MARIANNA KOSIC

Identity Matters: Strategies for Coping with Ethnic Identity Threats among Slovene Minority Adolescents in Italy

The article explores how Slovene minority adolescents in Italy experience and respond to ethnic identity threats, focusing on their coping strategies. These include the active construction of self-image through plural complex identity, seeking and maintaining distinctiveness, blending in and identity enhancement. Qualitative thematic analysis was performed on 35 written narratives, studied through the interpretative lens of social identity perspectives and identity process theory. Results are consistent with the theoretical framework. In the conclusions the author reflects on some practical implications of her findings.

Keywords: identity motives, ethnic identity threats, coping strategies, Slovene minority adolescents in Italy

Identitetni pomeni: strategije obvladovanja groženj etnični identiteti med adolescenti slovenske manjšine v Italiji

Članek preučuje, kako mladostniki slovenske manjšine v Italiji doživljajo in se odzivajo na grožnje etnični identiteti, s poudarkom na njihovih strategijah spoprijemanja z le temi, na aktivni gradnji samopodobe preko večplastne pluralne identitete, na iskanje in ohranjanje posebnosti, mešanje in poudarjanje pozitivnih plati identitete. Kvalitativna tematska analiza je bila opravljena na 35 pisnih pripovedih v interpretativni luči perspektiv družbene identitete in teorije o procesu identitete. Rezultati so v skladu s teoretičnim okvirom. Avtorica v zaključkih posreduje razmišljanja o nekaterih praktičnih pomenih izsledkov.

Ključne besede: identitetni motivi, grožnje etnični identiteti, strategije spoprijemanja, mladostniki slovenske manjšine v Italiji

Correspondence address: Marianna Kosic, SLORI – Slovene Research Institute / Slovenski raziskovalni inštitut / Istituto di ricerche sloveno, Ul. / Via Beccaria 6, 34133 Trst / Trieste, Italia, e-mail: marianna.kosic@gmail.com

1. Introduction

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The autonomous region of Friuli-Venezia Giulia in the North-Eastern part of Italy bordering on Slovenia is the context of the research presented in this paper. It is a territory that hosts a multitude of ethno-linguistic groups: Italians, Slovenes, Friulians, Germans and many other communities, including new ethnic minorities, e.g. Serbs, Croats, Albanians, Romanians, Chinese, Bengali, etc. The wide diversity in the population that this area offers implies that some inhabitants are more or less easily identifiable as different from the majority group because of their physical appearance, language, religious belief, cultural practices or other features that might or might not be visible and easily identifiable markers of their identities. In the focus of this study, specifically, is the Slovene minority group, an autochthonous national minority group that was historically present on the territory and is as such recognized by the Italian state by the law n. 482/1999.

Despite formal legal protection of minority rights, it has been largely documented in social psychology research that being a minority group member makes it more likely to be the target of discrimination and rejection. Belonging to a minority group can, therefore, represent a threat to a positive social identity, especially in young people, and push them to adopt several coping strategies to counteract their devalued social identity, i.e., the identity with attributes that are perceived to be not fully accepted in the societal context where they live.

There is increasing concern for knowledge about, and an understanding of the depth and breadth of, the above mentioned issues. The formation of a healthy ethnic identity is in fact an important developmental life task during adolescence, and is more salient and complex for adolescents belonging to ethnic minority groups (Phinney 1989, 1990; Phinney & Alipuria 1990; Crocetti et al. 2008a, 2009b). How identities are constructed, kept alive and negotiated matters, since identity construction shapes our experiences in everyday life and is significantly linked to the ways in which we internalize practices, knowledge, beliefs and feelings about the world and about ourselves, and how we interact and behave with others in the societal context.

Given these premises, the article aims to present and discuss some of the coping strategies reported by Slovene minority adolescents in response to a perceived ethnic identity threat, qualitatively analyzing selected written narratives through the lens of social identity perspective combined with inspirations from identity process theory.

