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Unfolding the concept of person by verbal abuse

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Abstract

Examined the prevalence of an interpersonal device, namely insult types, in a collectivistic and individualistic cultural context as an index of how the concept of person is culturally constructed. Insults were divided into three general categories, individualistic (those that refer directly to a person), relational (those that refer to a person and his/her significant relations) and swear-words. An examination of the insults subjects produced in Catania, southern Italy (collectivistic), Trieste, northern Italy (individualistic) and Bologna, central Italy, partially confirmed the hypothesized differences in types of verbal abuse. In the collectivistic context instances of verbal abuse are significantly more likely to be directed to a person and his/her relations than in the individualistic context. The social psychological implications of these findings are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The study reported here investigates variations in the cultural conception of a central social and psychological category, namely the 'category of person' (Mauss, 1933; Sampson, 1985). In order to do this we introduce the empirical examination of verbal abuse as a domain of social discourse which provides a theoretical and methodological vehicle to highlight cultural variations in the 'category of person'. We shall start by briefly elaborating on the notion of 'person' and then examine the relationship between 'verbal abuse' as an interpersonal device and the cultural construction of the category of person.

As Triandis, Bontempo, Villareal, Asai and Lucca (1988) point out in their recent

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paper, one of the possible ways of coming to social psychological terms with a fuzzy concept such as culture is by examining what they term 'determining dimensions of cultural variation' (p. 323). One such dimension on the cultural level is collectivism versus individualism (Hofstede, 1980). The social psychological significance of this dimension is to be found in the differences of the person's relationship to the group or in the way identities are embedded in social relationships. Triandis (1988) in contrasting collectivism to individualism points out that in collectivism personal goals are subordinate to ingroup goals, greater stress is put on the social norms and duties; the types of beliefs are consensual to the in group; there is higher readiness towards ingroup cooperation, and emotional attachment to the ingroup is strong, *inter alia*. Other comparable distinctions are made with respect to differences in the types of social activities whereby cultures that are predominantly collectivist (e.g. Chinese) display more 'situation centred' rather than 'individual centred' activities (Hsu, 1981); or a stronger 'social orientation' than an 'individual orientation' (Yang, 1981).

One psychological translation of the cultural dimension of collectivism–individualism has been to examine it as an individual difference variable, namely allocentrism — idiocentrism (e.g. Triandis, Leung, Villareal and Clack, 1985; Triandis *et al.*, 1988). Another psychological implication is differences in everyday social interaction styles. Wheeler, Reis and Bond (1989) demonstrate that in Hong Kong, a predominantly collectivist culture, interactions between students were longer but fewer with a greater percentage of group and task interactions compared to students in the U.S.

It has also been shown that variations in cultural conceptions of the person are associated with differences in social-cognitive processes. Stronger situational attributions are made in societies where the social role is treated as the primary normative unit and reference in comparison with societies that have an 'individual-centred' emphasis where dispositional attributions are more prominent (*cf.* Miller, 1984; Shweder and Miller, 1985; Shweder and Bourne, 1985). For instance, Miller (1984) reports a comparative study of the types of attributions Indian and American adults and children make for both pro-social and deviant behaviours. She demonstrates that Americans at older ages utilize more dispositional explanations and fewer contextual ones than Hindus. Her developmental study shows that whereas American subjects increasingly use dispositional explanations the reverse is the case for Hindus. These results illustrate the differential impact of cultural conceptions of the person on the attributional process.

