

Research Reports

“Does Community Make Any Sense?” A Semantic Analysis of the Term “Community” Among Albanian Immigrants and Italian Majority Residents

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Abstract

Bridging Community Psychology and the Theory of Social Representations, the study was aimed at exploring how the concept of community and sense of belonging to various communities vary across diverse ethno-cultural groups (namely, immigrant and native-born groups) and how the meanings and the experience of community affect or are affected by the relationships that each group establishes with the other group. Participants were 30 native-born Italians and 30 immigrants from Albania living in an area located in the south-east of Italy. They participated in an open-ended semi-structured interview, which was analysed using T-Lab software. Results indicated that the concept of community and sense of belonging to multiple communities do vary across diverse ethno-cultural groups and that each group is cross-cut by multiple axes of differentiation, one of which is linked to the experience of inter-cultural relations. Furthermore, the findings indicated that the functions served by the diverse communities affect the representations shared by the distinct sub-groups and that the simultaneous orientation of individuals toward multiple communities stimulate the development of a compound and even conflicting sense of attachment towards them. Implications for acculturation processes are discussed.

Keywords: community, minority immigrants, social representations

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Introduction

The concept of community and the construct of Sense of Community (SoC) can have a great heuristic valence in the investigation of the wide range of intercultural encounters in modern plural societies. Viewed through the lens of ethnic relations, communities are social phenomena that capture the psychosocial complexity of immigrant settlements in host societies; in particular, communities conglomerate contextual and group factors, encompassing social, historical, political, religious, and economic characteristics, as well as social structures, institutions, and cultural practices. All of these elements are at the core of the acculturation process (Berry, 2005).

Ethno-cultural groups of immigrants represent relational communities that are based on shared components such as symbols, languages and history (Sonn & Fisher, 1996). These communities are important insofar as they provide identity, social support and opportunities for socialization, thereby facilitating the psychological and social adaptation of immigrants in the new context (Rivas-Drake, 2012). The sense of community captures the psycho-

logical experience of being part of a community. Such a belonging is decisive for immigrants to keep their personal consistency and the day-to-day continuity of their self-identity, that is, the feeling of being the same person throughout different life stages and across different cultural contexts (Grinberg & Grinberg, 1975, 1984). Throughout the challenging processes of immigration and acculturation, immigrants can preserve the continuity of their cultural identity (Phinney, 1990) by virtue of their sense of belonging to relational communities, despite the transition from the community of origin to a new area of settlement.

Recently, the concept of multiple psychological sense of community (MPSoC) (Brodsky, 2009; Brodsky & Marx, 2001; Mannarini & Fedi, 2009) has been introduced in community psychology to account for the fact that people experience many diverse communities in their lives (Pretty, Andrewes, & Collett, 1994). The multiplicity of the communities of reference has a noticeable role in the acculturation challenges, which press immigrants to reorganize their social identities, either the social identity that derives from their being a part of the host cultural community or the identity related to their community of origin (i.e., ethnic identity) (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001). However, acculturation is not a one-way process. Notably, acculturation requires members of the host society to confront the increasing cultural diversity of the social environment (Berry, 2008). Referring to the host culture, acculturation theorists (e.g., Bourhis, Moïse, Perreault, & Senécal, 1997; Van Oudenhoven, Prins, & Buunk, 1998) have highlighted the fact that dominant groups within a host society have a leading role in enforcing or promoting certain modes of acculturation (Hofstra, Van Oudenhoven, & Van der Zee, 2009; Van Oudenhoven & Hofstra, 2006), so that the sense of attachment or identification of native-born groups with the larger society represents a pre-condition to positive acculturation outcomes (Berry & Kalin, 1995). Community psychologists and acculturation theorists seem to agree on the multiple benefits of social support networks and group memberships (Berry, 1984; Vieno, Santinello, Pastore, & Perkins, 2007); more interestingly, they also seem to converge on the possibility that community memberships can generate potential negative effects by fuelling separation or conflicts between the minority immigrant groups and the majority resident group or by fostering ethnic prejudice in the host society (as attested to by decades of empirical research on social categorization and group identification processes, see Abrams, 2010). Nevertheless, studies on SoC and inter-ethnic exchanges (Castellini, Colombo, Maffei, & Montali, 2011; Mannarini, Rochira, & Talò, 2012) show divergent findings, which suggest that the relation between community belonging and the attitude towards those who are perceived as being outside the community boundaries (e.g., immigrants) is far from being linear. Some studies have concluded that the coexistence of different ethnic groups in the same territorial area does not affect the feelings of belonging and attachment that people have established with their community of residence (Prezza, Zampatti, Pacilli, & Paoliello, 2008). However, other studies have claimed that the ethnic heterogeneity does make a difference depending on the degree of familiarity among the immigrants and the host group (Hombrados-Mendieta, Gómez-Jacinto, Domínguez-Fuentes, & García-Leiva, 2013). These controversial findings suggest that the relationship between the SoC and the acculturation process can be context-dependent and highly influenced by local dynamics. Despite this fruitful interconnection, the constructs of community and SoC have received relatively little consideration in the broad field of acculturation studies. Furthermore, though the literature suggests that acculturation is not a uniform process (Berry, 2008, 2006; Navas et al., 2005), the frequent use of large-scale surveys has not hitherto allowed for an in-depth comprehension of the local meanings or of the differences between and within various ethno-cultural groups. Consistently, the present study focuses on the peculiar and contextual connotations of the concepts of community and SoC as well as to the notable variations in content and meaning that these notions may undergo. In the background of the social representations theory, our investigation intends to explore how the concepts (i.e., the representation) of community and sense of belonging to a variety of possible communities vary across diverse ethno-cultural groups

(namely, immigrant groups and host groups) and how the meanings and the experience of community affect or are affected by the relationship that each group establishes with the other group.

Theoretical Framework

Community and Sense of Community

The academic debate contests the actuality of the “community” despite the fact that it represents a significant part of people’s everyday life (Howarth, 2001). Specifically, it has been argued that community is an antiquated concept that has lost its explicatory valence and become “a backward looking notion” (Puddifoot, 1995). Contrarily, though urbanization, migration, and globalization have enfeebled the spatial and geographical side of the community, this keeps on playing a pivotal role in people’s socialization process (Cohen, 1995). The increase in complexity, mobility, technological changes, and the variety of lifestyles has affected and changed the meanings of community (Brodsky & Marx, 2001), but its importance has remained unchallenged. Therefore, while the significance of community as a territorial phenomenon has declined, the significance of community as a relational phenomenon has grown (Royal & Rossi, 1996).