68   2. Theoretical Framework

Social identity perspective (e.g., Tajfel & Turner 1979, 1986; Hogg 2003, 2005; Hogg et al. 2007), also termed social identity theory and self-categorization theory, describes why and how individuals identify with particular social groups, as well as the various ways in which social identities influence behaviour and perceptions. In recent years identity process theory (e.g. Breakwell 1983, 1986, 1988; Vignoles et al. 2000, 2002, 2006; Vignoles 2011) has further explained how identity stems from psychological processes and manifests itself through thought, action and affect in relation to the representations and attributions in a particular social context as well. Following these lines of research, scholars have identified several important identity motives that shape identity construction, including pressures for self-esteem, distinctiveness, continuity, meaning, efficacy, and belonging (e.g., Vignoles et al. 2006; Vignoles 2011). These identity principles guide identity processes of assimilation and accommodation in defining desirable states for the structure of identity (Breakwell 2010, 6.4).

In brief: social categorization is a fundamental cognitive adaptive process that enables us to organize and categorize our daily experiences in the world, accentuating the similarities within and differences between categories (Hogg & Abrams 1988, cited in Stets & Burke 2000, 225–226). Any trait that is meaningful to a person or a group can become the foundation of a social identity, defined as the knowledge that one belongs to a social group or category. The process of social categorization at the basis of identity formation is generally evaluative in nature: it goes hand in hand with intergroup bias, that is, with in-group favoritism and intergroup discrimination. In social identity theory it is argued that in order to have good self-esteem, once we identify with a certain social category, we tend to highlight the positive attributes of the in-group, the one that we are members of, and differentiate ourselves from others, members of the out-group, who do not share these characteristics (Turner et al. 1987; Hogg & Abrams 1988, cited in Stets & Burke 2000, 232; Hewstone et al. 2002, 579–580). According to Tajfel (1978, 74–75), these comparative processes, and particularly the negative evaluations that result from them, can become problematic, precisely because people generally need and strive to obtain a positive self-image in their interactions with others.

Like all other forms of social identities, ethnic identity is self-identification derived from group membership (Tajfel 1978; Tajfel & Turner 1979). Rotherham and Phinney (1987, 13) define ethnic identity as a "sense of belonging to an ethnic group, and the part of one's thinking, perceptions, feelings and behaviour that is due to ethnic group membership". It develops as individuals categorize and compare

themselves to others within an environment and negotiate their identification through communication (Yep 2002, cited in Albert et al. 2005, 109).

Generally, compared to dominant group members, minority group members are more likely to experience identity threats in the form of prejudice, discrimination, racism, stigma, institutional barriers or negative attitudes of the mainstream society towards them.

Identification with a group and an ethnic category ideally imbues the person with "psychological security, a feeling of belonging" (Aydingün 2002, 191), but the subjective perception of possessing an ethnic identity with characteristics that are negatively evaluated in one's context or that are not recognized as we would wish by others, is experienced as a threat by the individual and can have negative effects, "challenging continuity, distinctiveness or self-esteem" (Breakwell 1986, 51); these lead, inter alia, to defensiveness, passivity, in-group hostility, and identification with the oppressor (Allport 1954; Jaspal & Cinnirella 2012). Identity process theory outlines both the conditions in which identity processes are successful and situations when an identity is threatened and coping strategies are consequently enacted, i.e., any activity or thought that can, consciously or not, remove or ameliorate a threat (Breakwell 1986, 79) which occurs "when the processes of assimilation-accommodation are unable, for some reason, to comply with the principles of continuity, distinctiveness, self-efficacy, and self-esteem" (Breakwell 2010, 6.5).

As Jaspal and Cinnirella noted (2012, 504), ethnic identity is acknowledged as an important dimension of the self as it has significant implications for a wide range of phenomena, including psychological and physical well-being (Phinney et al. 2001), but also linguistic behavior (Jaspal & Coyle 2009, 2010) and intergroup relations (Verkuyten 2005). It is therefore important to research these issues in the young minority population.