A fundamental aspect of this cultural distinction between collectivism and individualism is that it entails differences in the cultural construction of the person. For instance, Kon (1984) argues that in the case of traditional Japan, the category of the person and its assessment is related to its area of action. Personality, in our Western sense is not valued but the person is seen as duties and responsibilities resulting from being part of a community, or a family, where the self is not separable from the role. This type of conception appears to have prevailed in medieval Europe (*cf.* Cherry, 1967). There are diverse arguments originating from literary (e.g. Weintraub, 1978), philosophical, and social historical sources (e.g. Foucault, 1970, 1986) that suggest the origins of Western individualism to emerge around the 16th and 17th centuries (see also Sampson, 1989). The emergence of a Western conception of the person centred on individualism is seen among other things to be linked

to the emergence of social mobility, the growth of a bourgeois middle class, the emergence of increasingly secular attitudes and questionings which arose with the becoming of 'science'. As Geertz (1979) points out: 'The Western conception of the person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic centre of awareness, emotion, judgment, and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively against other such wholes and against a social and natural background is, however incorrigible it may seem to us, a rather peculiar idea within the context of the world's cultures' (p. 229).

One of the ways in which one can examine the cultural construction of the category of the person is to investigate those everyday practices in social interaction which question or challenge what it means to be a person. The prototype of such social practice is verbal abuse which involves denial of what is near and dear to a person. Thus, verbal abuse can be psychologically revealing since it enables one to examine those aspects of the person which are culturally so critical that their denial removes a central feature of the category of person prevailing in the culture. If it is the case that in individualistic cultures the person is central as an individual then the types of verbal abuse should predominantly be directed to the person as the singular object of abuse irrespective of the types of insult employed (e.g. psychological, sexual, animal names, etc.) by that culture. In contrast, for collectivist cultures where the central feature of the category of the person is defined by the relations this person has to the ingroup (which could be actual group membership, kin, etc.) a distinctive feature of the types of verbal abuse should be references to the person's culturally significant relations. That is, one should be able to distinguish between individualistic and relational (or collectivist) verbal insults as a function of the orientation that is dominant in the culture.

One should not confuse the type of argument advanced above with questions of the strategic use of verbal abuse in discourse (e.g. Kockman, 1972; Labov, 1972; Dundes, Leach, Özkök, 1972; *inter alia*) or questions about the origins of insults. There are different potential explanations as to why specific objects, terms or phrases become verbal abuse (*cf.* Douglas, 1966; Leach, 1976), but the origins of the language of obscenity is not the question here. What is relevant is to some extent the type of verbal abuse in different cultures. As Leach (1964) points out 'Broadly speaking, the language of obscenity falls into three categories: (1) dirty words — usually referring to sex and excretion; (2) blasphemy and profanity; (3) animal abuse — in which a human being is equated with an animal . . .' (p. 28).

Although this type of classification is useful for analytic purposes, each of the types mentioned by Leach can occur both in an individualistic and collectivistic form (e.g. animal abuse referring to the person versus animal abuse referring to the person and their relatives). While the sociolinguistic and anthropological literature is of interest the central issue here is different. In cultures where a collectivist category of the person is dominant verbal abuse will involve relational references, that is an insult hurled at a person will not only be directed to the person, but also entail their kin or group. In contrast, in cultures where an individualistic concept of the person dominates the types of insults will in the main be directed towards the person as an individual. Obviously, certain types of insults that are individualistic and directed to the person implicitly refer to a person's relationship to others such as references to bad manners or ill conduct. Others, however are explicitly individualistic such as denying a person intellectual abilities (e.g. cretin, imbecile, etc.). In

the research we report below we adopted a conservative strategy of classifying these types of verbal abuse as individualistic, although one might expect variations across collectivistic and individualistic cultures on these types of instances of insults. That is, one would expect insults that are explicitly directed to a person (e.g. abilities) to be more pronounced in an individualistic context than a collectivistic context. For purposes of completeness in collecting verbal abuse, we also inquired about swear-words in our study. Obviously, this category was not central to the hypotheses under examination because this type of abuse does not entail the category of person as such.

To sum up, we would like to propose that the examination of the prevalence of different types of verbal abuse can provide a general methodological entry to the examination of the cultural constitution of the category of the person. The general hypothesis we advance is the following: In collectivistic cultures verbal abuse that is typically relational, namely involving kin or group membership, will be more pronounced in contrast to individualistic cultures where verbal abuse that is directed to the person only will be more prominent.

