

SAME PEOPLE, DIFFERENT IMAGES. THE SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS OF MIGRANTS IN A LOCAL COMMUNITY

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The increase of immigrants compels local communities to find appropriate responses to encourage successful intercultural adjustment. The migrant public perception of native population may strongly influence the effectiveness with which migration is managed. Nonetheless, the social understanding of immigrants is not homogeneous among native community members. Functioning within the theory of social representations, this research aimed to capture the differences between the representations of migrants experienced by distinctive groups of native residents, and their relation to the experience of community (Sense of Community - SoC) and ethnic prejudice. Following a quali-quantitative approach, 494 inhabitants of Nardò (51% female), a town in Southern Italy, were asked to fill in a questionnaire including a words association task and measures of SoC, modern prejudice and the perception of impact of immigration on SoC. The dataset was submitted to the analysis of similarity through SIMI2005 software. The results indicated that the social construction of the targeted migrants was consistent across diverse community groups. However, the structural analysis highlighted a quota of inter-individual differences among community members; the peripheral contents of the representations were diverse among groups of residents with either positive or negative attitudes towards community and immigrants.

Keywords: social representations, migration, ethnic plurality, sense of community, prejudice

1. Introduction

Migration represents one of the most controversial and noteworthy issues in contemporary societies, which has become a phenomenon of increasing public concern in recent times because of the massive flows of undocumented immigrants and refugees who reach the borders of European countries from the Middle East and Africa in search of opportunity and freedom. The immigration *crisis* that occurred over the spring and summer periods of 2015 compelled the

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European (EU) member states to respond to a major emergency, implementing new immigration and citizenship policies. In addition, EU governments were tasked with finding successful responses to the socio-cultural implications of the growth of ethnic-cultural diversity in Europe and to the political reactions it has generated.

Dealing with migration-related phenomena has become a thoughtful challenge not only for centralized political organizations but also for localized entities. Due to the increase of the number of immigrants, local communities are becoming increasingly diverse in terms of ethnicity and face the consequences arising as a result of inter-ethnic relations. Ethnic diversity is valued as a contribution to the receiving communities because it may enrich cultural variety and stimulates interest in global relations. However, ethno-cultural multiplicity can produce complex inter-group challenges that require communities to contend with demands resulting from underlying social dynamics brought about by inter-ethnic contacts, such as integration, isolation, marginalization, and alienation.

In fact, immigrant settlements in local communities cause changes that may include various stages of mutual accommodation that are social, cultural, and psychological (Berry, 2005) involving both native and foreign groups that inhabit the same environment. Intercultural accommodation neither occurs easily nor takes place homogeneously (Berry, 2008) because people differ from each other in the ways that they engage in inter-ethnic confrontation. Consequently, the potential outcomes can vary as well, from adaptation and integration to conflicts and divisions. For instance, integration can be successfully practiced when host communities have an inclusive orientation towards cultural diversity and natives are willing to meet the multifaceted needs of foreign groups establishing themselves in the common territory (Berry, 2011). There is, therefore, a need to understand how effective interventions can be designed to promote ethnic diversity and avoid damaging separations and conflicts amongst diverse cultural groups.

The public perception of populations of the host society plays a pivotal role in migrant integration and in promoting particular intercultural outcomes (Mannarini & Rochira, 2014). However, the social understanding of immigrants may not be uniform amongst residents in a community. In fact, communities are plural entities where cultural variety not only refers to ethnic diversity but also encompasses the numerous social belongings and identities that are intersected and that intersect the inter-psychic and inter-group environments in which members take part (Townley, Kloos, Green & Franco, 2011). Community is not a homogenized unit that overpowers individual needs, ethics and opinions. Rather, persons have their own systems of symbols that interact with aspects of the community/ies that they belong to (Nowell & Boyd, 2011). In light of this, community therefore emerges as a social and relational phenomenon in which the subjective experiences that members collect from the community itself encompass the shared systems of meanings, beliefs, values and traditions without expunging identity distinctiveness and the complexity of inter-individual and inter-group dynamics occurring within a social *milieu*.

Intercultural research confirms that with regards to the perception of immigrants, recent inquiries attest that instead of sharing very few and general stereotypes (Lee & Fiske, 2006), people tend to parcel stereotypes into distinctive and diverse representations. For example, Volpato and Durante (2008) have investigated the social categorization of immigrants in Italy and shown that in place of a unique and global stereotypical type, diverse images of ethnic groups are related to two foremost dimensions, namely warmth and competence. Furthermore, varied representations result in diverse types of prejudice towards immigrants, encompassing

distinguishing intergroup affective reactions, such as envy, admiration, pity, and disrespect (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick & Xu, 2002).

Based on this premises, the natives' perception of immigrants appeared to be a key factor in understanding the social dynamics underlying inter-ethnic relations occurring in local communities as well in creating appropriate interventions to promote effective intercultural accommodation. Accordingly, it becomes crucial to address whether the public perception of immigrants undergoes variations amongst community residents or not. A solid theoretical route to delve into such a challenging issue is offered by the Theory of Social Representations (TSR) (Moscovici, 1973, 1984, 1988) and, in particular, by the integration between two accredited approaches to the study of social representations (SRs), namely the socio-symbolic perspective (Doise, 2001; 2003; Doise, Clémence & Lorenzi-Cioldi, 1995) and the structural perspective (Abric, 2001; 2003).

2. The Theory of Social Representations

Social Representations (SRs) denote a way of thinking and producing knowledge that is public, created in the flowing of social life, and interdependent with the particular context of its production (Galli, 2006). Agreeing with Abric (1994), SRs are the “product of processes of mental activity through which an individual or group reconstitutes the reality with which it is confronted and to which it attributes a specific meaning” (p. 13). Almost fifty years ago (Galli, 2012), Serge Moscovici in his seminal work *La Psychanalyse, son image, son public. Étude sur la représentation sociale de la psychanalyse* (1961) introduced the notion of social representations that later defined as “a specific way of understanding and communicating what we already know” (Moscovici, 1984, p. 17); therefore, SRs enable people to orient themselves in the material and social world and to communicate unambiguously (Moscovici, 2005; 2011).

SRs are dynamic and consistent structures of knowledge – encompassing various psychosocial phenomena such as beliefs, opinions, attitudes, stereotypes, social practices, and behavioral repertoires – that perform the social understanding of facts relevant in a given milieu. Through the process of familiarization, SRs allow individuals to transform an object, which is perceived as unusual, strange, and somehow disturbing into something that sounds familiar through associations to those images, concepts and languages that are already known. At the same time, SRs are not blind to change because their genesis involves both a stabilizing process (e.g., anchoring) and a process of “formation of new meaning of the phenomenon in question (e.g., objectification)” (Markovà, 2000). According to TSR, people can either confirm or challenge representations, calling for alternative images of significant targets in accordance with their social positioning, ultimately unveiling complementary versions of the same reality (Liu, 2004). In fact, the degree of consensus around which the comprehension of important objects is interrelated with the inter-groups dynamics reflects the actual and symbolic social placing of subjects in a given social field (Doise, 1992).

Positioning is at the core of the socio-dynamic approach (SDP) to the study of SRs (Doise, 1992; Palmonari & Emiliani, 2009; 2014), which posits that these are “organizing principles of symbolic relationships between individuals and groups” (Doise, 2001). This perspective focuses on the core concepts of objectification and anchoring. The process of objectification rests on the social creation of a set of symbols – i.e., beliefs, opinions, values, norms, etc. – that form a

definite cognitive map that is common to a given population. At the same time, the anchoring process integrates new objects into the existing worldviews and allows individuals to position themselves within the representational field and guides action. Accordingly, individuals cognitively adjust the elements that form a social representation in accordance with the positions that they hold in their relational context (Doise, 1992; Viaux, 2000). Complementarily, in the view of the structural approach (Abric, 2001), the Theory of Central Nucleus (TNC) emphasizes that “as an organized systems, all representations have two components: content and structure” (Abric, 2003, p. 59). Content features the set of information that a community shares about an object of knowledge, and the structure features the links that connects this information into a coherent construction. According to TNC, the structural configuration of the representation consists of two main sections: the central *nucleus* and the *periphery*. The central core (i.e., *nucleus*) regulates the whole organization of the representation and determines its full sense, whereas the *periphery* designs the most changeable part of the representation that filters the social circumstances and the inter-individual differences among communities’ members (Flament, 1989). As the central core sets the commonsensical logic underlying the links among all the representational contents, the varying configuration of the peripheral elements endorses the global sense of the social representation, integrating it with individuals’ stories, experiences, and subjective standpoints.

Functioning within this theoretical framework, the public perception of the immigrants can vary among community residents in accordance with their social positioning towards the particular object of knowledge. Representations can be diverse in terms of the structural linkages that connect the various representational contents into meaningful and consistent constructions. Based on these conceptual groundings, this study intends to explore how the social representations of immigrants may vary amongst the members of the same local community depending on residents’ insertions within a common symbolic and relational field, namely, their levels of Sense of Community (SoC) and prejudice.

