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## Portrait values, Similarity in aspects of everyday life, Self and Group representations in refugees asylum seekers

Elisabetta Sagone<sup>a\*</sup>, Maria Elvira De Caroli<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Educational Processes, University of Catania, 95124 Catania, Italy

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### Abstract

The study explored in refugees seeking asylum in Italy the value priorities, the perceived similarity in various aspects of everyday life between their own people and the Italians, and the Self-Group representations. Portrait value questionnaire, perceived similarity scale, and semantic differential technique to analyze the representation of Self, the Italians and their own people were used. Refugees have considered highly important the values of security, tradition, followed by benevolence; they expressed high levels of similarity between Italians and their own people in occupational and cultural aspects; they showed a good representation of Future Self and a more positive representation of their own people than that of the Italians.

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**Keywords:** Refugees, values, similarity, actual and future self representation.

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### 1. Introduction

The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees of the United Nations has defined *refugee* as “a person who was allowing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his [or her] nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail him [her] self of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his [or her] former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it” (2002, p.630). The specific condition of *asylum seekers* has characterized the status of people who made themselves known to the authorities and exercised the legal right to apply for asylum according to Convention. In Italy, recent indications from the Report Sprar (2010-2011) -Protection System for Asylum Seekers and Refugees- pointed out that the current number of beneficiaries of the right of asylum is equal to 6900 (only for Sicily, 807 refugees mainly from Somalia, Eritrea, Afghanistan, Nigeria, and Iraq).

The issue of refugees asylum seekers is considered one of the most important problems of social policy in relation to their “vulnerability” as immigrants. The break up of existing relationships with their own social background, generated by migration in foreign countries to seek asylum, is likely to produce both positive and negative effects: (i) the loss of social identity, deriving from the belonging to own ethnic group (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and the possible construction of a common in-group identity (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000; Dovidio, Gaertner,

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\* Elisabetta Sagone. Tel.: +39-095-2508021; fax: +39-095-2508070

E-mail address: [esagone@unict.it](mailto:esagone@unict.it)

& Saguy, 2009), (ii) the forced inclusion in different cultural contexts with the consequent assimilation or integration of values and beliefs on everyday life domains (Roccas & Schwartz, 1993), (iii) the reduced social distance and the positive ethnic attitudes towards members of out-group through the intergroup contact (see Allport, 1954; Brewer, 1999) and so on.

This complex process of “psychological and structural settlement” in a new country has been always correlated to the similarity-attraction paradigm (Byrne, 1971; Brown & Abrams, 1986): individuals are attracted to the others because they recognize similarities between themselves and the others and are more likely to get along with others like themselves (also, in multicultural contexts: see Osbeck, Moghaddam & Perreault, 1997) and to have more positive interactions and more effective collaborations than perceived dissimilar individuals (Tsui, Porter, & Egan, 2002). Perceived similarity in value priorities and in different aspects of everyday life (for example, education, religion, customs) between in-group and out-group depends on the quality of intergroup contact and personalized interactions (Miller, 2002; Dovidio, Gaertner, & Kawakami, 2003). The better the intergroup contact in terms of frequency, duration, type of activity, social status and institutional support (in this case, the condition of asylum), the greater the perceived similarity with ethnically dissimilar individuals on different aspects of life such as values.

