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Students' images of immigrants in Italy: first results from a national mixed methods study

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Abstract

The study aims to explore the social representations of immigrants' image provided by a sample of young Italian students, starting from a qualitative content analysis of a set of metaphors. The methodology is based on mixed methods approach that combines and integrates qualitative and quantitative analyses. Results describe the main source domains related to the students' metaphors and suggest a resulting pattern of emerging attributes against a classic representation of immigrants as a threat. The metaphors are a tool through which can figure out, simplify and communicate meanings, ideas and experiences. Metaphors can thus be considered as a textual artefact useful to read complex social representations.

1. Introduction

The image that people have of immigrants in their country is one of the most central and hotly discussed collective social representations of the present day and it is related to a set of individual and collective meanings firmly rooted in various psychological, social and cultural processes. Immigrants are typically seen in terms of foreignness, social distance and potential threat, concepts that can lead to exclusion, stigmatization and even conflict (Elias & Scotson, 1965; Simmel, 1908; Znaniecki, 1931). Wherever prejudice and stereotypes are prominent (Allport,1954; Cipollini (ed), 2002) a border or barrier is created between "us" and "them".

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Such attitudes are constructed and formulated in several different social contexts, one of the most important of which is school, as this is the main secondary socialization environment. Here, through interactions with their peers, students attribute and share meanings (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934; Ritzer, 2008). The school environment constitutes a particularly interesting field of research as this is the main context in which young people develop their perception of themselves, others and communities, including their image of "the other", typically which is quintessential represented by the immigrant.

This kind of study nevertheless requires a particular methodological and empirical approach which is able to appropriately deal with the complexity and variety of the topic.

1.1. Metaphor based questions as a mixed-methods research tool

The image of immigrants at school is a very complicated and sensitive issue to be investigated only by means of quantitative approaches based on closed questions. Mixed methods research enhances the evidence gathered in the field and ensures a balanced reliable relationship between an inductive and deductive approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methodologies (Alivernini, 2012).

An innovative way to investigate the phenomenon and provide a broader picture of its peculiarities consists of combining these two kinds of approach by means of an interaction between open data and the theoretical structure of the study being conducted.

In order to do this, the image of immigrants was explored through the use of a specific linguistic device: the metaphor. This is an analogy that allows people to represent an experience in terms of another, thereby helping them to acquire complex concepts and understand new situations (Vosniadou & Ortony, 1989). On the basis of the idea that metaphors are linguistic tools used in literature as well as in everyday life, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) developed a cognitive approach to the interpretation of metaphors, seeing them as an inevitable process of human thought (Kovecses, 2007) and a means by which meanings, ideas and experiences are anticipated, simplified and shared. Metaphors allow us to generate conceptual and linguistic systems and to give a definite form and structure to our perceptions and experiences. They constitute a way to categorize and give meanings to experience and they are culturally and socially situated and mediated.

2. Objectives

The present study aims to provide a structured representation of immigrants by means of the reading of metaphors provided by young Italian students. The specific objectives are:

- To identify, by means of an inductive and reliable method, the attributes that constitute the image that students have of immigrants
- To test the resulting pattern of emerging attributes against a classic representation of immigrants as a threat (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss, 1987; Strauss & Corbin, 1997)

3. Method

3.1. Data

This study analyzed a set of 200 answers which were randomly extracted from a sample of students who participated to a study[1] aimed to identify the ways in which students are prepared to participate as active citizens of a democratic society (Schulz, Fraillon, Ainley, Losito & Kerr, 2009a,b).

The key question analyzed in this article was an open question, which asked respondents to formulate a phrase starting with the words: "*Immigrants are like...*".

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[1] The study is IEA ICCS-2009 (International Civic and Citizenship Education Study), a comparative survey promoted by IEA (www.iea.nl).