3. The Subjective Positioning of Community Members: Sense of Community, Prejudice, and Impact of Immigrants on Sense of Community

To distinguish sub-groups of community residents, we resolved to take into account the relations that they establish with their own community of residence and with the immigrants category as such. Therefore, the construct of prejudice and SoC served as proxies of the subjective positioning of individuals along with TSR.

Notably, empirical research on social categorization and group identification processes (Abrams, 2010) states that confrontation with cultural diversity and inter-ethnic heterogeneity is likely to result in prejudice and adverse attitudes towards immigrants. These attitudes exist within sets of compound inter-ethnic social relationships and solicit dynamics of social identification/dis-identification (Rochira, 2014). In particular, prejudice has been viewed as a “temporary way to cope with the social and cultural changes involved in immigration flows” (Castellini, Colombo, Maffei & Montali, 2011). In the same vein, societies that accept cultural pluralism have been considered more unlikely to enforce conflictual inter-groups dynamics (such as assimilation, segregation and marginalization), and the evolving ethno-cultural communities that incorporate social and cultural changes emerge as particularly capable of providing social

support to immigrants (Murphy, 1965). Nevertheless, even where ethnic plurality is accepted, there are variations in the degree of acceptance of specific cultural groups (Lebedeva & Tatarko, 2004), with the result that immigrants who are less welcomed often experience hostility and rejection, which in the long run inhibits intercultural adaptation (Berry, 2005).

As far as inter-ethnic encounters are concerned, variability in the perception of immigrants has been shown to be interrelated with the degree of identification that native residents develop towards their community, which is at the very base of the construct of SoC. According to McMillan and Chavis' model (1989), SoC encompasses the multifaceted relation existing between individuals and community along with four key dimensions. Sense of Community includes the identity dynamics underlying the subjective sense of belonging to an organized system (i.e., membership). Additionally, the history and the collective memory nourishing the heritage of shared norms, symbols, and experiences (i.e., shared emotional connection) creates a common ground for the newness experienced by the community's members. Indeed, social insertions reflect the expectations of having personal needs fulfilled by the community and its members (i.e., needs' fulfillment) as well as the sense of being influenced by and having an influence on the whole community (i.e., influence).

Research on SoC within urban contexts characterized by high racial heterogeneity indicates that ethnic variety contrasts with the achievement of SoC at a local level (Hombrados Mendieta, Gomez-Giacinto, Dominguez-Fuentes & Garcia Leiva, 2013). In fact, the perception of similarity among community members was recognized as a key factor in the development of a positive identification towards one's community (Townley, Kloos, Green & Franco, 2011). At the same time, empirical evidence attests to the reality that the more immigrants are perceived as competitive and diverse (Mannarini, Rochira & Talò, 2012), the more the positive sense of attachment towards one's community is likely to increase (Loomis, Dockett & Brodsky, 2004), ultimately activating a defensive reaction by the inhabitants (Fisher & Soon, 2002). Along with this logic, the literature on stereotype content models (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick & Xu, 2002) posits that the perception of competence and warmth affects the diverse representations that natives attach to diverse ethnic groups and that such a variation produces distinctive forms of prejudice each encompassing peculiar intergroup affective reactions, namely, envy, admiration, pity, and disrespect.

Despite these findings, several issues remain unresolved. In fact, a positive identification with the larger society has been shown to be a pre-condition of constructive multicultural adjustment of concern to native populations (Berry & Kalin, 1995). At the same time, no relationship between SoC and prejudice has been established at the empirical level; thus, the link between community belonging and the attitude towards immigrants is far from being recognized (Prezza, Zampatti, Pacilli & Paoliello, 2008).

Based on the human capacity to dismantle stereotypes of immigrants into meaningful sub-representations that are more informative and imaginable than the overall category (Brewer, Dull & Lui, 1981), in this study we argued that SoC and prejudice encompass significant individual positioning and would serve as the anchoring basis for the diverse social representations produced by sub-groups of inhabitants.

4. Research Design

4.1.1. *Study Rationale*

Few studies “have examined targeted stereotypes of immigrants specifically” (Lee & Fiske, 2006, p. 752). Accordingly, the main goal of this research is to identify the potential variations amongst the representations of a target group of migrants produced and shared by distinctive groups of residents of a small local community. In particular, functioning within the TNC and SDP, the general objective of the present work was to capture the potential differences existing between the internal structure of the representations shared by particular sub-groups of residents segmented in accordance with their subjective positioning towards the community of residence and the immigrants.

Two assumptions corroborated this investigation. First, following TNC, we assumed that subgroups resemble varied organizations of the representational contents in terms of central nucleus and periphery, all featuring the common view that community members maintain about the target object. Second, in accordance with SDP, residents of a local community vary in their degree of adherence toward a common set of references featuring the public perception of a significant topic depending on their subjective positioning within a common socio-symbolic field. Accordingly, this study focused on two core research questions. Do the images of a group of migrants settled in a local community vary among native community residents? Are the variations related to the subjective positioning of the inhabitants, particularly the relation that they establish with their local community and the immigrants in general?

In line with TNC and SDP, it was expected that by virtue of the positioning of community’s members, differences would emerge in the internal structure of the social representations (i.e., subgroups) of the target group even though all the SRs endorse a common vision. In line with stereotype content model (Volpato & Durante, 2008), sub-groups of community residents would produce diverse representations of the target migrants along with their attitude towards the immigrants category as such. In particular, we expected that the more community residents are adverse towards immigrants, the more they are likely to share a destructive image of a specific group of migrants settled in their community. At the same time, the literature on SoC and inter-ethnic relations suggest that there would be a difference in the public perception of immigrants among residents depending on their degree of identification towards the community. Specifically, due to the previous findings concerning the relation between ethnic heterogeneity and SoC, a positive engagement towards the community could be associated with adverse representations of the targets immigrants. However, because empirical evidence is controversial, we were cautious in accepting such an expectance.

4.1.2. *The Phenomenon and the Context of the Study*

To pursue the research goal, we resolved to select a peculiar phenomenon of immigration – namely, the seasonal migration wave of farm workers as they head toward the countryside of the local community of Nardò. This group of people was chosen according to three main criteria. First, research on immigrants’ stereotypes reveals images of large ethnic groups; however, few studies have addressed targeted immigrant’s stereotypes (Lee & Fiske, 2006) or the variation in

stereotypical sub-categorizations (Volpato & Durante, 2008). Second, consistent with the TSR, “the view which group members maintain about a social object is specific for the group and, hence, also the object itself takes on group specific social characteristics” (Wagner et al, 1999, p.96). Therefore, we resolved to utilize a community perspective that required us to fully capture the context-dependency of the formation of social representations. Third, the phenomenon of seasonal migration can be considered an “exemplary case” (Patton, 1990) because it entails an exploration into the potential differences among sub-groups of residents and the development of a comparison amongst them based on common grounds of culture, collective memory, history, social norms, values, and symbols all featuring the community that they belong to.

The study was conducted in Nardò, a small village located in the province of Lecce in the Apulia Region, the southeastern geographical area of Italy. Since ‘80, from May to September, hundreds of immigrant laborers have reached this community to harvest watermelons and tomatoes and settle in the surrounding countryside. In the whole province of Lecce, the immigrant communities represent only a small percentage of the resident population. At the beginning of 2015, the foreign population was 2.6% of the total residents (ISTAT, 2015), with Romanians (23.4%), Albanians (13%) and Moroccans (11%) being the most numerous settled immigrant communities. Additionally, immigrant groups are above all concentrated in the urban area of Lecce, a medium-sized city of 95,520 inhabitants, although Nardò represents one of the villages placed in the area of the province with the highest number of immigrants residents (623 foreigners officially registered, ISTAT, 2015).

The phenomenon of seasonal migration of farm workers in the nearby countryside of Nardò is a very complex issue because of the critical life and working conditions of the laborers, despite the efforts of many volunteer organizations to provide migrants with material and legal support. In fact, although waves of foreign workers have moved to the province of Lecce every summer period since the late eighties, the immigrant reception policy of the local governance is far from being fully implemented; hence, many migrants still live in camps where sanitary furnishings, hot and drinkable water, and electricity are often not available. In addition, laborers easily become a target and a source of profit for small criminal organizations in local territory. This assortment lessens the chances of peaceful co-existence among the migrant group and the host local community.

5. Method

The present investigation is a part of a larger study of the representation of the targeted migration phenomenon experienced by the residents of Nardò, carried out on behalf of the “Caritas Diocesana”, a catholic association that assists the migrants temporarily settling in the village.