The centrality of the concept of community lies primarily in the feeling of belonging that it elicits (Crow & Allan, 1994); community is one of the anchors for the development of individuals’ and groups’ social identities. As Cohen (1995) argued, “people construct community symbolically, making it a resource and repository of meaning, and a referent of their identity” (p. 118). Precisely, scholars generally agree on the prominence of community but not on its univocal significance. Indeed, an extensive variety of diverse meanings can be found that are based around shared commonalities and common experiences, the feeling of belonging, the exclusion of “non-members,” and the practical descriptors such as location and interests. Additionally, people belong to diverse psychological and social communities, some of which are place-based, that is to say settled in a physical space, and others are relational, precisely converging around common experiences, interests or ideas (Fisher & Sonn, 2002); furthermore, some communities are ascribed, such as family or ethnicity and race, and others are achieved, such as the communities of interests or of ideas such as clubs, associations, etc. (Obst, Zinkiewicz, & Smith, 2002). Comprehending how persons make sense of the diverse communities they experience helps to penetrate into their sense of identification with these communities. Furthermore, comprehending how individuals from diverse cultures engender a sense of attachment towards some communities allows for a better understanding of the symbolic place held by the various communities in people’s mental life and well-being (Bishop, Colquhoun, & Johnson, 2006).

These specific aspects are further captured by the construct of sense of community (Sarason, 1974). SoC is a milestone concept of community psychology originally defined by Sarason as a pivotal dimension for human functioning, “the sense that one was part of a readily available, mutually supportive network of relationships upon which one could depend and as a result of which one did not experience sustained feelings of loneliness” (Sarason, 1974, p. 1). The notion of SoC was operationalized by McMillan and Chavis (1986) about ten years after its first appearance. The theorists proposed a multidimensional model, which applies to a variety of communities and is comprised of four components: membership, mutual influence, fulfillment of need, and shared emotional connection. Accordingly, SoC is fed by salient *membership*, which is one’s acknowledgment of being a member of the community and an inclusiveness/exclusiveness descriptor; *mutual influence* is the perception of having an impact on community life and being affected by the community as a whole and by its members; *needs fulfillment* is the confidence of having one’s personal needs met by community resources; and *shared emotional connection* is the feeling of

being connected to the community and community members, which is nourished by a common heritage of shared history and symbols.

More recently, scholars have focused on the investigation of multiple sense of community (MPSoC) to capture the sense of attachment connected to diverse communities (Brodsky & Marx, 2001). Precisely, MPSoC uses McMillan and Chavis' (1986) framework to account for the fact that individuals' experience is not limited to one community (i.e., the primary community). On the contrary, individuals relate to *multiple* communities, each meeting crucial needs and serving social functions, and each providing the ground for developing *multiple* psychological senses of community. Additionally, scholars' interest has been recently focusing on exploring the way in which multiple senses of community intermingle between each other's, so that in people's psychological experience significant communities are not always perceived as separate but somehow overlap. Hunter and Riger (1986) argued that people live in a series of nested communities organized on the basis of a hierarchy of symbolic communities. As highlighted by Brodsky and Marx (2001), "people participate in any number of distinct communities at any one time. Each of these distinct communities is also comprised of multiple, nested sub-communities, defined by individual and group roles, experiences and identities" (p. 176). According to such a perspective, variations exist not only between communities but also within communities, so that as a consequence "individual [...] sub-cultural and intra-group differences" (Wiesenfeld, 1996, p. 339) can emerge. Hence, the idea of multiple senses of community entails the co-existence of both commonalities and diversities. The focal point is how such commonalities and diversities are symbolically organized to preserve the coherence of the individual self. "Macro-belonging" is the sense of community that incorporates multiple communities and their members beyond their specific discrepancies. Conversely, "micro-belonging" is the sense of community that enhances the diversity between sub-community memberships and keeps them separate (Wiesenfeld, 1996). Following Nowell and Boyd (2010), the link between the individuals and the communities they belong to can be accounted for on the basis of needs theory. According to this perspective, each component of McMillan and Chavis' (1986) construct (i.e., membership, needs fulfillment, influence, and shared emotional connection) is linked to a specific subjective need, whose fulfillment feeds individual PSOC. Assuming that psychological sense of community is a need-based construct and people experience diverse communities in the course of their life, the functions served by each of these communities are understood as key elements to grasp the way multiple sense of community operates. Ultimately, community psychologists (Rappaport, 1995) have suggested that sense of community is a community narrative and emphasized the importance of shared collective narratives in building communities, i.e., sense of belonging, feelings of interconnection and cohesion. The connection between narratives and the creation of communities as socially constructed objects requires us to consider the theory of social representations. This theory conceptualizes knowledge as a process of the personal construction of meanings at the crossroads *in-between* the individual sphere and the social sphere. It also emphasizes the interconnection between symbolic knowledge and multiple systems of belonging.

The Theory of Social Representations

The social representations theory (SRT) (Moscovici, 1981, 1984, 2005) is an extensive theoretical paradigm and a framework for inquiring into the flow of social knowledge in contemporary societies. Specifically, knowledge is conceptualized as a dynamic process that encompasses both cognitive and social functioning. In fact, the question at the very core of the SRT is "what is the relation between society in general, or social relations in particular, and psychological function"? (Gillespie, 2008, p. 3). In the primary literature, Jodelet argued that social representations are portrayed as "practical and communicable ways of thinking" (as cited in Bergmann, 1999, p. 4.2) and tools

that people “use to make sense of their worlds, to interpret the novel, the unfamiliar, and the strange” (Howarth, 2001, p. 12). Social representations are dynamic, cohesive and consistent systems of knowledge; they are meanings, beliefs, opinions, attitudes, practices, and behavioral repertoires, all of which feature the social understanding of objects relevant to a given social milieu. Two ideas are at the core of this definition. The first is the existence of “certain patterns of thinking, actions and interactions” that are associated with the concerted creation of relevant social objects (Wagner, Valencia, & Elejabarrieta, 1996); the second is the development of an intersubjective reality that works as a code for the communicative and social exchanges between individuals, groups and communities (Jovchelovitch, 2002). Social representations imply a form of consensus that enables people to make sense of their social and material world and to use this to master these worlds. The notion of positioning (Doise, 2003) accounts for the co-existence of variances among persons. Individuals cognitively adjust the elements that form a given social representation in accordance with the positions they hold in their relational context (Viaux, 2000). Accordingly, *sharedness* is not a general and unchallenged form of agreement but rather it accounts for the fact that social representations are set on a common basis.