To examine this hypothesis we designed a study investigating the types of insults that can be found in three regions of Italy, northern, central and southern Italy. In southern Italy the dominant cultural orientation is a collectivist one and the status of the person is generally a dependent one. In large part this is seen in the reliance upon a traditional family form. The person is identified in terms of affiliations with specific social groups and their family (cf. Galtung, 1971; Schneider and Schneider, 1976). In the north, in contrast, due in large part to northern European influence and high degree of industrialization, the conception of the person is predominantly an individualistic one. Thus we choose three samples from three cities, namely Catania, Bologna and Trieste and predicted that relational or collectivistic insults would be more prominent in Catania (south) than Trieste (north), with Bologna occupying an intermediate position between the two, in particular due to migration to Bologna from both south and north. We are not claiming that within a culture both types of concepts of person cannot coexist depending on the pragmatic contexts. We obviously did not expect to find exclusively relational types of verbal abuse in one community and individualistic ones in another. Indeed, given that Italy is exposed to common media (TV, radio, national newspapers) one would expect both types of insults to exist side by side. It is their relative frequency by city that is in question. One of the aims of our study is to illustrate this point.

METHOD

Subjects

Ninety subjects (38 males and 52 females) participated in this study on an unpaid voluntary basis. They were selected from three different towns in three different regions of Italy. Thirty were recruited from a northern university, Trieste, 30 from a southern university at Catania, Sicily and the remaining 30 from Bologna University. The student populations in northern and southern Italy are known to be composed relatively homogeneously from the local regions, whereas Bologna has a high degree of migration and has a more mixed student population.

Procedure

Subjects were contacted in small groups and handed out a questionnaire which contained the following instructions: 'We are developing an anthology of the different swear-words and insults that are available in different cultures. In this work we would like to collect as exhaustively as possible the insults and swear-words that people use in Italian. We would therefore like to ask you to help us by listing all the insults and swear-words that you can think of. Please help us by listing all the terms that come into your mind, irrespective of what you personally think about the use of these words. In writing down the insults and swear-words please include any that you have heard of or know people to use. It is very important for us to have as exhaustive a list as possible. Your information will remain confidential'. They then had a lined whole page to write the insults and swear-words that came into their mind.

We choose such an operant method instead of a respondent method (*cf.* Klinger, 1977; McClelland, 1984) because it is a more suitable method in the examination of cultural constructs. However, one might regard this research strategy as eliciting insults that subjects know of, but which are not in general use in their own cultural context. Thus, subjects from the south, for instance, may generate individualistic insults because they know of their existence but in fact never use them. However, such a strategy provides a more conservative test of the general hypothesis giving a better indication of its strength.

The independent variable

The independent variable consisted of the type of City, namely Trieste versus Bologna versus Catania.

The coding

To code the insults we derived a category system which consisted of three broad categories: (1) individualistic insults; (2) relational insults; and (3) swear-words. By and large, the derivation of the subcategories was guided by the available anthropological literature on the subject (e.g. Leach, 1964, 1976; *inter alia*). The taxonomy for the content analysis was as follows.

Individualistic insults

The type of verbal abuse involved here consists primarily in the denial of 'normal' personal properties, health, abilities and physiognomic features, etc.

Insults involving denial of psychological properties Insults involving the ascription of negative intellectual abilities (e.g. stupido — stupid, cretino — cretin, deficiente — imbecile).

Insults involving denial of physical features and health (a) Insults concerning negative physical features (e.g. bruttone — you are incredibly ugly; ciccione — you are fucking fat, racchia). (b) Ill omens and wishes regarding health (e.g. che ti venga un colpo — I wish you an accident; che ti venga un cancro — I wish you a cancer; va a morire ammazzato — I hope you will be murdered).