Values have been considered as “conceptions of the desirable that influence the way people select action and evaluate events” (Schwartz & Bilsky, 1987, p.550). According to the Values Universal Theory (Schwartz, 1992), confirmed also in Italy (see De Caroli & Sagone, 2011), values pertain to desirable goals, transcend specific situations, and guide the selection or evaluation of actions and events. They are ordered by importance relative to one another. People decide whether behaviors or events are good or bad, justified or illegitimate, by considering whether they facilitate or undermine the attainment of cherished values. This perspective has described ten cross-cultural human values grouped in four areas, (1) conservation, (2) self-transcendence, (3) openness to change, and (4) self-enhancement, respectively characterized by the following dimensions: (1) *security* (that is, safety, harmony, stability of society, of relations, and of Self), *tradition* (that is, respect and acceptance of the customs or ideas which belong to the tradition), and *conformity* (that is, restraint of actions, inclinations to upset or harm others and to violate social expectations or social norms); (2) *benevolence* (preservation and enhancement of the welfare of people with whom one is in frequent and direct contact, promotion of supportive social relations) and *universalism* (tolerance and protection for the welfare of others and for nature); (3) *self-direction* (that is, independent thought and action, derived from need for control of situations), *stimulation* (that is, novelty and challenge in life), and *hedonism* (pleasure and gratification for oneself); (4) *achievement* (personal success through demonstrating competence according to social standards) and *power* (social status and prestige, control of resources, and dominance over people).

Little empirical evidence about the analysis of values in refugees asylum seekers has been reported in literature with reference to Schwartz’s perspective and specifically in Italian context. This vacuum has represented the rationale for testing a group of refugees in Sicily and for exploring in this group the perceived similarity with the Italians.

## 2. Methodology

The aim of this study was to explore the values, the perceived similarity in various aspects of everyday life between in-group and the Italians, and the representation of Self, in-group, and the Italians in a sample of refugees seeking asylum, living in Sicily (Italy) for a minimum of six months to a maximum of two years of permanence.

We expected to find ( $H_1$ ) differences for sex in values according to previous researches realized in different social contexts (see Schwartz & Rubel, 2005); ( $H_2$ ) differences for period of permanence in relation to the perceived similarity and Self-Group representation consistent with the “intergroup contact hypothesis” (Allport, 1954). In

addition, we expected to highlight (H<sub>3</sub>) significant correlations between values and Self-Group representation and (H<sub>4</sub>) perceived similarity and representation of the above-mentioned dimensions.

### 2.1. Participants

The sample was composed by 60 refugees, divided in 34 men and 26 women, from Afghanistan, Eritrea, Nigeria and Senegal, visiting in Sicilian reception centres, as established by Martelli Law (L.39/1990) and, subsequently, Turco-Napolitano Law (L.40/1998) and Bossi-Fini Law (L.189/2002) in Italy.

The refugees were aged between 18 and 32 years and divided in two groups: 34 junior refugees (age range: 18-26 years;  $M=22.3$ ,  $sd=1.4$ ) and 26 senior refugees (age range: 27-32 years;  $M=30.4$ ,  $sd=1.2$ ). About the period of permanence in Sicily, 48,3% of sample lives in Sicily from six months to twelve months ( $N=29$ ), 35% from one to two years ( $N=21$ ), and 16,7% over two years ( $N=10$ ). All refugees were supported by the presence of linguistic and cultural intermediary in reception centres.

### 2.2. Measures

2.2.1. *Demographic Information*. All participants completed background questions related to their age, gender, nationality, and period of permanence in Sicily (Italy).

2.2.2. *Portrait Value Questionnaire* (Schwartz, 1992; Capanna, Vecchione & Schwartz, 2005). PVQ is a questionnaire constituted by 40 statements or short verbal portraits of 40 different people, gender-matched with the respondent. Each portrait describes a person's goals, aspirations, or wishes that point implicitly to the importance of a value. For each portrait, respondents answered on a 6-point ranging scale (from 1=*not like me at all* to 6=*very much like me*). This measure is useful to analyze the importance attributed to the following 10 cross-cultural values: benevolence ("*It's very important to him/her to help the people around him/her. He/she wants to care for other people*"), universalism ("*He/she wants justice for everybody, even for people she doesn't know*"), self-direction ("*Thinking up new ideas and being creative is important to him/her. He/she likes to do things in his/her own original way*"), stimulation ("*He/she likes surprises and is always looking for new things to do*"), hedonism ("*It is important to him/her to do things that give him/her pleasure*"), achievement ("*Being very successful is important to him/her. He/she likes to impress other people*"), power ("*It is important to him/her to be in charge and tell others what to do*"), security ("*He/she avoids anything that might endanger his/her safety*"), conformity ("*He/she wants to avoid doing anything people would say is wrong*"), and tradition ("*He/she tries hard to do what his/her religion requires*"). Internal consistency reliability resulted to be satisfactory with Cronbach's  $\alpha$  equal to .94.

