



# Cultural identification, perceived discrimination and sense of community as predictors of life satisfaction among foreign partners of intercultural families in Italy and Spain: A transnational study



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## ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper was to analyze how cultural identification, perceived discrimination and the sense of community are related to life satisfaction among foreign partners in intercultural families.

The study compared 105 and 95 foreign partners in mixed families resident in Italy and Spain, respectively. The phenomenon in both countries displays similar sociodemographic aspects. In contrast to Social Identity Theory, the results show that in both groups the foreign partner's identification with their own ethnic-cultural group is not associated with life satisfaction, nor does it increase perceived discrimination. In turn, increased perceived discrimination leads to a decreased sense of community and life satisfaction among foreigners. Regarding religion, interreligious couples in Italy perceive more discrimination than mono-religious couples. Finally, we found that a low sense of discrimination and a strong sense of community are related to life satisfaction among mixed families in both groups. The implications of the study are described and suggestions for future research discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

The present study analyzed a growing phenomenon in Italy and Spain known as intercultural or mixed families. The main objective was to explore a group of variables associated with ethnic identity and intergroup relationships, and to determine how these relate to life satisfaction among foreign partners in intercultural families.

Regarding the relationship between different ethnic groups in multicultural contexts, Berry (2001) has identified two main currents in recent studies. The first refers to intergroup analysis derived from Social Identity Theory (SIT), whereas the second focuses mainly on the acculturation process.

In this study, we discuss the theory of acculturation in order to introduce studies that explain how ethnic identification may influence adaptation among foreigners, whereas SIT will mainly be used to explain how intergroup relationships form the basis for the development of discriminatory attitudes towards foreigners. The sense of community (SOC) is introduced

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as a novel factor. This concept is strictly linked to social interaction and cooperation within the community context and has important implications regarding life satisfaction among its members.

As discussed in the different sections, numerous studies have examined how the process of acculturation, ethnic identification, and the role of perceived discrimination or SOC influence the welfare of foreigners. However, studies on intercultural families are scarce (Moscato, 2008, 2012).

### 1.1. Definition of mixed families and their extent: the case of Italy and Spain

In the migration process, mobility among individuals involves a direct continuous contact with members of the host society that gives rise to new acculturation processes, which in turn lead to changes in the original cultural setting of one or both groups. A phenomenon strictly related to this type of mobility is the formation of new intercultural families (Panari, 2008; Tognetti Bordogna, 1996).

A mixed marriage (bicultural or intercultural) is defined as the union of individuals belonging to different cultural, national or religious contexts (Waldman & Rubalcava, 2005). The phenomenon of migratory movements has created interest in relation to the foreign partner (Di Sciullo, 2004; Zanatta, 2003).

The intercultural family is a relatively recent phenomenon in both Spain and Italy. The increase in these kinds of relationships is directly proportional to the increase in migratory movements in the last decade (Panari, 2008). Italian demographic data confirm that 9.4% of civil and religious marriages are intercultural (ISTAT, 2010). However, these statistics do not take into account the number of intercultural couples living together (out of wedlock).

The size of the phenomenon can be better appreciated by taking into account those intercultural relationships in which the foreign partner has obtained Italian nationality. The 2001 census (Maffioli & Paternò, 2008) found that 39.6% of mixed marriages were composed of a native Italian and a naturalized Italian.

Similar to the Italian context, the number of intercultural families in Spain is significant; between 2000 and 2008 (INE, 2011), nearly half the marriages in some cities were mixed, such as in the case of Melilla (46.7%). In the main Spanish cities (Madrid, Barcelona, Malaga, Valencia) the phenomenon reaches 14.4%. Couples living together out of wedlock also have to be taken into account in this national context. From the 2001 census it can be deduced that 4.8% of Spanish couples live together and 25% of mixed couples live together. In the Spanish context it is also reasonable to assume that intercultural families are potentially more numerous.

We consider the study of intercultural families of great importance because they represent a unique relationship that, due to introducing new elements and change, may help us to understand a great social transformation (Barbara, 1985). According to Social Identity Theory, a foreigner who belongs to a group considered subordinate (low status), especially individuals from developing countries, can experience feelings of frustration that can negatively affect personal identity (Pagliaro, Ellemers, Barreto, & Leach, 2010). These negative feelings may lead the foreigner to improve their own social identity via various cognitive and behavioural strategies, such as attempting to become a member of a higher status social group. A study on intercultural families showed that intercultural marriage helps foreigners with a low status to improve their socioeconomic situation (Fu & Heaton, 2000). Thus, unlike other types of foreigner, those in intercultural families are able to feel part of a higher-status social context and probably improve their social identity. On the other hand, whereas foreigners generally migrate for economic reasons or to cities where they have a contact (family, friends, etc.), foreigners in mixed families usually migrate to the cities where their native partners live in order to reunite with them.

Unlike foreigners who migrate for different reasons and belong to a family network of 3.75 members (Martínez, García, Maya, Rodríguez, & Checa, 1996), foreigner partners in mixed families have a network of 2.7 family members. In fact, 44.1% state they have no family members in the city where they live, thus underlining the difficulties involved when there is a lack of family support (Moscato, 2008).

This study focuses on foreigner partners in mixed families living in Spain and Italy. These two countries were chosen due to their having comparable features:

- (a) Italy and Spain used to be countries with a high level of emigration; however, the large number of recent arrivals has converted them into host countries for immigrants. According to the Statistical Office of the European Union (Albert & Masanet, 2007), in 2005 the European Union grew by 2 million people, mainly immigrants, of whom half settled in Spain (652,300) and Italy (338,100).
- (b) In general, foreign partners in mixed unions in Italy and Spain are first-generation foreigners, i.e., a foreigner who has passed through the migration process.
- (c) Both countries share strong cultural similarities (similar lifestyles, the same religion, etc.), and it is therefore reasonable to use the same theoretical model to predict life satisfaction.

### 1.2. Acculturation and adaptation

According to Castro Solano (2011) and Berry (2003), acculturation can be considered a process of cultural and psychological change that foreigners experience as a result of intercultural contact. The psychological changes experienced by the individuals involve variations in attitudes towards the acculturation process and cultural identity (Phinney, 2003), as well as changes in their social behaviour in relation to the groups in contact (Berry, Phinney, Sam, & Vedder, 2006). Thus,

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