Based on the theoretical premises, a mixed-method approach was adopted to answer the research question. Specifically, a qualitative technique of data collection – i.e., words association task – was implemented to elicit the emergence of the semantic contents of the social representations. Additionally, in line with an exploratory perspective, measures of SoC, Impact of Immigrants on Sense of Community (iiSoC), and Prejudice were used in order to capture the relations perceivers established with their community of residence and with immigrants, as a general category. Afterwards, a quantitative method of data analysis was performed by means of

Simi2005, a software for the computer assisted analysis of lexical data, to detect the internal structure of the representations for distinctive sub-groups of participants. Finally, results from the quantitative analysis were submitted to a qualitative interpretation (Marzana et al., 2015).

In conclusion, the multi-method approach supported the detection and description of the internal structure of the social representations (Fasanelli, Galli & Somella, 2005) as these resulted from the dynamic of self-other positioning featuring the relations that participants establish with their community and the immigrants.

5.1 Participants

494 residents (51% female) of Nardò participated in the study, aged between 18 and 81 years (Mean = 44.34, SD = 17.47). 47.4% were high school graduates, 17.5% were college graduates. The remaining 35.1% had lower education levels. Participants were selected according to a quota sampling by gender and age and recruited by means of a snowball design. Interviewees were asked to participate in a survey concerning their territorial community by anonymously answering questions regarding relevant social issues pertaining to Nardò and the phenomenon of seasonal migration of farm workers. The questionnaire was completed in approximately 15 minutes, and no incentives were provided for completing the task.

Finally, 443 valid cases were considered for the sake of the analysis as those interviewees who did not complete the words association task were excluded.

5.2 Instruments

Data were collected through a self-administered questionnaire. For the purpose of the present study, the following measures were adopted.

Words Association Technique. Using the stimulus term “seasonal immigrants”, interviewees were invited to freely list the first five words – they were nouns, adjectives, verbs, etc. – that came to their mind when they thought about seasonal immigrants.

Sense of Community (SoC). The Brief Sense of Community Scale (BSCS) by Peterson, Speer and McMillan (2008), a congruent scale with McMillan and Chavis’ (1989) theory, was used. This 8-item scale has five response modalities (from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) to measure four first-order factors (i.e., needs fulfillment, group membership, influence, and emotional connection) and one second-order factor (i.e., sense of community). The following are examples of items: “I can get what I need in Nardò” (needs fulfillment); “I feel like a member of community of Nardò” (membership); “I have a say about what goes on in Nardò” (influence); “I feel connected to community of Nardò” (emotional connection).

Modern Racial Prejudice. The measure used was the Modern Racial Prejudice Scale of Akrami, Ekehammar and Araya (2000), which is a measure of covert prejudice. The scale was inspired by McConahay’s (1983) theory of modern racism and is composed of 9 items (five response modalities from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree) examining three dimensions: denial of continuing discrimination (items such as “Racist groups are no longer a threat for immigrants”), antagonism toward demands (e.g., “Immigrants get too little attention in the media”) and resentment regarding special favors (e.g., “Special programs are needed to create jobs for immigrants”).

Impact of Immigrants on the Sense of Community. Four items were used to assess how the prospective increase of community’s ethnic heterogeneity might impact on residents’ perception of compatriots’ sense of community. In particular, participants were asked (three response modalities 1= negative impact; 2= neutral; 3 = positive impact) how a growth of the presence of immigrants in Nardò would impact on community members with reference to the four dimensions of SOC. Examples of the items are: “residents would have more/less chances to meet their needs” (i.e., needs’ fulfillment), “residents would have a greater/narrower influence on relevant issues” (i.e., influence).

Socio-demographics. The participants were asked to provide demographic information specifying their age, gender, level of education and professional position.

5.3 Analyses

By free association exercise, we obtained a data corpus that was submitted to the *Analyse des similitudes* (Flament, 1962; Vergès & Bouriche, 2009) that is a particular type of network analysis. *Simi2005* was used, a computer assisted software analysis of lexical data that entails to identify the network of linkages among the various constitutive elements that form the social representation, i.e. its internal organization.

In particular, through a combinatory analysis of a matrix of similarity among words (i.e. co-occurrence), the software provides for graphs displaying the “trees of maximum similarity”, that is a topological organization of the SR’s internal structure, where the lexical components and their reciprocal connections can be observed. In fact, the trees show the lexical texture that embraces each significant word where thick lines stand for the most relevant bonds that contour the core nucleus versus lines that are thin representing the periphery as approached indicating that the connections gradually become less significant. In addition, each link is marked by a number that indicates the frequency of co-occurrences between the words and stands for the degree of similarity among the lexical constituents. Therefore, the trees resemble the cognitive map that interlaces the significant information (i.e., words) into meaningful concepts.

Remarkably, the software permitted exploration of the variations in the overall stereotypical representations of the targeted migrants along with the variables chosen. Therefore, whereby descriptive analysis techniques, the individual levels of SoC, iiSoC and prejudice were computed and the sample of interviewees was split in three sub-groups (i.e., high, medium and low levels) using the 33° and the 66° percentiles (see Table 1).

Table 1. Sense of Community, Prejudice, and Impact of immigration on Sense of Community

	SoC		Prejudice		IISOC	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Low	126	28,5	141	31,8	127	28,7
Medium	138	31,1	118	26,6	90	20,3
High	151	34,1	152	34,4	210	47,4
Missing	28	6,3	32	7,2	16	3,6
Total	443	100,0	443	100,0	443	100,0

Then, the analysis of similarity was carried out for each sub-sample of interviewees in order to explore the internal structure of the representation shared by the segmented sub-groups of

participants. For the sake of this analysis, all the words with occurrence values lower than 4 were excluded from the matrix. The significant threshold of words' occurrences was determined along with the results of the lexical analysis performed through the software *EVOC2005* with the aim of detecting the constitutive elements of the social representations that were scarcely frequent, hence irrelevant. Furthermore, before running the analysis, the matrix of words was read carefully and lemmatization and disambiguation of lexical components were performed.

6. Results

The results of the analysis of similarity are described below starting with the account of the central nucleus and proceeding throughout the portrayal of the periphery of the structure focusing on the three variables considered, that is SoC, prejudice, and iiSoC.

6.1 Sense of Community

The findings of the analysis of similarity concerning the three clusters of participants segmented according to their individual level of SOC are presented in Figure 1 (i.e., low level of SoC – LSoC), Figure 2 (i.e. high level of SoC – HSoC), and Figure 3 (medium level of SoC – MSoC).

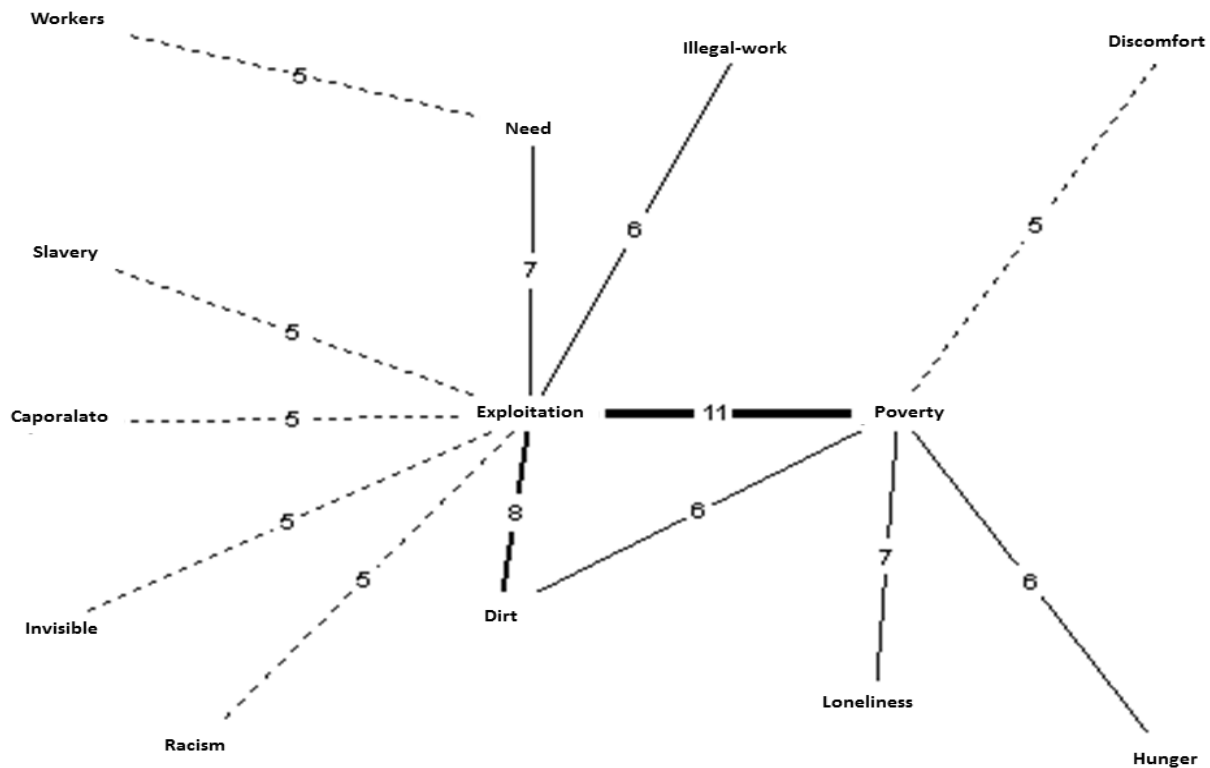


Figure 1. Tree of Maximum Similarity – Low SoC participants

The tree of maximum similarity displayed in Figure 1 indicates that the dyad interconnecting *exploitation* and *poverty* (.11) features the core of the representation, with *exploitation* resting at the very center of the nucleus because this establishes the larger portion of relations of co-occurrences within the representation, although the majority of these linkages are modest. In particular, both *exploitation* and *poverty* are bonded to *dirt* (respectively, .8 and .6), whereas the sole *exploitation* interconnects *need* (.7) to *illegal work* (.6) and also to *slavery*, *invisible*, *racism* and *Caporalato*¹, all attaining low values of co-occurrences (.5). The detrimental image of the working conditions experienced by migrants is displayed in the left part of the structure, whereas towards the right zone of the periphery, the relations of co-occurrences link *poverty* to *loneliness* (.7), *hunger* (.6) and *discomfort* (.5) contributing to the depiction of a very negative image of the target foreigners.

