



Acculturation across life domains and perceived social support: a research in a suburban community of the city of Genova (Italy)

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Abstract

The concept of acculturation is related to interethnic contacts and describes the psychological and cultural changes that occur as a result of continual relations among peoples belonging to different cultural or ethnic groups (Gibson, 2001). The acculturation process can be facilitated or inhibited by cultural aspects, individual skills, forms of support and sense of value (self esteem) that the person experiences and develops in contact with the host culture.

Over past three decades, social support has been one of the major topics for community psychological investigation and viewed as “one of the basic building blocks of social, psychological and biological integrity” (Pierce et al., 1996). Migration process gives several implications with reference to the support to reception; the support structure, given to adolescents, is considered as an efficient protecting factor in front of many problematic aspects of the life of subjects belonging to ethnic minorities (Zimmermann et al., 2000).

Self-esteem is commonly considered as an index of well-being and of psychological adjustment of adolescents (Benjet, Hernandez-Guzman, 2001; Phinney, 2001). The present study examines the relationships among acculturation strategies across life domains, self esteem and social support of Italian, double heritage and immigrant adolescents. Participants are 137 Italian, 119 immigrant and 92 double heritage adolescents recruited from public schools in Genoa (ITALY). The students fulfilled a questionnaire consisting in Socio-cultural data, Self-esteem Scale (Rosemberg, 1965: 10 items), Social Support From Family and from Friends (Procidano and Heller, 1985), Psychological Acculturation Scale (Tropp et al., 1999, in a version modified by Manetti, Frattini, Olivieri: 14 items). *Veçu et santé perçu par l'adolescent VSP-A* (Simeoni M-C., Sapin C., Antoniotti S., Auquier P., 2001). Results show significant relationships, between family support and friend's support, self esteem and well-being and different acculturation profiles by domains among Italian, double heritage and foreigner students.

Key words: immigrant adolescents, acculturation, social support, self-esteem, well being.

An overview of the current research

1.1. Acculturation processes

The concept of acculturation is related to interethnic contacts and describes the psychological and cultural changes that occur as a result of continuous contacts

among people belonging to different cultural or ethnic groups (Gibson, 2001).

Redfield, Linton, & Herskovits, 1936 defined acculturation as “ *those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of*

either or both groups..' (, pp. 149–152). Graves (1967) introduced the concept of psychological acculturation, and defined it as the set of psychological changes that take place in individuals who are members of cultural groups.

Berry and Kim (1988), when considering how immigrants relate to the host culture, took into account two parameters: the first one is the time running between the decision to leave and enter a new culture and the moment the immigrant establishes a relationship with the host culture. That means that there are phases of pre-contact, contact, conflict, crisis and adaptation.

The second parameter examines the degree of behavioral change immigrant persons develop entering into relationship with the host culture; so behaviors range from loss of the original identity (assimilation) to a condition of acceptance of the relationships coexisting with the preservation of their own culture and identity (integration), maintenance of relationships only for certain situations, staying outside the host culture (separation), and, finally, total denial of contacts with the host culture (exclusion).

Arends-Toth J., Van de Vijver F.J.R. (2004) suggest a specific domain model and argue that relationships with a new culture must be considered in relation to the different areas migrants decide to accept or consider consistent with their point of view, while other existing domains are refused or felt totally unacceptable for their culture.

This model is linked to the recent work of Ward (2008) who examined ethno-cultural identity conflict as a function of cultural distance. According to the author, this concept operates both individually and at level of group, and her findings converged to indicate that the identity conflict is stronger when migrants originate from countries whose culture, language and ethnic composition differ markedly from the host society. Parameters which measure closeness/distance between cultures become crucial. In particular, the author identified three constellations of relevant variables: developmental factors, family values and dynamics, and intergroup factors.

The acculturation process is facilitated or inhibited by other aspects of the migrant life such as: family and friend support structures and level of self-esteem.

1.2. Family and friend social support

Over past three decades, social support has been one of the major topics for community psychological investigation. Social support has been viewed as “one

of the basic building blocks of social, psychological and biological integrity” (Pierce et al., 1996).

Many studies point out how the support parents give their children depends on two features: the first is a care dimension and a second is control or protection (Parker and Gladstone, 1996). The skills parents exhibit in such areas result in a good level of adjustment of children in adulthood (Timko and Moos 1996). The parent-children relation needs the re-negotiation of boundaries and the development of progressive independence levels in relation to parental authority, especially during adolescence (Steinberg and Silk, 2002). This step may be particularly critical to immigrant teens for the following reasons:

the acculturation process may follow different timing and arrangement between the first and second generation (Kwak, 2003; Okagaki & Bojczyk, 2002). Moreover, different levels of acculturation between parents and children can intensify the challenges and conflicts, normally occurring at this stage of development, compared to what occurs in families in which members are at similar levels of acculturation.

