PERCEPTIONS OF INTERGENERATIONAL COMMUNICATION ACROSS CULTURES: AN ITALIAN CASE [1,2]

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Summary.—406 Anglo-American, Italian-American, and Italian (Northern and Southern Italy) students were asked to evaluate past conversations with same-age peers, i.e., 17 to 30 years, and older adults, i.e., 65 years and older. While according older adults more deference, all cultural groups perceived older adults as more rigid and nonaccommodating than younger adults. Exchanges with older adults were reported as having more negative affect than were those with other young adults, and were also more likely to be avoided.

Recent research in Western cultures has shown that young adults perceive communication with nonfamily elderly adults to be largely unsatisfactory and problematic (e.g., Coupland, Coupland, & Giles, 1991; Williams & Nussbaum, 2001). For example, young adults report that they are often patronized by older adults in the sense that the latter seem overly nurturing, do not listen, and express negative stereotypes to them about their young age group (Giles & Williams, 1994). Older adults can also be perceived as "nonaccommodative" via their communication styles in that they are perceived to be authoritarian, dismissive, inattentive, closed-minded, and out-of-touch; young people report feeling obliged to be polite and to defer to the older adult in such exchanges (Williams & Giles, 1996).

This same pattern of intergenerational communication dissatisfaction, at least from the perspective of young adults, has also been documented in East Asian contexts (e.g., The Phillippines, Japan, and South Korea) where respect for and norms of obligation to older people are evidently greater than in Western societies (Sung, 1995; Williams, Ota, Giles, Pierson, Gallois, Ng, Lim, Ryan, Somera, Maher, Cai, & Harwood, 1997). For instance, while intragenerational communication among peer-young adults is reportedly very

similar between Asian and Western sites, studies have shown that the *inter-*generational communication climate in Australia and the USA is perceived to be more favorable than in the People's Republic of China (Noels, Giles, Cai, & Turay, 1999), Hong Kong (Noels, Giles, Gallois, & Ng, 2001), Japan (Ota, 2002), and Taiwan (Giles, Liang, Noels, & McCann, 2001). In fact, East Asian young adults report more nonaccommodation from and avoidance of older adults than do their Western counterparts, despite respect and obligation being expressed as higher among the former (see overview, Giles, McCann, Ota, & Noels, 2002). Such a pattern is consistent with other cross-cultural research on age stereotypes where Japanese (Arnhoff, Leon, & Lorge, 1964), Thai (Sharps, Price-Sharps, & Hanson, 1998), and Indian (Williams, Pandey, Best, Morton, & Pande, 1992) informants report more negative images of elderly people than their American counterparts (see also, Harwood, Giles, Ota, Pierson, Gallois, Ng, Lim, & Somera, 1996; Harwood, Giles, McCann, Cai, Somera, Ng, Gallois, & Noels, 2001). All these findings may derive, in large part, from the transfer of social power, finance, and influence from older to younger people in some regions of Asia—as well as the strong resistance to such changes by some older people in recent, highly technologically developing and modernizing times.

While variability among East Asian societies in the specifics of the above intergenerational communication patterns have emerged, there is relatively little difference in respondents' intergenerational perceptions across the Western regions of the USA, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand (Williams, *et al.*, 1997). That said, the young adults surveyed in the West thus far have been limited to Anglophone respondents (see also, Williams & Garrett, 2002), with no research to date having examined other ethnolinguistic cultures in Europe. Toward this end, the current investigation examines Anglo-American young adults contrastively with non-Anglophone Europeans by utilizing three Italian samples (LaGumina, 2000), namely, Northern and Southern Italians and those of Italian heritage in the USA. Although little communication and aging research has been reported from Italy, some data indicate that intergenerational communication problems, similar to the above, might well exist there too (Paoletti, 1998; see also Johnson, 1985). In this study, we examined whether Italian young adults follow the trends described above for Anglophone cultures or whether a different pattern emerges. Nonetheless, and based on prior research, our first hypothesis predicted that older people (and across all samples studied) would be perceived communicatively less favorably than young adults.