2.2.3. *Perceived Similarity Scale* (Roccas & Schwartz, 1993; Huddy & Virtanen, 1995). This scale (adapted to our investigation) is composed by 6 items on a 3-points Likert (from 1=*not at all similar* to 3=*very similar*) to verify the level of perceived similarity between their own people and the Italians in occupation, religion, gender differences, values, education, and cultural aspects (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .52$ ).

2.2.4. *Semantic Differential Technique* (Osgood, 1962; Osgood, Suci, & Tannenbaum, 1957). It is a measure, consisting of 36 pairs of bipolar adjectives for each concept, each evaluable on a 7-points Likert (with the intermediate value equal to 4), used to investigate the representation of Actual and Future Self, the group of Italians and their own people (Cronbach's  $\alpha$  range from .74 to .80).

### 2.3. Data analysis

Materials were administered individually. SPSS 15.0 was used to verify statistical significance of results by means of MANOVA,  $t$  for paired sample, and Pearson linear correlations. The statistical analyses compared scores

by sex (men vs. women), age groups (senior vs. junior refugees), and period of permanence (6-11 months; 1-2 years; over 2 years) as independent variables using scores on portrait values, perceived similarity, and semantic differentials as dependent variables.

### 3. Results

*Portrait Values.* As shown in Table 1, refugees asylum seekers have considered highly important the values linked to the areas of conservation and self-transcendence, respectively, security ( $M = 4.92$ ,  $sd = .68$ ) and tradition ( $M = 4.91$ ,  $sd = .72$ ), followed by benevolence ( $M = 4.88$ ,  $sd = .78$ ). On the contrary, they judged less important the power ( $M = 3.87$ ,  $sd = 1.02$ ), which is one of the values connected to the area of self-enhancement.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for PVQ – Total Sample (N=60)

Areas	Values	Mean	Std. Deviation
Self-transcendence	benevolence	4.88	.78
	universalism	4.73	.79
Conservation	security	4.92	.68
	conformity	4.68	.80
	tradition	4.91	.72
Self-enhancement	success	4.82	.61
	power	3.87	1.02
Openness to change	self-direction	4.81	1.04
	stimulation	4.67	.74
	hedonism	4.72	.67

A 2 (age groups) x 2 (sex of refugees) x 3 (period of permanence) analysis of variance was carried out on the mean scores obtained by participants on PVQ. There was no interaction of age groups and period of permanence for total sample, but there were significant interactions of (i) sex and age groups,  $F_{(4,46)} = 3.56$ ,  $p = .013$ ;  $\eta^2 = .24$ , only for self-enhancement, and (ii) sex and period of permanence,  $F_{(8,94)} = 3.69$ ,  $p = .001$ ;  $\eta^2 = .24$ , for self-transcendence, conservation, and self-enhancement. With reference to each value linked to the four areas, it was possible to notice statistically significant interactions of (i) sex and age groups,  $F_{(10,40)} = 3.50$ ,  $p = .002$ ;  $\eta^2 = .47$ , specifically for success and power, and (ii) sex and period of permanence,  $F_{(20,82)} = 3.06$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $\eta^2 = .43$ , for benevolence, universalism, security, and tradition. These data showed that men and younger refugees have considered more important the personal success through demonstrating competence according to social standards and the control of resources than women and older ones; in addition, women with a period of permanence in Sicily from six months to twelve months have considered more important than the others to preserve the welfare of nature and persons with whom one is in direct contact, to promote cooperative social relations, and to save the stability of society, and the respect of customs which belong to the own tradition.

