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Bilingualism and identity processes.

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Abstract

The coexistence of people with different cultural backgrounds is an important issue for the social sciences.

In particular, mixed couples could represent an interesting field of research in order to explore their representational framework in terms of bilingualism, biculturalism and identity processes.

The aim of this study was to explore the attitudes that a group of mixed couples has on bilingualism and biculturalism. Specifically, it intends to test the hypothesis that there is a link between bilingualism/biculturalism, self-esteem and identification.

Results revealed that mixed couples tend to harmonize cultural differences and the data confirmed our hypothesis

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1. Introduction

The features of current multi-ethnic societies impose a reflection on the dynamics of identity definition and redefinition. Indeed, from globalization and migration processes arise questions relating identity, membership and relationships between persons of different cultures.

In this regard, Mantovani (2004) states that cultures, memberships and identities are not homogeneous dimensions, but could be considered as exchange spaces, resources for action and shared stories.

In this framework, our focus of interest is on mixed couples, characterized by an 'intimate' and long lasting contact (Allport, 1954; Amir, 1976; Hamberger & Hewstone, 1997; Pettigrew, 1997) who are called to face up to their cultural differences (of which language is often an expression) and with educational practices.

Specifically, in mixed couple relationships, a positive evaluation of both partners' language and culture could be a valuable tool for their children's identity enrichment and could help them to deal with the differences through the harmonization of what are sometimes even very different cultural traditions (Barbara, 1989).

Language, in fact, is not only a functional tool for communication, but also a 'cultural mediator', a vector of symbolic universes and a crucial part of the inner sphere of each person, since it organizes the human mental map and the cognitive system. As Whorf says: "...language spoken by a person determines the way in which he/she perceives and conceptualizes the world" (Whorf, 1940:229)

Therefore, if language is part of identity, we could especially refer to social identity (Tajfel, 1981), in that a bilingual person would belong to different cultures. In other words, bilingual and bicultural individuals would tend

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to activate a set of distinct concepts or mental frames, which would include the various aspects of their identities (Peracchio & Torsten Ringberg, 2008). Moreover, a bilingual individual often reveals an intellect more willing to deal with diversity, to reconcile opposition and to resolve disagreements (Brannen & Thomas, 2010).

These processes could be at the basis of a fluid identity (Gergen, 1991) characterized by the ability to integrate diverse aspects which represent the results of an exchange process that occurs between individuals and their social context, and an identity that is the result of different memberships and not of a ‘..unique..’ belonging.

2. Method

2.1. Aim and hypothesis

The aim of this study was to explore the attitudes that a group of mixed couples has with regard to bilingualism and biculturalism, and to better understand the choices that are at the basis of educational and identity development processes.

Specifically, it intends to test the hypothesis that there is a positive link between bilingualism/biculturalism and self-esteem, and a negative one between bilingualism/biculturalism and identification with countrymen.

2.2. Participants

Research has been carried out with a group of mixed couples (N = 50), evenly distributed in relation to gender and with medium to high levels of education. The subjects' ages are between 25 and 57 ($M = 37.94$). In relation to nationality, 50% of the participants are Italian and the remainder are from central western Europe (especially Spain and the United Kingdom) (30%), central eastern Europe (12%), Africa (4%) and the United States (4%). Partners who come from a foreign country have lived in Italy from between 4 and 30 years ($M = 13.45$). With regard to the number of children for each couple, this ranged from 1 to 4 ($M = 1.84$).

2.3. Materials and techniques

Data have been collected using a semi-structured questionnaire containing:

I) a group of items each of which is treated as a four-point Likert scale in order to understand mixed couples' attitudes to bilingualism and biculturalism: A) *How many times you happen to* (1=*never*, 4=*often*) : 1) convey to your children the traditions (typically holidays or anniversaries) of your country of origin; 2) feel that children appreciate your culture; 3) speak your mother tongue with your children; 4) speak your mother tongue with your partner; 5) think that bilingualism produces a double cultural belonging; 6) think that bilingualism causes adverse effects on your children's language development; B) *How often in the family context a specific language is associated with only one parent* (1=*never*, 4=*often*); C) *How important is it for you*: 1) to convey to your children the traditions (typically holidays or anniversaries) of your country of origin; 2) to feel that children appreciate your culture; 3) to know your partner's language; 4) to speak your mother tongue with your partner; 5) to speak your mother tongue with your children; 6) to teach the languages of both partners to your children; 7) that your children can learn the language of your partner (1=*not at all*, 4=*very*); C) *In your opinion, bilingualism is a choice that allows*: 1) the well-being and enrichment of your children; 2) a way by which parents transmit their culture (1=*not at all*, 4=*very*);