Social representations are amalgams of collective memory and personal history with a key identity function. Collective memory “generates the signification of the representation and determines its organization [while personal history] allows adaptation to concrete reality, content differentiation and protects the continuity and consistency of the representation” (Abric, 1993, p. 76). More specifically, the actual organization of the various components of a social representation results in practical meanings (Duveen, 2007), and these are interrelated with the intragroup and intergroup dynamics reflecting the symbolic positioning of social actors, groups, and communities in a given social field (Doise, 1992).

Language is a vehicle for the study of social representations as they are formed through communication. Indeed, words can be taken as indicators of social representations, but the theory does not posit a linguistic approach to the study of social knowledge (Flament & Rouquette, 2003). Rather, there is a line of research that studies social representations through the analysis of semantic configurations (Bauer & Gaskell, 2008; Lahlou & Abric, 2011). The basic idea is that social representations are characterized both as processes and contents (Lahlou & Abric, 2011), and these contents can be examined through the analysis of the semantic elements and their reciprocal relations. Hence, semantic maps can be interpreted as core elements of social representations. More specifically, because the process of representation is both social and personal, the actual meanings attached to given objects derive from the adaptation of shared social representations to concrete realities. Hence, semantic structures can be considered to be “particular instantiations of larger repertoires” (e.g., social representations) (Veltri, 2013). In line with the general principles of social representations theory and following a method of analysis that is widely used in this strand of research, we investigated the social representations of community as transmitted by individual accounts by means of a semantic analysis of actual organization (e.g., meanings).

Study Rationale

This study was intended to explore the personal elaboration of social representations of community by means of an in-depth analysis of the meanings that are produced and attached to a variety of possible communities and of the variances and differences these meanings can have across various cultural groups. Two assumptions supported our investigation. First, we posited that meanings are transmitted through the social representations of social objects (i.e., community, whose psychology is captured by the construct of sense of community) that are relevant to groups of people. Second, in line with a cultural approach to collective processes, we assumed that sense of community is a context-dependent shared narrative (i.e., a social representation) whose particular meanings vary across diverse

groups. Accordingly, our investigation focused on three main research questions. First, what are the core semantic elements (i.e., the main features) of the representation of the community/communities that distinguish two different ethno-cultural groups, namely, a minority immigrant group and the majority host group? Second, do these elements shed light on the function served by the different communities in terms of identity, belonging, social support and emotional connection (theoretically: in terms of a sense of community)? Third, are there detectable differences within the immigrant group and the host group in terms of the meanings and the experience of communities according to the relationship each group establishes with the other group, namely contact?

In line with the SRT, it was expected that by virtue of their positioning, the immigrant and the host groups would refer to different visions of the community and that more than one perspective would emerge within each group, possibly according to the degree and type of inter-group contact.

Method

Participants and Procedures

This study was conducted in a territorial community named Salento, which is located in Apulia, the south-eastern region of Italy. In this region, international migration initially appeared in the eighties, but it was only in the early nineties, as the “great exodus” from nearby Albania began, that the region experienced its initial massive immigration flow. However, immigrant communities still represent only a small portion of the resident population and are mostly concentrated in the urban area of Lecce, a medium-sized city of 95,520 inhabitants. In 2011, the foreign population was 2.3% of the total population (ISTAT, 2011). The participants were selected from two groups, which therefore resulted in two sub-samples: native-born Italian residents in Salento and immigrants from Albania who settled in the same area. People with an Albanian ethnicity were chosen according to two main sampling criteria: (a) the Albanian group was a long-term settled immigrant community; and (b) this group was also the largest foreign community in Salento (16.7% of foreigners officially registered, ISTAT, 2011). Participants were selected according to a quota sampling. The population was segmented into mutually exclusive sub-groups based on two theoretical criteria, namely, nationality (native-born Italians vs. people of Albanian descent) and high vs. low contact with the out-group (i.e., people of Albanian descent for the Italian sub-sample and people with Italian nationality for the Albanian sub-sample). “Contact” was operationalized differently for the two sub-samples.

Within the Italian sub-sample, “contact” was operationalized as self-reported face-to-face relationships. Individuals who declared that they had no contact or only occasional and superficial contact with the immigrant group (low contact sub-group) and individuals who reported habitual and repeated contact with them either because they were friends, co-workers, neighbors or clients (high contact sub-group), were included in the sample in nearly equal numbers. Within the Albanian sub-sample, contact was operationalized by means of a proxy variable, i.e., first or second generation. This decision was based on two assumptions. The first assumption is that the quantity and quality of relationships that immigrant groups establish with the host society is a crucial component of the acculturation process (Berry, 2005). The second assumption is that, as shown by research on immigrant second generations in Italy (Ambrosini & Molina, 2004), second generations are generally more integrated in the host society than the first generation. Specifically, through the mediating agencies of school and peer-groups, they have more relationships, and more significant relationships, with native-born Italians than their parents. First-generation immigrants (i.e., participants who left their country as adults correspond to the low-contact sub-group) and second-generation immigrants (i.e., those born in Italy from Albanian parents or settled in during a very early stage of their lives, correspondent to the high-contact group) were included in the sample in nearly equal numbers.

The participants in the study included 30 native-born Italians living in Salento (17 women between the ages of 22 and 72, $M_{age} = 31.11$, $SD = 13.59$) and 30 immigrants from Albania (13 women between the ages of 23 and 61, $M_{age} = 29.29$, $SD = 11.08$). Among the native-born Italians, 16 were low-contact participants (between the ages of 22 and 72, $M_{age} = 31.02$, $SD = 14.71$) and 14 were high-contact participants (between the ages of 22 and 59, $M_{age} = 31.21$, $SD = 12.27$). On the Albanian side, 16 were first-generation immigrants (between the ages of 23 and 61, $M_{age} = 34.44$, $SD = 11.58$) and 14 were second-generation immigrants (between the ages of 14 and 30, $M_{age} = 22.15$, $SD = 4.38$) (see Table 1).

Table 1

Participants' Nationality and Gender

Contact	Nationality			Gender		
	Italians	Albanians	Total	M	F	Total
Low/First-generation	16	16	32	15	17	32
High/Second-generation	14	14	28	15	13	28
Total	30	30	60	30	30	60

They were all recruited using a snowball design. The immigrant participants (both first and second generation) were contacted via two local associations, namely a group of Albanian college students and a local immigrant advocacy group. The high-contact local residents were contacted via community associations providing targeted services to immigrants, families and small firms who employed immigrants and among neighbors of immigrant families. Nonetheless, none of the respondents worked as professionals (i.e., social worker, lawyer, translator, etc.) with immigrant clients. The low-contact residents were contacted via informal social networks. All of the participants who were contacted in the initial phase of the recruitment served in turn as recruitment agents, who provided the interviewers with tips for contacting new participants.