*Perceived similarity.* Refugees have expressed high levels of similarity between the group of Italians and their own people in all domains: in descending order, occupation ( $M = 2.75$ ,  $sd = .54$ ), culture ( $M = 2.65$ ,  $sd = .63$ ), education ( $M = 2.55$ ,  $sd = .50$ ), religion ( $M = 2.47$ ,  $sd = .68$ ), gender differences ( $M = 2.45$ ,  $sd = .57$ ), and values ( $M = 2.38$ ,  $sd = .59$ ). A 2 (age groups) x 2 (sex of refugees) x 3 (period of permanence) analysis of variance was carried out on the mean scores reached by participants on perceived similarity item-scale. There were no interactions of (i) age groups and period of permanence and (ii) sex and age groups. On the contrary, it was possible to observe statistically significant interactions of sex and period of permanence,  $F_{(12,90)} = 5.13$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $\eta^2 = .41$ , on occupation and religion; in addition, the main effects of sex,  $F_{(6,44)} = 6.26$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $\eta^2 = .46$ , on occupation, education, and culture, and of period of permanence,  $F_{(12,90)} = 3.60$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $\eta^2 = .32$ , on occupation, religion, and values were

found. It means that women present in Sicily for over two years have perceived higher levels of similarity between the group of Italians and their own people than men and other refugees.

*Self and Groups Representation.* Refugees have displayed a more positive representation of Future ( $M = 5.44$ ) and Actual Self ( $M = 5.29$ ) than the group of Italians ( $M = 4.78$ ),  $t_{(59)} = 6.95, p < .001$ ;  $t_{(59)} = 6.53, p < .001$ ; a more positive representation of Future Self ( $M = 5.44$ ) than that of their own people ( $M = 5.22$ ),  $t_{(59)} = 2.74, p = .008$ , and of their own people ( $M = 5.22$ ) than that of the group of Italians ( $M = 4.78$ ),  $t_{(59)} = 4.40, p < .001$ . A 2 (age groups) x 2 (sex of refugees) x 3 (period of permanence) analysis of variance was carried out on the means obtained by refugees on the representation of four concepts noticing only a significant effect of sex,  $F_{(4,46)} = 4.55, p = .004$ ;  $\eta^2 = .28$ , on the image of the group of Italians. Women have expressed a better representation of Italians than men.

*Correlations between values and Self-Groups representation.* Pearson linear correlations between the areas of PVQ (and each value) and the Self-Groups representation have indicated that: (i) the more refugees have considered important self-transcendence, conservation, and openness to change the more they have expressed a positive future image of themselves and their own people (in-group); the more refugees have valued important self-enhancement the less they have expressed a good representation of the Italians (Table 2); (ii) the more refugees have judged important the values of self-direction, benevolence, universalism, tradition, stimulation, hedonism, and conformity, the more they have expressed a positive self representation in the future; in addition, the more refugees have deemed important the values of universalism, self-direction, conformity, security, hedonism, and success, the more they have expressed a good image of their own people (in-group); the more they have considered important power the less they have expressed a good representation of the Italians (Table 3).

Table 2. Correlations between areas of PVQ and Self-Groups representation – Total Sample (N=60)

Areas of PVQ	Actual Self	People (in-group)	Italians (out-group)	Future Self
Self-transcendence	.18	.34(**)	.01	.43(**)
Conservation	.15	.41(**)	-.04	.35(**)
Self-enhancement	-.03	.10	-.32(*)	.01
Openness to change	.08	.43(**)	-.06	.48(**)

\*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*  $p < .05$

Table 3. Correlations between values and Self-Groups representation – Total Sample (N=60)

Values	Actual Self	People (in-group)	Italians (out-group)	Future Self
benevolence	.14	.24	.02	.44(**)
universalism	.20	.41(**)	.01	.39(**)
self-direction	.23	.46(**)	.17	.48(**)
stimulation	-.19	.26	-.24	.32(*)
hedonism	.12	.35(**)	-.18	.37(**)
success	.27	.33(*)	-.15	.14
power	-.19	-.07	-.33(*)	-.08
security	.02	.34(**)	-.09	.16
conformity	.19	.45(**)	.01	.38(**)
tradition	.17	.26	-.04	.34(**)

\*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*  $p < .05$

*Correlations between perceived similarity and Self-Groups representation.* Pearson linear correlations have indicated that the more refugees have expressed high levels of similarity between their own people and the group of

Italians (i) in cultural aspects the more they have reported a good representation of the Italians; (ii) in occupational domain the more they have showed a positive representation of Actual and Future Self; (iii) in religion the more they have displayed a positive representation of Future Self; (iiii) in values and education the less they have expressed a good representation of Actual Self (Table 4).