3. Method

3.1 Participants: Slovene Minority Adolescents in Italy

The study used a convenience sample of 35 secondary school students, self-identified as Slovene minority members, attending years 4 and 5 in two Slovene lyceums in Trieste and Gorizia, two border cities in the Friuli-Venezia Giulia region in the North-Eastern part of Italy. They were 16–19 years old, except three

who were older. Participants constitute a homogeneous sample, a definite group for whom the research question is significant: they were therefore deliberately selected for sharing the experience of a particular condition and considered able to offer insights and a meaningful perspective from their shared experiences.

3.2 Procedure and Methodology: Qualitative Thematic Analysis

Participation in the research was voluntary. In cooperation with teachers of Italian and Slovene language, participants were invited to write, as a school assignment, a text on their ethnic identity and/or perceived intergroup relations on the Italian-Slovene borderland in everyday life situations. In order to elicit a sharing of experiences, understandings, stories, opinions and feelings from participants, subsidiary cues and prompts were used (e.g., a list of associated words and possible themes for discussion). The written narratives were given to the researcher in an anonymous format. Excerpts were originally written in Italian or Slovene. The author translated them into English for the purpose of this paper.

The data set consists of all instances across the entire data corpus that had some relevance to ethnic identity threat and related coping strategies. The data were analyzed using qualitative, mostly theoretically driven or "top-down" thematic analysis following the approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 88), but inspired by interpretative phenomenological analysis as well (Smith et al. 1999; Smith & Osborn 2003, Smith et al. 2009). The choice of this qualitative methodology serves the research aims of understanding in depth and representing young people's everyday subjective experience of reality and related actions as they live through particular situations (Elliott et al. 1999, 216), and at the same time validates some recent theories in the field of social psychology.

After collecting the data, the author familiarized herself with all aspects of the content by actively and repeatedly reading the texts, searching for meanings and patterns. Coding was done manually, writing notes on the margins, using highlighters of different colours and a set of "post-it" notes to group segments of similar data and to combine them in a broader theme. During each reading emerging themes were noted and coded in the left margin, organizing the data into meaningful groups. In a subsequent phase, the right margin was used to capture superordinate themes, and to identify possible patterns and preliminary interpretations. Conflicts between different concepts within the same texts and between different texts were also examined.

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The discussion that follows is essentially "top-down", derived from the theoretical perspectives examined and seeded with verbatim extracts from the data that present a "grounding in examples".

3.3 Methodological Limitations of the Study

The findings of this study should be considered with an awareness of some methodological limitations. First, the reflections expressed in the narratives of adolescents are bound by the limits of their ability to verbalize and articulate in words their experiences. Secondly, the students' willingness to share their thoughts with the researcher might have been affected by the procedure selected for collecting qualitative data. Perceived threats to one's ethnic identity and the strategies adopted to counteract them are sensitive issues. Given the fact that students were asked to pen their feelings and experiences as a school homework assignment, and considering that the texts were collected by their professors, the researcher is aware that some participants might have not felt free enough to express themselves authentically, without fear of being judged or evaluated for the ideas exposed. Nevertheless, even though the students were also given the possibility to submit their texts anonymously on-line via an internet platform, almost all opted to hand the texts to their teachers. We can therefore assume that discomfort was minimal or even non-existent. Perception of the researcher's neutrality and the ethnic similarity between the researcher and the participants may have been crucial to ensure trust, and consequently, the validity of the data. Thirdly, generalizations from this sample to the wider population should be made with caution. The sample is very probably not representative of all Slovene minority adolescents. Despite this, the complementary qualitative study conducted permits us to deepen our understanding of the way coping strategies may be used in response to ethnic identity threats in a minority group.

4. Results: Coping with Ethnic Identity Threats

In this section we present a selection of data extracts that capture the recurring themes that emerged in this study, i.e., those coping strategies used to deal with perceived or potential ethnic identity threats, and specifically those that were the most prevalent in the group sample across the individual narratives. Four main superordinate themes are reported, all correlated one with another and not mutually exclusive, namely: 1) "active construction of self-image through complex identity", 2) "maintaining distinctiveness", 3) "blending in", and 4) "self-enhancement". The verbatim texts in the original Slovene or Italian language are in the notes.