Research in the intergenerational communication domain has, thus far, not tackled regional issues. Clearly, this is an important intranational issue where much variability has been documented across an array of sociostructural (e.g., Garwood, 1985) as well as social attitudinal domains (e.g., Van-

dello & Cohen, 1999). Like many other societies, Italy is worthy of investiga-
tion for its marked regional differences. Regionalism has historically been
strong in Italy, with cultural distinctions often made between North and the
South. The South, for its part, is a region historically dominated by agricul-
ture and so-called "traditional values," while the North has the reputation of
being more dynamic, forward looking, progressive, and academically and eco-
nomically developed (Chandler, 1979). Given this more community-oriented
profile of Southern Italy, we propose a second hypothesis in that Southern
Italian students will report fewer intergenerational communication problems,
i.e., communication avoidance and nonaccommodation, with elderly people,
yet express more respect for and obligations to them, than their Northern
Italian (and even Anglo-American) counterparts.

     As recent Italian immigrants to the USA serve as an interesting contras-
tive sample to the other groups mentioned, we also examine their ratings of
communicative experiences with older and younger adults. When arriving in
a new country, immigrants must decide the extent to which they will retain
their original values and identity and to what extent they will assimilate into
the new culture (Berry & Sam, 1997). The process of acculturation has been
suggested as influenced, among other variables, by intergroup communica-
tion practices (e.g., Noels, Pon, & Clément, 1996; Clément, Noels, & Den-
cault, 2001). Research and theoretical accounts offer several, sometimes con-
flicting, potential patterns of acculturation with regards to intergenerational
communication. For instance, some findings suggest that immigrants from
East Asian cultures—wherein filial piety is evident—may experience tense
and conflict-ridden relationships as a result of transporting their intergenera-
tional practices to an American context where they may be considered irrele-
vant or outmoded (e.g., Cheung, 1989; Kim, Kim, & Hurh, 1991), while
other investigations suggest that young immigrant adults may be located "in
between both cultures" (e.g., Tien-Hyatt, 1987; Giles, et al., 2001). Al-
though one study suggested that Italian immigrants readily acculturate to
their host societies yet still retain many aspects of their cultural heritage (Cer-
roni-Long, 1994), no intergenerational communication work has ever been
conducted with Italian-American immigrants. Given this omission, whether
Italian-American students' intra- and intergenerational communication cli-
mates are closer to those of their Italian peers, more in line with mainstream
(Anglo-) American students, or in between these two groups is of interest
here.

METHOD

     Female students (M age = 20.9, SD = 1.6) who self-identified with the eth-
nic/regional descriptions, e.g., "Italian-American," participated in the study;
effects of sex in previous intergenerational communication research have not

been found (e.g., Williams, *et al.*, 1997; Noels, *et al.*, 1999). Respondents were drawn from four cultural groups: 126 "Anglo-Americans" from southern California (Santa Barbara), 90 "Northern Italians" (Bologna), 100 "Southern Italians" (Bari), and 90 "Italian-Americans" (of Southern Italian heritage) from southern California (Santa Barbara and Fresno). This last group varied widely as to their generational statuses, i.e., first, second, etc. generation immigrants to the United States, the extent of their excursions to Italy, and their proficiencies in the Italian language.

The inventory has been used many times in this similar research (see specifically, Giles, *et al.*, 2001) and is referred to by Harwood and Williams (1998) as the "Perceptions of Intergenerational Communication Scale." Participants were asked to reflect on conversations they had previously with same-age peers, i.e., 17 to 30 years, and older adults, i.e., 65 years and older. In particular, they were asked to focus on conversations with people who were "*not* family members/*not* close friends, almost like family." This distinction was made as prior research has shown that, while young adults still have reported communication problems with family elderly, these are attenuated somewhat compared to nonfamily elderly (Ng, Liu, Wetherall, & Loong, 1997; Giles, Noels, Williams, Lim, Ng, Ryan, Somera, & Ota, in press). The order of the target to be rated was counterbalanced, with participants randomly assigned to one of the other target ages.