Children, generally, have a more rapid level of acculturation than parents. Parents have a stronger sense of identity than children and are more linked to the ethnic traditions of the origin country (Kwak, 2003). Differences in acculturation between parents and children are associated to levels of well-being of children (Lee & Zhan, 1998), to a lower level of satisfaction of life (Phinney and Ong, 2002), to an increased anxiety and lower self-esteem (Farver, Narang, and Bhadha, 2002), and to higher levels of depression (Kim, 2003).

However, some literature (Zimmermann et al., 2000), stresses as the support structure, given to adolescents, is considered as an efficient protecting factor in front of many problematic aspects of the life of subjects belonging to ethnic minorities.

Then, parental support assumes an ambivalent function: it can be positive when it helps young people to self integrate into the new culture, or have a function of withdrawal from intercultural relationships when parents feel threatened by the host culture or, *extrema ratio*, have maladaptive and strongly conflicting features either inside family and inside social context. Adolescents may not feel to be helped in the interpretation and negotiation with the host culture, and then the conflicts they have to face concern both the relationships with family and with

the host contexts (school, peer group, neighborhood, job, leisure).

Authors attribute different effects to the social support from family and from friends, with reference to the adjustment process, in various contexts (Roberts et al., 2000). These effects may depend either on the child immigrants culture of origin, or on the time elapsed since the arrival in the host country (Y.W. Ying, Lee P.A, Tsai JL (2007). Research has shown that when problems with friends exist these tend to be correlated with depressive situations, and that, among late adolescents and university students, the friendship relations have a protective function against stressors greater than those given by parents.

These occurrences have to be attributed to the process of separation / individualization typical of the age (Mattanah, Hancock and Brand 2004), but perhaps they depend on the fact that immigrant children recognize to the peer group a cultural know how greater than what they recognize to their parents. They utilize the peer group to comprehend, manage, and find meaning in their lives, and to ward off depressive symptoms (Gore and Aseltine, 1995; Rodriguez, et al 2003).

Generally, the friend support structures seem to produce positive effects on well-being but may have a negative impact when the request to comply with the community standards are particularly oppressive (Caughy et al. 2003; Wakefield and Poland, 2005). Moreover, family and friendly supports are not free from the influence of the context: they seem to be easily affected by economic level and by socioeconomic features of the community (Wen et al., 2005).

1.3. *Self esteem and well being*

Self-esteem is commonly considered as an index of well-being (Benjet, Hernandez-Guzman, 2002) and of psychological adjustment of adolescents (Phinney, 1991). The classical theory of "looking glass self" (Cooley's 1956) says that the point of view a person takes, for what is concerned, largely reflects the views of individuals and groups of reference of the individual himself. The migration process forces migrants to face the different views the groups of origin, people who have dealt with them on the migration and people belonging to the host countries, have. In many cases these views do not correspond each other, and they have to negotiate, from time to time, their own image and their own level of self-esteem. Furthermore, the level of self-esteem may vary depending on whether individuals compare themselves with their ethnic group or with people of

the majority group. Nesdale and Mak (2003), referring to the self categorization theory (SCT) of Turner et al. (1987) report of a level of individual self-esteem and of ethnic self-esteem and / or ethnic identification. In any case, self-esteem and the sense of personal self-worth is widely recognized as a central aspect of psychological functioning and is strongly related to many other variables, including general life satisfaction, psychological health and adjustment competences, even if literature, with reference to the connections between the level of individual and ethnic esteem, is very contradictory (Nesdale and Mak 2003). However, self esteem is acknowledged to mediate measures of emotional distress. High self-esteem is associated with psychological well-being and health, whereas low self esteem is associated with psychological problems, including depression and anxiety (Abe J. A. 2004) Mruk, 1995)

Objectives

Scope of the research is the collection of structural data of the reference people with particular attention to the migration situations.

Outlook of the acculturation process of subjects in relation with different life domains.

Analysis of familiar and friendly social support to check the effects on self-esteem and well-being.

Investigation of self-esteem and well-being of adolescents and pre-adolescents.

Evaluation of how these variables affect scholastic outcomes.

