THE MEDITERRANEAN AS A POTENTIAL SUPERORDINATE IDENTITY

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Abstract

The Mediterranean lands have experienced the birth, development and end of civilizations that have marked the history of humanity (Hamel, 2006). The aim of this study was to explore the attitudes that a group of students has about the Mediterranean as a possible super-ordinate identity. Specifically, it tested the hypothesis that there is a link between some identity and group dimensions and a Mediterranean representation as a potential super-ordinate identity (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000). Data was collected by using a semi structured questionnaire. Results seem to go in the direction of the Dual Identity.

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1. Introduction

The lands bordering the Mediterranean Sea have made this basin a place of meeting, contamination and, sometimes, clash between populations of different cultures and traditions. In general, the past is a fundamental resource to better understand the present and plan the future. However, the interpretation of the Mediterranean past is not a simple process due to its complexity and the different perspectives affecting this analysis. The present, moreover, is largely characterized by conflicting elements that constitute significant barriers (especially mental) to openness and dialogue between 'different' people. Today the Mediterranean is once again taking a leading role in the international arena due to renewed interest on the part of the European Union. This renewed interest is clearly seen in the Barcelona Declaration (1995) and the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) which both are aimed at developing a community based on a political, social and economic partnership.

The Mediterranean basin is not only a physical/geographical entity. Lewin (1935/1965, pp. 86-87) states that it should be understood in terms of a dynamic 'psychological environment'. This means that in addition to the physical/geographical aspects, it has a crucial role in terms of people, objects and present, past, future, probable or hypothetical situations, each of which takes on positive or negative values, eliciting feelings that may attract or repel.

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Social mobility has become the real challenge of Mediterranean integration policies (Triandafyllidou, 2007). In fact, it plays a part in conflicts, disagreements and great political, economic and social disparities. It is forcing those populations to redefine their identity.

Within this framework, the construction of a potential Mediterranean super-ordinate identity means that it is able to bring different cultures that have a common origin closer together in respect to their cultural identity. It could be based on processes that promote bottom-up interventions whose contents should find wide diffusion through participation, dialogue and exchange.

In this regard, the Dual Identity model (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000; 2007) is particularly relevant and attractive. Indeed, it refers to the possibility that sub-group and super-ordinate group identities could exist simultaneously without causing a loss or denial of identity- in other words ‘a different groups on the same-team’ representation. In fact, despite the possible changes relating to different contexts, both identities remain, to a certain degree, salient. However, this means defining a ‘potential Mediterranean Community’ (Licciardello, Damigella, & Eterno, 2009) as a reality to be constructed on the basis of a scientific analysis that explores the complexities involved in the construction of a Mediterranean super-ordinate identity.

2. Method

2.1. Aim and hypothesis

The aim of this study was to explore the attitudes that a sample of high school students has on the Mediterranean as a possible super-ordinate identity dimension able to bring cultures closer together while respecting the uniqueness of each one.

Specifically, it intended to test the hypothesis that there is a link between the in-group (Countrymen), the Mediterranean out-group (The other people of the Mediterranean) and the (Actual and Future) ‘Selves’ dimensions with a representation of the Mediterranean, according to the Dual Identity Model (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000), as a potential super-ordinate identity.

2.2. Participants

Research was carried out with a group of senior high school students (N. 278) who differed by gender (M=31.7%; F=68.3%) and education level (first high school class=57.6%; last high school class=42.4%). Subjects’ age was between 13 and 20 (M=16.20).

2.3. Materials and techniques

Data was collected by a semi-structured questionnaire containing:

I) four open questions on the Mediterranean and the people associated with it: 1) Write the first adjectives that come to your mind in relation to the Mediterranean; 2) In your opinion, what kind of possibilities does the Mediterranean offer?; 3) What kind of people come into your mind when you think of the Mediterranean?; 4) The Mediterranean people that I feel are closer to my culture ..."; II) a group of items each of which was treated as a seven-point Likert scale (1 = totally unsatisfactory; 7 = totally satisfactory, with 4 = ‘indifference point’) in order to understand: 1) the social representation regarding the kind of relationships between different Mediterranean populations; a) political agreements; b) economic exchanges; c) cultural relationships; d) social-economic conflicts; e) religious conflicts; 2) attitudes concerning the importance of preserving identity and cultural features (customs, language, religion): a) Yes, anywhere, because it is not fair to abandon the path created by one’s ancestors, whose wisdom should be the light to guide one’s life; b) Yes, when it is possible, because cultural identity is the basis of personal identity; c) I have never thought about this; d) I would say no, I don’t think it’s very important; e) No, it is very important to try to conform one’s own culture to another one, in order to reduce integration problems as much as possible; f) Absolutely not- it is very important to create a universal culture that could be the basis of living together in a civilized manner; 3) attitudes concerning the importance of establishing positive relationships between
peoples of the Mediterranean basin: a) Yes, it is absolutely necessary in order to build a pluralist, truly democratic society; b) Yes, of course, because only by knowing and understanding each other can it be possible to develop civil and tolerant relationships; c) Yes, in order to reduce conflict; d) No, I have never thought about it; e) No, I do not think it is very important; f) No, it is better to reduce contacts in order to avoid conflicts; g) Absolutely not, everybody should stay in his/her own place and it is the only way to avoid contamination (cultural, racial etc.) and to have a perfect social order; III) four Semantic Differentials (Di Nuovo & Licciardello, 1997) concerning the representation of Actual and Future Self (respectively As I am and As I will be), in-group (My countrymen are ...) and Mediterranean out-group (The other people of the Mediterranean are ...).

