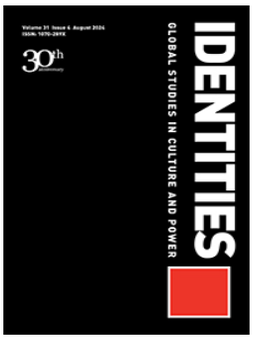

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Identities

Global Studies in Culture and Power

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/gide20

From being othered to promoting the value of otherness: pride and price of intercultural dialogue among migrant immediate descendants in Italy

Annavittoria Sarli

To cite this article: Annavittoria Sarli (2024) From being othered to promoting the value of otherness: pride and price of intercultural dialogue among migrant immediate descendants in Italy, Identities, 31:4, 466-486, DOI: 10.1080/1070289X.2023.2223056

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2023.2223056

Published online: 14 Jun 2023.

IDENTITIES
2024, VOL. 31, NO. 4, 466–486
https://doi.org/10.1080/1070289X.2023.2223056

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

From being othered to promoting the value of otherness: pride and price of intercultural dialogue among migrant immediate descendants in Italy

Annavittoria Sarli

Institute for Research into Superdiversity, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK

ABSTRACT

Migrant immediate descendants (MIDs) raised in Italy are frequently socialized across different ethno-cultural environments and often experience being othered. Both conditions may influence the way they face intercultural interaction, but this topic remains largely unexplored. Through 15 semi-structured interviews and 5 focus groups with MID university students raised in Italy, this work examines how MIDs describe and give meaning to their intercultural competence. It shows that through a complex process of appreciation of their inner diversity, MIDs can develop a heightened critical reflection on intercultural communication and the willingness to challenge, through intercultural dialogue, the social representations that underpin their being othered. However, the way difference tends to be constructed in Italian society hampers the valuing of one's multiple ethno-cultural identifications, and encouraging social acceptance of diversity represents a heavy emotional burden for MIDs.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 7 June 2022; Accepted 6 June 2023

KEYWORDS migrant descendants; Italy; intercultural; racialization; othering; minorities

Introduction

This paper investigates the way in which migrant immediate descendants (MIDs) describe their intercultural competence (IC). Following Barrett (2018), IC is intended as the combination of values, attitudes, skills and critical knowledge necessary to respect and communicate constructively with people perceived as culturally different. MIDs are defined as the children of migrants born or raised in a different country to their parents. MIDs are often socialized across different ethnic environments and may be victims of othering or racialization (Padilla 2006). Such experiences can influence the way in which MIDs approach intercultural relations (Mantel 2020; Sadjed,

CONTACT Annavittoria Sarli annavittoria.sarli@unipr.it Institute for Research into Superdiversity, University of Birmingham, Birmingham, UK

Sprung, and Kukovetz 2015; Morando 2013). MIDs represent an increasingly significant share of the Italian population, yet little is known about how they face and interpret intercultural interaction (Sarli and Phillimore 2022).

This work uses the so-called butterfly model of IC (ICBM) (Barrett 2018) to examine how MID university students who grew up in Italy perceive their strengths in intercultural interaction. It explores the patterns of IC they describe and the ways in which they think and feel about them.

This paper begins with a delineation of its underpinning theoretical concepts, followed by descriptions of the upbringing conditions of MIDs in Italy and, next, the methods adopted. The subsequent section contains an analysis of MIDs' perceptions: the general pattern of IC emerging from their narratives and the main meanings and emotions attached to it. This conclusion offers possible development avenues for future research.

Conceptual background

Culture is conceived as a fluid compound of material, social and subjective resources potentially available to the members of a certain group (Barrett 2018). Cultures are viewed as heterogeneous and dynamic overtime, with permeable boundaries. Each person is deemed to participate in multiple cultures (e.g. gender, ethnic, generational, occupational, and family cultures), and the salience of their multiple affiliations to vary by context. Each individual is viewed as participating in a unique constellation of cultures, so that every interpersonal interaction is potentially intercultural (Barrett 2018). An interaction is defined as intercultural when the subjects involved construct each other as members of different cultural groups, rather than individual selves. Cultural identities are defined as those self-descriptions, to which people attach value, that are constructed around their belonging to cultural groups (Barrett et al. 2018). They are viewed as context-related and interactional processes rather than inherent features of individuals (Anthias 2002). Cultural belonging is conceived as a personal and social issue: an intimate feeling influenced by social dynamics of inclusion and exclusion (Antonsich 2010).

Scholars have produced a number of definitions and analytical frameworks of IC (Chen and Feng 2017), each offering strengths and weaknesses and meeting different descriptive objectives (Spitzberg and Changnon 2009). This paper utilizes ICBM and the underlying definition, according to which IC is the set of values, attitudes, skills, knowledge, and critical understanding necessary for respecting, communicating appropriately, and establishing constructive relationships with people perceived as culturally different (Barrett 2018).

The ICBM is a subset of another framework: the model of competence for democratic culture (Barrett et al. 2018) (see Table 1). According to Barrett and his colleagues, navigating a democratic

Table 1. Model of competence for democratic culture (Barrett et al. 2018) and ICBM (Barrett 2018).

Values • Valuing human dignity and human rights • Valuing cultural diversity • Valuing democracy, justice, fairness, equality and the rule of law	**Attitudes** • Openness to cultural otherness and to other beliefs, world views and practices • Respect for other people and for other beliefs, world-views, and practices • Civic-mindedness • Responsibility • Self-efficacy • Tolerance of ambiguity
Skills • Autonomous learning skills • Analytical and critical thinking skills • Skills of listening and observing • Empathy (in particular, cognitive and affective perspective-taking skills) • Flexibility and adaptability • Linguistic, communicative and plurilingual skills • Co-operation skills • Conflict-resolution skills	**Knowledge and Critical Understanding** • Knowledge and critical understanding of the self • Knowledge and critical understanding of language and communication • Knowledge and critical understanding of the world: politics, law, human rights, culture, cultures, religions, history, media, economies, environment, sustainability

system requires, *inter alia*, being competent in intercultural relations (Barrett et al. 2018). Fourteen of the 20 components of the competence for democratic culture are deemed necessary for understanding and respecting people perceived as culturally different and are then identified as IC components. Table 1 highlights the components constituting IC according to ICBM (Barrett 2018).