Figure 2 shows that the internal configuration of the representation shared by the participants achieving high levels of SoC is more multifaceted and the linkages of co-occurrences are thicker than the ones featuring the representation peculiar to the LSOC cluster.

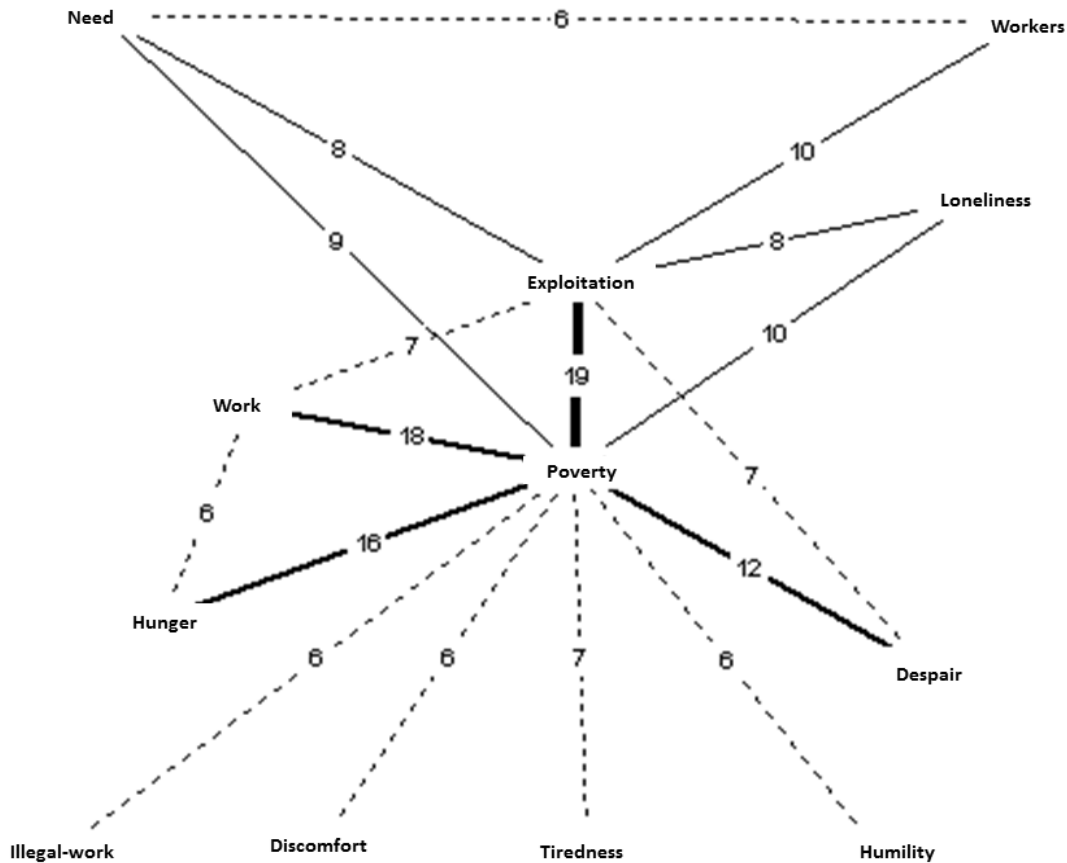


Figure 2. Tree of Maximum Similarity – High SoC Participants

¹ The term *Caporalato* designates an illegal hiring system in which immigrants are employed in exploitative working conditions for very little payment, often under the control of local criminal groups, such as mafia-type organizations. This mechanism is particularly widespread not only in agriculture but also in the construction sector.

The nucleus of the structure revolves around the key link between *exploitation* and *poverty* (.19), with the latter being the core component because it also establishes significant relations of co-occurrences with *work* (.18), *hunger* (.16), *loneliness* (.10), and *need* (.9). Similarly, *exploitation*, which institutes the most substantial association with *workers* (.10), interlaces *need* (.8) and *loneliness* (.8) but marginally *work* (.7) and *despair* (.7). However, the findings indicate that the concept of work orbits around exploitation. The structure indicates that the core elements of the representation (i.e., *exploitation* and *poverty*) feature two distinct but complementary cognitive components: *work* is meaningfully related to basic material *needs* such as *hunger*. In contrast, the central referents cross the affective facets evoked by the migrants' situation, as indicated by the peripheral relationships that *poverty* has with *discomfort* (.6), *tiredness* (.7), and *humility* (.6), in addition to *despair* and *loneliness*.

Figure 3 shows the internal configuration of the representation shared by the MSoC subgroup.

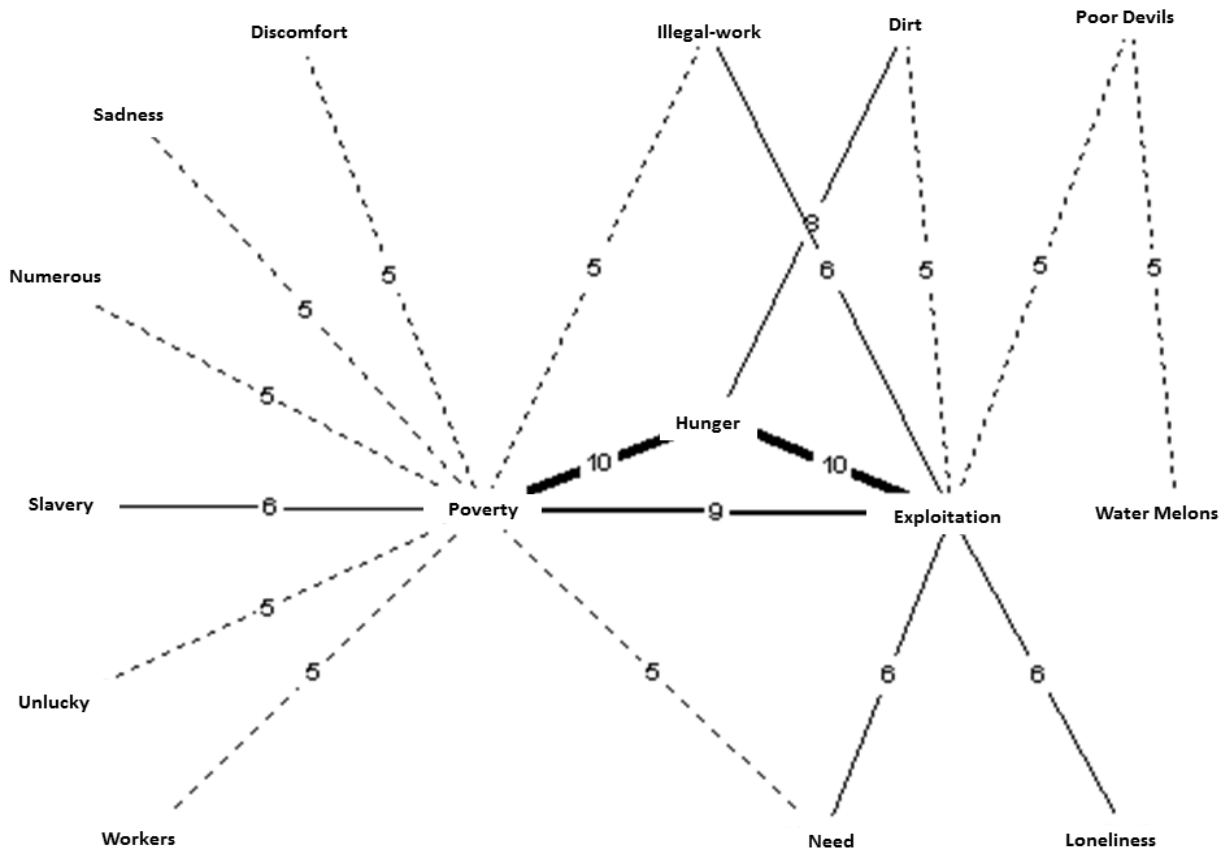


Figure 3. Tree of Maximum Similarity – Medium SoC Participants

The graph of similarity unveils that the internal structure introduces a shift within the central nucleus, where *hunger* constitutes the core component together with *exploitation* (.10) and *poverty* (.10), which in turn are associated with each other (.9). Similar to LSoC, the whole structure is feeble, with the majority of internal linkages attaining values of co-occurrences ranging between .5 and .6. *Poverty* is somehow set apart from *hunger* and *exploitation*; in fact, it