Insults involving civil conduct These refer to transgressions of 'good manners' (e.g. maleducato — ill-bred; screanzato — ill-mannered; scostumato — uncivil).

Insults involving references to the boundaries between the normal and abnormal (a) Insults implying analogies between the insulted person and domestic animals (e.g. porco — swine; vacca — cow; troia — pig). (b) Insults referring to excreta/dirtiness (e.g. merda — shit; stronzo — pile of shit; cesso — cesspit). (c) Insults implying adjectives stemming from 'dirtiness' with sexual reference (e.g. sborone, spruzzone, sporcaccione — all these concern the activity of ejaculating and dirtiness associated with it).

Sexual insults (a) Insults concerning sexual organs (e.g. cazzo — prick; figa — cunt; culo — ass). (b) Insults concerning sexual activities (e.g. vaffanculo — fuck off; succhiamelo — suck my prick; va a fare delle seghe — go and masturbate). (c) Insults implying adjectives or nouns stemming from sexual activities/organs (e.g. leccaculo — rimmer; bocchinara — sucker; segaiolo — wanker).

Relational insults

(a) Relational insults expressing incestuous relationships (e.g. va in mona di tua madre, va in figa di tua madre, leccacazzo di tuo padre — respectively: go and fuck your mother, go and lick the prick of your father).

(b) Relational sexual insults directed to the target person and one or more of his/her relatives (e.g. vaffanculo te a 36 dei tuoi parenti, bastardo, finocchio te e tuo padre — fuck off you and 36 of your relatives, bastard, you are queer and so is your father).

(c) Relational insults implying bad wishes to the target person and one or more of his/her relatives (e.g. a li mortacci tui, che ti venga un cancro a te e a tutta la razza tua —, che venga un colpa a te e a tutta la razza tua — go and see your fucking dead relatives, I wish a cancer on you and on all your relatives, I wish an accident on you and on your family).

(d) Relational sexual insults directed to one or more persons related to the target (e.g. tua madre puttana, la figa di tua sorella, tuo padre frocio — your mother is whore, your sister's cunt, your father is queer).

(e) Relational insults implying analogies between a relative of the target and domestic animals (e.g. quella troia di tua madre, figlio di troia, quella vacca di tua sorella — son of a bitch, your mother is a sow, your sister is a cow).

(f) Relational insults referring to group membership. The reference is to the group or category the target person belongs to; sometimes it is preceded with a negative adjective (e.g. sporco ebreo, comunista, marocchino — dirty Jew, Communist, Moroccan).

Swear-words

(a) Swear-words involving religious figures (e.g. porco Dio, puttana Madonna, Dio cane — God is a pig, the Virgin Mary is a whore, God is a dog).

(b) Swear-words that are not explicitly religious but refer to religious figures (e.g. puttana Eva, cazzo di Budda, mondo boia — Eve is a whore, the prick of Budda, damn it all).

(c) Swear-words referring to sexual nouns (e.g. cazzarola, che palle, che maroni — bum, balls).

The coding was blind to conditions and undertaken by the second author along with another native speaker. This involved entering for each subject the number (frequency) of insults or swear-words mentioned under each category. Intercoder reliability was more than 92 per cent. Disagreements were resolved by discussion.

RESULTS

We had an average of 17.78 insults and swear-words reported per subject. As one may expect, males reported a significantly higher number of insults and swear-words ($X = 19.32$) than females ($X = 16.65$), $F(1,84) = 9.58$; $p < 0.0005$. There were no significant differences between the cities in terms of the average number of insults and swear-words, $F(2,84) = 0.12$, nor was there a significant interaction between subject gender and city. Since our main interest is in the regional differences with respect to individualistic and relational insults we shall in the following analyses ignore the gender factor.