ICBM (Barrett 2018) was selected for three reasons. Firstly, it introduces values as a constituent dimension of IC. Values are defined as guiding principles that motivate and orientate individuals' actions (Barrett et al. 2018), yet few studies address the relationship between values and IC (Fondazione Intercultura 2020). Secondly, all the components of ICBM (Barrett 2018) and the related subcomponents are described in great detail in Barrett et al. (2018). This offers a useful framework for analysing MIDs' narrations around their IC. Thirdly, ICBM aligns with the conceptual framework underpinning the *Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters* an educational tool developed by the Council of Europe, which aims to foster intercultural dialogue by developing IC among young people; through a series of questions, this instrument guides individuals in the retrospective analysis of a personal encounter of their choice, with someone they perceived as culturally different. Analysis is aimed at prompting young people's critical reflection on their way of facing intercultural interaction (Byram et al. 2009).

IC is framed in culture-general terms, as a set of psychological resources that foster intercultural interaction, no matter the cultural backgrounds at play.

IC components are rarely deployed altogether or individually with specific clusters of IC mobilized depending on people's objectives and the demands of a given situation (Barrett et al. 2018).

Having set out the theoretical framework underpinning this paper, the next section describes the upbringing conditions that may influence MIDs' development of IC in Italy.

Growing up as a migrant immediate descendant in Italy

MIDs are defined as the children of migrants who are born in their parents' country of emigration or who migrated during their childhood (Padilla 2006).

Italy started receiving significant migration flows in the 1970s, and thereafter immigration meaningfully intensified (Colombo, Leonini, and Rebughini 2009). Initially, migrants were mainly young adults arriving alone, who settled and started reunifying or constituting new families. Subsequently, the children of migrants began to feature in Italian society (ISTAT 2020). By 2020, 7.1% of birth registrations had one foreign parent, with 14.8% having two foreign parents (ISMU elaborations on ISTAT data).

In Italy, policy and media discourses refer to migration-related issues mostly in the language of emergencies, deviancy or alleged cultural threats. The everyday presence of ethnic minorities as a permanent constituent of society is rarely acknowledged. Such public discourse perpetuates a kind of socio-cultural immaturity making it difficult for the population to accept growing diversity.

Myths of cultural homogeneity have driven a division between a monolithic national 'self' and 'the others', foreigners who comprise both first-generation migrants and their Italian-born descendants with consequences in terms of discrimination and racism (Frisina and Agyei Kyeremeh 2022; Marinaro and Walston 2010). Italianness has been constructed as monoracial and monocultural, a concept enshrined in the Italian law on citizenship, mainly based on *jus sanguinis* (Pesarini and Tintori 2020).

Educational opportunities are far from equal for MIDs, who have higher drop-out rates and lower learning outcomes than their counterparts with an Italian background (ISTAT 2016). MIDs frequently attend technical or vocational high schools, which offer fewer opportunities for social mobility, and the proportion of MIDs going to university is limited (Foundation 2022).

MID children usually experience multiple ethno-cultural transmissions: typically, they internalize the cultural norms and codes of their ethnic minorities at home, and the mainstream ones at school. Since childhood, their everyday life features continuous adjustment to varying

ethno-cultural demands (Granata 2012). According to this paper's theoretical framework, everyone has multiple cultural affiliations and, in their everyday interactions, experience crossing cultural boundaries (Barrett et al. 2018). However, what characterizes the experiences of MIDs is that the boundaries they cross since an early age tend to be constructed by essentialist discourses as borderlines dividing 'us' from 'them', what is normal from what is deviant, who is dominant and superior from who is minoritized (Holliday 2016). Such multiple ethno-cultural orientations may cause MIDs self-devaluation, inner conflict or confusion, but may also foster their developing IC (Christmas 2010; Manço and Franchi 2002).

MIDs, especially when members of visible ethnic minorities, can be subject to the dynamics of othering or racialization, often based on their ethnicity, race, and/or religion (Scarabello and de Witte 2019). Not being fully accepted by society can cause negative emotions and threaten MIDs' sense of belonging, with possible consequences on their ethno-cultural identifications (Padilla 2006).

Migration studies have shown different possible responses by MIDs. These include the denial of their origins and striving to be accepted as fully fledged members of the mainstream. The outcome is often unsatisfactory, as some ethnic markers cannot be hidden. Another response may be avoidance of mainstream society and embracing their heritage ethnic identifications. A third possibility arises, when often, after years of identity dilemmas, young people find mechanisms to maintain strong bonds with both their ethnic minorities and mainstream societies, thus developing multiple ethno-cultural identifications and belongings (Granata 2012).

Being a victim of othering dynamics may influence the way MIDs behave in intercultural interactions. Arguably, the study of MIDs' IC is intriguing because it entails exploring how those who have been othered based on their ethno-cultural difference interact with the subjects they may, in their turn, perceive as 'culturally other'. Clearly, it cannot be assumed that growing up as a MID implies the development of IC. Literature indicates that IC development can be influenced by a variety of biographical, psychological and contextual factors (Sarli and Phillimore 2022). Investigating such factors is beyond the scope of this paper, which instead explores, through the narrations of a group of MID university students raised in Italy, what kind of IC MIDs tend to develop, and what IC means to them within the contexts they inhabit.

Methods

This work is based on MIDs' self-perceptions and analyses how they describe their own IC. Having taken place between July 2020 and January 2021 during the Covid–19 pandemic, all primary research was undertaken online. It consisted of 15 semi-structured interviews and five focus groups with university students born in Italy or arrived when they were under the age of 11 years. Tables 2 and 3 sketch the demographic profile of interview and focus group respondents.[1]

Eight female and seven male individuals were interviewed. Both their mothers and fathers were migrants. Their ages ranged from 19 to 24 years. Ten were born in Italy, and five were born outside the country, in China, India, Moldova, Senegal and Ukraine.