Table 4. Correlations between perceived similarity and Self-Groups representation – Total Sample (N=60)

Perceived similarity	Actual Self	People (in-group)	Italians (out-group)	Future Self
occupation	.35(**)	.22	-.13	.30(*)
religion	.21	.08	-.04	.28(*)
gender differences	.01	.05	-.09	.01
values	-.27(*)	-.22	-.03	-.25
education	-.32(*)	.10	-.13	.09
culture	.04	.01	.36(**)	.20

\*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*  $p < .05$

#### 4. Conclusion

The findings of this study have provided a relevant contribution for a deeper knowledge of groups of refugees asylum seekers in relation to their values priorities, social attitudes towards members of group in host country, quality of intergroup relations, and representation of Self in the present and future.

Results are broadly supportive of hypothesis H<sub>1</sub>, in sense that men have considered more important the personal success through demonstrating competence according to social standards and the control of resources than women; on the contrary, women have valued more important to preserve the welfare of nature and the others, to promote cooperative social relations, and to save the harmony of society, and the respect of customs than men. These evidences are consistent with Schwartz and Rubel's research (2005), which reported that men attribute consistently more importance to power, stimulation, hedonism, achievement, and self-direction values than women; the reverse is true for benevolence and universalism values and less consistently for security. Also, Capanna and his colleagues (2005) found that girls consider more important self-transcendence values while boys those linked to self-enhancement and openness to change.

Referring to hypothesis H<sub>2</sub>, refugees (but only women) present in Sicily for over two years have perceived higher levels of similarity between the group of Italians and their own people than other refugees, specifically in occupational, religious, educational, and value aspects. These results are partially consistent with the "intergroup contact hypothesis" (Allport, 1954) and "similarity-attraction hypothesis" (Grant, 1993), according to whose a greater perceived similarity is linked to more frequent and direct contact between in-group and out-group members and vice versa.

In relation to hypothesis H<sub>3</sub>, results partially have confirmed the correlations between values and Self-Groups representation. The more refugees have considered important the area of conservation (particularly, tradition and conformity) the more they have expressed a positive image of their own people; the more refugees have valued important the area of openness to change (specifically, self-direction, stimulation, and hedonism) the more they have expressed a positive image of themselves in future; in addition, the more refugees have judged important the area of self-enhancement (mainly, power) the less they have expressed a good representation of the group of Italians, consistently, evaluated (through the semantic differential technique) with average scores lower than other dimensions. These findings could be explained, on the one hand, by means of the desire to grow as "future citizens of host country" and, on the other hand, to preserve the integrity of their cultural roots as "citizens of native country".

Finally, results have indicated significant correlations between perceived similarity and representation of Self and in-group/out-group as provided in hypothesis H<sub>4</sub>. In fact, a greater similarity in the occupational domain is linked to a better representation of Self in the present and future; in addition, a greater similarity in the cultural aspects between their own people and the Italians is associated with a positive representation of the Italians. Also in this case, these last findings could be supported by the “similarity-attraction hypothesis” (Grant, 1993), in the light of which a greater perceived similarity with members of out-group could improve the representation of these members and vice versa.

The complexity of empirical evidences emerged from this investigation leads to carry out further in-depth examinations by monitoring the “psychological and structural settlement” of refugees asylum seekers during their permanence and the social integration in host country, in order to improve the quality of intergroup contact and of life of all individuals involved in the phenomenon of migration.

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