Relative proportion of individualistic insults versus relational insults versus swear-words

A preliminary analysis of variance was undertaken to examine the general hypothesis that there should be a systematic difference in relational insults as a function of region. The data entered in all the analyses were arcsin transformed proportions. We utilized this data form because we were interested in the proportion of relational and individualistic insults that subjects produced rather than mere frequencies. Since the main hypothesis is that there should be a monotonic relationship between frequency of type of insult category and city we performed three independent test of polynomial trends on the overall proportions of relational insults, individualistic insults, and swear-words respectively, as proportions of the total number of insults mentioned. The expectation was a significant linear trend term for relational insults, which was confirmed, $F(1,87) = 5.42$; $p < 0.03$. We found no significant differences or trends for individualistic insults, $F(2,87) < 1.00$. Furthermore, we found a significant effect, $F(2,87) = 3.76$; $p < 0.02$ for swear-words. As can be seen from Figure 1 below the proportion of relational insults is highest in the southern region, intermediary in the Bologna region and lowest in the northern region. Additionally, we found a significantly higher proportion of swear-words in Trieste, compared to the rest of the sample.

Subanalysis of individualistic insults

Although there were no differences between the regions in terms of overall proportion of individualistic insults, we expected that some specific types of individualistic insults would vary as a function of city, in particular insults directed at intellectual functions, and psychological properties of persons. The main reason for this is that a category such as ability is probably one of the most prototypic individualistic insult categories.

	Catania	Bologna	Trieste
Relational Ins.	18,82	14,74	11,93
Swear-words	4,88	4,88	10,89