is encircled by very modest relations of co-occurrences with varied elements placed in the right part of the graph, such as *discomfort* and *sadness* (.5), *numerous*, *unlucky* and *workers* (.5), and also *slavery* (.6). At the same time, the left section of the figure illustrates a more compound set of linkages, some overlapping with each other; for instance, *illegal work* and *need* interlace *poverty* (.5) and *exploitation* (.6), and *illegal work* interlaces *hunger* (.8) and marginally *exploitation* (.5). Finally, slight concern towards migrants rests in the very periphery of the structure, as indicated by *loneliness* and *poor devils*, which are modestly connected with *exploitation* (.5 and .6, respectively).

In general, the findings indicate that the more the level of individual SoC grows, the more the representational contents increase, the internal structure of the representation becomes multifaceted, and the links of co-occurrences appear marked. In fact, the participants who are positively engaged with their community share a compound representation of the targeted group that filters a sharp involvement of interviewees in the migrants' situation. Such a concern almost disappears in the representations shared by the LSoC and MSoC clusters, which mainly converge towards the exploiting working conditions experienced by migrants, although the interviewees with a medium level of SoC related to diverse contents somehow disentangled from each other.

6.2 Prejudice

The results of the analysis of similarity carried out the three sub-samples of participants clustered according to their level of prejudice are shown in Figure 4 (i.e. low level of prejudice - LP), Figure 5 (i.e., high level of prejudice - HP) and Figure 6 (i.e., medium level of prejudice - MP). In general, the findings indicate that *exploitation*, *poverty*, and *hunger* are pivotal to the configuration of the central nucleus of the social representations for all the sub-groups of interviewees, with some peculiarities.

Figure 4 unveils the finding that *illegal work* and *hunger* participate in the construction of the central nucleus of the representation mostly revolving around the significant interconnection between *exploitation* and *poverty* (.15). Two main concepts orbit around the core elements. These are the abusing working conditions borne by migrants and the decaying living situation they experience. In fact, *illegal work* co-occurs with *exploitation* (.8) and both are slightly related to *invisibles* (.5) whereas, on the other side, *hunger* relates to *poverty* (.8) that embraces a substantial relationship with *need* (.6), and in turn modestly co-occurs with *workers* (.5). In the same way, both *workers* and *need* are significantly associated with *exploitation* (respectively, .6 and .7) but slightly with *dirt* (.5). More interestingly, both the significant and the peripheral linkages alternate references to the affective energies aroused by migration, as suggested by *loneliness*, that is associated with *exploitation* and *poverty* (.7), also *isolation* and *hope* that are linked to *exploitation* (respectively .6, .5) together with *racism* (.5). Ultimately, *despair* and *discomfort* that are associated with *poverty* (respectively .7 and .6).

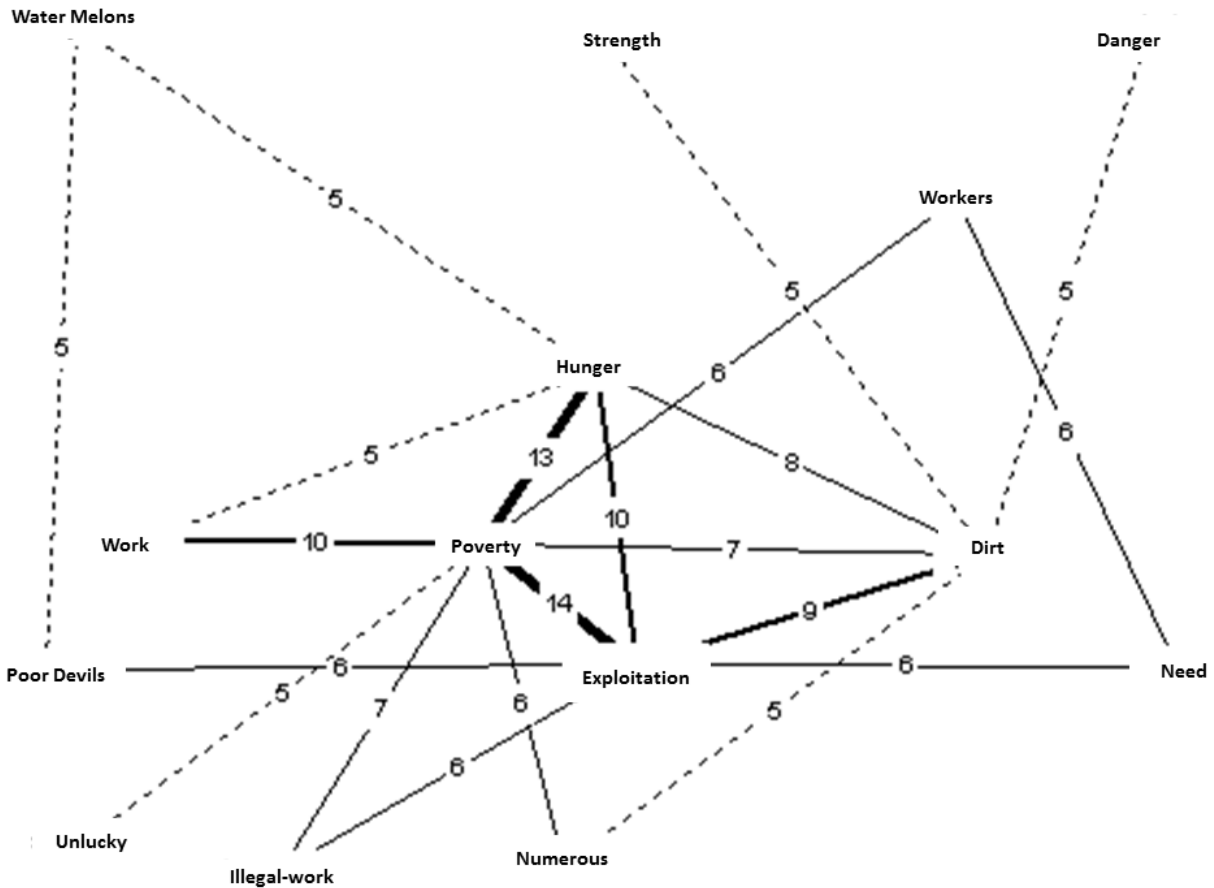


Figure 5. Tree of Maximum Similarity – High Prejudice Participants

Figure 6 introduces a slightly but noteworthy modification in the configuration of the core nucleus of the social representation that is distinctive of the MP sub-group. In fact, it corroborates the centrality of *poverty* that is significantly associated with *exploitation* (.10).

However, two more components revolve around the core of the representation, these are *loneliness*, significantly linked to *poverty* (.10), and *need* which co-occurred with *poverty* (.7) and *exploitation* (.8) towards the center of the structure. At the same time, on the way to the periphery, *need* feebly interconnects *marginalization* (.4) and *workers* (.4), that is also marginally linked to *exploitation* (.4). Generally, the significant relationships of co-occurrence with values higher than 5 interconnects *poverty* with *hunger* (.9), *dirt* (.7), *discomfort* (.6), *work* (.6), *fatigue* (.5) and *despair* (.5) all together figuring not only the unhealthy work situation but also the adverse affective burden born by the farm laborers. The remaining structural bonds are almost irrelevant, with frequency of co-occurrence lower than 4.