3.2. Analysis

The study is based on a mixed-method approach that combines a qualitative and a quantitative data interpretation. According to Morgan (2007), a qualitative interpretation is characterized by an inductive and subjective process (data-driven); while a quantitative interpretation is deductive, objective and mainly sustained by a theory-driven method. This kind of approach often adopts a sequential path, with the quantitative and qualitative analyses performed at different times (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Mixed methods can allow researchers to discover meanings that are neglected by quantitative studies, as well as to assess various dimensions deduced from theory (Alivernini, Lucidi, & Manganelli, 2008) in order to integrate the findings in a circular and reflective way (Cavicchiolo & Marchi, 2011).

In this research the metaphors proposed by young Italian students are the textual and qualitative basis from which a series of attributes and meaningful patterns can be induced and put into relation with the main deductive theoretical constructs related to the phenomenon in question.

4. Results

4.1. Categorization

The categories identified were collected in a codebook. The codebook is a sort of manual that collects and clarifies the criteria for the allocation of attributes to the metaphors, ensuring a high degree of reliability for the next phase of the content analysis (Neuendorf, 2002). For each attribute, the codebook contains the name of the category, the definition (based on that found in most dictionaries), the rules of coding and some examples.

4.2. The pattern of the categories identified and representations of immigrants

The set of attributes identified by the process of encoding allowed us to describe and map the domain of "immigrants" over a wide variety of objects and characteristics. The basic literature on immigration focuses primarily on representations of the foreigner and on the nature of the systems of relations with the communities he/she comes into contact with. The social representation of the immigrant is thus seen in a dual and spatial manner, with a strong component of identity regarding the distinction between the integrated group and newcomers.

The following table shows the most frequent characteristics (only categories with a frequency greater than 10 are displayed) assigned to immigrants by the respondents to the Italian questionnaire and correlates these categories with the classic social representations that are most prevalent (Table 1).

Table 1. Most frequent characteristics assigned to immigrants by students.

Name of category	Frequency	Prevalent social representation
The same as us	34	Not a threat
Different	20	Potential threat
Foreign/Estranged	21	Potential threat
In need of help/protection	16	Not a threat
Undefended	16	Not a threat
Numerous	16	Potential threat
In need of improvement	11	Not a threat

The results of the analysis reveal a viewpoint opposition between the groups of "us" and "them", as well as a sense of closeness and empathy. Some of the attributes that emerged are closely associated with classic themes of the literature on stereotypes and prejudice (Allport, 1954 ibid; Tajfel, 1981) based on processes of categorization, which lead to the construction of rigid boundaries between groups, intra-group cohesion and intergroup hostility as well as to the formation of social representations and negative stereotypes regarding a group that is identified as external.

The perception of belonging to a well-integrated group or community, the history, values and norms of which one shares and participates in, gives rise to mechanisms of social detachment and opposition regarding those who are seen as outside the group or community and who are perceived as a threat to its cohesion and social prestige (Elias & Scotson, 1965 ibid). The idea of the immigrant as a threat, from an economic as well as a social and a cultural point of view, is extremely widespread in the relevant literature (Tabboni (ed), 1986) and, as noted by Bauman (1999), it consists of a destabilizing force associated with uncertainty, which has to be opposed in order to preserve one's values. The perception of the immigrant includes this sense of a threat to social stability as well as a more positive sense of novelty and innovation (Bauman, 1999 ibid). Various other attributes provided by young Italian students create a very complex and variegated picture of a rather fluid nature, with immigrants seen not only as a threat, but also as people in need, like us, who are trying to improve their lives and who cannot be precisely defined within the simple dualism of "us" and "them".

5. Conclusions and recommendations

The main objective of the study was to reconstruct the most significant social representations related to the image of the immigrant. The results provide initial evidence for the validity of a mixed research methodology that can analyze the open content (of a figurative and symbolic type) of the metaphor and that is robust enough to stand up to comparison with the findings of the literature on the subject. Metaphors can be an important textual instrument that allows us to determine the social representations of individuals and their capability to effect a fusion of their opinions, experience, learning and environment.

Metaphors prove to be a powerful investigative tool that allows us to explore sensitive and "difficult" issues, as well as to examine the wide range of meanings that are attributed by respondents, more or less voluntarily consciously to a phenomenon.

Metaphors are thus a complex and reliable instrument for reading phenomena that are equally complex, heterogeneous and rich.

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