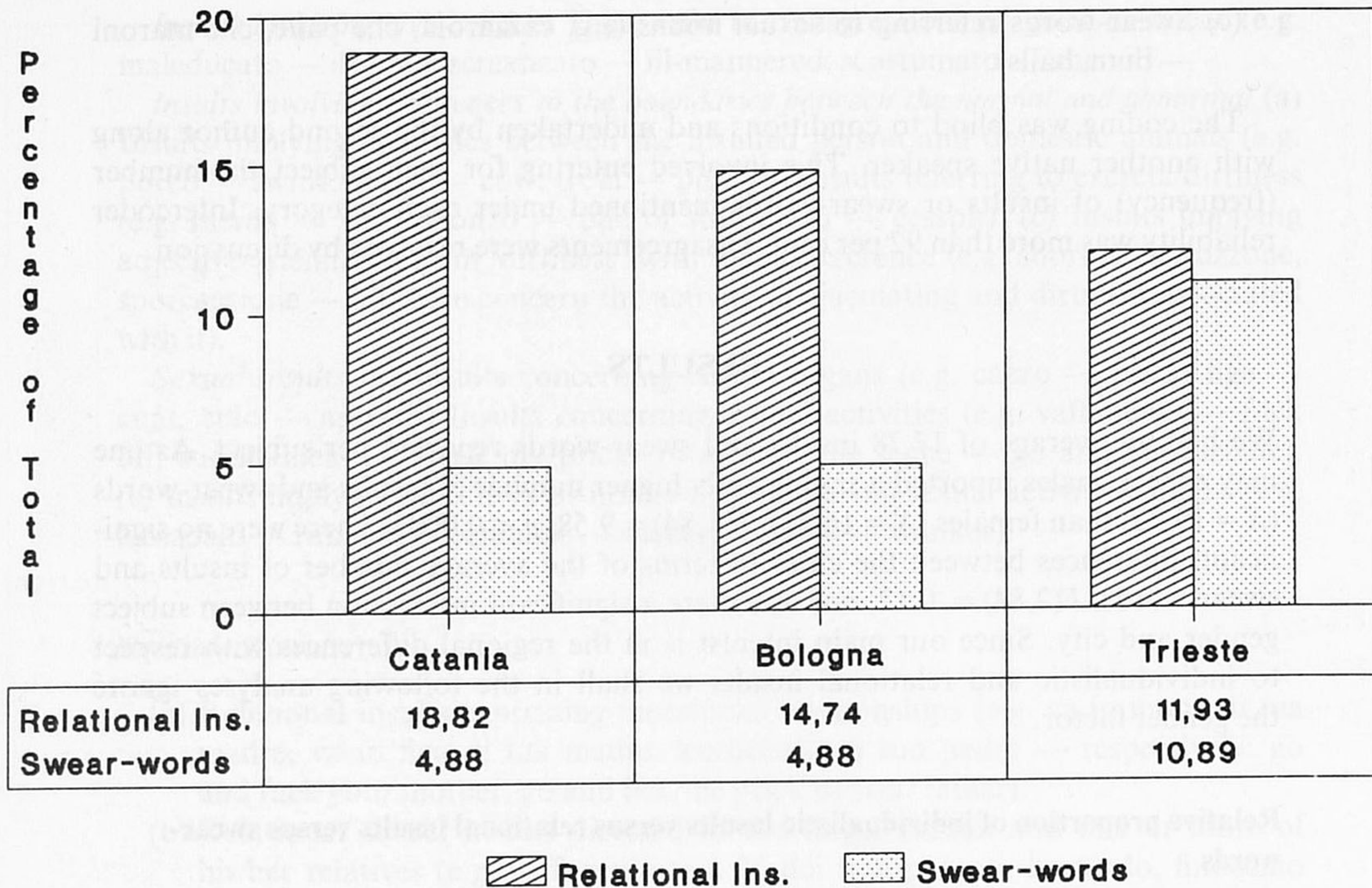▨ Relational Ins.   ▨ Swear-words

Figure 1. Types of insults/swear-words as a function of city

That is, abilities do not contain any implied relational features in contrast to a category such as bad manners which although without explicit relational reference is nevertheless about interpersonal conduct and to that extent not as prototypic as the ability category. We therefore conducted a multivariate analysis of variance for individualistic insults with the 10 categories as repeated measures. The multivariate effect was significant, $F(16,162) = 3.25$; $p < 0.001$, with six significant univariate terms, which we discuss in turn: (1) Denial of intellectual abilities yielded a significant linear term, $F(1,87) = 6.32$; $p < 0.02$, suggesting that it is mainly in the north (Trieste) that these terms are used and less so in central and southern Italy (see Figure 2). (2) Ascription of bad manners yielded a significant main effect, $F(2,87) = 3.68$; $p < 0.05$, suggesting that this type of insult is used mainly in the south (see Figure 2). (3) Excreta as an individualistic subcategory yielded a significant linear term, $F(1,87) = 18.36$; $p < 0.001$, suggesting that there is an increase in usage of these insults from the south, to the central, to the northern region of Italy. (4) The reference to sexual organs subcategory yielded a significant main effect, $F(2,87) = 7.17$; $p < 0.002$, suggesting that this group of insults are more prominent in Bologna compared to the other two regions. (5) The use of the sexual adjectives subcategory was found to have a significant linear trend, being a category most prominently mentioned in Catania, then in Bologna and least frequently in Trieste.

Analyses involving subcategories of relational insults and swear-words were not undertaken mainly because of the small numbers that fall into the subcategories that make it difficult to perform uni- and multivariate analyses.

