Construing the cultural other and the self: A Personal Construct analysis of English and Italian perceptions of national character

Viv Burr [a],*, Massimo Giliberto [b], Trevor Butt [a]

[a] School of Human and Health Sciences, University of Huddersfield, Queensgate, Huddersfield HD1 3DH, UK
[b] Institute of Constructivist Psychology, Via Martiri della Libertà, 13, 35137 Padova, Italy

A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

How we perceive other cultures is arguably of increasing importance in contemporary society, impacting on realms such as international relations, business and tourism. The qualitative research reported in this paper was carried out in the UK and in Italy and adopted a Personal Construct Psychology approach. It aimed to explore intercultural perceptions in a sample of people who had some degree of experience with the 'other' culture, and a unique feature of the research is that it asked how those perceptions might be affected if people from both cultures are given access to each other's perceptions. There was considerable commonality in the perceptions of the English and Italian participants, and each culture envied some of the qualities of the other. However, they initially struggled to accommodate how they were seen by the other and endeavoured to resolve difference by construing at a more superordinate level. The findings also suggest that national identity is rooted in the construing of others' constructions, achieved through relationship and comparison.

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1. Introduction

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Perceptions and stereotypes of people from different nations around the world have previously received a good deal of attention from researchers. For example, Linssen and Hagendoorn (1994) asked teenage students from seven western European countries to rate those nationalities on several trait dimensions. The results suggested that the more northern peoples, for example Germans and English, were perceived as more likely to have qualities such as 'efficient' and 'scientific' than southern European countries like Italy and France. The southern nationalities were rated as more emotional, enjoying life and more religious than northern nationalities. Italians were also seen as more empathic, helpful and friendly than the English. According to Lönnqvist, Yijälä, Jasinskaja-Lahti, and Verkasalo (2012), there has been very little research on the accuracy of national stereotypes and they call for more research in this area. What research there is seems to suggest that,

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +44 01484472454.
E-mail addresses: v.burr@hud.ac.uk (V. Burr), giliberto@icp-italia.it (M. Giliberto), t.butt@hud.ac.uk (T. Butt).

in the absence of significant personal experience with the other culture, perceptions of national stereotypes tend to be inaccurate.

A number of research studies have additionally studied how people perceive other cultures compared to their own. For example, Suanet and van de Vijver (2009) used rating scales to measure perceived cultural distance to understand acculturation in exchange students visiting Russia, with questions such as "How similar or different do you find the mentality in Russia and in your home country?" In the UK, Puddifoot (1996) studied adolescents' perceptions of other cultures and the degree of perceived 'intercultural distance' between them. Using free responses to photographs of several cultures (British, French, Asian, Gypsy, Chinese, Eskimo, African and American), participants ranked each culture on approximately 20 bipolar constructs. Measures of perceived distance between the cultures indicated that the participants saw those with the greatest similarity to the British to be Americans and French. Those perceived as having the greatest distance from the British were Africans, Gypsies and Asians.

Van Oudenhoven, Askevis-Leherpeaux, Hannover, Jaarsma, and Dardenne (2002) and Van Oudenhoven, Selenko, and Otten (2010) measured social distance (Bogardus, 1933) and liking for six European nations. Van Oudenhoven et al. (2002) asked over 400 students from France, Germany and the Netherlands to rate their liking for the other nations and to rate similarity to their own nation on traits such as 'friendly', 'tolerant', 'practical' and 'domineering', as well as measuring the degree of participants' contact with those nations. The aim of this research was to assess the usefulness of Social Identity Theory (SIT) (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) over other hypotheses, namely the similarity-attraction hypothesis (Baron & Byrne, 2000) and the 'contact hypothesis' (Allport, 1954), in accounting for attitudes between nations. SIT states that in developing our own (in this case, national) identity we compare our nation to others and are motivated to see our own as distinctive and superior, and to stereotype others negatively by comparison. Van Oudenhoven et al. (2002) argue SIT predicts that people from smaller nations will denigrate larger nations because the smaller nations will have more difficulty in constructing and maintaining a high-status identity. In line with SIT, they found that members of smaller nations (Belgium and the Netherlands) expressed less liking for larger nations such as France, Germany and Great Britain. There was some evidence that perceived similarity, but not degree of contact, was related to liking.

Existing research therefore suggests that people perceive varying degrees of 'distance' or similarity between their own nation and others and that perceived similarity may be one of a number of factors which play a part in our attitudes towards other nations. However, we appear to have little in-depth knowledge about these perceptions or about the value that may be attached to particular characteristics. Research into intercultural perceptions appears to have been predominantly quantitative. It has relied on ratings of prescribed lists of attributes with no check on the relevance of these dimensions in people's eyes. We do not know whether being, for example, 'emotional' or 'independent' is seen as desirable by different nationalities, or why. However, Peng (2012) explored how American and Chinese college students perceive and stereotype each other using free responses. The students were simply asked to write down as much as they knew about the other culture. A content analysis of their responses revealed low levels of awareness of Chinese culture among the American students, and popular in their perceptions of China were terms such as 'Communism' and 'overpopulated'. Common terms associated with America and Americans for the Chinese students were "freedom", "independence", and "open-mind". Peng's free-response method also provided some insight into the value judgements that students made about the qualities they saw in the other. For example, one Chinese student wrote "I do not like their [Americans'] attitude towards the family. They think if the children grow up, they should leave their home. I do not like that. I think family is important to us".

Furthermore, it may be argued that one nation's perception of another is only part of the picture we need to build if we are to more fully understand intercultural perceptions. In her study of young people in Brixton, UK, Howarth (2002) found that perceptions of self are intimately bound up with how we feel we are perceived by others. By extension, our perceptions of the other are also likely to be influenced by how we feel we are perceived by them. However there appears to be no research which has explored the significance for intercultural perceptions of one's becoming aware of the other's view of us and of themselves.

In this research we therefore intend to move away from an approach using measured attributes to a qualitative approach exploring the views that people hold about themselves and others, and their views on how they believe they are seen, and are actually seen, by the other.

1.1. Theoretical framework

Personal Construct Psychology (PCP) (Kelly, 1955) has a long and successful history of use in exploring people's perceptions of themselves and others, especially in clinical and organisational settings. We believe that its theoretical concepts are rich resources with which to understand issues of cross cultural perception. According to PCP, in making sense of our experience each of us employs a number of bi-polar dimensions (constructs). Very often we are not consciously aware of doing so, but nevertheless our conduct depends upon this 'construing'. For example, one person may approach a new acquaintance with the implicit question "Is s/he going to be a friend or a threat?" while another may ask "Will s/he be self-confident or needy? In each case, friend vs threat and self-confident vs needy are constructs and could be expected to imbue the subsequent interaction with quite different qualities.

We asked how English and Italian people construe themselves and each other and what implications for potential change their construing holds. We were therefore interested in whether Italian and English people base their judgments of each other on similar issues (such as friendliness, work orientation, religiosity, etc.), what Kelly terms 'commonality', to what