For each target separately, participants were asked to rate (on 7-point rating scales anchored at one pole by "very much" and "not at all" at the other) their perceptions of *others'* behavior and their *own* behavior on the following three evaluative dimensions: (1) nonaccommodation, (2) positive/negative feelings, and (3) avoidant communication/respect obligation. Four items assessing a fourth dimension were included but had such low internal reliability that they were not used in the analysis. First, the target's "nonaccommodative" tendencies towards participants were rated (Cronbach alpha = .75). The items constituting this dimension consisted of: "closed-minded," "out-of-touch," "forced their attention on me," "made angry complaints," "complained about their health," "complained about their life circumstances," "talked down to me," "treated me like a child," "gave unwanted advice," "were overly caring," "were controlling," and "were patronizing." Items that made up the second dimension concerned respondents' generally positive or negative feelings toward the interactions. Specifically, respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they felt "unsatisfied-satisfied," "annoyed-pleased," "contented-melancholic," and "hopeful-despairing" (Cronbach alpha = .72). Third, participants assessed their perceptions of their *own* communicative behavior while interacting with each target age group in terms of so-called "avoidant communication" and "respect/obligation" (Giles, *et al.*, 2001). In the former case, participants indicated the ex-

tent to which they "had to bite their tongue," "did not know what to say," "avoided certain topics," and "looked for ways to end the conversation" (Cronbach alpha = .67). In the latter case, respondents indicated the extent to which they "felt obliged to be polite," "showed respect for age," "made allowances for age," "spoke slower," "spoke louder," "did not act like myself," "avoided certain words, e.g., slang," "talked about topics they enjoy," and "used simplified vocabulary" (Cronbach alpha = .62). An English version of the questionnaire was distributed in the United States and an Italian back-translation version administered in Italy.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A 2 × 4 multivariate analysis of variance was computed with Target (older vs younger) as the within-subjects factor and Cultural Group (Southern Italian, Northern Italian, Italian-American, Anglo-American) as a between-subjects factor. All multivariate effects were significant (Target Group: Wilks $\lambda = .29$, $F_{5,385} = 189.36$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .71$; Cultural Group: Wilks $\lambda = .90$, $F_{15,1063} = 2.82$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .04$; and Target Group by Cultural Group: Wilks $\lambda = .93$, $F_{15,1063} = 1.81$, $p < .03$, $\eta^2 = .02$). Follow-up univariate analyses were conducted and, where appropriate, multiple comparison procedures (Games-Howell tests) were used to examine the source of those differences. Means and standard deviations for perceptions of older and younger adults as they relate to the evaluative dimensions and cultural groups appear in Table 1.

For "nonaccommodation," there was a significant Target effect ($F_{1,394} = 274.51$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .41$), with respondents perceiving older people as more nonaccommodating than younger people. For "positive emotions," there were also modest Target ($F_{1,394} = 4.35$, $p < .04$, $\eta^2 = .01$) and interaction ($F_{3,395} = 4.19$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .03$) effects. Respondents felt, overall, a more positive feeling toward their own peer-aged than toward elderly individuals. However, Italian-Americans felt less positive toward their own age group than Southern Italians, Northern Italians, and Anglo-Americans. Also, Northern Italians felt significantly less positive toward elderly persons than Anglo-Americans.

Modest Target effects ($F_{1,394} = 74.95$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .16$) emerged for "avoidant communication." Respondents reported feeling consistently more avoidant with older than younger people. Finally, with regard to "respect/obligation," there was a significant Target effect ($F_{1,394} = 777.33$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .64$), with members of all four groups reporting that they felt more deferential toward older than younger people.