The participants were asked to take part in an open-ended, semi-structured interview and were informed about the topic of investigation. The interviews lasted from 40 to 90 minutes, were tape-recorded and transcribed *verbatim*. The length of the interview sessions varied randomly among the sub-groups of participants and, though the time-duration of the interviews may correlate with the variety and quantity of contents, the primary focus of our study was to detect the differences in meaning production among the sub-groups of participants, and no significant difference was found between them. All of the interviews were conducted in Italian because the Albanian participants showed good or excellent mastery of the language.

Instruments

An open-ended, semi-structured interview was used to elicit a general narrative on the communities of reference on the topic of inter-ethnic encounters. After an introductory section focused on the immigration experience that was excluded from the analysis, the respondents were asked to describe what they had in mind when they thought of "community" and to specify which communities they were referring to in their descriptions such as, for example, the ethnic community, the local community in which they were currently located, the community of the fellow countrymen, the personal community made up of informal social networks, etc. The participants were then prompted to elaborate on "what makes a community what it is, to me." Based on their subjective experiences, they were encouraged to verbalize their perception of the "community," precisely the activities that take place in it and the persons, groups and objects they think it is composed of and the functions of community. In particular,

the four components of [McMillan and Chavis' \(1986\)](#) model were used to identify the basic needs/functions that were met/served by the diverse communities referred to by participants. Interviewees were specifically asked to express their views on the value of being part of a community, the feelings of attachment and connection, the possibility of having their needs met by the community and the opportunity to be an active part of the community life (i.e., the four components of SoC, according to [McMillan and Chavis' 1986](#) model). Finally, interviewees were asked to describe their relationships with the other members of the community and other ethnic groups within it. All of the topics were covered in depth, but the order of presentation of the questions and the probing questions varied across the interview sessions. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed with the respondents' permission.

Analysis

The analysis aimed at identifying the core themes interwoven in the narratives of community, covering both the meaning of community and SoC, and at highlighting the differences within the sub-group narratives. Theme identification is one of the most fundamental tasks in qualitative research, and many methods and techniques can be used to achieve it ([Ryan & Bernard, 2003](#)). We used the word co-occurrence technique, an approach that comes from linguistics and that is based on the idea that a word's meaning is related to the other words' meanings and that there is a connection between these meanings. Specifically, semantic analysis considers how words relate to each other to connote the concepts, thus allowing the detection of the meanings as the system of relations between them ([Veltri, 2013](#)). This mixed-methods approach, which applies statistical analyses to qualitative data, mainly correspondence and cluster analysis, enables researchers to find answers to questions such as "Which words are important in distinguishing the groups, and what are the relationships between them?" Hence, a computer-aided content analysis was conducted with the T-Lab software ([Lancia, 2004](#)). T-Lab is a software package that provides statistical and linguistic tools for text analysis. The logic underlying the principal analyses performed by T-Lab is based on the assumption that signs (expressions/contents) are related to objects through the mediation of a cognitive process, and that words and their reciprocal relations within a text stand for the concepts they denote ([Veltri, 2013](#)).

Before running the analysis, the transcribed interviews were merged into a single text composed of 146,786 occurrences and 10,126 different lexical units (average frequency = 14). The occurrences are quantities that result from the computation of how many times (frequencies) a single lexical unit occurs within a corpus. The lexical units are words or multi-words (two or more words that stand for just one meaning) as they appear in the corpus. The words with a frequency of less than 5 and "meaningless" words such as pronouns, articles, adverbs, prepositions and conjunctions were removed. Verbs, nouns and adjectives were reduced to their common lexical root. Nonetheless, because denotative meanings result from word associations within the textual strings, words with similar forms such as friends (individuals) and friendship (value or notion), people of Albanian descent (population), Albanian (the prototypical character), and Albania (the country) can acquire different meanings depending on their specific instantiation. Accordingly, we decided to preserve their original forms to prevent the loss of relevant information. Once these procedures were completed, the resulting text was composed of 1,223 lexical units and 2,318 segments (strings of words into which the text was divided).

For this purpose, the participants' responses were grouped through a descending cluster analysis. This technique is based on lexical co-occurrences within strings of words (or segments) and permits semantic classes, each of which is characterized by a distinctive vocabulary, to be distinguished. Through this technique, we were able to identify a variety of semantic universes, which were shared by groups of participants. These semantic universes

correspond to the core semantic elements of the social representations of the community. Specifically, a cluster analysis was used to obtain semantic classes including both words and textual fragments that are put together as they contain the same patterns of words (co-occurrences). A semantic trait (i.e., a word) can be typical in more than one cluster but its occurrences vary among the clusters because each word is considered solely with reference to its relationships with other semantic traits within each cluster. In other words, the same word can have a high occurrence value by being central to a cluster and have a low occurrence value by being peripheral to another cluster, depending on its particular semantic associations with the other words of the same cluster.

We analyzed the most salient words, i.e. those with the highest chi-square value, and the textual segments composing each cluster according to a qualitative approach, which aimed at extracting the underlying core theme. The association between clusters and particular sub-groups of participants were also tested. The sub-groups were selected according to nationality (native-born Italians | people of Albanian descent), gender (M | F), age (<25 | 26-45 | >45 years) and inter-group contact (native-born Italians high | low contact; people of Albanian descent 1st generation | 2nd generation).

A parallel correspondence analysis of the contingency table “lexical units x clusters” was performed to explore the relationships among the clusters. Like all factorial analysis techniques, a correspondences analysis allows for the extraction of new variables (i.e., the factors) through an organized summary of the significant information. In geometrical terms, each factor sets up a spatial dimension that can be represented as an axis line whose center is the value “0” and that develops in a bipolar way towards the negative (-) and the positive (+) ends, so that the objects placed on the opposite poles are the most different. The correspondence analysis accounts for the actual organization of the meanings within the representational field, as the relationships among clusters of words and textual fragments are represented on a two-dimensional space.

Results

Cluster Description

The cluster analysis resulted in four clusters. No difference was found among the clusters for the gender or age of the participants. Each cluster was characterized by a set of distinctive words and strings of words (referred to as “elementary context units”, ECUs), which identified its main feature. We labeled each cluster according to the meaning expressed by the most significant ECUs, the words with the highest chi-square value (see [Table 2](#)), and the global meaning expressed by the whole set of distinctive words and ECUs. The excerpts from the interviews that have been included in this section correspond to significant ECUs, and have been translated in English by the authors. A comprehensive view was therefore granted.