Forty-five students took part in the focus groups. In most cases, their parents were both migrants, only four had one migrant parent and one Italian-born parent. Thirty-one were born in Italy, with the remainder being born in Belarus, Croatia, Egypt, Morocco, Pakistan, Senegal and Tunisia. There were 23 female and 22 male participants, and their ages ranged from 19 to 31 years.

Respondents studied in various universities located all over Italy, except for three who studied abroad. Their university studies covered different disciplines ranging from physical to social sciences and the humanities. All but three respondents were fluent in at least one mother tongue besides Italian.

The focus of this study was university students, who represent a minority among Italian MIDs. MID university students who grew up in Italy were considered as sharing a relevant common experience of 'being into society' regardless of their ethnic background.

Table 2. Demographics of Interviewees.

Pseudonym	Origin of parents	Gender	Age (of interview)	Country of birth (if not Italy)	Age (of arrival in Italy)
Adam	Morocco	Male	22		
Amina	Morocco	Female	21		
Amos	Russia	Male	22	Moldova	7
Bineta	Senegal	Female	23	Senegal	10
Brigitte	Ivory Coast	Female	22		
Dalia	Egypt	Female	22		
Dima	Ukraine	Male	24	Ukraine	5
Eddie	Ghana	Male	23		
Germain	Ivory Coast	Male	24		
Hakima	Morocco	Female	19		
Henry	Nigeria	Male	23		
Jiao	China	Female	21	China	2
Lan	China	Female	22		
Ushapati	India	Male	21	India	2
Zahia	Morocco	Female	19		

Table 3. Demographics of focus group participants.

Focus Group	No	Origin of parents	Gender	Age (focus group)	Country of birth (if not Italy)	Age (of arrival in Italy)
1	A	Croatia	Female	23	Croatia	2
1	B	Syria	Male	22		
1	C	Morocco	Female	21	Morocco	1
1	D	Ghana	Female	22		
1	E	Pakistan	Male	23		
1	F	Senegal and Italy	Female	24		
1	G	Philippines	Female	25		
1	H	Egypt	Female	21	Egypt	5
1	I	Russia	Male	22	Russia	MISSING
2	A	Philippines	Male	20		
2	B	Nigeria	Female	21		
2	C	India	Male	22		
2	D	Morocco	Female	23		
2	E	Croatia and Morocco	Female	21		
2	F	Morocco	Male	22		
2	G	Egypt	Male	21	Egypt	4
2	H	Pakistan	Female	25		
3	A	Morocco	Female	22		
3	B	Tunisia	Female	25		
3	C	Morocco	Female	19		
3	D	Nigeria	Female	19		
3	E	Egypt	Female	19	Egypt	5
3	F	Morocco	Female	28	Morocco	6
3	G	Brazil and Italy	Female	25		
3	H	Ghana	Female	31		
3	I	Somalia	Female	23		
4	A	Senegal	Male	21		
4	B	Morocco	Male	24	Morocco	11
4	C	Morocco	Male	26	Morocco	1
4	D	India	Male	22		
4	E	Pakistan	Male	22	Pakistan	5
4	F	Philippines	Male	25		
4	G	Ghana	Male	22		
4	H	Syria and Italy	Male	22		
4	I	Senegal	Male	20		
5	A	Angola and Congo	Male	25		
5	B	Ghana and Italy	Female	21		
5	C	Tunisia	Female	23	Tunisia	4
5	D	Morocco	Male	28		
5	E	Lebanon	Male	24		
5	F	Senegal	Male	24	Senegal	3 months
5	G	Morocco	Male	30	Morocco	8
5	H	Russia and Belarus	Female	21	Belarus	4
5	I	Egypt	Male	23		
5	J	Morocco	Female	27		

The recruitment of respondents was undertaken by telephone, email and social media. An advert was shared on Facebook and Twitter and via the author's personal and professional networks. Recruitment began with a self-selection mechanism, which suggests that respondents were interested in

intercultural issues. Those students willing to participate were filtered according to the recruitment criteria.

Interviews and focus groups were conducted on Zoom in Italian, by the author and a colleague who both have an Italian background. Full ethical approval was gained from the *Ethical Review Committee* of the University of Birmingham (ERN_20–0239).

Questions covered respondents' perceptions of their strengths and weaknesses when communicating with someone they perceived as culturally different based on his/her ethnicity, religion, generation, social class, or any other identification dimension. The questions were partially based on the *Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters* (Byram et al. 2009), with respondents asked to give concrete examples of their intercultural interaction styles. Other questions probed their ideas around the values, attitudes, skills and knowledge necessary to engage constructively in intercultural encounters.

Interviews lasted around 120 min and focus groups 150 min. Despite the online setting, the exchange between interviewers and interviewees and between focus group participants was perceived as highly empathetic by the author. During focus groups, respondents contributed mainly orally, but could add some thoughts via chat. Speaking turns were managed spontaneously by participants, but, compared to face-to-face settings, animating discussion required more frequent prompts by the facilitator. Usually, all group members engaged actively, but in few cases participation was encouraged by private messaging by the co-facilitator.

The analysis used a thematic approach (Braun and Clarke 2006). After extracting all the interview excerpts describing components of IC, these were categorized according to ICBM (Barrett 2018) or under new categories when relevant. Themes were identified within MIDs' descriptions of their IC. After drafting preliminary results, focus group prompts were designed to explore some of the ideas, which emerged from the interviews. Focus groups were analysed in a similar fashion to interviews.

Findings

Respondents' intercultural competence: general pattern

Overall picture

In this section, an overview of the patterns of IC emerged from the analysis of MIDs' narrations will be provided. The differences between such a pattern and ICBM (Barrett 2018) will be highlighted, along with a description of the IC components that are prominent or hardly mentioned in MIDs' descriptions.

The interview and focus group data enabled a rich and nuanced portrait of IC, as respondents reflected critically over intercultural

communication and their strengths and weaknesses within it. Table 4 shows the IC components raised in MID narrations and how each was described.