Consistent with previous research and the first hypothesis, the data indicate that young adults view intergenerational communication in intergroup terms (Harwood, Giles, & Ryan, 1995). In other words, their responses suggest a strong evaluative ingroup bias in favor of same-aged peer conversations compared to those with an older outgroup. While according older

TABLE 1
PERCEPTIONS OF YOUNGER AND OLDER ADULTS: OVERALL AND CULTURAL GROUP DIFFERENCES

	Perceptions of Older Adults		Perceptions of Younger Adults		Effect Size eta^2
	M	SD	M	SD	
All Groups ($N=406$)					
Nonaccommodation‡	3.90	.93	3.04	.80	.41+
Positive Emotions*	4.35	.77	4.72	.80	.01+
Avoidant Communication‡	3.59	1.33	2.96	1.17	.16+
Respect/Obligation†	4.54	1.00	2.65	1.02	.64+
Nonaccommodation					
Southern Italians	4.02	.95	3.16	.81	
Northern Italians	3.91	.81	2.90	.85	
Italian-Americans	3.77	.98	2.98	.76	
Anglo-Americans	3.88	.97	3.09	.77	
Positive Emotions					.03++
Southern Italians	4.41	.91	4.91‡ᵃ	.86	
Northern Italians	4.16†ᵃ	.66	4.76*ᵃ	1.03	
Italian-Americans	4.35	.66	4.47ᵇ	.70	
Anglo-Americans	4.44ᵇ	.79	4.73†ᵃ	.80	
Avoidant Communication					
Southern Italians	3.57	1.44	2.73	1.11	
Northern Italians	3.50	1.26	2.85	1.20	
Italian-Americans	3.76	1.24	3.26	1.19	
Anglo-Americans	3.56	1.34	3.02	1.13	
Respect/Obligation					
Southern Italians	4.43	1.04	2.73	1.14	
Northern Italians	4.47	1.03	2.29	.90	
Italian-Americans	4.67	.97	2.79	1.01	
Anglo-Americans	4.58	.96	2.80	1.04	

Note.—For groups of Southern Italians $n=99$; Northern Italians $n=89$; Italian Americans $n=87$; and Anglo-Americans $n=118$. For each scale (on the respective targets, nonshared superscripts indicate significant differences found through Games-Howell tests. *$p<.05$. †$p<.01$. ‡$p<.001$. + = main effects, ++ = interaction.

adults more respect and deference, older adults were still perceived as more *nonaccommodating* than younger adults. Conversations with older adults indicated significant negative affect, and young adults were more inclined to avoid them as opposed to their intragenerational encounters. Given the consistency of this response, it will be important to determine what actual behavioral characteristics give rise to these intergenerational perceptions, in which kinds of social contexts, and at what points in the lifespan.

In terms of our second hypothesis, only a few between-cultural group differences emerged. In fact, Hypothesis 2 was disconfirmed and, at least in the domain of intergenerational communication, Northern and Southern Italians tend to perceive things fairly similarly. It is possible that, in recent years, increased mobility, communication and technological advances, and

greater access to education have somewhat homogenized Italian culture, and thus attenuated these differences. Our research question was answered to the extent that Italian-American students were, for the most part, evaluatively no different than the other three groups sampled.

Research—some of which we aim to undertake—should focus on the specific kinds of subtypes of "young" and "elderly" target participants they had in mind during the rating tasks. Second and relatedly, researchers may want to consider actually manipulating the social characteristics beyond those of the generic age groupings. Third, more work is required to bolster the reliability and robustness of the measures and ensure that they reflect items and factors related to the cultural contexts investigated. Fourth, it would also be useful to investigate older respondents' and nonstudents' ratings, particularly those in rural areas, and from males as well as females (see Boscia-Mulè, 1999). Such studies may need to control for bilingualism and generational characteristics. Finally, we recognize that many student samples (with some important exceptions, including arguably Black Muslims, international, and Native Americans in the USA) are subject to common academic pressures and cultural practices that can forge a stronger sense of identity with other students than any affiliation with their ethnic origins (see Bond & Forgas, 1984; Jones, Gallois, Barker, & Callan, 1994). Hence, finally, we suggest assessing respondents' levels of adherence to religious doctrines (including their attitudes toward filial piety), their cultural practices, e.g., personal orientations to individualism-collectivism (see Bellioti, 1995; Triandis, 1995; Triandis, Chen, & Chan, 1998), and their ethnic and other socially different group identities.

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