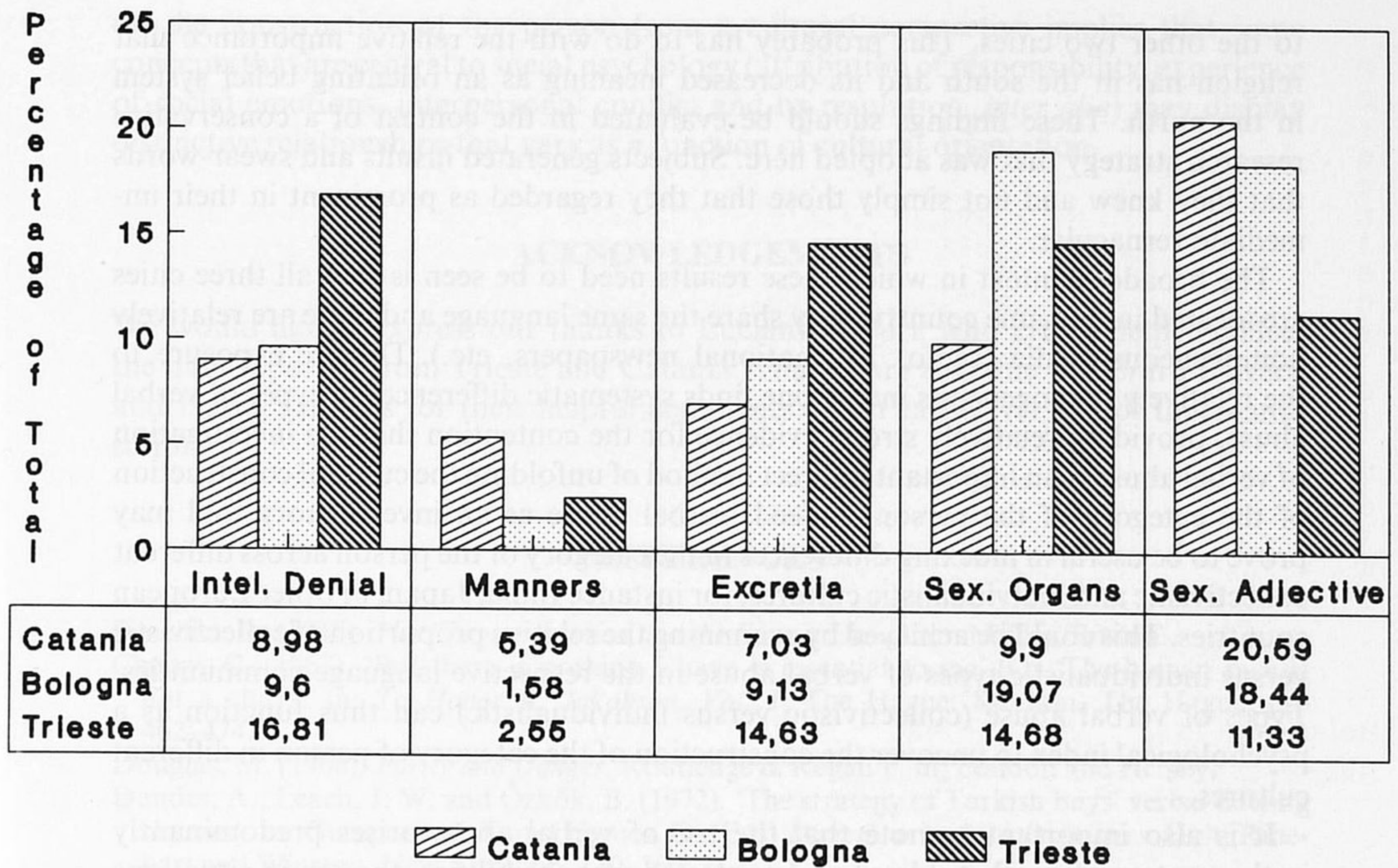|	Intel. Denial	Manners	Excretia	Sex. Organs	Sex. Adjective
Catania	8,98	5,39	7,03	9,9	20,59
Bologna	9,6	1,58	9,13	19,07	18,44
Trieste	16,81	2,55	14,63	14,68	11,33

Catania ▨ Bologna ▦ Trieste ▧

Figure 2. Variations in individualistic insult subcategories as a function of city