Comparing findings with the butterfly model of intercultural competence

The descriptions of the IC that emerged from the analysis were categorized under all 14 components of ICBM. Two additional behavioural components were raised: autonomous learning and cooperation skills, both of which appear in the framework of competence for democratic culture (Barrett et al. 2018). Such skills appear, for instance, in the following excerpts: '*You also need enough time to elaborate a whole series of concepts by yourself, I mean, things that you struggle to understand, you know? (FG5)* '*Some people feel like fish out of water. I'm someone who keep people together in groups, because I say: 'oh, let's hear what you have to say (Eddie)'*.

Valuing human rights was not mentioned as an essential ingredient for positive intercultural interactions. Rather, some respondents referred to the tensions between valuing human rights and valuing cultural diversity, and how it may be difficult to defend human rights in certain intercultural contexts. As Dahlia explains: '*Sometimes we have debates. But at other times it is better not to in order to avoid conflict. Usually these are the topics: women's rights, rights in general'*.

Consequently it seems appropriate to re-name the ICBM component 'valuing human dignity and human rights' as 'valuing human dignity'.

Prevailing features of intercultural competence

As shown in Table 4, respondents described in great detail their openness to cultural diversity and respect. Within the behavioural dimension, linguistic and communication skills were described in detail, with particular references to plurilingual and linguistic and intercultural mediation skills. Knowledge and critical understanding of the self was the IC component most richly described within the cognitive dimension, but the category of knowledge and critical understanding of the world also contained very nuanced details.

Conversely, values rarely emerged, usually in implicit terms. Respondents seemed to be unclear about the meaning of the word 'value' and the difference between 'values' and 'attitudes': '*Respect – this is a value you must have. Without it you will never be able to try approach people, if you do not respect them. (Dima)'*.

Brigitte's words suggest that talking explicitly about values may be perceived by respondents as somewhat rhetorical: '*If we start from the assumption that human beings matter per se as people, it certainly may seem trivial, but it affects how you approach differences'*.

Table 4. Description of IC components by MIDs.

Values
- Valuing cultural diversity
  - Diversity = asset and growth;
  - Intercultural dialogue is positive;
  - Valuing human dignity
  - Respecting common humanity and emotions.

Attitudes
- Openness to cultural otherness
  - Willingness to interact with others;
  - Interest in difference;
  - No judgement;
- Interest in my multicultural identity.
  - Respect for others
  - Respecting difference/agreeing to disagree;
  - Avoiding othering/feeling superior;
  - Respecting self-identifications;
  - No intrusive questions;
- Self-efficacy
  - Most respondents feel highly interculturally competent, although improvement is always deemed possible;
  - Tolerance of ambiguity
  - All interpretations are valuable;
  - Appreciating complexity.

Skills
- Analytical and critical thinking skills
  - Ability to analyse; the pros and cons of a choice; others' cultural premises; my prejudices and media stereotypes;
- Skills of listening and observing
  - Observing others' communication styles;
  - Listening to others' viewpoint before expressing mine;
  - Finding common ground.
- Empathy
  - Understanding emotions andperspectives of others, especially ofminorities;
- Flexibility and adaptability
  - Adjusting to different environments;
  - Regulating emotions when confronting difference;
- Linguistic, communicative and plurilingual skills
  - Plurilingualism;
  - Adjusting communication & highlighting similarities;
  - Expressing my viewpoint respectfully;
  - Linguistic and intercultural mediation;
- Cooperation skills
  - Ensuring everyone has a chance to speak in a group;
  - Building compromise;
- Skills of autonomous learning
  - Studying to overcome preconceptions;
  - Going beyond ethnocentric sources of knowledge and searching for inclusive language.

Knowledge and critical understanding
- Of the self
- Awareness of:
  - My Multicultural identity and its value
  - My cultural bias and other weaknesses in intercultural exchange
- Of language and communication
  - Links between language and culture;
  - Linguistic variations and their symbolic meanings;
  - Translation implies changes in meaning;
  - Communication conventions change by group;
  - Of the world
- Culture shapes beliefs and behaviours;
  - Media can strengthen stereotypes;
  - Power dynamics shape official art and history;
  - Power structures perpetuate minorities' disadvantages;
  - Cultural/religious groups are heterogeneous and identity is fluid;
  - Culture-specific knowledge favours interaction.

Cross-cutting themes

In this section, the main cross-cutting themes that emerged in respondents' descriptions of their IC are described.

MID individuals as mirrors of contemporary societies

MIDs' identity development was seen as a mirror of the dynamics in place in a diverse society. For example, FG1 explains: '*When I approach others I have a strong desire to understand, that is [. . .] trying to understand everyday situations but also feeling the need to understand myself*'.

Respondents often referred to their inner diversity. They described it as an inherent constituent of their being MIDs and attributed it to their having developed multiple ethno-cultural selves.

The attitude towards one's internal diversity was said to mirror the one adopted in intercultural interactions. '*By self-reflecting [. . .] I learned that in reality I cannot and should not erase my diversity but I should rather enhance its value, and I think this helps you value others' diversity too. (FG2)*'.

Respondents' awareness of intercultural issues was described as the fruit of a lengthy, often harrowing process of introspection, which over time enabled them to discover, accept and value their inner diversity. Having multiple ethno-cultural selves was not viewed as an easy burden to bear, particularly whilst growing up and questioning 'who am I?'. Struggles were said to be particularly intense in Italian society, where ethno-cultural identity is often essentialised and people tend to be categorized as members of a single group. Additionally, it is difficult to accept those parts of oneself that are perceived by others as 'different', especially in contexts where little interest or respect is shown towards diversity. '*I always wanted to cancel this diversity of mine, [. . .] because usually you are taught we all have to be the same to be accepted. (FG2)*'.