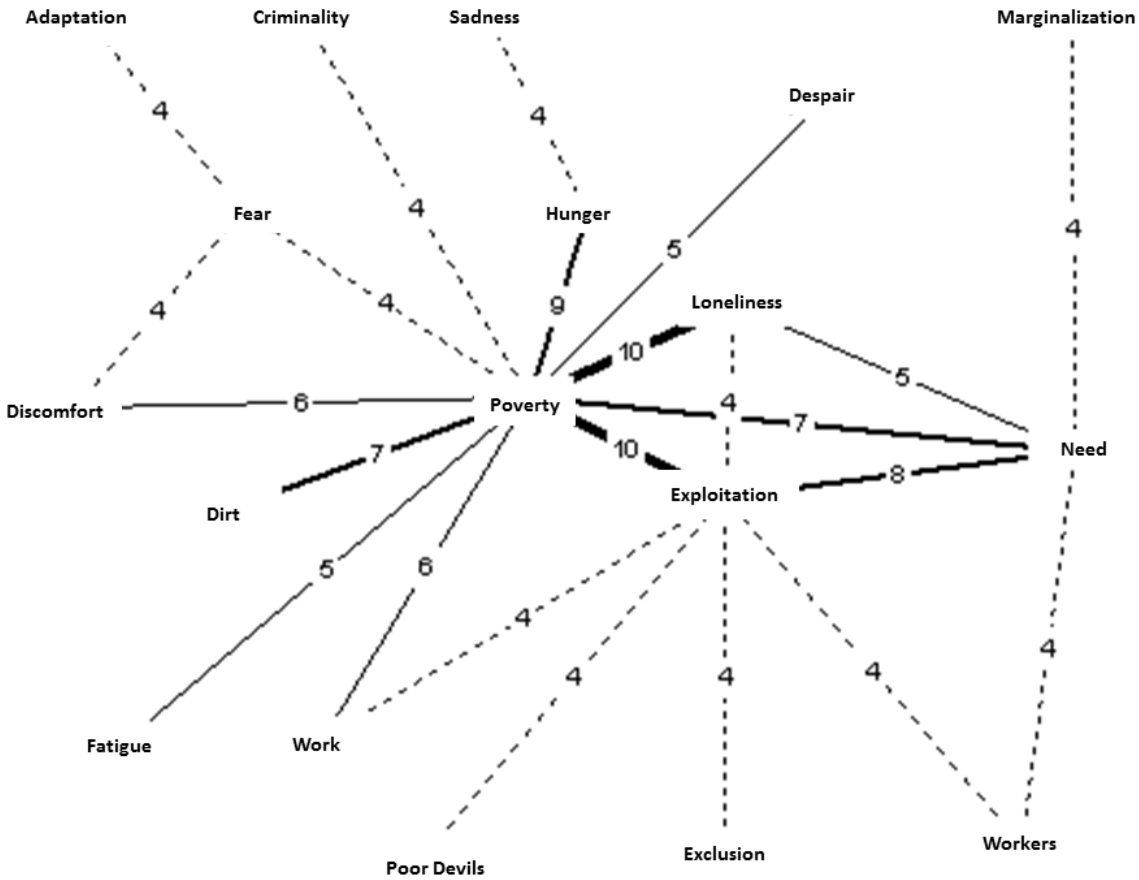


Figure 6. Tree of Maximum Similarity – Medium Prejudice Participants

6.3 Impact of Immigrants on Sense of Community

The findings of the analysis of similarity occurring in the three sub-samples of iiSoC, display a predominant difference in the internal organization of the social representations. Particularly, the sub-group of interviewees who perceive the benefits associated with a growth in the presence of immigrants residing in their community (Positive Impact - PiiSoC) is varied and compound, as indicated in Figure 7. Contrarily, the representations of the other two units (No Impact - NoiiSoC and Negative Impact - NiiSoC) are limited and bare, as emerged from Figure 8 and Figure 9.

Figure 7 shows that the components of the central nucleus reflect the conventional relation between *poverty* and *exploitation* (.24). Additionally, these are encircled by two dyads of significant associations; in the southern section of the central nucleus, the core referents are associated with *hunger* (respectively .17 and .9) and *work* (respectively .16 and .8) whereas *need* (respectively .10 and .12) and *loneliness* (respectively .13 and .11) are intersected towards the northern section. Besides, a compound set of noteworthy interactions disembroil from these two core elements.

In particular, the left side of the graph is characterized by a pool of elements co-occurring with *poverty* and all evoking the affective tenets of migration condition, such as *despair* (.11), *discomfort* (.8), *sadness* (.7), and *fatigue* (.7); conversely, *dirt* (.7) denotes the hazardous living situation of migrants. Finally, once the right periphery is approached, the harmful circumstances and prejudicial state of farm workers in the host community are depicted by elements such as *invisible* (.7), *poor devils* (.7), and *exclusion* (.8) all associated with *exploitation*.

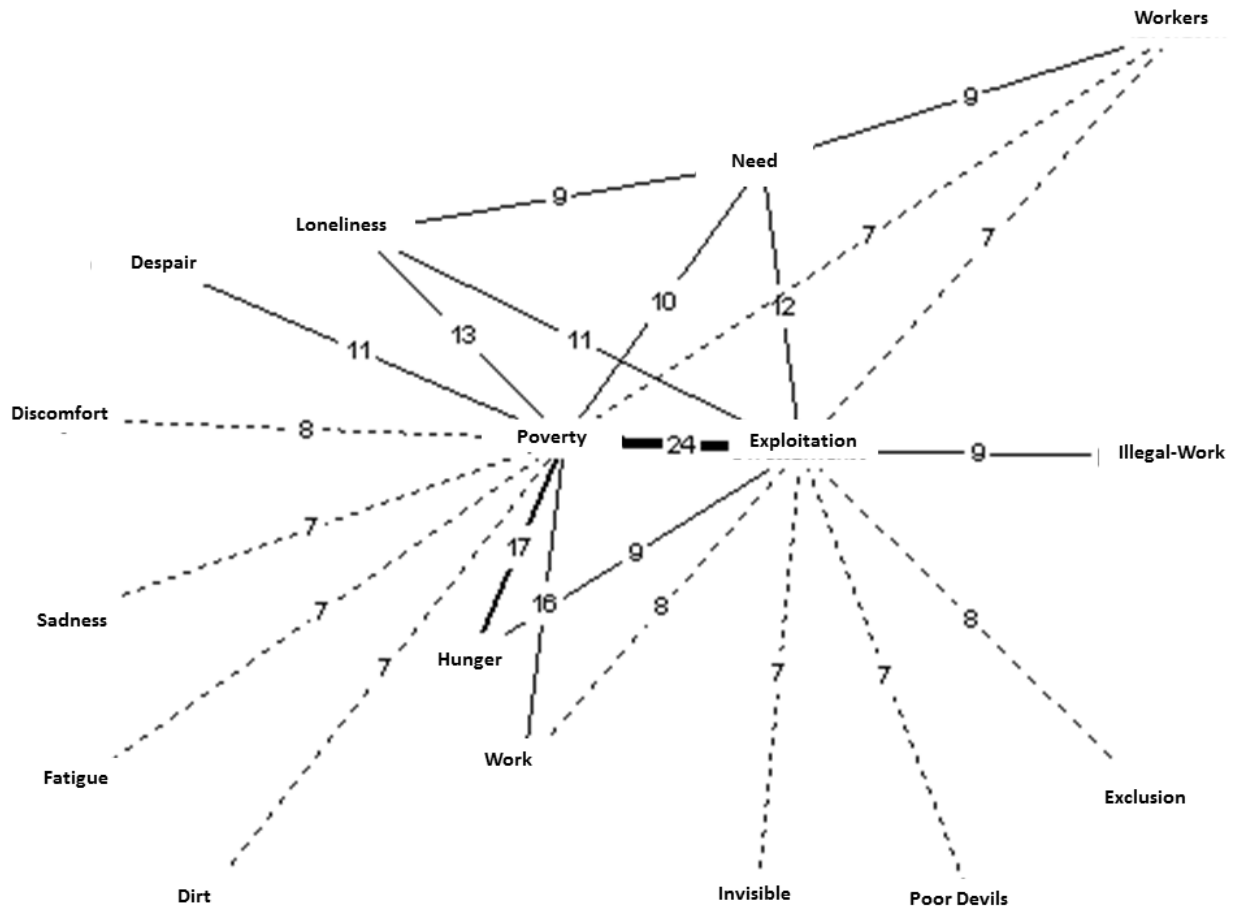


Figure 7. Tree of Maximum Similarity – Positive Impact of Immigrants on SoC (PiiSoC)

Figure 8 and Figure 9 display the social representations of the targeted group shared by NiiSoC (see Figure 8) and NoiiSoC (see Figure 9), correspondingly those who perceive as detrimental the rise of immigrants in the residential community and those who think that no change would occur.

The figures consolidate the significance of the dyad *exploitation* and *poverty* in NIISOC with both these references interconnecting *dirt* (.7) whereas uniquely *poverty* co-occurs with *hunger* (.7). In the upper section of the periphery, *despair* and *need* are slightly connected with *exploitation* (respectively .5 and .6) and *poverty* (both .5) with the latter core content establishing feeble peripheral linkages with elements that corroborate a negative view of the targeted phenomenon, exactly *discomfort* (.6), *criminality* (.5), *loneliness* (.5), *fatigue* and *unlucky* (.4).