2.4. Procedures

The sample consisted of a group of senior high school students. The materials were administered by the researcher in a face to face setting.

3. Results

Data analysis was carried out by SPSS 20 for Windows, Manova and Pearson’s “r” for correlation analysis.

We calculated the mean values of each item for the data obtained with the semi-structured questionnaire. Regarding the Semantic Differentials, we calculated the: 1) reliability with Cronbach's alpha: Actual Self (α=.749), Future Self (α=.832), in-group (α=.852), Mediterranean out-group (α=.830), which allowed us to consider each one as a scale; 2) and the average sum of each pair of opposite adjectives scores (for each a score ranging from 1, absolutely negative, to 7 absolutely positive, with the point of indifference=4).

3.1. Mediterranean social representation

The majority (78.1%) of our sample expressed positive comments about the Mediterranean area in aesthetic (sunny, beautiful, blue etc...) and emotional terms (exciting, relaxing, etc.). This data seems to reveal that the positive outlook is due to tourism: the experience of beautiful beaches and positive holiday activity.

The percentage of respondents who used power adjectives (16.2%) and negative associations (5.8%) was remarkably small.

Three quarters of the sample seemed to favour the aspects of social mobility (42.4%) and tourism (32.7%) when responding about perceived possibilities.

This Mediterranean representation that seems to be characterized by dynamic aspects contrasts with an image of the people associated with it. Indeed, it is essentially characterized by a strong attachment to the in-group and the past (past civilizations responsible for the foundation of Mediterranean culture): more than two-thirds of the sample referred to the Italian in-group (33.1%) and the ancient populations including the Phoenicians, Siculans, Romans, Carthaginians (38.5%).

Moreover, more than half of our sample seemed to indicate a substantial proximity to those people with whom they shared the same cultural features (Spanish, Portuguese and French: 28.8%) or to those ancient populations which influenced their current culture (ancient populations: 29.9%).

3.2. Cultural Identity and Mediterranean relationships

In relation to cultural identity, the students of our sample demonstrated a general orientation towards the preservation of their identity and their cultural features. As indicated by the data (Manova, with 6 Within factors, DF=5.1385, F=136.86; p<.001), they supported the idea that cultural identity should be preserved because it is the basis of their personal identity (M=5.27) and, to a lesser extent, because it represents an important legacy left by their ancestors (M=4.61).

Below the point of indifference were the scores related to the possibility that, in order to minimize the problems of integration, there should be a strong effort to adapt one’s culture to another one (M=3.54) or that it is
possible to develop a universal culture to promote more peaceful relationships (M=3.64). Those items that stated there is no question about it (M=2.47) were rejected as well as the item that stated that it is not an important problem (M=1.88).

In terms of social representation, students of our sample (Manova, with 5 factors Within, DF=4.1108, F=72.61, p<.001) seemed fairly convinced that relationships between the Mediterranean populations are primarily characterized by economic exchanges (M=5.09) and, to a lesser extent, by cultural relationships (M=4.55). Below the point of indifference the scores related to religious (M=3.09) and economic and political conflicts (M=3.64), as well as to political agreements (M=3.56).

Moreover, our sample agreed with the need to establish positive relationships with other groups living on the Mediterranean coast. Specifically (Manova with 7 factors Within DF=6.1662; F=374.07; p<.001), they agreed (moderately) with the ideas that: only by knowing and understanding each other can civil and tolerant relationships be possible (M=5.45); it is possible to build a pluralist, truly democratic society, founded on the wealth that only the contribution of different forces can secure (M=5.19); positive relationships are a means to reduce conflicts (M=5). Those items that expressed indifference on this issue and in-group attachment were rejected.