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The findings of our study lend support to the contention that in a cultural context where a collectivist orientation is more dominant (i.e. Catania) there are more relational verbal abuses available than in a cultural context that is more individualistic (i.e. Trieste). Although there is no apparent and significant difference in individualistic insults overall we nevertheless find systematic differences of particular subcategories of individualistically orientated insults as a function of the cultural context of the cities. These differences suggest that insults involving denial of highly individualistic properties such as intellectual abilities are less frequent in the south and more prominent in the north. However, interestingly the availability of sexual adjectives is more prominent in the south than the north as is verbal abuse referring to manners. Certainly, the latter involves implicit references to the inability of dealing with social relations. It may be for this reason that these are significantly more prominent in the south. It is also worth considering a further factor not controlled in this study which may have contributed to the high overall proportion of individualistic insults. The availability of insult type may be a function of social class. A dimension such as collectivism–individualism can be expected to covary with social class such that more middle class or highly educated individuals are also more likely to share in an individualistic culture. The fact that our subjects came from a university environment may thus be regarded as contributing to the relatively high proportion of individualistic insults.

Somewhat incidentally for the central ideas under examination in this paper, we also find that swear-words are significantly more frequent in Trieste in contrast

to the other two cities. This probably has to do with the relative importance that religion has in the south and its decreased meaning as an orienting belief system in the north. These findings should be evaluated in the context of a conservative research strategy that was adopted here. Subjects generated insults and swear-words that they knew and not simply those that they regarded as prominent in their immediate vernacular.

The broader context in which these results need to be seen is that all three cities are located in the same country; they share the same language and there are relatively homogeneous media (radio, TV, national newspapers, etc.). Despite exposure to the relatively homogeneous media one finds systematic differences in types of verbal abuse, providing relatively strong evidence for the contention that the investigation of verbal abuse is an important indirect method of unfolding the cultural construction of the category of the person. Indeed, verbal abuse as an investigatory tool may prove to be useful in indexing differences in the category of the person across different collectivistic and individualistic cultures, for instance India, Japan, or other European countries. This could be achieved by examining the relative proportion of collectivistic versus individualistic types of verbal abuse in the respective language communities. Types of verbal abuse (collectivistic versus individualistic) can thus function as a psychological index to uncover the construction of the category of person in different cultures.

It is also important to note that the use of verbal abuse arises predominantly in the context of conflict, blame and contested responsibilities, though in situations involving strong emotions or emotion repertoires. One of the potential implications of the work we report here concerns differences between collectivistic and individualistic cultures with respect to 'syndromes' of social psychological variables operating in situations involving conflict and social transgressions. In collectivistic cultures where relational insults prevail one would also expect responsibility and blame to be shared collectively. For instance, consider, quite independently of the issue of verbal insults, the reactions of a family and relatives upon discovering that their unmarried daughter is pregnant within a collectivistic versus individualistic community. One would expect blame, responsibility, and shame to be shared in a collectivistic community to a degree that would be unimaginable in an individualistic community, where guilt would replace the collectivistic emotion of shame. Indeed, the earlier anthropological distinction between guilt and shame cultures (e.g. Benedict, 1946; Mead, 1937; *inter alia*) interfaces neatly with the distinction between the two cultural orientations discussed here. In collectivistic cultures the general expectation would be that in cases of social transgressions responsibility would be shared by members of the ingroup, that the emotions that are experienced as a consequence of a social transgression would be more shame-orientated rather than guilt-orientated, whereas in individualistic cultures the expectation would be that both responsibility and emotion would be centred upon the individual. Similarly, blame and blame ascriptions would be expected to vary along the cultural dimension of individualism versus collectivism. The interlacing of distinctive cognitive, emotional and behavioural repertoires as a function of distinctive cultural orientations is what we refer to here as different 'syndromes'.

Thus, an examination of the specific issue of verbal abuse, which is used as an index of differences in the cultural construction of the category of the person is also related to a number of interpersonal, cognitive and emotional differences. Work

on the construction of the person from a cultural perspective implies that some concepts that are central to social psychology (attribution of responsibility, experience of social emotions, interpersonal conflict and its resolution, *inter alia*) may display distinctive relationships that vary as a function of cultural orientation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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