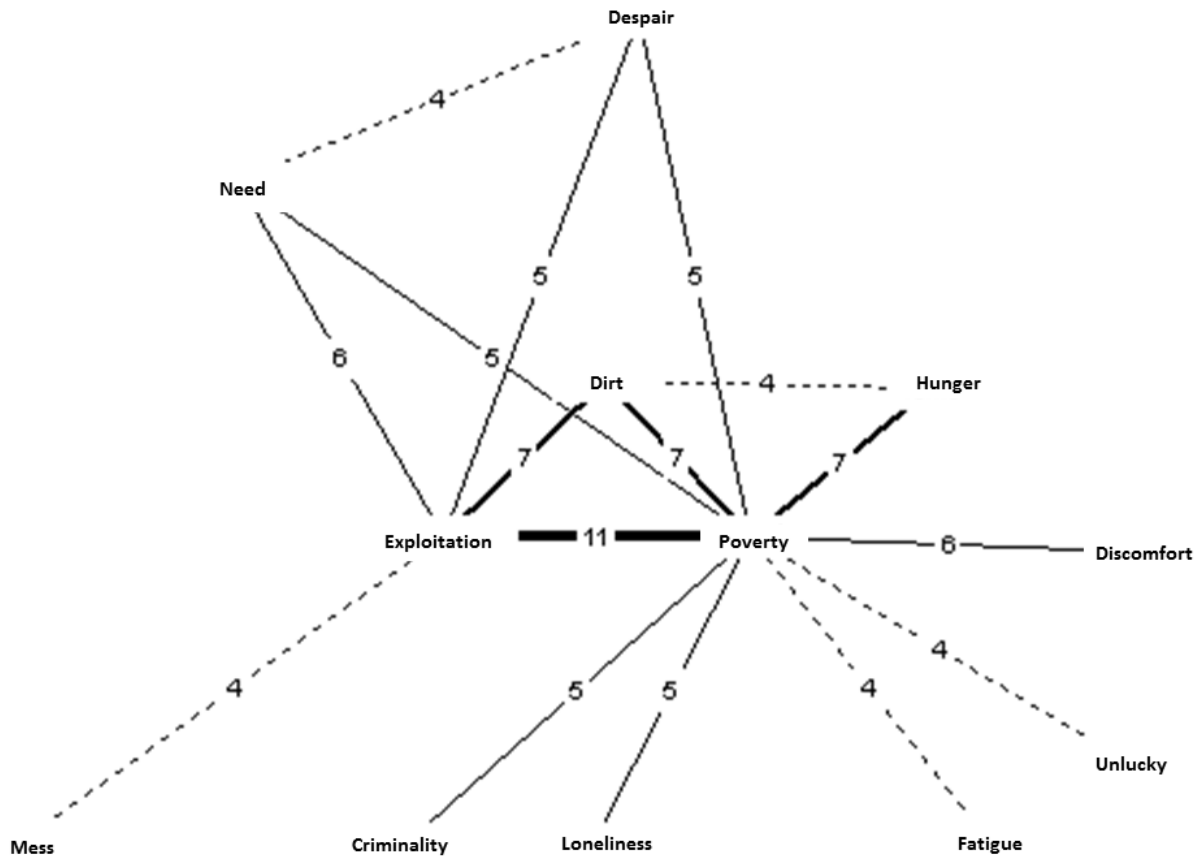


Figure 8. Tree of Maximum Similarity – Negative Impact of Immigrants on SoC (NiiSoC)

Similarly, figure 9 displays a very fragmented structure where the relations of co-occurrence among the internal elements are almost insignificant, as revealed by a texture of unsubstantial relationships, with values of co-occurrences ranging between .4 and .5., with the exception of the linkage between *hunger* and *poverty* (.8), in turn intersecting *exploitation* (respectively, .5 and .4). In general, the content of the representation evokes a feeble concern for the unwelcomed working circumstances experienced by the migrants and for their *needs*. In details, in the southern section of the periphery *need* intersects *poverty* and *workers* (.4) whereas in the northern part of the graph *poverty* is associated with *illegal-word* (.4). At the same time, *exploitation* interweaves *dirt* and *need* (5) but marginally *illegal work* and *underpaid* (.4).

Generally, the social representations of the targeted group alternate between two poles. A sympathetic vision of the migrant group is distinctive of LP and PiiSoC sub-samples and intersects concerns for the necessities and the affective stances associated with the immigrant condition in the host society. On the opposite, a deteriorating image is peculiar to the remaining sub-samples and predominantly engenders the ruinous features associated with the presence of migrants in the residential community. Furthermore, the findings indicate that the internal organization of the representations shared by the both MP and NiiSoC sub-groups is scarcely structured. In fact, the relationships of co-occurrence among the components of the central

nucleus are feebler compared with the ones peculiar to the representations produced by the other sub-samples as well as the peripheral links are almost unsatisfactory.

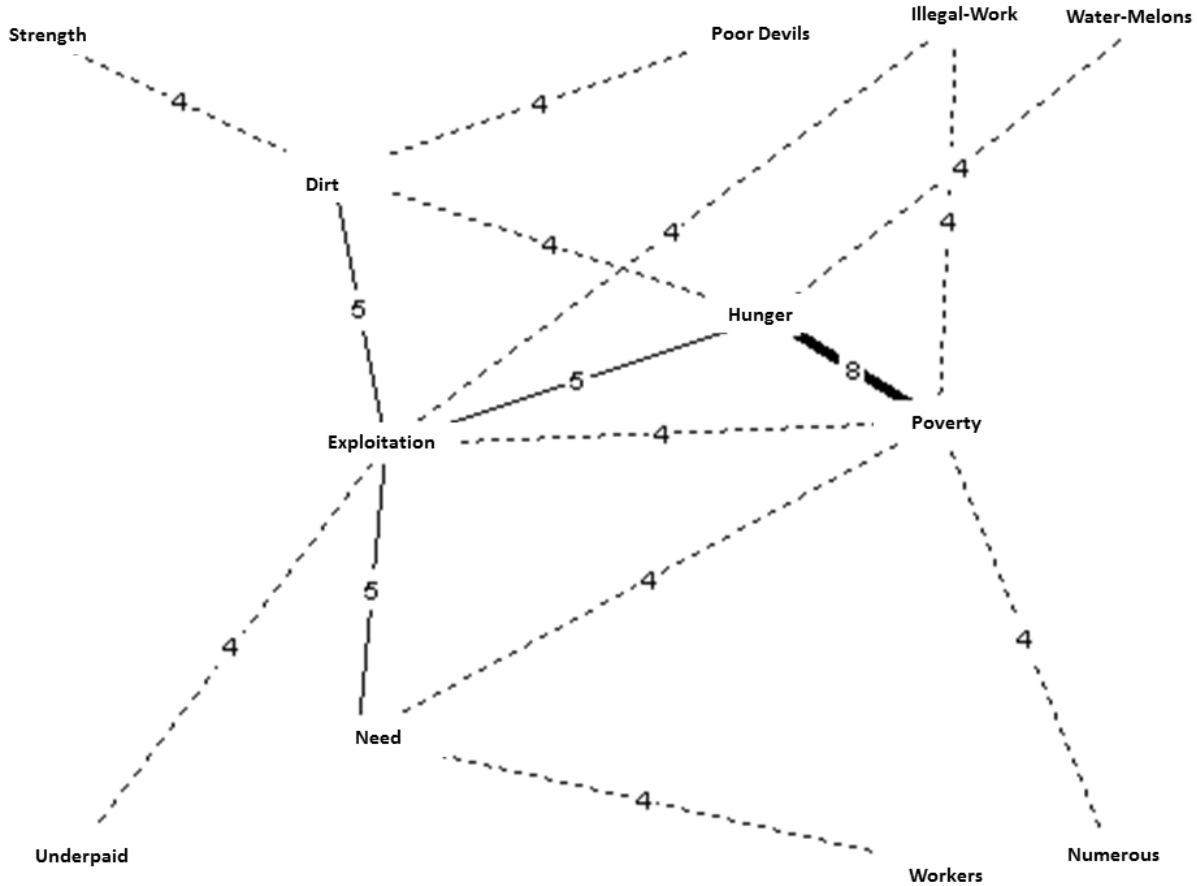


Figure 9. Tree of Maximum Similarity – No Impact of Immigrants on SoC (NoiiSoC)

7. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the public perception of a targeted group of immigrants that circulates in a local community. Specifically, the research aimed to detect the potential differences across the social representations produced by distinctive groups of inhabitants through an analysis of their internal structure. Particularly, it was expected to detect variances within the organization of the contents of the representations shared by clusters of residents according to the relations they establish with their own community and the immigrant category in general.

In line with SDP, the results indicated that the social representation of the migrant workers rests on a well-established common set of references. Specifically, according to TNC, the central nucleus of the various representations has significant mutual overlaps across the groups of residents. At the same time, we found that the periphery of the representations reflected a quota

of relevant inter-individual differences among community members who participate in the social creation of the targeted object. Therefore, following Doise (2003) and Abric (2003), we can consider the emerging variations among the groups of participants as anchored in both the personal experiences and the socio-symbolic structure in which they were embedded (i.e., their socio-psychological anchoring). Indeed, the findings corroborated that meaningful representations organize “the symbolic relationships between individuals and groups” (Doise, 1992) along with the socio-psychological insertions of community residents within the common socio-cultural environment.