72 4.1 Active Construction of Self-Image through Complex Identity

Individuals and groups actively construct and maintain their images of themselves. As Breakwell (2010, 6.5) stated, "the person has agency in creating identity."

> I am a son of this land, a Goričan [inhabitant of Gorizia]. Half Slovene, half Friulian, but I cannot say I am not Italian either. A human being is and has the right to be what s/he feels, based on national values that s/he received in the cradle or that were discovered later in life. [1]

In this extract the difficulty of choosing a single label for self-categorization and identification is evident: the adoption of a single label or a reductive category would not fit the subjective sense of belonging, which is, rather, a multiple one, comprising a mixture of different degrees of ethnic, national and local territorial dimensions. The territorial dimension appears to be the one that grounds the identity. It is expressed in more affective terms, "*I am a son of this land*", emphasizing the ties to the land, denoting a familial relationship with it as a child with qualities similar to the "motherland/fatherland", or more rationally seeing oneself as its by-product, logically relating to the intrinsic linguistic diversity of the territory that is considered home and that by its own nature makes it more likely for its inhabitants to develop (by choice, influenced by socialization and exploration processes) and to express a more (structurally and contentively) complex, and/or a hybrid, identity rather than a simple one.

Ethnic identity is an identity that develops from within the person actively engaged in its construction, instead of being an image that is imposed only by stereotypes from the outside. Yet, at times self-categorisation is a difficult task to negotiate with others, because, as one student explains,

> … there are also others who categorise you … it is not only that you self-define.[2]

Identities are socially constructed and constantly contested facts. They are the result of discursive processes and assigning and accepting meaning by political actors (Risse 2004, 267).

> We 'Zamejski Slovenci' [Slovenes living on the Italian side of the border] are not regarded as Slovenes in Slovenia, but as Italians.[3]

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In our sample the perception of mismatch between the category assignment by others and one's own self-image results in mixed feelings, sometimes positive, often negative, often with a sense of uniqueness and being something special. Frequently surprise, disappointment, annoyance, annoyance, frustration, concern, fear and worry would be apparent, especially when negative stereotypes and prototypical features are attributed to the categories.

> But something really disappointed me. When a few years ago I was in Kranjska Gora for sport training sessions, we and some other girls talked with some peers from Slovenia and they were looking at us in surprise when we told them that we were members of the Slovene minority in Italy, as they did not know that we 'existed'.[4]

> In a moment I felt, getting closer to me, wide-open eyes staring at me. 'Are you a Russian?', 'No, I am not a Russian, I am a Slovene!', 'Ah, so you are Slav…', 'And why are you in Italy?'… The word "Slav" still bothers me a lot even today. I am fed up with answering the same questions all the time, fed up with those surprised and confused looks, fed up with being a stranger. But that's exactly how I felt when I went for a 2-week vacation across Italy. Every time I had to list again the reasons why I can speak such a strange language, why I do not live in Slovenia, why I attend Slovene schools. I felt like an unusual, new animal species in the zoo, that everyone looks at with interest, analyses and compares. That was me, a special case. Finally I have come back home. I have returned to a place of different, Slovenes, one who are treated in a special way.[5]

In Ivana's narrative as set out above, category misconceptions of the Italian majority group members she referred to are due to lack of previous contact with and a scarce knowledge of the national minority group. It is clear that in some contexts lacking the knowledge and ability to function competently and successfully in interpersonal and intergroup encounters, not being able to assign identities to others in harmony with one's self-image, can hinder future relations and interactions with the person due to the establishment of mutual negative impressions and related interpretations, even more so if these are associated with traumatic experiences of the past that can revolve around personal experiences of discrimination, or with social memories of Fascism and Italianization.