Table 2
 Clusters: Typical Words per Cluster, Percentage of Elementary Context Units (ECUs) Grouped, Chi Square Values, Occurrences within Clusters, Total Occurrences and sub-Groups of Participants Associated to each Cluster

Words	Cluster 1: Relational community 22.6% of ECUs			Cluster 2: Traditions 21% of ECUs			Cluster 3: Intercultural relations 30.7% of ECUs			Cluster 4: Community of origin 25.4% of ECUs					
	χ^2	N within cluster	N in total	Words	χ^2	N within cluster	N in total	Words	χ^2	N within cluster	N in total	Words	χ^2	N within cluster	N in total
friend	246.23	209	381	traditions	291.38	111	141	immigrant	865.35	450	487	Albania	479.99	243	295
talk to	227.07	207	389	important	217.10	188	363	relations	145.30	76	82	go back	237.03	103	115
fulfill	204.32	74	87	identity	139.81	68	99	choice	105.78	91	123	years	207.80	167	252
needs	112.55	49	64	ties	121.97	64	97	influence	85.62	53	62	grandpa	152.30	68	77
understand	95.86	68	114	place	120.55	68	107	depend on	84.98	107	167	live	132.42	265	555
foreigner	86.73	71	127	birth	110.91	33	36	attitude	83.76	60	75	uncle	122.42	57	66
turn to	79.46	35	46	Italian	99.13	78	144	relationship	70.63	109	182	father	118.99	57	67
student	70.73	35	49	bond	95.97	44	62	genuine	62.01	28	28	parents	107.10	102	165
interest	65.03	34	49	cultural	80.64	55	95	society	60.57	81	129	home	101.79	110	187
Albanians	64.68	64	124	maintain	71.39	60	114	impact	58.40	40	49	brother	100.91	49	58
college	61.53	44	74	history	67.44	47	82	Italians	56.26	205	429	stay	90.86	87	141
necessity	55.20	74	161	recognize	62.95	36	57	person	54.41	127	239	offspring	88.91	48	60
friendship	50.63	46	86	religious	60.95	23	29	help	50.30	81	137	mother	88.33	50	64
emotional	39.68	16	20	habit	51.19	27	41	avoid	49.82	26	28	Italy	81.61	227	519
Albanian	38.75	33	60	characteristic	51.02	39	71	establish	47.91	31	37	cousin	72.45	32	36
youth	38.30	76	188	festivity	49.97	13	13	fear	40.58	41	59	get married	65.46	32	38
academic	36.34	15	19	Albanian	47.21	79	195	ethnic	38.85	42	62	relatives	54.20	40	58
problems	34.11	81	211	south	46.91	38	71	integrate	37.69	78	142	experience	50.66	68	125
Associated sub-group															
Second-generation immigrants ($\chi^2 = 27.94$)			High-contact native-born Italians ($\chi^2 = 65.58$)			Low-contact natives-born Italians ($\chi^2 = 70.81$)			First-generation immigrants ($\chi^2 = 87.83$)						

Cluster 1, which was statistically associated with the second-generation immigrant interviewees ($\chi^2 = 27.63$) but which also included young Italian respondents, grouped 524 ECUs that covered 22.6% of the whole text. This cluster illustrated a representation of a community based on peer relationships and friendships that are able to fulfill the individual personal needs. The terms *friend* ($\chi^2 = 246.23$), *talk* ($\chi^2 = 227.07$), *fulfill* ($\chi^2 = 204.31$), *need* ($\chi^2 = 112.55$), and *understand* ($\chi^2 = 95.86$) were among the terms with the highest chi-square value.

In this cluster, for example, two interviewees referred to this community of relationships as follows: “I have Italian friends, I often hang out with them because we’re all college students. I’ve been making friends at the dorm, where I’ve been living for six years, and also because I live in this context, I live in Italy, in Lecce, and so I have a network of friends who live here”. Additionally, “My community, at least the most intimate, is made by people with whom I share my everyday life and my hopes, basically my friends”. Another participant affirmed that “In these cases [satisfaction of emotional needs] first of all I turn to my friends... friends are really important to me, their opinion is really important to me”. Satisfying personal needs by turning to the personal community of significant relationships emerged as a central psychological function of the community, that was experienced as being mostly relational. This experience of the community was shared by both young Italians and young people of Albanian descent. Consistently, friends were the exemplary community members regardless of their nationality. The needs for comprehension, as denoted by the semantic trait “understand,” seemed crucial to the youth, who appear to be mainly oriented towards the primary community of peers.

Cluster 2 grouped 21.1% elementary contexts units of the whole text and was associated with the Italian high-contact subgroup ($\chi^2 = 65.57$). The most typical words of this cluster were *tradition* ($\chi^2 = 291.38$), *important* ($\chi^2 = 217.10$), *identity* ($\chi^2 = 139.80$), *tie* ($\chi^2 = 121.97$), *birth place* ($\chi^2 = 110.91$), *cultural* ($\chi^2 = 80.63$), and *history* ($\chi^2 = 67.76$), all of which emphasize the connections and bonds that keep the individuals together within their community, which is experienced as a source of shared identity. Several of the Italian interviewees mentioned the local traditions within their primary community and emphasized their attachment to them. As stated by a participant: “The traditions in this land are always traditions that connect those who belong to this community. They are very important, they help to overcome the problems that concern the community and the relationships between its co-members”. Another interviewee explained that “traditions are deeply felt, they unite the local communities and the folklore is a common property, it is shared. There is a strong identity linked to the food and the way of eating and cooking local products”. The meaning of community constructed by the Italian group of high-contact interviewees was exemplified by the reference to traditions, common symbols, and significant places, and suggested that community was intended as a vehicle for collective identification and connection with others. Traditions were perceived as having a strong symbolic valence insofar as they kept individuals together and fostered their sense of belonging. As clarified by another participant, “[traditions] are all things that make us feeling close, we meet more often and we work together”. Interestingly, common symbols and traditions referred both to the local (i.e., Salento) and the national community (i.e., Italy), which suggests a common ground for the two communities.