3.3. Selves, Italian In-group and Mediterranean Out-group representation

In general, students of our sample (MANOVA with 4 factors Within DF=3.1108; F=120.78; p<.001) presented a positive representational framework related to Future Self (M=5.02) and, to a lesser extent, Actual Self (M=4.66); however, they came out just above the point of indifference for both the Mediterranean out-group (M=4.26) and the Italian in-group (M=4.07).

Specifically, post hoc analysis (“t paired sample”) showed that: a) Actual and Future Selves are assessed more positively than the Mediterranean out-group and the Italian in-group (in all cases p<.001); b) the Mediterranean out-group is assessed more positively than the Italian in-group (p<.001).

3.4. Correlation analysis

The correlation analysis between Selves and items concerning the Mediterranean social representation revealed that:

1. the better the attitude towards Actual Self the greater the importance of cultural identity as a heritage to preserve (r=.13; p=.02);
2. the higher they assessed the Future Self the less they thought that relationships among Mediterranean people were characterized by cultural relations (r=.12; p=.04); on the other hand, the less they valued the Future Self the more they thought that the issue related to the Mediterranean population relationships was insignificant (r=-.13; p=.02) and that to avoid conflicts everyone should stay in his/her own country (r=-.17; p=.004);
3. the better the attitude towards the Italian in-group the more they: a) thought that the relationships among the Mediterranean populations were characterized by economic exchanges (r=.13; p=.02); b) were unconcerned about the issue of Mediterranean relationships (r=.17; p=.003);
4. the more they assessed the Mediterranean out-group the more they thought that: a) it is necessary to create positive relationships among Mediterranean people in order to build a pluralist and truly democratic society (r=.14; p=.01); b) only by knowing and understanding each other can civil and tolerant relationships be possible (r=.12; p=.03); on the other hand, the lower the assessment of the Mediterranean out-group the more they thought of the Mediterranean in terms of economic and political conflicts (r=-.15; p=.01).

In discussion of this data, we could say that a positive Mediterranean out-group assessment was related to attitudes of openness, reciprocity, integration and pluralism. A lower value attributed to this out-group and the Future Self expressed by the students of our sample demonstrated negative attitudes, often inspired by a segregationist logic. Moreover, the higher the assessment of the Italian in-group the higher their indifference was to the importance of establishing positive relationships among the Mediterranean populations.
4. Conclusion

Data analysis seemed to reveal an articulated and, to some extent, ambivalent framework.

In general, positive Mediterranean representation emerged through the aesthetic and emotional connotations attributed to it and for the dynamic that characterizes this area, since social mobility and tourism represent the most relevant possibilities that it can offer.

Moreover, the subjects of our sample stated that commercial exchanges constitute the main relationship between Mediterranean populations and they hoped that these relations would be characterized positively and functionally to ensure greater mutual understanding, a pluralistic society and a reduction of conflicts.

However, when they considered the peoples that gravitates to the Mediterranean area, there was a substantial attachment to the in-group and those ancient population that are the foundations upon which their culture is based. The only openness (which also confirms the tendency to prefer the 'already known') was towards those groups with whom they shared some of the same cultural features (Spanish and French).

This anchorage to what is familiar is confirmed by the prevailing orientation towards the preservation of their identity and their cultural characteristics because it is the basis of the individual self and an important legacy left by their ancestors.

This already ambivalent general framework is more articulated in relation to the salience of the in-group and out-group, as well as the dimensions of identity considered.

Specifically, when the assessment of the other Mediterranean populations was lower, the economic, political and religious conflicts assume greater importance and the consideration of segregationist positions increased. These positions together with the lack of interest in the issue of Mediterranean relationships were evident when Mediterranean out-group and the Future Self were considered less important.

Otherwise, a higher assessment of the Future Self was associated with a greater focus on the importance of the cultural relations that characterize the coastal Mediterranean. In addition, a positive assessment of the Mediterranean out-group was associated with an attitude of openness in terms of a functional construction of a pluralistic and democratic society.

Overall, the results of this research showed a substantially ambivalent framework. In fact, our sample students appear to be geared towards both in-group attachment and preservation of their cultural identity and a proactive openness to diversity and mutual understanding. It can be assumed that this ambiguity is somehow due to the complexity that characterizes the object of our analysis: the Mediterranean between light and shadow that reveals significant potential, but it also represents a multitude of risks. We aim to further researches (action researches) based on educational processes able to concur to the construction of a ‘potential Mediterranean Community’ (Licciardello & Damigella, 2009) inspired to the Dual Identity Model (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000; 2007).

References


