



CONTACT HYPOTHESIS" AND EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT CULTURAL OPENNESS AND COOPERATION EFFECT

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ABSTRACT

The Contact Hypothesis (Allport, 1954), widely established in the international scientific field, has undergone interesting developments, over the years (Brown, Capozza & Licciardello, 2007).

In particular, three different models, founded on the importance of Social Identity (Tajfel, 1981) in intergroup relationships, have analyzed the conditions that could reduce mental borders (prejudices) between different ethnic groups: De-categorization (Brewer & Miller, 1984); Mutual Intergroups Differentiation (Hewstone & Brown, 1986); and Identity Re-categorization in terms of *Common Ingroup Identity* and of *Dual Identity* (Gaertner, Dovidio et alii, 1990, 1993, 2000, 2007).

According to this last approach, regarding the school's role in identity formation as well as in social life educational processes, a school context based on intercultural openness and cooperation (Gillies, 2004; Cary, Johnson & Johnson, 2008) could contribute to reducing *Self* "distances" between *Outgroup* and *Ingroup*.

This research, carried out with a sample of high school students, aims to verify the effects of an educational policy based on cultural openness and cooperation. The hypothesis is that "contact", in such a context, could contribute to a *Dual Identity* development, that is the importance of subgroups identities and superordinate *Self* dimension at the same time. The results seem to support this educational policy, that leads to positive relationships toward the *Ingroup* and the *Outgroup*. Instead, a conservative educational model seems to support an individualistic orientation.

Key words: Contact, School, Cooperation, Identity, Intergroup relationships.

INTRODUCTION

The contact Hypothesis (Allport, 1954) has been the subject of different research that has advanced conditions favourable to the reduction of intergroup prejudice: desegregation (Aronson, 1972); school status (Stephan & Rosenfield, 1978; Schofield, 1986); level of education and social-economic status (Duckitt, 1992); occasions to develop intergroup friendships (Pettigrew, 1997); and social climate (Brown, 2000).

Studies based on Social Identity Theory, enlarging Tajfel's (1981) hypothesis on *ingroup/outgroup bias*, have highlighted:

a)the importance of the wealth of experience in reality and *Self* categorization processes (meta-con-



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trast principle and depersonalization: Turner, 1987) and in specific interactions (between different cultures, groups, and individuals: Hinckle & Brown, 1990; Capozza, Voci & Licciardello, 2000; Brown, 2000) that lie at the bottom of the possible *bias*;

b) Personal Identity like a relevant dimension of the way in which each one refers to the others as single persons (Turner, 1987 [1999, pp.64/65]) and as group (Brown, 2000);

c) The *Dual Identity* hypothesis that allows as combine subgroup identity with a new superordinate membership that is the product of a relationship with groups characterized by a culture sometimes very different from one's own (Gartner & Dovidio, 2000).

According to the same authors (Gaertner, Dovidio, Blake & Mania, 2007), the *Dual Identity* model takes into account the moderating action of some contextual factors. In particular, *Dual Identity* does not seem to be related to positive intergroup attitudes when there are few subgroups belonging to the same domain of superordinate groups (ex. corporate merger, stepfamily etc.) and when relations between groups are expected to be cooperative.

Since there are several subgroups that could not belong to the same domain of superordinate groups and that there is no expectation that a one-group feeling would be ideal, the school context, seems potentially favourable to prejudice reduction when there are appropriate conditions: equal status, cooperative interdependence, common goals, and institutional support (Allport, 1954).

In fact, in schools there are more and more students with different cultural backgrounds and therefore there is more contact with diversity; if not properly managed, this could trigger off dynamics based on anxiety that, anticipating negative psychological and behavioral consequences to the *Self* (Stephan & Stephan, 1985; Spencer-Rodgers & McGovern, 2002; Levin, van Laar & Sidanius, 2003; Voci & Hewstone, 2007), result in relationships based on stereotypes and prejudices.

However, the promotion of social competences that lie at the bottom of emotional (Goleman, 1996) and social (Doise & Mugny, 1982) intelligence, could contribute to the development of 'flexible' Identities (Licciardello, 1997), enabling the students to feel empathy and to recognise diversity as a mutual source of enrichment and not as a threat to the stability and safety of one own 'universe of meanings'.

Method

This research aims to verify the effects of an educational policy based on cultural openness and cooperation.

According to this hypothesis, this approach could be favourable to a *Dual Identity* development.

Participants

The research has been carried out with two groups of students, 160 in all, a first year class and a fifth year class of two eastern Sicily senior high schools different as regards cultural policy and educational approach.