Most respondents experienced, to different degrees, the suffering caused by the scarce acceptance of their difference. However, they said they could cope with negative emotions, and painful experiences became triggers for personal growth. Three elements were mentioned as important for favouring such positive reactions: exchanges with other MIDs were crucial for sharing difficult experiences and for developing awareness of their causes and possible coping strategies. Additionally, teachers or family members who encouraged them to cultivate multiple ethno-cultural belongings were helpful. Thirdly, many respondents described empowerment processes emerging from experiencing inclusive contexts, for instance attending university: '*University has certainly helped, because there you are in an environment that is a melting pot, it is a mix, you find people from all over the world. (FG1)*'.

Through these positive experiences that only concern some of the MIDs living in Italy, respondents learnt to appreciate and fully express their multiple ethno-cultural selves. Both from an individual and social perspective, dealing with inner cultural diversity meant accepting that different, equally legitimate interpretations of reality are possible and can coexist. As FG5 explains, such attitudes require readiness to question one's certainties: '*The*

fact of putting yourself out there, questioning yourself, that does a lot. [. . .] It is essential in order to open up, otherwise you cannot accept diversity'.

Respondents described their ability to look at reality from different standpoints. Such multi-perspectivity was not always an easy condition to live with, as it implied dealing with constant doubt: '*There are questions [. . .] I just can't answer because I see the two sides of the same coin and say: "What about now?". (FG2)*'

Yet, multi-perspectivity allowed for the comprehension of complexity and enhanced respondents' critical skills. Over time, they became aware that their cultural identity is fluid, indefinite, and ever-changing and accepted that their inner negotiation is ongoing. '*You must accept that you are not one definite thing [. . .], understand and know that when we ask ourselves questions we will never get to a definitive answer. (FG1)'*.

Thanks to such abilities, they felt better equipped than their contemporaries for navigating an increasingly complex reality where tolerance of ambiguity is crucial. '*Being part of the "second generation"[. . .] gives us the possibility of having a much more complex overview. [. . .] We can be a sort of bridge to the future. (FG1)'*.

Respondents repeatedly referred to having developed the ability to act as agents of change, towards a society better equipped for dealing constructively with complexity and diversity. They described this potential as the positive outcome of the deep, often excruciating process of self-scrutiny that helped them overcome traumatic experiences: '*In order to get to that type of competence we suffer a bit along the way. (FG3)'*.

Respondents argued that many MIDs cannot overcome the negative emotions linked to exclusion. These individuals do not have the opportunity to discover the value of 'being different' and experience only negative consequences: '*You grow some skills by having one foot in one culture and one in another, but it is also a burden that you carry with you. [. . .] If you can't handle the weight, you may become a "bad" person. (FG2)'*.

Such individuals were said to try to assimilate into mainstream society or self-segregate into their ethnic groups. Respondents argued that such individuals developed low levels of IC and risked poor psycho-social well-being.

Emotional alliances between cultural minorities

Respondents reported that they were able to empathize with anyone perceived as different, or partly excluded by the majority, for example newcomers, or other MIDs. They also described feeling emotionally connected to all cultural minorities, such as LGBTQI+ or disabled people, who, in their perception, experience similar problems to their own: *I see many points of disability that are in common with the condition of second generations, because in both cases there is a representation gap, [. . .] there is stereotyping, and*

dynamics – as it goes for gay people or minorities in general – are always the same. (FG4)

Affective empathy was often framed as the core of other IC components, such as openness to cultural diversity, mediation skills, cooperation skills, and respect. According to the narrations analysed, respondents tended not to be scared, but rather attracted by visible differences: they felt they had something in common with people perceived as different by mainstream society.

They reported that they often initiated interactions with newcomers or migrants in order to help them overcome negative experiences, which they or their parents had too:

At that moment I feel like the person who needs help, so if someone comes up to me. . .and instead of mocking me, gives me a hand [. . .] (FG2).

Respondents talked about their capability to encourage everyone in a group to express their viewpoint and felt they were good mediators between 'others' and mainstream society. '*Many times people who aren't able to speak Italian fluently risk getting angry, raise their voice to be understood better. . .sometimes I had to explain: "look, that man, if you speak Arabic [. . .] he is very sweet". (FG5)'.*

Many respondents expressed their self-perceived tendency to respect other people's freedom to be and live as they wish, the same way they would like others to respect their own diversity. As Bineta explains, respondents felt that encouraging intercultural dialogue required avoidance of feeling superior to others and imposing one's viewpoint: *Never consider yourself superior to others, to people who are different – this is very important, because as soon as people feel like treated as a minority they are much less willing to collaborate because they feel oppressed.*

Many experienced the negative emotions provoked by contemptuous attitudes and referred to their subsequent tendency to show appreciation and respect towards manifestations of cultural difference. Affective empathy also lays at the root of respondents' proneness to respect others' right not to manifest their differences: '*I deeply sympathize with people who are different, [. . .] who distance themselves from what is commonly defined as 'normal'. . . so . . . I always try to never put under the spotlight people who don't want to. (Bineta)'.*

Most respondents said in intercultural interaction it is essential to let people reveal their cultural distinctiveness in their own time and way. Some thought that asking respectful questions signalled an interest and appreciation of others' cultural backgrounds but underlined that such questions must follow encouragement by one's interlocutors: others' willingness to talk about their difference is not to be taken for granted. Respondents highlighted that, to be respectful, questions must avoid treating interlocutors as stereotyped or infeirorised others: *In high school people tended to focus more on my external appearance [. . .] at university*

instead they asked me other types of questions, [. . .] they didn't look at me as someone who is Chinese, they saw me as a normal person. (Jiao).

Respondents stressed that assumptions about other people's cultural belonging are problematic, as they may differ from an individual's own self-perceptions. Subsequently, respondents stressed the importance of respecting others' right to self-determine their cultural affiliations: '*It is not just about me being "Croatian or Italian", it is also about me having lived in South Africa for two years, so why can't I feel "South African" too? Why do I have to fit into people's categories? (FG1)*'.

As FG1 expressed, cultural identification was seen as fluid and self-definitions as varying across time and contexts: '*The thing is there are many different small sides of us when we interact with one another: there is always a way to feel similar or different*'.