II) the Inclusion of the Other in Self Scale (Aron, Aron & Smollan, 1992; Schubert & Otten, 2002) consisting of eight circular graphics symbols, each representing a different degree of overlap between cultural identity and language (1=*distant*, 8=*complete overlapping*);

III) a self-esteem scale (Rosenberg, 1965) on the measurement of psychological well-being, in which each item is treated as a four-point Likert scale (1=*complete disagreement*, 4=*complete agreement*);

IV) an identification scale (Manganelli Rattazzi, 1991) in which each item is treated as a seven-point Likert scale (1=*completely false*, 7=*completely true* with 4 as 'point of indifference').

2.4. Procedures

The sample comprised mixed couples chosen using the snowball method. The materials were administered by the researcher in a face-to-face setting.

3. Results

Data analysis have been carried out by SPSS 20 for Windows software, and by the use of Manova and the Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient for correlation analysis.

For the data obtained using the semi-structured questionnaire, we calculated the mean values of each item.

3.1. Cultural identity and attitudes on bilingualism and biculturalism

Regarding the Inclusion of Other in Self Scale data, the participants revealed a substantially abundant overlap between the two dimensions ($M=5.70$). In other words, to the extent that language and cultural identity are experienced so close to each other, we could infer that language is not only a communication tool but also the mediator of a culture.

In relation to attitudes on bilingualism and biculturalism, the participants (Manova with 6 Within factors, $Df = 5.245$ $F = 58.60$, $p < .001$) seem frequently to convey the typical traditions of the country of origin ($M = 3.58$) and they feel that their children sufficiently appreciate their culture ($M = 3.34$). Furthermore, the members of mixed couples, interacting with their children, often speak the languages of both parents ($M = 3.78$). In contrast, in the relationship with the partner, the language of origin appears to be used sometimes ($M = 2.76$). Quite often they think that bilingualism produces a double cultural belonging ($M = 3.18$), and they do not believe it causes adverse effects on their children's language development ($M = 1.52$).

Another interesting and positive result is related to the fact that, in the family context, a specific language is associated rather frequently with only one parent ($M = 3.52$). In fact, according to Mahlstedt (1996), a bilingual family has a high probability of success when both the father and the mother are engaged in a responsible way in bilingual education, using, for example, the practice of one person one language, and when the partner who has the 'weaker language' maintains a strong link with his/her origin language and culture. Instead, when each partner of a mixed couple has a weak link with his/her origin language and culture, the success of bilingual and bicultural practices will be low.

According to these data are those regarding the importance attributed to the language and culture of each partner (Manova with 7 Within factors, $Df = 6.294$ $F = 7.81$, $p < .001$). In fact, for the participants it seems very important that: their children could learn the language of the partner ($M = 3.78$), both languages could be taught them ($M = 3.76$) and, to a lesser extent, they could speak to their children in the language of origin ($M = 3.44$). Moreover, a certain importance is given to the transmission of the typical traditions of the country of origin ($M = 3.50$), to the appreciation by their children of the parent's culture ($M = 3.36$) and language ($M = 3.56$), to the opportunity, with a little less agreement, to talk with the partner in the mother tongue ($M = 3.06$).

In relation to the choice of bilingualism, the subjects of the sample are quite confident in stating that it is useful for the well-being and enrichment of their children ($M = 3.78$) and they believe that it is also a way to transmit their culture ($M = 3.72$).

Moreover, the positive attitudes on the part of the participants with regard to bilingualism and biculturalism, and their rejection of fears or prejudice on this matter, are supported by their low agreement ($M=1.30$) in relation to the possibility of recourse to experts in order to clear doubts and fears about the possible negative consequences of bilingualism in the communicative and linguistic development of their children.