The students are aged between 13 and 19. In particular, for students from the first year class the age range is 13-16 (*Mean*=13,99; *Median*=14) and for those from the fifth year class is 17-19 (*Mean*=17,78; *Median*=18).

Materials and techniques

The data was collected by 4 Semantic Differentials (Di Nuovo & Licciardello, 1997) on: Present (Me as I am now) and Ideal (Me as I would like to be) *Self*, *Ingroup* (Sicilians) and *Outgroup* (Asiatic or dark-skinned African).

Procedure

The sample comprises student chosen randomly from two eastern Sicily Senior high school: one (open) is characterized by the presence of migrant students and by openness and cooperation; the other (conservative) is characterized by only 'local' students and by a conservative educational method. The research design is 2x2x2: Senior high school typology (open, conservative), class (I, V), sex (M, F).

The materials were administered by the researcher, during school time, in small group setting.

Results



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The data analysis was carried out by SPSS 15 for Window software and by the use of Manova and “t” of Student.

First of all, we calculated:

a) average values of each Semantic Differentials on specific valued concepts (Present *Self*, Ideal *Self*, Sicilians, Asiatic or dark-skinned Africans);

b) Euclidean Distances of the semantic space between Semantic Differentials considered in pairs (the calculation was made by the following formula; $\sqrt{\sum (PS_i - IS_i)^2}$; PS=Present *Self*, IS= Ideal *Self*, i= each pair of (homologous) opposite adjectives, in both Semantic Differentials; we have proceeded in the same way for the others distances considered, changing the respective indices).

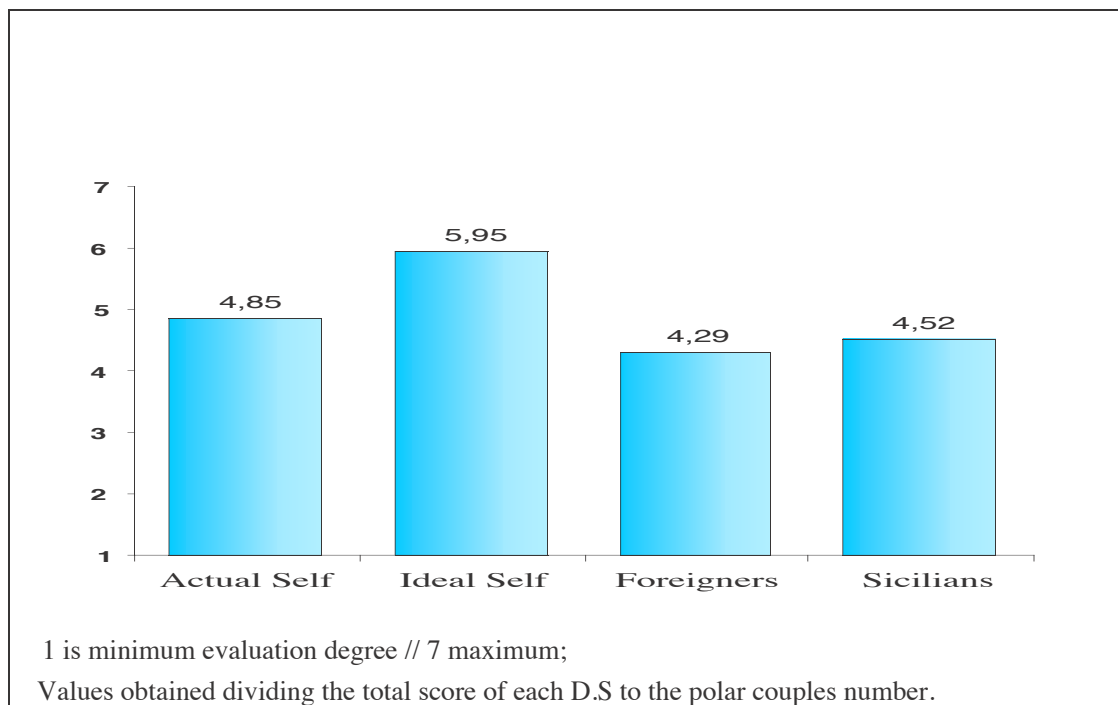
Comparison S.D. average values

In general (Fig. 1):

a) *Self* values are significantly better compared to those of *Ingroup* and *Outgroup* ($p < .001$);

b) *Ingroup* values are significantly better compared to those of *Outgroup* ($p < .002$).

Figure 1. Comparison S.D. average values



1 is minimum evaluation degree // 7 maximum;

* Values obtained dividing the total score of each D.S to the polar couples number.