The social representation of the target migrants was negatively associated with unfavorable attributes and markers that seemed not to reflect overall bias, stereotypes or generic prejudicial stigmas of immigrants (Volpato & Durante, 2008). The results indicated that participants did not resort to broad and vague stereotypical categories rather they rely on the direct experience they had of the object of knowledge (Moliner, 1996) that in turn facilitated the formation of distinctive representations.

The comprehensive meaning of the social representation captured the degrading working and living conditions borne by the migrant farmers. In specifics, it incorporated the perception of the socioeconomic and interpersonal circumstances that are distinctive of the kind of treatment that immigrants received in the host community. In fact, the core of the representations revealed that migrants were viewed as abused and manipulated whereby the local law enforcement system of irregular employment (i.e. Caporalato). In addition, the central nucleus evoked the deprived surroundings that migrants live in ensuring that neediness and poverty developed into enduring stereotypical traits that reified a particular social asset (Howarth, 2002) which emerged as more distinctive of the local community where migrants temporarily settled rather than of the immigrant group per se.

This outcome can be interpreted considering that the depleting working and living conditions of migrants have been being issues of public concern and daily communication for a long time. The lack of an effective immigrant reception policy by the side of the local governance of Nardò substantiated a prejudicial worldview into which upcoming representations of migrants were integrated. Thus, these findings turned into meaningful social representations that work as a code for the communicative and social exchanges between individuals and groups within the local community although very few space lingered for “resistance, innovation, and transformation” (Howarth, 2006). According to TNC (Flament, 1989), social representations can be modified if the environmental factors are altered and innovative practices are produced. The peripheral elements allow for the flexibility of social representations because they are likely to integrate innovation and to facilitate the transformation of the central nucleus (Abric, 2003). In light of this, the implementation of appropriate interventions and practices could reverse the established images by contributing in the creation of a new social environment where inter-ethnic accommodation could be practiced.

In the same vein, the periphery of the social representations sets the symbolic terrain where community members are active agents who negotiate societal divisions and social categorizations in an effort to organize experience in which a process of self-other definition and location emerges (Duveen, 2007). In particular, the peripheral linkages of the representations of the migrants filtered the inter-individual differences among community’ members (Flament, 1989) and disclosed feeble but noteworthy distinctions among sub-groups of residents. Largely, the outcomes indicated that SoC, iiSoC, and prejudice accounted for a minor portion of inter-individual differences than it was expected. This result corroborates that the social creation of the migrant

farm workers was highly consensual within the local community. However, the results revealed that the representations of migrants varied across a main axis of differentiation that segmented inhabitants in two main clusters.

On the one side, a positive sense of belonging towards the community as well as a welcoming attitude towards immigrants led the emergence of sympathetic configurations where the concern for the motivational and affective drives underlying immigration was amalgamated with the harmful circumstances experienced by migrants in the host society. On the contrary, the deficiency of personal attachment towards the community and the adverse attitude towards immigrants were associated with an almost detrimental representation where the periphery lacked of any thoughtful understanding of the emotional aspects activated by the immigration so that the image of migrants rested exclusively on the social and public facets relating to work and life conditions.

With regards to SoC, the findings not supported that the strong sense of identification with community was associated with a negative perception of migrants, as it was expected (Loomis, Dockett & Brodsky, 2004). In the main, the results indicated that in the background of inter-ethnic exchanges within the local community, SoC served as a meaningful basis for representations formation, discriminating sub-groups of residents along with their either positive or negative identification. In fact, those who positively engaged with their community were more concerned with migrants' affective moods whereas the cognitive map of citizens who felt detached from their community covered the main theme of work.

This outcome partially discarded the role of ethnic heterogeneity in respect of the development of a valuable community membership (Townley, Kloos, Green & Franco, 2011). We can echo Berry and Kalin (1995) cautiously suggesting that a positive identification with one's community can promote constructive multicultural adjustment concerning the native population. In fact, this finding suggests that SoC might positively confront with inter-ethnic heterogeneity at least as it may foster residents' positive openness towards immigrants' necessities and affections hence revolving into a more sympathetic perception.

Despite the variances among the representations that were statistically modest, the individual positionings accounted for significant qualitative differences. As far as this research is concerned, we agree with Volpato and Durante (2008) in claiming that people may dismantle the over comprehensive collective image of immigrants into varied representations along key dimensions. Prudently, it can be advanced that the exploration of the internal structure of the representations of the targeted group of migrants corroborated that competence is a key aspect in stereotypes formation. In fact, the socioeconomic status featured the central nucleus of the social representations across all the sub-groups of community residents. On the contrary, the affective categories were distinctive of those clusters of inhabitants who reported low levels of prejudice, high levels of SoC and feel that immigrants may have a positive impact on their fellow residents' sense of community. Additionally, research on stereotype content model (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick & Xu, 2002; Manganelli Rattazzi & Volpato, 2001) demonstrated that low socioeconomic status is often associated with either paternalistic or disrespecting types of prejudice depending on the fact that immigrants are perceived as warm or not. To some extent, the empirical evidences of our study are consistent with these postulates as they disclose that the affective stances intersecting migration mainly featured the periphery of the sympathetic representations shared by welcoming and community engaged groups of residents. On the contrary, they appeared almost meaningless to Italian inhabitants who established a valued relation neither with their community nor with the immigrants.

Finally, with regards to SRT, in line with previous findings (Fasanelli, Galli & Liguori 2014) this research indicates that the process of anchorage is strictly interdependent with the construction of the internal structure of the social representations. In fact, the more participants established well-defined relations with their community or with the immigrants, regardless of their orientation (i.e. either positive or negative) the more the internal structure of the social representations were multifaceted and linkages among contents were robust. Contrarily, mid-way positionings not provided for a solid anchorage to social representations of migrants suggesting that these residents shared either a very simplified or an imprecise and ambivalent idea of the targeted group. In conclusion, the integration of the two perspectives to the study of SRs consented to address how public perception of immigrants may diverge across community members. In particular, the structural analysis of SRs helped to achieve the varied images featuring the common understanding of a specific group of foreigners that emerge more detailed, comprehensive and, hence, informative than the global stereotypical category they refer to. In such a way, SRs can provide for significant evidences concerning how the relation that native members establish with their community may encompass the general comprehension of significant objects of knowledge.

8. Conclusion

In this study we aimed to shed light on the potential variances featuring the social comprehension of immigrants that flows in a local community in search for a better understanding of the variability with which residents accept ethnic plurality and approach intercultural adjustment. In fact, the public perception of immigrants may significantly affect the effectiveness of the migration management. Therefore, the exploration of the heterogeneous images featuring the social categorization of targeted immigrants can be explanatory of the assorted positioning of community residents towards the diverse forms of inter-ethnic accommodation (Navas et al., 2005). Although the research findings disclosed feeble differences among groups of native inhabitants, we have provided for useful, if preliminary, clues to link public perception and effective responses to the inter-ethnic variety characterizing local communities in modern plural societies.

First, the description of the core nucleus of the social representations reveals that the collective image of immigrants may rest on the type and amount of solutions implemented at the local level to meet the needs of the foreigners temporarily or permanently settled in the host territories. In fact, the social practices of exploitation and carelessness towards the deprived life of the farm workers contributed in feeding the collective memory of the community, ultimately performing the social comprehension of this object of knowledge (Moliner, Rateau & Cohen-Scali, 2002). Consequently, the modification of this environment can afford community members with fruitful opportunities to challenge reified images, to call for alternative representations and ultimately unveil complementary versions of the same reality (Liu, 2004). In view of that, we claim that the public perception of immigrants greatly depends on the capacity of the local communities to appropriately receive and accommodate immigrants thus preventing them from becoming targets of unlawful organizations. In particular, we argue that the kind of public support and treatment that local policies designed to manage migration can make immigrants either undesirable or welcomed targets to native population.

Secondarily, the slight but significant divergences among sub-groups of residents suggest that a profitable dialectic among plural perspectives should be implemented as part of community practices (Townley, Kloos, Green & Franco, 2011). In fact, divergent solutions that take into account the plurality of views among community members can be more effective as these can accommodate the diversity more fruitfully “rather than trying to integrate the viewpoints in one static solution environment” (p. 70). In line with the Authors, we posit that plurality and cultural diversity are meaningful symbolic resources that can promote either peaceful or conflicting lives in multicultural societies (Berry, 2005) depending of the ways these are adjusted whereby migration policies.

According to the multicultural theory (Berry, 2008), effective interventions in local communities should both foster positive identification towards one’s group (i.e. SoC) and encourage acceptance towards dissimilar groups. In this line, there is a need in community psychology to elaborate on the idea of *extended community* where diverse belongings can be dialogically integrated into a common system beyond the homogeneous nuclear membership. In this vein, the theory of social representations could afford intriguing hints to elaborate on the transformation of the images of homogeneous community incorporating positive views of multicultural diversity whereby the implementation of innovative practices.

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