Another issue mentioned by the participants, one that arouses in them more concern and discomfort, was in fact the negative attitude from the dominant group, illustrated by an extract from Katarina's report:

> History can be seen nowadays too. Since I was a child I have been victim of verbal violence. Italians call us "sciavi" (slaves), which is very offensive. Quite often you get to know that they have written something on our monuments or in public places. From personal experience I know that Italians do not like Slovenes, though exceptions do exist. / … / In some sports meetings there were insults and sometimes even beatings.[6]

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Similar shared reports confirm that in the cities where Slovene minority members live the tendency towards a negative view of diversity is still occasionally conveyed by discourses and practices of exclusion against minorities and their rights by right-wing Italian groups; and further, that these remain deeply and long lastingly present in adolescents' awareness, at least until, as we will see later, they have the opportunity to have a positive experience. Miklavcic (2006) in her fieldwork observed that the graffito Basta sciavi ["Enough of the Slavs/slaves"] is one such example. "Sciavi is a derogatory term used to define Slovenes and other Slavs in general" and "it is directed against both the Slovene minority and immigrants from former Yugoslavia."

As Velikonja (2002) puts it, in the political, cultural and media discourse terms like "Yugoslavia" and "the Balkans" were commonly associated with communism and socialism and therefore had negative connotations of backwardness, disorder, wildness, poverty, etc. On the contrary, Europe was seen as synonym for the developed world, prosperity, democracy, freedom, etc. That is one of the reasons why Slovene minority members strive to safeguard themselves from being seen as from former "Yugoslavia" or as "Slavs".

Individuals can more or less actively reject categorisations made by others. Adolescents activate different cognitive and behavioural defensive mechanisms in order to restore consistency with their self-view or to avoid any "categorization threat" (Ellemers 2012, 850), a threat evoked when a person is seen as a member of a certain group but the person does not see this as desirable or appropriate to their own self-identification, and when the threat is accompanied by fear and feelings that their preferred self-identification is not accepted and respected by significant others.

A way to cope with the stress derived from non-matching or negatively evaluated categorizations is to switch among identities according to situations or to present only selected aspects of one's identity.

> I always introduce myself as a Slovene and explain that I am from Trieste. In fact you must adapt the description depending on the person you talk to, but only in the sense that I stress one thing [rather than something else] ...[7]

> I define myself as a Slovene. Self-designation of course can change according to situations, often under different types of pressures, hardly ever consciously and completely freely.[8]

Ethnic identity can change across contexts. Individuals may have different ways of perceiving themselves and these can get activated depending on situations.

Different circumstances will trigger different identifications and lead to a corresponding set of behaviours (including language choice) and attitudes.

In their explanations, very often informants maintain that their multiple identities are stable and that they are self-confident, but also admit that their self-presentations do change depending on the situation, their interlocutors and their own ethnic identity strength.

> I have a high degree of self-confidence and a stable identity: I am a Slovene and a Friulian. / … / I present myself differently in different situations. For instance, if I introduce myself to an Italian, I tell him/her that I am a Slovene and a Friulian and of course an Italian citizen, while if I introduce myself to a foreigner, I first of all say that I come from Italy and that I have Italian citizenship, afterwards I explain my identity to him/her.[9]

As we can see from the above, in both cases, when introducing himself to an Italian or to someone of another nationality, the person feels the need to stress his Italian citizenship as a common identification element or as a national-territorial identity marker. Afterwards, he endeavours to explain the special features of his sense of belonging as a Slovene and as a Friulian, representing the enriched complex and multifaceted identity that integrates a variety of historical and cultural roots which would not be otherwise reflected in a single general label.

4.2 Maintaining Distinctiveness

As explained in Chapter 2 above, identity creation is guided by motivational principles that are similar to needs and tendencies towards certain identity states and away from others (e.g. Breakwell 1986; Brewer 1991; Vignoles et al. 2006, 309; Hogg 2007). It is argued that individuals seek to establish and preserve a positive self-view by enhancing their sense of belonging to the ethnic group and maintaining the distinctiveness of this identity, that is, a sense of moderate differentiation and separateness from others on both individual and group levels of identity (Vignoles et al. 2000, 337–338).

Having a distinctive sense of identity is especially important for reducing subjective uncertainty. Participants typically show both heightened in-group identification and intergroup discrimination under conditions of subjective uncertainty (Hogg 2000; Hogg et al. 2007). Optimal distinctiveness theory (Brewer 1991, 2003) proposes that identification with a social group or category is stronger when the optimal level of distinctiveness and inclusiveness is found, i.e., an adequate balance between the conflicting drives for differentiation of the self and for assimilation with others.