Manova (with 4 Within factors) DF=3.414 F= 245.50 $p < .001$

Post hoc (“t repeated measures”)

Present *Self* Vs Ideal *Self* = -20.518 $p < .001$

Ideal *Self* Vs *Outgroup* =22.863 $p < .001$

Present *Self* Vs *Ingroup* = 5.431 $p < .001$

Ideal *Self* Vs *Ingroup* =22.005 $p < .001$

Present *Self* Vs *Outgroup* = 8.142 $p < .001$

Outgroup Vs *Ingroup* = -3.077 $p = .002$

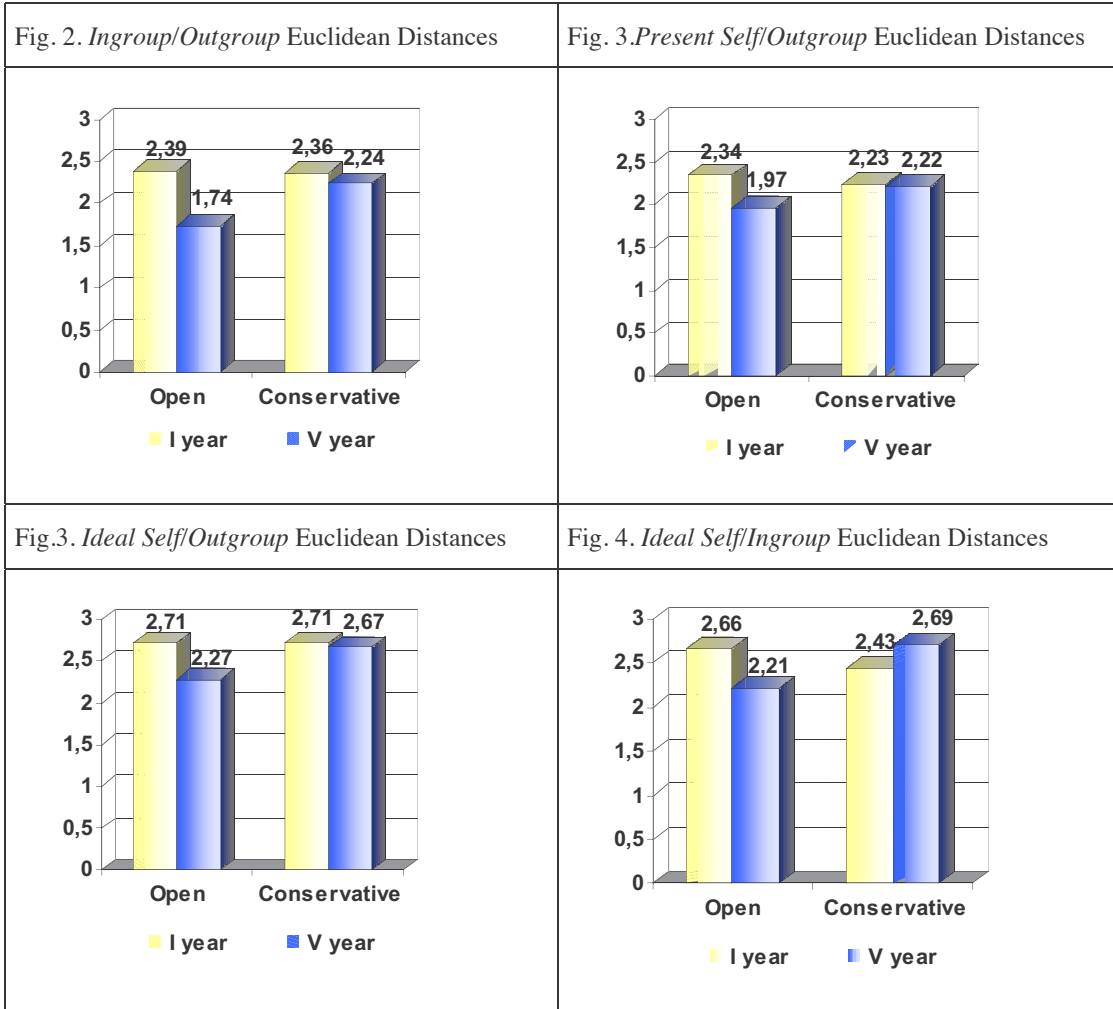
Euclidean Distances Analysis

The Euclidean distances analysis highlight significant differences between the two Senior high schools. In the school characterized by the presence of migrant students and by an open educational policy, according to the data comparison, students from fifth year compared to those from the first year:



