THE ACTIVATION AND EVALUATION OF ITALIAN LANGUAGE AND CULTURE IN A GROUP OF TERTIARY STUDENTS OF ITALIAN ANCESTRY IN AUSTRALIA

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the present study was to carry out an investigation of the activation and evaluation of minority language and social systems within a group of tertiary students of Italian ethnic ancestry. In particular, the study examines the effects of cultural interaction in ethnically plural societies on personal cultural systems, cultural identity and cultural core values. A model which combines measures of the activation of Italian cultural systems and personal ideological value orientations is proposed. The ideal types so described provide an indication of the success or otherwise of Italian language and culture maintenance efforts and the long-term viability of Italian-Australian cultural systems.

A survey of the study group was conducted which combined quantitative and qualitative approaches. Thus, in addition to a self-administered questionnaire, which contained both closed and open-ended questions, participants were also given the opportunity to provide more extensive written personal accounts. It was believed that the integration of both these methods of data gathering would allow the application of the humanistic coefficient and reveal the intentions, experiences and activities of the participants as they themselves perceived them. Such cultural data were examined within the context of the social ecology of the Italian group resident in Adelaide, South Australia.

The variables examined by the questionnaire covered both concrete data (including the participants’ personal and family characteristics and their activation of cultural and social systems) and cultural data (including participants’ judgments and evaluations of personal cultural identity, cultural maintenance and cultural value). Frequency tables were developed for each item and predictor and outcome variables were cross-classified. Chi-square tests of significance were performed on the data allowing the testing of meaningful associations. The written comments and personal accounts, which were categorised thematically, assisted the interpretation of the quantitative data and provided useful insights into the thoughts, beliefs and values of the participants.

Results indicate that considerable variation exists between participants on the degree of activation of Italian cultural systems such as language, primary personal and secondary personal social systems. Statistically significant differences emerged when
participants were compared on the basis of their 'generation' of migration, family types based on the age at migration of participants' parents, the Italian regional background of participants' parents and the participants' experience of the formal study of Italian. On the question of personal cultural identity, the majority of participants considered themselves both Italian and Australians. Participants based their cultural identification on such factors as personal attributes, physical characteristics, place of birth, parents' ethnic background, ingroup recognition, outgroup categorisation, and family values, beliefs and morals.

The participants' assessments of Italian cultural values show that language maintenance generally is not rated as important to the maintenance and transmission of Italian culture in Australia as maintaining an appreciation and knowledge of Italian cultural heritage, contributing to a multicultural Australia and maintaining close family ties. An analysis of the comments indicates that attitudes to Italian language and culture maintenance in Australia varies. While some participants are critical or even hostile to the idea, the great majority view the maintenance and transmission of Italian culture positively.

The model of cultural types developed from the data on the participants' activation and evaluation of Italian cultural systems includes participants who demonstrated high levels of activation and high levels of evaluation of Italian cultural systems and values ('Active Italophile'), participants who demonstrated low levels of activation but high levels of evaluation ('Inactive Italophile'), participants who activated Italian cultural systems and values but evaluated them negatively ('Active Italophobia'), and participants who neither activated nor evaluated positively Italian cultural systems and values ('Inactive Italophobia'). The Italophile groups (active and inactive) outnumbered considerably the two Italophobe groups. The study reveals, therefore, that there exists within the study group a core of participants ('Active Italophile') who have successfully maintained Italian language and cultural systems and values and who intend to transmit these to their own children. Furthermore, there is a second equally large group of participants ('Inactive Italophile') who are at least ideationally disposed to the maintenance and transmission of Italian language and culture in Australia.
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