In Cluster 3, which grouped the highest number of elementary context units (30.7%), the low-contact Italian subgroup was overrepresented ($\chi^2 = 70.81$). In this cluster, the core theme revolved around intercultural relations, as suggested by the most distinctive words: *immigrants* ($\chi^2 = 877.50$), *relationships* ($\chi^2 = 145.30$), *choice* ($\chi^2 = 105.77$), *influence* ($\chi^2 = 85.61$), *depend on* ($\chi^2 = 84.98$), *attitude* ($\chi^2 = 83.75$), *society* ($\chi^2 = 60.57$), *help* ($\chi^2 = 50.30$), *avoid* ($\chi^2 = 49.81$), and *fear* ($\chi^2 = 40.58$). The notion of community was not directly addressed, but the notion of the national community (i.e., Italy and the Italian population) emerged as the background of the general attitude toward immigrants, who were perceived as “non-Italian.” The general attitude towards immigrants appeared to fluctuate

between suspicion and fear, based on a stereotypic vision of diverse groups. Overall, negative or ambivalent feelings were reported in this sub-group of participants. The following excerpts (i.e., elementary contexts units) are examples of contrasting views. An interviewee stated that “There’s too much fear, our culture is too grounded in our traditions, we are not open-minded, and to me, unless we change our mentality, we won’t really accept immigrants one-hundred-per-cent”. Another participant expressed her opinion using these words: “It’s not easy to achieve integration in a new country. There are enormous difficulties, the language for example... I do really understand their difficulties so I try to make them feel at home”. Interestingly, when the respondents directly addressed issues related to their national identity, they clarified that the Italian country is far from a cohesive community; on the contrary, fragmentation and internal divisions were mentioned as denoting its internal dynamics. As a respondent affirmed: “[the Italian community] can be meant as a community just in a very general sense, it’s neither homogeneous nor organized. My country is characterized by a huge gap among North and South, there is a cultural gap among regions and above all among cities”. To put it in different words, people with Italian nationality were perceived as members of a collection of individuals who lack internal unity. In such a collection the reciprocal interdependence and the possibility of providing social support and sharing symbols and values cannot be taken for granted. As attested by an interviewee, “[Italians] mind their own business. They are not united”.

In conclusion, in this cluster, the concept of community remained in the background even though the respondents were inclined to use the nationality as the main category for positioning themselves and the immigrants.

Cluster 4, which is associated with the Albanian first-generation immigrants ($\chi^2 = 87.83$), covered 25.4% of the whole text of the interviews. In this cluster, community was mainly identified with the origins and was meant as the symbolic primary community from which the immigrant participants came from. The use of terms such as *Albania* ($\chi^2 = 479.99$), the act of *going back* ($\chi^2 = 237.02$), *time/years* ($\chi^2 = 207.79$) and many words referring to family members (*grandpa* $\chi^2 = 152.30$; *uncle* $\chi^2 = 122.41$; *parent* $\chi^2 = 104.10$; *brother* $\chi^2 = 100.91$; *offspring* $\chi^2 = 88.90$) indicated that the country of origin was perceived as a community. Mixed feelings were expressed in this sub-group of respondents who were torn between the past and present. They acknowledged their ties with their country while at the same time stressing how different their life had become in the new context, and how they had set a growing distance between themselves and what was once their home. Some of them took this distance to an extreme degree, as this participant who stated: “I was ten years old when I came here and I’ve never gone back to Albania. My husband and my children live here and my parents are dead. It’s been such a long time since I have seen my Albanian relatives that I don’t even remember their faces... they burned bridges when my family moved from Albania, so I don’t see why I should make it up with them”. As a general trend, the primary community (i.e., the family) and the country of origin were perceived by this group of respondents as a repository of meanings and a source of identity, but their attachment to the Albanian community was expressed in contradictory terms. As stated by an interviewee, “I don’t see as I could move back to Albania...I could go back, but not remain there forever. I mean, I got used to live far from my parents, far from my country, far from my loved ones, this is not essential to me anymore. I don’t see Albania as a place to go back to and settle down”. Table 3 summarizes the main findings hitherto described.

Table 3

Synoptic view of the Communities of References and the Functions Served by the Communities in each Cluster

	Native-born Italians		People of Albanian descent	
	High contact (Cluster 2)	Low contact (Cluster 3)	Second-generation (Cluster 1)	First-generation (Cluster 4)
Main communities of reference	Local community (place of birth, i.e., Salento community)	National community ("Italian")	Relational community (friends and peers)	National community ("Albanian") + Family of origin
Functions served by the communities	Positive membership (feeling proud of being part of the community) + Emotional connection (feeling connected to the place and the fellow residents)	Negative membership (being part of a community that lacks support, cohesion and shared values)	Need fulfillment (the personal community of relationships meets material, social and emotional needs)	Ambivalent membership (acknowledging the importance of being Albanian while feeling detached and not as Albanian any more)

Relationship Among Clusters

The two-dimensional graphic representation engendered by the correspondence analysis shows similarities and differences among the clusters in terms of proximity and distance (Figure 1). The first axis (i.e., factor) explained 42% of the inertia (i.e., variance in the correspondence analysis), and the second explained 32% of the inertia.

As indicated by the position of the clusters, Cluster 4 and Cluster 3 were the most distant (= different) on the first factor, with Cluster 1 positioned almost half-way in between the two but closer to Cluster 3, and almost as close to the "neutral" point corresponding to the origin of the axes.

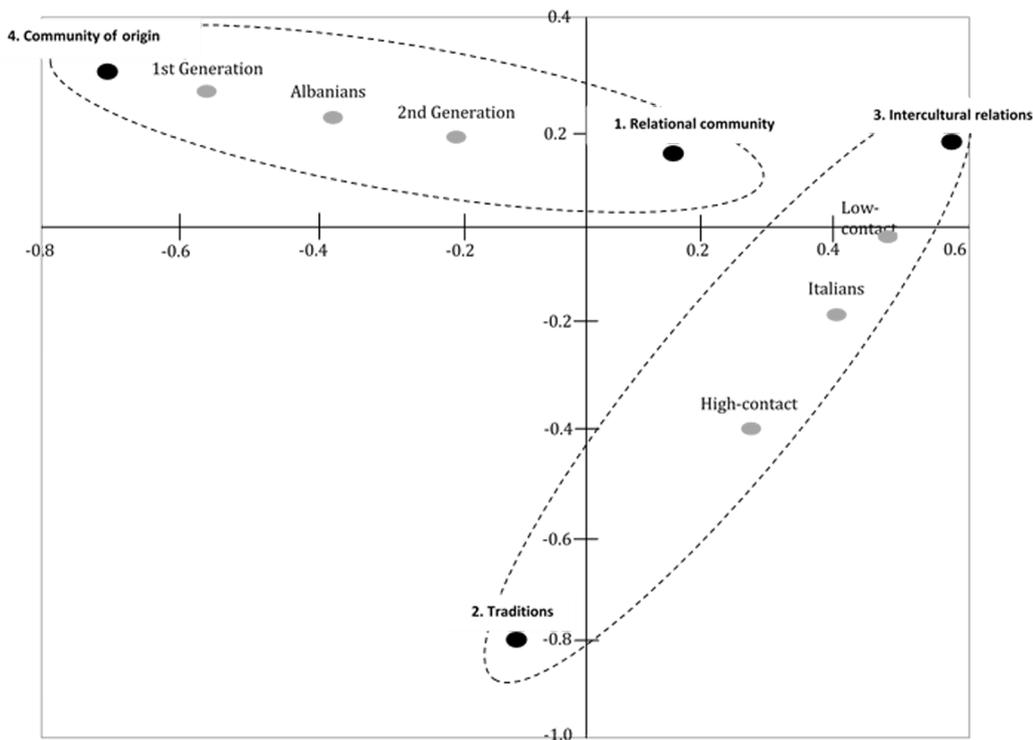


Figure 1. Correspondence analysis on words x clusters table.

