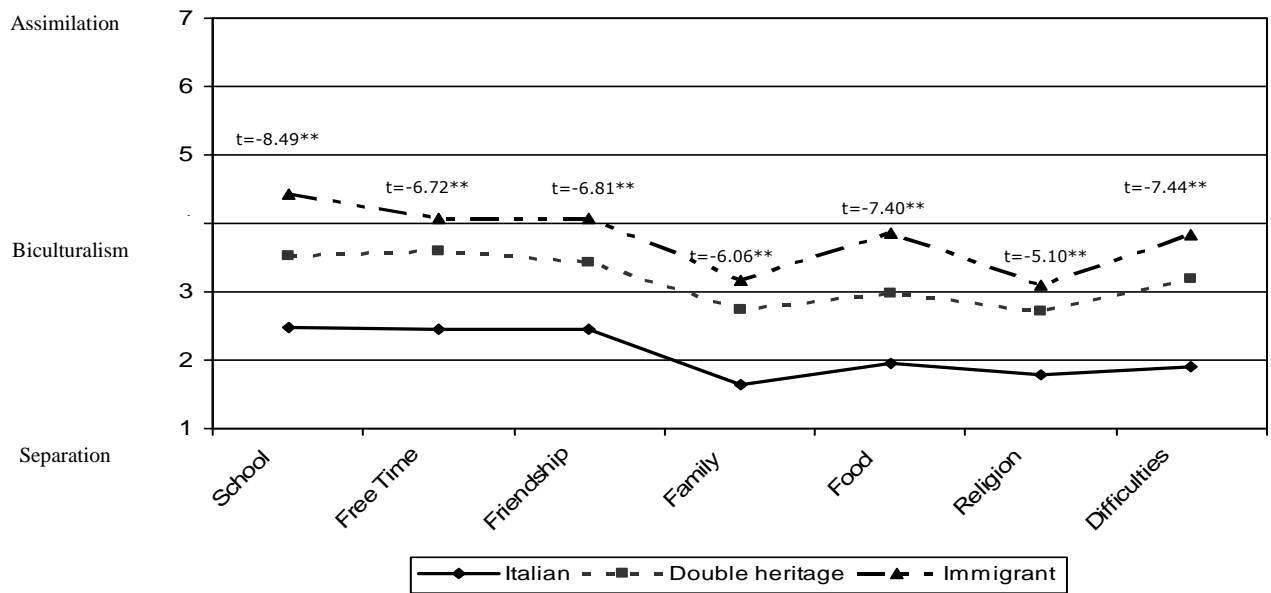
Tab. 1 Acculturation strategy and ethnicity

	Acculturation Strategies		
	Separation	Biculturalism	Assimilation
Italian	58.2%	17.0%	0
Double heritage	28.6%	43.7%	47.4%
Immigrant	13.2%	39.3%	52.6%
Total	100%	100%	100%

Chi square: $p < .001$

According to domain specificity in acculturation models, there are no differences within life spheres of relevance to adolescents. The school context represents the life sphere in which immigrant adolescents tend to assimilate towards host community (Fig. 2). On the contrary, family context represents the private sphere in which separation prevails, as well as regarding religion choice, especial for immigrant adolescents. Double heritage adolescents tend to use biculturalism strategies as they probably are more used to negotiating between different cultures.

Fig. 2 Means in acculturation strategies of the three groups in different life domains.



T-test ** significant at .001 level

Our results show acculturation strategies significantly differ among the three groups regarding life domains. This data demonstrates that acculturation strategies by domain differ among adolescents with different ethnic identities. The acculturation process introduces a similar course for the three groups; nevertheless the Italian adolescents present lower differences among life sphere; this data can indicate that for Italian adolescents, the thought domain is less subject to change, and there is a tendency to choose separation acculturation strategies. A comparison with immigrant acculturation strategies reveal more differences in thought life sphere.

Frequencies for each strategy of acculturation by context with different ethnical class composition are shown in Table 2. The strategy of acculturation choice on the basis of the ethnic density of the school class context reveals that at high and medium density bicultural strategies are predominant while in very low density, separation strategies are used. Assimilation is preferred in medium density context.

Tab. 2 Intercultural context and acculturation strategy

		Acculturation Strategies		
		Separation	Biculturalism	Assimilation
Intercultural	very low density	35.2%	7.1%	5.3%
	low density	28.6%	25.9%	31.6%
	medium density	26.4%	32.2%	42.1%
	high density	9.8%	34.8%	21.0%
Total		100%	100%	100%

A further analysis regarding immigrant adolescents has been conducted in order to understand the relationship between intercultural leaning context and academic performance. The correlation analysis shows that when the

context learning is more intercultural, the academic performance of immigrant students is better ($r=.443$; $p < .01$, two tailed).

4. Conclusions

The increasing multiethnic characterisation of the Italian context in the last decades justifies social and community psychology's attention to the dynamics through which persons construct their relationships with other people belonging to specific cultural and national ethnic groups. Inside this conceptual framework, the study of how different acculturation strategies in Italian, immigrant and double heritage adolescents are relevant for proposing that the strategies change among different groups present in the same school context, and among different domains in which a person lives. The results show that the Italian group adopts more separate strategies regarding other groups; on the contrary, the immigrant group tends to use more assimilation strategies. In particular family context represents the most separate dimension, probably because family and cultural identity are powered by beliefs, values, norms, rules and expectations shared among members (Migliorini, Cardinali & Rania, 2011). The present work underlines the complex relationship between adolescent acculturation strategies chosen and learning intercultural context. Results confirm the idea that intercultural context seems to favour the adoption of bicultural strategies of acculturation (Berry, 2005).

The ethnic composition of the schools may also play a role in determining the availability of potential contact from different ethnic groups (Smith, & Schneider, 2000). The multi-ethnic environment can stimulate in adolescents improved social skills regarding contact with other cultures (Bandura, 2006; Briones, Tabernero, Tramontano, Caprara, & Arenas, 2009; Rania, Cardinali, Cifatte & Migliorini, 2012). According to Gu et al. (2010) this kind of research suggests that personal and psychological factors are as important as organisational and social cultures for influencing students' adaptation, identity change and academic performance.

This finding points towards intercultural contact as a potentially important aspect in development. In order to better clarify how to handle intercultural contact in development, it would be necessary to deepen the relationship with friend support, which is marginal in our results. However, more experimental approaches could be developed to supplement the current findings. Further analyses should also consider gender, specific group ethnicity, age, duration of residency, and acculturation strategies. Despite these limitations, our results are interesting because they provide some data for understanding different acculturation strategies adopted by different groups.

These findings raise two points. First, the acculturation result sheds light on the different strategies used by different groups and domains in which adolescents are embedded. Second, classroom ethnic composition may have different meanings for different ethnic groups thus making it important to consider ethnic group differences. This issue has become even more pressing as change in funding has necessitated that school context and civil society find resources to address student's needs and to promote positive youth development.

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