Respondents' tendency to understand the negative emotions experienced by members of cultural minorities reinforced their willingness to promote change in a society described as scarcely inclusive and hardly ready to deal with its inner diversity. They reported their feeling luckier than many MIDs and other members of cultural minorities who did not have the opportunity to discover the value of 'being different' and expressed their desire to 'give voice' to those who lack opportunity to be heard, with a view to making society a better place.

Commitment to social change: pride or burden?

Respondents noted the discriminatory practices that limit the opportunities of people belonging to minorities. Some expressed understanding that official narratives of history and geopolitics, as well as artistic and literary canons, are strongly influenced by power dynamics and contribute to the disempowerment of minorities:

For me Eurocentrism was not even something to be questioned since there was no other centre. [. . .] It is precisely for this reason that we find ourselves [. . .] in this situation of inequality. (Bineta).

The desire to counteract such social dynamics emerged alongside the willingness to educate Italian society on the acceptance of diversity. Two clusters of IC components often emerged. One concerned respondents' efforts to contrast prejudice within themselves, with many referring to how preconceptions can influence people's perceptions and describing their tendency to analyse how their own prejudice impacts on their intercultural interactions.

Many respondents described their own willingness to overcome their preconceptions by identifying their knowledge gaps, learning new things, and changing their way of thinking:

I [. . .] saw Islam as a threat [. . .], but over time I tried to fight this somewhat closed vision [. . .]. Now my boyfriend is Muslim. (FG1).

Many reported being interested in listening to other points of view, and to suspend judgement, overcoming their preconceptions through dialogue: '*You also need to have some curiosity in. . .trying to understand things that can also seem odd or, in any case, out of place or even negative. (Henry)'*.

Respondents often referred to overcoming preconceptions around their own ethno-cultural backgrounds, particularly their heritage ones. Such processes required studying and reflecting, and were deeply entangled in appreciating one's inner diversity: '*You talk with [. . .]people who don't know Islam and live through prejudices [. . .]. But then when you educate yourself you say "man, I have what I need to be able [. . .] to tell you 'this thing here is not true' with some evidence [. . .]. I have reconsidered many things, so many! (FG5)'*.

Fighting prejudice within themselves was referred to as the prerequisite for promoting an inclusive society: '*Self-criticism is very important, [. . .] you always need to start with yourself [. . .] in order to get to the others, otherwise you can't do that. (FG5)'*.

Respondents deployed another cluster of IC components to engage in discourse with individuals who express exclusionary attitudes and to educate them to accept diversity. Respondents underlined their tendency to listen to others' viewpoints before expressing their own: *If you want to expect that the others hear you, that they hear something different you may have to say, you must be the first one to receive, to welcome, what is different from you and reaches you in any way (FG5)*

They also described their attempts to express their perspective respectfully, even when in a position of power disparity. Respondents argued that aggressive responses to exclusionary attitudes are counterproductive: *'If you express yourself badly you are wrong even if you say the right thing. (FG5)'*

They reported their effort to adopt a dialogical attitude, which is not always easy on an emotional level: '*Even when you would like to get angry and scream. . .you find yourself there having to isolate and give weight to every single word. (FG5)'*

Some respondents experienced frustrations when interacting with people who expressed closed-minded attitudes. They referred to the suffering and anger caused by assumptions about their ethno-cultural identifications, questions implying othering dynamics, and misconceptions or manifestations of contempt towards their beliefs: '*Emotions usually make you explode, because all the logic of the world won't be enough if a person annihilates what is important to you, that is your identity. (FG1)'*

However regulating emotions was described as the foundation for their attempt to educate society to the acceptance of diversity: '*If I feel this responsibility of being a 'bridge', man I have to be careful . . . I have to be careful! (FG5)*.

Many reported having developed such ability overtime, through exposure to repeated, traumatic experiences. Respondents were aware that people's

ideas are strongly influenced by the environment that surrounds them. Analysing the cultural premises that lead someone to have xenophobic or racist positions helped them regulate their emotions when exchanging with them: '*I always try to think "why do they think like this?" and tell myself because they grew up in a different environment than mine. (Dahlia)*'.

Respondents deemed dialogue to be the only way to make their voice heard. Any other attitude was deemed somehow inadequate and dysfunctional, and unable to guarantee MIDs a comfortable position in society. They believed in and expressed pride in their commitment to promote the acceptance of diversity. Yet, they described such engagement as a heavy responsibility requiring a constant control over their emotions: '*I miss that feeling of lightness, you know? That ability to say "nope, I don't give a damn". (FG4)*'.

Discussion and conclusion

All 14 components of ICBM (Barrett 2018) were discussed by the MID university students who participated in this study. Two more components emerged: autonomous learning and cooperation skills, both constituents of the framework of competence for democratic culture (Barrett et al. 2018). Thus, the pattern of IC described by MID respondents overlaps more extensively with the competence for democratic culture than the pattern described by ICBM (Barrett 2018).

The analysis shows students' heightened critical reflection on intercultural interaction and on their participation in it. Descriptions of most IC components are richly nuanced, with a special focus on openness to cultural diversity, respect, linguistic and communication skills, and knowledge of the self. Conversely, values rarely appear explicitly, which may relate to respondents' difficulty in understanding the meaning of values, or in abstracting a principle from its more concrete manifestation.

Respondents may perceive mentioning values as somewhat rhetorical and decided not to discuss it. Recognizing the value of human rights did not emerge as a constituent of IC. Rather, some respondents referred to the tensions between valuing human rights and valuing cultural diversity and reported their difficulty in asserting the inviolability of human rights in given intercultural settings.

Three thematic threads unfolded throughout the analysis. Firstly, respondents' high critical reflection over IC developed through a complex process of appreciation of their inner diversity. Such inner diversity, that can be considered as the result of a process of social construction where self-perceptions are shaped by dominant discourses, was described as an essential feature of MIDs and attributed to having developed multiple ethno-cultural selves. Having accepted and valued their hybrid identity, respondents felt prepared for dealing with

complexity and diversity, but not all MIDs have the opportunity to go through such a process. Secondly, respondents empathized with the difficulties faced by cultural minorities and shared their emotional burden. Thirdly, respondents often employed their IC to attempt to encourage the acceptance of diversity in Italian society, a civic commitment implying a strong emotional burden.