3. Hypotheses

On the basis of the considerations reviewed in foreword, the following hypotheses have been assumed:

- Hypothesis 1- Acculturation process effectiveness depends on different life domains.
- Hypothesis 2- Family support is assumed to act differently from friend support.
- Hypothesis 3- A relationship is expected between social support and adolescent self-esteem, their well being and their scholastic outcomes.
- Hypothesis 4- Foreign and double heritage adolescents are assumed to face more difficulties than Italian with regard to self-

esteem, well-being and scholastic outcomes.

4. Method

The project developed a quantitative methodological approach, based on dispensing a structured questionnaire to 348 participants: 137 Italian, 119 immigrant and 92 double heritage adolescents, recruited from public schools in Genoa (Italy). The analysis of quantitative data obtained from the questionnaires was performed by the software package SPSS.13 (Software Package for Social Sciences).

4.1. Participants

The sample consisted of 348 students: 39.4% Italians, 26.4% double heritage and 34.2% foreigners. Foreign students came from four areas in particular: South America 58%, East Europe 25.2%, Africa 15.1% and North Europe 1.7%. With reference to the educational level, the majority of the interviewed students (56.6%) attended the last two classes of primary school, 30.7% the lower middle school, and the remaining 12.6% the first two years of the upper middle school. The average age for the entire sample was 11.7 (SD 2.2). Sample was equally divided on the basis of sex: M 50.3% , F 49.6%.

The majority of foreigner and double heritage students (43.8%) lived in Italy since their birth; 31.8% between 3 and 6 years; 13.5% between 7 and 10 years; 7.8% between 0 and 2 years and 3.1% between 11 and 15 years. Parent mean age was 44 for fathers [(SD 6.07) minimum 22 and maximum 60]; and 40 for mothers [(SD 6.00) minimum 22 and maximum 56]. Comparing the educational level of parents we found out that there were no significant differences and that most of parents had a medium-high educational level 61.7% (tab.1).

Tab.1

School level	MOTHERS			FATHERS		
	Italians (123)	Double heritage (82)	Strangers (90)	Italians (124)	Double heritage (80)	Strangers (86)
Primary and lower middle school	36	27	37	44	25	42
Higher middle school and university	64	73	63	56	75	58
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100

Despite a substantial cultural equivalence among the families of the three groups a marked difference in the type of jobs played by parents was found. Most of fathers played intellectual or business activities (entrepreneurs, professionals, employees, teachers) (see tab. 2) especially those of the double heritage

group (79.3%). On the contrary, most of mothers played manual or domestic activities, and Italian women was the ones mostly employed in intellectual occupations (47.3%).

Tab.2

Professions		Italians	Double Heritage	Foreigners	F	Sig.
		Intellectual and entrepreneurial	53.0	79.3	44.6	13.7
Manual	47.0	20.7	55.4			
Total	100	100	100			
Mothers professions	Intellectual and entrepreneurial	47.37	38.20	7.83		0.000
	Manual	52.63	61.80	92.17		
	Total	100	100	100		

4.2. Instruments

Following specific tools have been employed:

- Socio-cultural data sheet of adolescent and his family.
- Psychological Acculturation Scale (Tropp et al., 1999, in the version modified by Manetti, Frattini, Olivieri 2005).
- Perceived Family and Friend Social Support Scales (Procidano & Heller, 1983).
- Global Self Esteem scale (Rosemberg, 1965).
- Veçù et perception de la santé des adolescentes (Simeoni, Sapin, Antoniotti, Auquier, 2001).
- Scholastic Outcomes.

4.2.1. Socio - cultural variables

The structured questionnaire for students consisted of open and closed applications and included the following data: age, sex, educational level, country of origin, time of permanence in Italy, housing conditions, school outcomes (class failed, assessment of educational skills, level of comprehension, reading and writing Italian and parent language), family situation (age, educational level and employment of parents).

4.2.2. Acculturation by domains

The Psychological Acculturation Scale [PAS] (Tropp et al., 1999, modified by Manetti, Frattini, Olivieri). consists of 10 items concerning individuals' psychological responses to differing cultural contexts (language use, cultural foods, music, holiday celebrations, and family celebrations). Item responses for the PAS were scored on a 7-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (only with my ethnic group) to

7 (only with other groups), with a bicultural orientation defining its midpoint. Thus, a bicultural orientation (when a person is in a position of equidistance between its own group and other ethnic groups) could be defined as a parallel sense of connection to both cultures (Cuellar et al., 1980).