The motive of distinctiveness is exemplified in the following observations that Slovene minority members tend to use to stress the difference between themselves and Slovenes from Slovenia [here, Slovenian Slovenes] or Italians, who are both considered simultaneously potential relatives and belonging both to the in-group and the out-group:

> I do not feel much belongingness to the 'mother' homeland [i.e., to Slovenia]. Of course we do have the same roots and a lot of common history, but there are also many differences. To me 'zamejska' and 'primorska' cultures [the former that of the Slovenes in Italy, the latter the coastal regional culture] mean a lot. My homeland is the Goriška region [i.e, the region of Gorizia] and partly also the Tržaška region [the region of Trieste].[10]

> ...to be 'zamejski Slovenec' [a Slovene from the Italian side of the border] doesn't mean to be a 'slovenski Slovenec' [Slovenian Slovene]. We are different, even though we have the same roots.[11]

When distinctiveness needs are threatened, people adopt cognitive coping strategies to restore a sense of adequate distinction between the categories "us" and "them". The distinction is likely to reflect a self-protecting mechanism, even though not always a conscious one, making it possible, through particularization and specifications, to enhance a sense of belonging, acceptance by, inclusion and closeness to the group, and to emphasize one's in-group positive attributes that will increase self-esteem (Vignoles et al. 2006, 310).

A satisfaction of both motives – the one of exclusiveness and the other of inclusiveness – is, therefore, possible at the same time, even though they appear to be opposed (Vignoles et al. 2006, 328).

> Some people ask me if I feel more Slovene or Italian and I answer that I feel Slovene through language and culture, but at the same time Italian, because there are some aspects in me that are, precisely, part of the Italian culture. So how do I define myself? 'Confinante/Zamejka' [see below]

As it is shown in these examples, the adoption of new identity labels is very often highlighted and has priority in the narratives. Differences and similarities with both in-groups/out-groups, i.e. Slovenes and Italians, are recognized in the discourse, as speaking the same language, sharing the same culture and nationality or citizenship, but as having different lifestyles, varieties of language, living in different life contexts, etc.

The acknowledgment of having common roots with "Slovenian Slovenes" enables, inter alia, individuals to perceive the historical connection with their

ancestors and with the population of the broader territory that shares the same ethnicity. "Continuity across time and situation" (Breakwell 1986, 24) is, in fact, another important psychological motive of identity.

The Slovene label adopted for self-categorization, "zamejci" (expressed as "confinante" in Italian in the last excerpt above, meaning "those living on the other side of the border"), being sufficiently discriminating, particular and inclusive at the same time, allows Slovene minority members to

> describe themselves with an optimal level of distinctiveness (Brewer, 1991) with flexible, malleable and dynamic boundaries: feeling varying degrees of "closeness" and "distance" in perceived (dis)similarity and identification with Slovenes in the "mother nation" and the Italian majority, sometimes defensively finding ways to demonstrate that they are from there, where they live (Kosic 2011, 160).

4.3 Blending in

In our previous quantitative research based on structured questionnaires on ethnic identification in a larger population of Slovene minority adolescents, we found no significant evidence of rejection of their own group and culture, despite the fact that this can be quite a common characteristic of minority members (Kosic & Caudek, 2005; Kosic 2010).

Nevertheless, perceived discrimination and the stereotypes that our broader society places on ethnic groups can greatly affect adolescents' sense of pride in, or shame about, their own ethnicity. They can perceive a problem leading to assimilation due to fear of rejection (Berry 2004: 176–179).