The main difference between the representation of community expressed in Cluster 4, which was positioned on the left half of the horizontal axis, and Clusters 1 and 3, both of which were positioned on the right half of the horizontal axis, lays in the types of community and societal relationships they evoked. While in Cluster 4 community was the realm of primary ties that were mainly symbolized by family ties, the notion of community emerging in Cluster 1 emphasized the relational networks outside the family (mainly friends). Cluster 3 took this tendency to the extreme by moving from primary, intimate and familiar relationships, to secondary relationships, distancing and unfamiliar relationships such as those involving the outsiders (i.e., the immigrants). Overall, these three clusters were positioned on a continuum whose extremes were labeled according to the classical Tönnesian categories of “community” (left pole) vs. “society” (right pole).

On the second factor, Cluster 2, which was positioned on the inferior half of the vertical axis, was opposed to all the others, which were positioned on the superior half of the axis. The most striking difference between the concept of community represented in Cluster 2 and the concept of community emerging in the other clusters lays in the possibility of the communities to provide a foundation for identity. Whereas in Cluster 2 the local community membership was fed by traditions and clearly served as an anchorage for cultural identity, in Cluster 4 (the most distant from Cluster 2), the community of origin was perceived as no longer having this function. As highlighted in the cluster description, the first-generation immigrants acknowledged the importance of being Albanian while feeling detached and not identifying with the Albanians any more. In a different way, the community of peers drawn by Cluster 1 was not meant to be a source of identity because it was rather focused on the instrumental function of meeting the individuals’ needs and was experienced in the “here-and-now.” In contrast, the ambivalent and almost differentiated national community sketched in Cluster 3 was not intended as a basis for a strong and positive identity but emphasized the fragmentation of a contradictory community. Based on these considerations, the extremes of this continuum were labeled as “strong” (inferior pole) vs. “weak” (superior pole) cultural identity.

Discussion

The goals of our study were to (a) identify the core semantic elements of the representation of the community/communities in a minority immigrant group and in the majority host group, (b) shed light on the functions (i.e., identity and belonging, social support, emotional connection, and influence) served by the different subjectively important communities, and (c) detect the differences within the immigrant and the host group according to the relationship each group establishes with the other group. The results indicated that the meanings of community and sense of belonging to multiple communities vary across diverse ethno-cultural groups and that each group is cross-cut by multiple axes of differentiation, one of which was taken into consideration in our study and is linked to the experience of inter-cultural relations. Following [Doise \(1992\)](#), we can consider the variations among individuals as anchored in both the different socio-cultural group positions and the personal experience of inter-ethnic encounters.

The various representations of community and its function appeared to have few mutual overlaps across the Italian and the Albanian group. Indeed, though each of the narratives drawn from the interviews was not totally exclusive of one sole sub-group, each sub-group was characterized in a peculiar way. In line with the SRT, we found that the members of the two ethno-cultural groups considered in this study shared an in-group common set of references. We also found that the strength of the individual adherence to the various aspects of the shared representation of the community reflected the way in which interviewees of Albanian descent and native-born Italians interviewees perceived the social relations between diverse ethno-cultural groups and more generally the social structure they were embedded in (i.e., their socio-psychological anchoring).

In detail, the analysis of narratives highlighted that the Albanian participants viewed community as either their ambivalent community of origin or their everyday friendly and supportive community of friends and close personal networks. The first-generation immigrants mostly contributed to shape the former meaning, and the younger second-generation contributed to form the latter. Although both of these memberships were perceived to be important, neither of the two appeared to serve the psychological function of anchoring a clear cultural identity. In the Albanian immigrants who settled in the area in the nineties, as in the case of the majority of our first-generation interviewees, the country of origin evoked memories of childhood and the awareness that cultural heritage could not be escaped, but it also activated the need for putting some distance between the actual self and the community of origin, which is criticized by some for being traditionalist, sexist, and frozen at a pre-modern stage. According to the conceptualization of sense of community proposed by [McMillan and Chavis \(1986\)](#), membership was the core dimension that emerged in this representation. Among the first-generation immigrants, membership appeared to be accepted in its consequences as an ascribed membership to a country and its national culture, but not always subjectively valued. In some cases, the distancing attitude suggested that the participants were experiencing a negative multiple sense of community, meant as a centrifugal force that drove them away from the community ([Mannarini, Rochira, & Talò, 2014](#)). For this group, the country of origin and the family were the two overlapping communities of reference, and both were described as having similar features and elicited similar feelings. In the mind and the discourse of these participants, talking about Albania and talking about their family was talking about the same mental object.

For the participants of Albanian descent who arrived in Italy when they were children and who initiated and completed their socialization process and schooling in the new country, the notion of community and membership turned out to be somehow “liquid,” loose, focused on the present time, and sufficient for providing emotional and material support but not for sustaining what might be defined as a cultural identity. Following [McMillan and Chavis’ \(1986\)](#) model, need fulfillment emerged as the central component of sense of community, thus emphasizing the support that in its various forms could be provided by community members. This finding suggested that sense of community might be a resource (for second-generation immigrants) that goes beyond an adaptation to promote social integration. The category of ethnicity, defined as the combination of the myth of the common lineage, shared inter-generational memories, shared values and distinctive symbols ([Smith, 1986](#)), appeared to be less conspicuous in the definition of identity among the second-generation immigrants. Indeed, they sometimes used categories such as those of students, youngsters and friends as superordinate categories including both Italians and Albanians, thus sharing a common group identity ([Gaertner, Dovidio, Anastasio, Bachman, & Rust, 1993](#)). Therefore, we argue that the different socio-psychological experiences of migration held by the first- and the second-generation immigrants can be regarded as the anchorage for the organization of the social representations of community. With various nuances, all of the immigrant interviewees were aware that they had a cultural heritage that made them different from the host society (i.e., the consciousness of diaspora, see [Hannerz, 1992](#)), but they were also aware that the immigration experience made them different from their fellow countrymen. Ultimately, as for the symbolic organization of the multiple communities of reference, the community of origin and the community of settlement seems to be kept distant, thus putting “micro-belonging” first ([Wiesenfeld, 1996](#)).