4.2.2. Social support

The Procidano & Heller scale (Perception of Social Support From Family and Friends, 1983) is a 40-item measure of perception of support from family and friends, 20 for family and 20 for friends. Participants were asked to respond to each of the statements with a response of “yes,” “no,” or “don’t know.” Previous research demonstrates that the scale has excellent validity (Cumsille and Epstein 1994; Procidano and Heller, 1983).

4.2.3. Self-esteem

Self-esteem (10 items) was measured with the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (1965). The measure assessed adolescents’ global feelings of self worth (e.g. “At times I think I am no good at all”). Response categories ranged from 1 (strongly agree) to 4 (strongly disagree). This measure was computed as the sum of the 10 items in the scale. Five items were reversed scored so that higher scores denoted greater self-esteem. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale demonstrated good reliability in the past (Cronbach’s alfa :71; 1965). Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale is probably the most used measure of personal self-esteem in ethnic identity and acculturation research (Li Gong, 2007).

4.2.4. Subjective well-being

The scale Vécu et Santé Perçue de Adolescent (VSPA, Simeoni, Sapin, Antoniotti & Auquier, 2001) consists of 36 items, inquires various dimensions of the quality of life: vitality, physical and psychological well-being, relationship with teachers, relationship with parents, relationships with friends, school performance, body image and leisure activities. Each item was answered on a 5-point Likert scale, from 1 “not at all/never” to 5 “very much/always”. The time frame for the measure was the previous 4 weeks. The test is reliable (Cronbach alpha 0.74–0.91). Content and construct validity are good (Sapin, Simeoni, El Khammar, Antoniotti & Auquier, 2005).

4.2.5. Scholastic outcomes

Students were asked a personal assessment of the results of the average of their school outcomes, in all the scholastic subjects. Responses were evaluated

according to the following criteria: (seriously insufficient =3-4 , inadequate = 4-5, sufficient = 6-7, more than enough = 7-8).

5. RESULTS

5.1. Acculturation by domains.

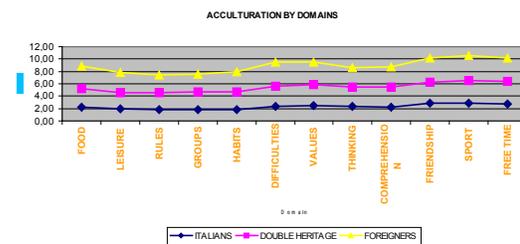
Tab. 3 shows the descriptive statistics of the tool for acculturation by domains. Mean scores and SD of the different acculturation strategies were calculated for the different ethnic groups. For each domain statistical significance is $p > 0.00$.

In relation to domain specificity in acculturation models, considerable research has shown that level of acculturation relates to varied outcomes in different life environment relevant for immigrant adolescents. For all domains of the areas of acculturation appeared evident how the Italians have practically exclusive reference to the Italians themselves while foreigners are the group most willing to weave relations with other ethnic groups (see tab. 4).

Tab.3

Acculturation Scale by Domains	Italians (137)		Double Heritage (86)		Strangers (119)		F	Sig.
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
Acculturation_TOT (Alpha .91)	2.33	0.98	3.18	1.28	3.54	1.04	39.2	0.00
Culture (Alpha .83)	1.92	1.05	2.82	1.38	3.21	1.33	36.2	0.00
Comprehension Sharing (Alpha .91)	2.37	1.21	3.26	1.47	3.47	1.30	25.3	0.00
Friendship (Alpha .75)	2.82	1.18	3.55	1.38	3.93	1.15	27.1	0.00

Tab.4



5.2. Perceived Family and Friends Support.

Table 5 shows how the whole sample perceived family support as significantly higher than what received by friends, to signify an important and intimate relationship the family offers either as care dimension or control and protection with respect to the external social context. But the perception of

support from the family is significantly higher for Italians than for both of comparison groups.

This may simply depend on different cultural patterns or, rather, on the perception that the double heritage and foreigner families are less competent in helping children to cope with the new contexts.

Relations with friends, however, put in evidence significant differences for the benefit of foreigner and double heritage adolescents. This figure can be explained by a specific trend of local culture to have a shortage of relationships outside the family. On the contrary, the cultures of immigrants show intense relations with extended families and peer groups. It is significantly higher, however, the score achieved by Italians in relation to the perception of a situation of isolation by friends.