Respondents found it difficult to deal with their multiple ethno-cultural selves in the Italian context. For years, based on the expectations coming from their social environments, they felt they had to choose one of their belongings over the others. Additionally, due to their ethnic markers they suffered from being attributed cultural affiliations not corresponding to their self-perceptions and not reflecting the complexity of their life experience.

Respondents stressed the importance of avoiding reified cultural labels and of respecting individuals' self-definitions.

They saw cultural identifications and differences as fluid and context-related and argued that individuals should be free to choose and combine different belongings based on their needs in given situations (Caneva 2017; Colombo, Leonini, and Rebughini 2009).

Respondents maintained that, having multiple ethno-cultural selves, MID individuals can easily find in their repertoires aspects that relate to the experience of others. Thanks to such threads, it is possible to start a process of co-costruction of shared meanings (Holliday 2016). According to respondents, intercultural interlocutors may also bring to the fore and exchange on their perceived differences. For such exchange to occur fruitfully and harmlessly, however, people need to share similar levels of power and their differences to be recognized the same value. Minoritised people may be reluctant to display their differences when, like in the Italian context, intergroup power disparities are pronounced and being different often means being viewed as inferior" (Zotzmann 2015).

Being essentialised as 'other' causes intense pain. Suffering often leads MIDs to suppress their inner diversity. However, as shown by the MIDs involved in this study, in some cases negative emotions can be overcome by construing hybrid identities as positive, through a lengthy process of meaning construction that entails an often harrowing self-scrutiny. Factors that favour such process are family members or teachers who encourage multiple cultural belongings, exchanges with other MIDs, and experiencing inclusive contexts. Data showed that attending university has a relevant role in helping MIDs value their hybrid identities.

Thus, some MIDs have the opportunity to learn to appreciate their multiple belongings. During such process, they also become willing to engage in intercultural communication. They start valuing diversity in society and use intercultural dialogue to challenge the social representations that underpin being othered.

Difference can be turned into a gift: the possibility to look at reality from a position where the power dynamics that reproduce the dichotomy between superior normalities and inferior anomalies are visible, together with their noxious effects. Under certain conditions, MIDs grown up in Italy can re-signify their liminality as a training ground where they experience more intensely than their contemporaries the complexities of intercultural encounters, becoming equipped for the challenges posed by increasingly diversifying societies. Thus, otherness becomes an agentive condition that allows for creating new knowledges and counter-discourses on diversity and for harnessing novel cohabitations with viability for everyone (Ferri 2020).

Respondents saw a common denominator between the experiences of all minorities living in Italy – ethnic and other groups such as disabled people or LGBTQI+. They felt close to the suffering of all those constructed as different and, having developed the competences to challenge negative views on cultural diversity, felt a responsibility to do so. They play such a role by engaging in dialogue with people with scant IC, which entails exposing themselves to the suffering caused by exclusionary attitudes. Learning to cope with such pain is perhaps the only way to maintain a constructive relationship with their life context.

After years of 'unavoidable training', respondents have learnt to regulate the negative emotions provoked by aprioristic labelling and lack of recognition, and to maintain a dialogical attitude towards people less open to diversity, with a view to educating them. However, controlling their own emotions and responding dialogically to microaggressions represents a heavy emotional burden. Respondents tend to accept such a burden without question, as the inevitable price to pay in order to build a space of agency within Italian society and to foster a better future for themselves and other minorities.

There is a need for further research in this area. The issue of values was barely touched within MIDs narrations, and this does require particular attention. Findings suggest that growing up as a member of an ethnocultural minority in a society barely open to diversity can offer the potential to develop a heightened awareness of intercultural communication. The recruitment mechanisms adopted, based on a self-selection of people interested in intercultural issues, may have led to such views being overrepresented. Involving different groups would advance understanding of how and to what extent being a MID influences developing IC. Comparisons with people with no migration background, but also between distinct categories of MIDs, would be insightful. Future studies should move beyond a focus on university students, whose way of facing intercultural interaction may be influenced by the successful and empowering educational outcomes achieved, and could compare MIDs from more and less visible minorities, or from specific local contexts with different attitudes towards

diversity. Finally, descriptions of IC emerged from interviews and focus groups should be combined with ethnographic observation of actual intercultural encounters, to capture the possible gap between self-description and enacted behaviours.

Note

1. In tables and interview excerpts respondents' identities are concealed by pseudonyms.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my gratitude to the university students who took part in the study and who made it possible by sharing their personal experiences. I am thankful to Jenny Phillimore, the editorial team of this journal, and the anonymous reviewers, whose insightful suggestions meaningfully improved the quality of this work. I would like to thank Sian Lawrence and Chiara Formichi for their proofreading, and the research team of the Institute for Research into Superdiversity at the University of Birmingham for the informal exchanges that inspired some of the ideas expressed in this paper.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the European Commission, Horizon 2020 program, Marie Sklodowska-Curie IF funding scheme. Research Project; Migrant descendants' intercultural competence and their recognition in the English and Italian labour market, grant number 841716 and grant number 874979 (special needs support grant).

ORCID

Annavittoria Sarli http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8240-3791

References

Anthias, F. 2002. "Where Do I Belong? Narrating Collective Identity and Translocational Positionality." *Ethnicities* 2 (4): 491–514. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468796802002040301 .

Antonsich, M. 2010. "Searching for Belonging – an Analytical Framework." *Geography Compass* 4 (6): 644–659. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-8198.2009.00317.x.

Barrett, M. 2018. "How Schools Can Promote the Intercultural Competence of Young People." *European Psychologist* 23 (1): 93–104. https://doi.org/10.1027/1016-9040/a000308.