Participants with Italian nationality too offered two narratives of their community. One narrative was shaped mainly by those participants who did have relationships with immigrants and emphasized the importance of membership and the distinctiveness of the local community, which was experienced as a common cultural ground and the basis for collective identity. A highly valued membership, along with shared emotional connection (one more component included in the proposal by [McMillan and Chavis, 1986](#)), stood out as the main dimensions of the

sense of community characterizing this group. The emphasis on the positive in-group identity was combined with an increased contact with the immigrant groups, as if the contrast or the sheer comparison activated by the inter-group contact was likely to make the cultural identity of the local residents more salient. However, despite what could be expected on the basis of social categorization research, there was no sign in this narrative of a clear connection between the salience of cultural identity and negative attitudes towards the out-group, nor traces of emotional negative reactions triggered by the immigrants. Cautiously, this investigation suggests that sense of community within the local community does not necessarily prevent residents from accepting cultural and ethnic diversity.

On the contrary, fear, ambivalence and concern were more present in the narrative proposed by the Italian participants who did not have a personal and ongoing experience of immigrants. In this sub-group, the in-group, i.e., the community of reference, was only seldom overtly addressed, but the “we” was mostly meant as “we Italians.” Feelings of belonging were left in the background, and the difficulties of the encounter with diverse ethnic groups were brought to the foreground. This specific sub-group overused stereotypes to account for these difficulties but did not appeal to the out-group to affirm the in-group’s positive identity. Following [Moliner \(1996\)](#), it can be argued that this sub-group of participants reduced the vagueness of the object of representation through the overuse of stereotypes and dominant ideas. These results confirmed that contact is an effective strategy for enhancing inter-cultural relations (as attested to by decades of research, see [Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006](#)) and that the positive effects of contact do not imply that groups engage in de-categorization processes, even though a dual identity has been related to both decreased bias ([Gaertner, Dovidio, & Bachman, 1996](#); [Hornsey & Hogg, 2000](#)) and increased bias ([Mummendey & Wenzel, 1999](#); [Waldzus, Mummendey, Wenzel, & Boettcher, 2004](#)). On the other hand, our findings suggested that when there was no direct contact with immigrants, not only were the immigrants viewed in more stereotypical terms but also that the distinctiveness of the in-group did not clearly emerge. In this case, common sense supplied participants with stereotypical representations of both the host and the immigrant group. In both cases, it was apparent that the reference to the out-group (either directly experienced or perceived through the media discourses) was to some extent entailed in the definition of identity and community.

To conclude, multiple communities at various scales (family, group of peers, local community, country) and multiple belongings variously important, shaped the experience of both the native-born Italians and the Albanian immigrants. The psychological side of being part of one or more communities, i.e., the subjective meaning, was articulated in terms of membership, shared emotional connections, and needs fulfillment. Influence, i.e., the fourth component posited by the theoretical definition of sense of community of [McMillan and Chavis \(1986\)](#), did not emerge as a clearly defined theme. As a speculative hypothesis, it could be argued that influence, meant either as the feeling of being able to make a contribution or as being aware of being influenced by the larger society, is less likely to be experienced by the generality of the individuals than it is by a specific category of individuals, i.e., those who are actively engaged (or willing to engage) in the community life or have at least developed a global vision of the relationships between themselves as individuals and the groups they belong to and the overall community.

Conclusions

Our study, positing that culture accounts for the situated nature of meanings entailed in the living experience of community and that these meanings can in turn shed some light on the unfolding of inter-cultural relationships, provides an initial basis for understanding the role of community and the sense of community in the study of inter-ethnic encounters and the relationship between multiple senses of community and acculturation processes. The

variability with which acculturation can take place (Berry, 2008) has recently captured the interest of scholars (Navas et al., 2005) who have argued that “the adaptation strategies in them may not be uniform either. On the contrary, in some cases a person will follow the patterns of their heritage culture and in others will open up to the novelties and contributions of the host society culture” (p. 28). Precisely, the analysis of variability and differences calls for a tighter connection between culture and cognition and for in-depth and situated explanations that are in line with a cross-cultural psychology approach that views human thought and behavior as interacting with the cultural context within which they occur. Our study precisely examines the variability of the individual and the collective socio-cognitive processes in inter-cultural encounters. The notion of psychological sense of community has received scarce attention in the broad field of acculturation studies despite the profitable interconnection between these two constructs (Berry & Kalin, 1995). In particular, we argue that the concept of a multiple sense of community can advance the study of variability of the acculturation process because it captures the simultaneous orientations of individuals toward several communities and the corresponding development of a compound sense of attachment towards them. Indeed, positive outcomes of the acculturation process can derive from the symbolic integration of the multiple communities that inhabit the symbolic world of each culture. Moreover, our study sheds light on the variations of the meanings of sense of community between and within groups.

At the same time, there are some limitations that have to be acknowledged and addressed by future research. One limitation concerns the method of analysis, which enables the exploration of the explicit or denotative meanings of social representations but leaves the implicit meaning in the background (Veltri, 2013). Additionally, the semantic analysis captures the content of social representations but it cannot be used to make conclusions about the process that generates social knowledge (Lahlou & Abric, 2011). To investigate these processes, groups should be studied in the natural contexts of their daily interactions. Largely, as the SRT is not a linguistic theory, the semantic analysis of textual production is not sufficient for grasping the complexity of the construct of social representations. Nonetheless, because we were interested in the investigation of the denotative meanings of community, the methodological approach of this study was consistent. However, our results are far from complete and require further research. One more limitation concerns the number and the characteristics of the respondents. The sample was quite small ($N = 60$), and though this size is not unusual in qualitative research, a larger sample would have certainly increased the soundness of the results. Furthermore, our sample included only acculturated Albanian immigrants with a proficient level of the Italian language. However, because the study was based on an emic perspective and aimed at an in-depth examination and understanding of the local dynamics, the generalization of the findings was not in the scope of the study. A third limitation lies in the methodological expedient of using self-report measures of the inter-ethnic contact for the host group, and immigrant generation as a proxy variable for the inter-ethnic contact. We acknowledge that this methodological artifact limits the validity of our findings.

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