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1) a significant decrease of: *Ingroup/Outgroup* ($p=.002$), *Present Self/Outgroup* ($p=.011$), *Ideal Self/Outgroup* ($p=.015$) and *Ideal Self/ Ingroup* ($p=.008$) "distances" (Figs. 2-4);



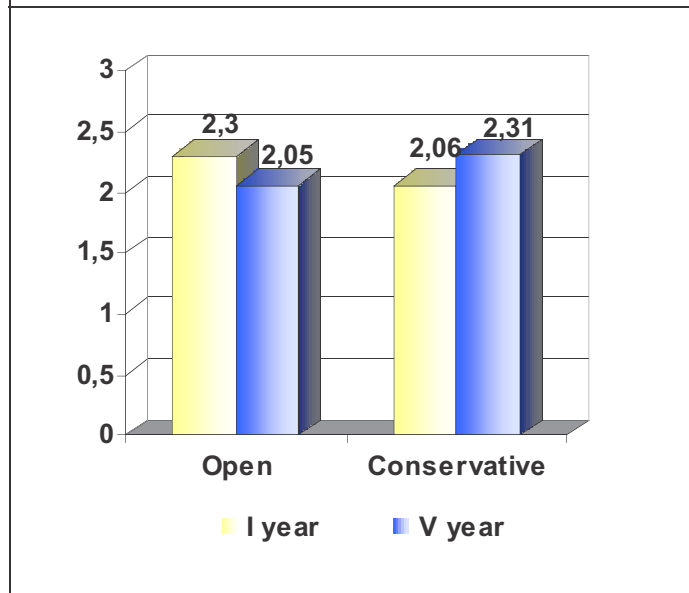
2) a trend in the decrease of *Present Self/Ingroup* ($p=.07$) "distance" (Fig. 5).

These changes are not found in the conservative senior high school where, indeed, the *Present Self/Ingroup* ($p=.034$) "distance" increases (Fig. 5).



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Fig. 5. *Present Self/Ingroup* Euclidean Distances



DISCUSSION

According to the hypothesis, the results seem to indicate that an educational policy characterized by openness and cooperation could produce positive effects regarding the “contact”. This approach seems to contribute to a *Dual Identity* development, that is important for subgroups identities and for a superordinate *Self* dimension at the same time, able to realize openness towards the *Outgroup* and to strengthen relationships within the *Ingroup*.

In this direction, it seems that cultural openness and cooperation result in a conception of the “other” (foreigner or fellow-countryman) as a “possibility” rather than a “limit”. On the contrary, a conservative approach seems related to individualism, regardless of the group memberships of the “other”.

CONCLUSION

According to Allport (1954), simple contact between subjects characterized by some differences is not able to reduce prejudices. There should be specific conditions that may not be present in real situations of intergroup contact (working, school, neighbourhood context etc.).

In particular, in the intercultural educational field, adequate information on minority groups or on prejudice could wedge the germ of a doubt in the stereotypes stronghold, but they could easily be forgotten.

A direct learning approach that involve the student in all aspects of his/her personality seems to have deeper and more long lasting effects. It should be characterized by activities that promote real and cooperative contact in heterogeneous groups (Allport 1954), reduce the influence of emotional processes able to constrain contact and instead, use tools such as empathy (Batson et alii, 1997; Voci & Hewstone, 2007), through which it is possible to acquire another person’s experience in a cognitive and emotional way.

This approach seems also able to promote social abilities such as listening, mutual respect and trust, taking care of the others, encouraging etc., that lie at the bottom not only of respect and recognition of mutual diversities, but also of collaboration and cooperation. These kind of skills are very



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important to create and to maintain different type of groups (family, work group, friendship etc.), as well as a more peaceful world (Slavin, 1985; Deutsch, 1993).

In particular, the research data seems to indicate that a school context that gives enough space to an educational policy oriented toward the realization of a peaceful and positive comparison between 'diversity' could contribute to a flexible *Self* development, the result of processes through which persons could explore the meaning and the implications of different ethno-cultural memberships and of their interactions.

Furthermore, these results do not appear to confirm *ingroup/outgroup bias* Paradigm (Tajfel, 1981) because a positive *ingroup* evaluation does not seem to be necessarily related to a negative *outgroup* evaluation when cultural relations that lie at bottom of socialization lead to mutual understanding and to recognition of diversity.

Individualistic orientation seems, instead, favoured by an educational context based on a conservative cultural approach.

The results seem to suggest the need for a school policy able to promote respect and recognition of diversity that should be interpreted as a resource rather than a limit.

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