Tab. 5

	Italians (137)		Double Ethnic Heritage (92)		Strangers (119)		F	Sig.
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
FAMILY SUPPORT (Alpha .73)	1.73	0.26	1.62	0.31	1.64	0.29	5.70	0.00
FRIENDS SUPPORT EXCHANGE (Alpha .58)	0.93	0.24	0.98	0.24	0.99	0.25	2.10	0.12
FRIENDS ISOLATION (Alpha .43)	1.34	0.43	1.28	0.43	1.21	0.45	2.38	0.09
FRIENDS TOT. (Alpha .47)	1.09	0.17	1.05	0.16	1.12	0.17	5.02	0.00

5.3. Self Esteem and Well Being

The three ethnic groups differed significantly with respect to self-esteem: specifically, foreign adolescents reported significantly lower levels of self-esteem than biracial and Italian ones (see. Tab 6). Literature (Phinney et al.1997). reports for immigrant adolescents' lower scores in relation with self-esteem. In fact they are ought to face a plurality of challenges related to the acculturation shock, scholastic fatigue and, sometime, ethnic prejudice. Also well-being for foreigners is lower than for Italians (tab 6)

Tab. 6

	ITALIANS (137)		DOUBLE HERITAGE (92)		STRANGERS (119)		F	Sig.
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
SELF-ESTEEM Alpha .73	3,26	0,49	3,18	0,48	3,05	0,45	6,11	0,00
WELL BEING_TOT Alpha .87	3,09	0,84	2,63	0,51	2,98	0,85	10,26	0,00

School outcomes

School adjustment is generally regarded as the primary socio-cultural and developmental task for children and adolescents (Mattanah, et al.,2004). In

the examined sample, foreign subjects turned out school grades significantly lower than Italian and double heritage ones, also maintaining assessment over the sufficiency (see tab. 7).

Tab. 7

	ITALIANS	DOUBLE HERITAGE	FOREIGNERS
Very unsatisfactory	0,0	1,1	5,1
Unsatisfactory	2,9	4,4	12,0
Satisfactory	35,0	35,2	45,3
Very satisfactory	62,0	59,3	37,6
Total	100	100	100

All differences are significant (F 14,532, sig. p>0.000)

5.5. Correlation

Bivariate correlation among all the measures are presented in Table 7. The data confirm the correlation between family and friend support, between family support and self-esteem as reported in literature (Phinney, et al.2002), between family support and well-being. There is a positive correlation between friend support and self-esteem, as expected, and a negative one between friends and acculturation. This last figure may be explained by the fact that friends, referred to by the foreigners, belonged, mostly, to the same ethnic group (though at school and in other contexts related predominantly with individuals of other groups). As a consequence the relationship between friend support and process of acculturation correlates negatively. Instead, self-esteem of all students correlated positively with school performance.

Tab. 8

	FAMILY SUPP.	FRIENDS	SELF_ESTEEM
FAMILY SUPP.	1		
FRIENDS	**0,19	1	
SELF_ESTEEM	**0,21	*0,11	1
WELL BEEN	**0,14	-0,07	0,050
ACCULTURATION	-0,11	**-,0,16	-0,056
SCHOLASTICS OUTCOMES	0,06	0,04	**0,191

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Discussion and future research

In the acculturation scale for domains, Italians showed a strong tendency to ethnocentrism, while the need of relationship with the host culture (allocentrism) was a feature of foreigner and double heritage adolescents.

Data confirm a strong correlation between family and friend support as reported in literature, but family support seems to work in a different way for Italians, foreigners and double heritage families. In fact, for these last two groups the family is perceived as less present; this, even if strong signals of relational problems are not observed at level of community. That, however, could become meaningful in the near future as an indicator of discomfort needing further investigations.

Foreigner and double heritage adolescents have problems about: self-esteem and well-being and scholastic outcomes, on the contrary Italians have higher indexes of perception of isolation from friends.

Friend support seems to be particularly effective for foreigners and shows a negative correlation with acculturation processes, that points out how a strong sense of belonging to the ethnic group contrasts integration.

Immigrants are reported to have more difficulties in most of the areas considered, these data indicate problems attributable to the stress for migration, even in the sphere of intimate relationships (lower family support).

Presented data do not include the processing in relation to gender differences because they have been found not particularly significant.

In future research should focus on the different paths of migratory processes; in particular, in relation to the differences between cultures. Indeed, the ease / difficulty of a path of acculturation may be a result of the closeness / distance between one culture and another. The conceptual crux of proximity/ distance between cultures currently is not yet been analyzed in the mainstream of research on migration processes, therefore requires further study.

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