Barrett, M., L. de Bivar-Black, M. Byram, J. Faltýn, L. Gudmundson, H. Van't Land, C. Lenz, and P. Mompoint-Gaillard, et P. Al 2018. *Reference framework of competences for democratic culture*. Council of Europe, Strasbourg. https://www.coe.int/en/web/campaign-free-to-speak-safe-to-learn/reference-framework-of-competences-for-democratic-culture.

Braun, V., and V. Clarke. 2006. "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology." *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3 (2): 77–101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa .

Byram, B., M. Ipgrave, R. Jackson, and M. Mendez-Garcia. 2009. *Autobiography of Intercultural Encounters; Context, Concepts and Theories*. Strasbourg: Language Policy Division, Council of Europe Publishing. https://openresearch.surrey.ac.uk/esploro/outputs/book/Autobiography-of-Intercultural-Encounters-Context-Concepts/99516909202346#file-0.

Caneva, E. 2017. "Identity Processes in the Global Era: The Case of Young Immigrants Living in Italy." *Journal of Youth Studies* 20 (1): 79–93. https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2016.1184240 .

Chen, L., and G. C. Feng. 2017. "Host Environment, Host Communication, and Satisfaction with Life: A Study of Hong Kong Ethnic Minority Members." *Communication Research* 44 (4): 487–511. https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650215570655 .

Christmas, C. 2010. "Assessing Intercultural Experience: Differences in Biculturalism, Intercultural Sensitivity, and Cognitive Flexibility Among Latino Immigrants." *Master's Theses* 152. Liberty University, USA. https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/masters/152/.

Colombo, E., L. Leonini, and P. Rebughini. 2009. "Different but Not Stranger: Everyday Collective Identifications Among Adolescent Children of Immigrants in Italy." *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 35 (1): 37–59. https://doi.org/10.1080/13691830802489101.

Ferri, G. 2020. "Difference, Becoming and Rhizomatic Subjectivities Beyond 'Otherness: A Post-Human Framework for Intercultural Communication." *Language and Intercultural Communication* 20 (5): 408–418. https://doi.org/10.1080/14708477.2020.1774598.

Fondazione Intercultura. Trimestrale Intercultura No. 99. Bilancio Sociale 2019/20. 2020. https://www.fondazioneintercultura.org/_files/uploads/trimestrale_intercultura_n99_2020.pdf .

Foundation, O. 2022. *Migranti. Gli stranieri nelle scuole Italiane*. [Document Accessedonline only, Friday January 21, 2022]. https://www.openpolis.it/gli-stranieri-nelle-scuole-italiane/ .

Frisina, A., and S. Agyei Kyeremeh. 2022. "Music and Words Against Racism: A Qualitative Study with Racialized Artists in Italy." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 45 (15): 2913–2933. https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2022.2046841 .

Granata, A. 2012. "Nuovi italiani, generatori di intercultura." *Studium Educationis* 13 (1): 51–61. Classe A, settore 11/D1. https://ojs.pensamultimedia.it/index.php/studium/article/view/580.

Holliday, A. 2016. "Revisiting Intercultural Competence: Small Culture Formation on the Go Through Threads of Experience." *International Journal of Bias, Identity & Diversities in Education* 1 (2): 1–14. https://doi.org/10.4018/IJBIDE.2016070101.

ISTAT (Istituto Nazionale di Statistica). 2016. Annuario Statistico Italiano. https://www.istat.it/it/archivio/194422.
ISTAT (Istituto Nazionale di Statistica). 2020. Identità e percorsi di integrazione delle seconde generazioni in Italia. https://www.istat.it/it/archivio/240930.
Manço, A. A., and V. Franchi. 2002. Compétences interculturelles des jeunes issus de l'immigration : perspectives théoriques et pratiques. *Institut de Recherche, Formation et Action sur les Migrations (IRFAM)*. Paris: L'Harmattan.
Mantel, C. 2020. "Being a Teacher with a So-Called 'Immigrant background': Challenges of Dealing with Social Boundaries." *Intercultural Education* 31 (2): 173–189. https://doi.org/10.1080/14675986.2019.1702291.
Marinaro, I. C., and J. Walston. 2010. "Italy's 'Second generations': The Sons and Daughters of Migrants." *Bulletin of Italian Politics* 2 (1): 5–19. https://www.gla.ac.uk/media/Media_165443_smxx.pdf .
Morando, S. J. 2013. "Paths to Mobility: The Mexican Second Generation at Work in a New Destination." *The Sociological Quarterly* 54 (3): 367–398. https://doi.org/10.1111/tsq.12019 .
Padilla, A. M. 2006. "Bicultural Social Development." *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences* 28 (4): 467–497. https://doi.org/10.1177/0739986306294255.
Pesarini, A., and G. Tintori. 2020. "Mixed Identities in Italy: A Country in Denial." In *The Palgrave International Handbook of Mixed Racial and Ethnic Classification*, edited by Z. L. Rocha and P. J. Aspinall, 349–365. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-22874-3_19.
Sadjed, A., A. Sprung, and B. Kukovetz. 2015. "The Use of Migration-Related Competencies in Continuing Education: Individual Strategies, Social and Institutional Conditions." *Studies in Continuing Education* 37 (3): 286–301. https://doi.org/10.1080/0158037X.2015.1066768 .
Sarli, A., and J. Phillimore. 2022. "The Intercultural Competence of Second-Generation Individuals: Knowledge Gaps and Steps Forward." *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 88:11–21. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijintrel.2022.03.004.
Scarabello, S., and M. de Witte. 2019. "Afroeuropean Modes of Self-Making: Afro-Dutch and Afro-Italian Projects Compared." *Open Cultural Studies* 3 (1): 317–331. https://doi.org/10.1515/culture-2019-0028.
Spitzberg, B. H., and G. Changnon. 2009. "Conceptualizing Intercultural Competence." In *The SAGE Handbook of Intercultural Competence*, edited by D. K. Deardorff, 2–52. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc.
Zotzmann, K. 2015. "The Impossibility of Defining and Measuring Intercultural Competencies." In *Resistance to the Known*, edited by D. Rivers, 168–191. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137345196_8.