3.2. Correlation analysis

The correlation analysis between self-esteem and bilingualism/biculturalism revealed that:

1. the attitude towards themselves is better, the more frequently participants: *a*) convey the typical traditions of the country of origin ($r=.350, p < .013$); *b*) feel that their children appreciate their culture ($r = .522, p < .001$); *c*) talk to their partner in his/her mother tongue ($r=.447, p < .001$); *d*) think that bilingualism produces a double cultural belonging ($r=.428, p < .002$);
2. they think they are a person of worth more frequently, the more they feel that their children appreciate their culture ($r = .391, p < .005$);
3. they are satisfied with themselves more frequently if they: *a*) talk to their partner in his/her mother tongue ($r=.374, p < .007$); *b*) think that bilingualism produces a double cultural belonging ($r=.287, p < .043$);
4. they think they are able to do things as well as most other people less frequently the more they think that bilingualism causes adverse effects on their children's language development ($r=-.299, p < .035$);
5. they consider themselves a failure less frequently, the more they: *a*) talk to their partner in his/her mother tongue ($r=-.461, p < .001$); *b*) think that bilingualism produces a double cultural belonging ($r=-.409, p < .003$);
6. the less frequently they talk to their partner in his/her mother tongue, the more: *a*) they think they have nothing to be proud of; *b*) they would like to have more self-respect; *c*) they think they are not good (respectively $r=-.338, p < .016$; $r=-.302, p < .033$ and $r=-.487, p < .001$);
7. they feel useless: *a*) the more frequently they think that bilingualism causes adverse effects on their children's language development ($r=.376, p < .007$); *b*) the less frequently they talk to their partner in his/her mother tongue ($r=-.484, p < .001$) and they think that bilingualism produces a double cultural belonging ($r=-.325, p < .021$).

The correlation analysis between identification and bilingualism/biculturalism revealed that:

1. the more frequently they think that bilingualism causes adverse effects on their children's language development, the more: *a*) they perceive themselves as being similar to their countrymen ($r=.313, p < .027$); *b*) they have a good opinion of their countrymen ($r=.303, p < .033$); *c*) they think often of being Italian/foreigners ($r=.305, p < .031$);
2. the more they have a good opinion of their countrymen, the less frequently they talk to their partner in his/her mother tongue ($r=-.442, p < .001$) and the more they think that bilingualism produces a double cultural belonging ($r=-.357, p < .011$);
3. the more they think that bilingualism produces a double cultural belonging: *a*) the less they behave like a typical Italian/foreigner ($r=.280, p < .049$); *b*) the more they have a tendency to be critical of their countrymen ($r=.378, p < .007$);
4. the more they feel uncomfortable with their countrymen, the less frequently they speak their mother tongue with their children ($r=-.463, p < .001$).

4. Conclusion

The results revealed that mixed couples try to harmonize their different socio-cultural backgrounds, transferring, in this way, identity and cultural values to their children.

In general, indeed, the participants seem quite convinced that the bilingual and bicultural educational practices aimed at their children, can produce a double cultural belonging and an enrichment which is not only linguistic, but also relational, cultural and cognitive. According to these results, they do not share the stereotype that associates bilingualism with negative consequences on the development of their children's language.

The hypothesis concerning the positive link between bilingualism/biculturalism and self-esteem and the negative one between bilingualism/biculturalism and identification, seems confirmed by correlational analysis.

In particular, the better is their self-esteem in term of attitudes, satisfaction and positive evaluation towards themselves, the more frequently they use their mother tongue, convey their typical traditions and think that bilingualism produces a double cultural belonging.

On the other hand, a negative self-image correlates with an adverse representation of bilingualism and with a less frequent use of the mother tongue.

Moreover, positive attitudes with regard to bilingualism/biculturalism do not seem to be related with countrymen identification dynamics. Identification with countrymen, indeed, correlates with bilingualism stereotypes and with a less frequent use of the mother tongue. These results seem to confirm those of previous research about the positive effect of the evaluation of the ingroup towards the outgroup, but only if this assessment does not lead to identification with the ingroup (Damigella, Eterno & Licciardello, 2010).

In other words, in general, and specifically for those persons with a good self-esteem who do not identify with their countrymen, bilingualism/biculturalism would represent an important condition of cultural enrichment for all people involved in this process.

It could lead to a process essentially concerning alternation or bi-culturalism (Hong, Morris, Chiu & Benet-Martinez, 2000), a complex psychological and social phenomenon which enables the combination of elements of different cultural systems, stimulates the creation of a multiethnic society that values the differences, and encourages the development of new and more advanced forms of culture.

Specifically, educational processes based on these orientations can be an important procedure in favour of the new generations (Licciardello & Damigella, 2009).

Finally, given that the foreign partners of the sample are mainly of European culture, in terms of possible developments, we aim to undertake further research with mixed couples characterized by very different cultures.

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