Language is one of the most important symbolic markers of ethnic identity in Slovene minority adolescents (Kosic 2010). Consequently, language-related situations can induce perceptions of identity threat. Hiding or abandoning an identity, in this case the linguistic one, is one possible strategy to overcome ethnic identity threat (Breakwell 1986). In the words of our participants we discovered that this strategy is adopted at least temporarily in some situations:

> We youngsters use more and more Italian or English words. In public also, with friends, we prefer to speak Italian rather than Slovene. And why this? Because we fear what people are saying about us, about the Slovene minority. We fear that people may not accept us, if they hear a language that is not Italian, we fear what they think of us. For this reason we youngsters often prefer to speak Italian rather than Slovene. /…/ In Trieste and Gorizia there are schools with Slovene as teaching language. These schools, especially high schools, are often damaged by people that enjoy writing insults or drawing swastikas

on the walls of the school building. This is another reason why we youngsters are often ashamed to speak Slovene in public.[12]

Language is an important marker for moving from "them" to "us" and vice versa. Therefore, language switching can also indicate a weakening ethnic (minority) identity and the desire to switch from one group to another by acquiring competence in the dominant group language and losing the minority language. In most of the cases examined in this sample, however, it appears that the preferred strategy is one of blending in. Blending in is manifested as an attempt to be socially accepted and included by others of the in-group or by the dominant group that has a perceived higher status, without calling attention to ethnic heritage or to other specific traits, even though the latter are not necessarily denied as aspects pertaining to the self. This strategy may include not speaking Slovene language in some contexts.

Segatti's research (2008, 87), in fact, documented that about a quarter of 1122 Italian respondents showed negative reactions, expressing feelings of anger or annoyance, when hearing a conversation in Slovene in public spaces, i.e., in a bus, at a post office or at the municipality in Trieste or Gorizia. Positive feelings of pride and satisfaction accounted for 12 per cent of Italophones.

It goes without saying that to express one's true self in all its completeness in some situations can be difficult and may require courage. According to social identity theory, if one group membership cannot provide a positive social identity, the person may try to leave the group and join the other, which is seen as having a better position (i.e., enabling social mobility), even though the cost of this strategy may result in condemnation from one's peers or other group members and loss of authenticity at a personal level.

> To get lost in the majority is neither a good nor a bad thing in my opinion. It is not bad because it is the easiest exit from potential torture done by the majority, because this way you become equal to all others, you are not different but just one of the crowd / … / I do not judge these people, but I do not congratulate them either. It is understandable that they only seek peace in their lives, that they do not want to feel that they are outsiders. But there are also those people that are ashamed of being part of the minority and decide to renounce it. This is a very bad thing, and is to be condemned, even though every opinion has to be taken in consideration. This is not correct, because I think that it is a kind of refusal of one's self and a falsehood about who you really are.[13]

4.4 Self-Enhancement

A socially more accepted strategy is to seek new ways of intergroup comparison

that would favour one's own group (i.e., a kind of social creativity). When and if being a minority group member is considered to be a threat to a positive social identity, common responses to this threat are the accentuation of positively-valued qualities that differentiate minority group from out-groups, and stronger in-group identification. A multicultural perspective of accepting diversity is frequently adopted by Slovene minority members (Kosic & Caudek 2005) and it provides the ideological justification for affirming one's ethnic minority identity and enhancing the value of ethnic differentiation (Verkuyten 2005).

This may be illustrated with some excerpts from the texts written by the students:

> To be a minority is not that bad, it brings its benefits that we should all be aware of. I've read somewhere that it is scientifically proven that "zamejci" [Slovenes living on the Italian side of the border] are more open to foreign languages, more tolerant of diversity, more altruistic and empathetic. In my opinion this is true, as it would be logical that "zamejci" and those who are regularly in contact with reality along the borderland, would understand diversity more easily and understand what it means to be oppressed by a majority group.[14]

> We members of the minority have in my opinion the advantage of knowing a language more, but also have more cultural baggage. Since we are ourselves a mixture of different cultures we respect and accept people that are different from ourselves more easily. / … / To tell the truth, it often happens that being a minority we do isolate ourselves. Maybe this is a way to protect ourselves that allows us to avoid feeling discomfort.[15]

> A positive aspect of being a minority is, first and foremost, knowing two languages. Because of this we are more mentally flexible and we adapt better to different situations.[16]

Individuals are willing to identify with a positive stereotype or to compare their in-group with out-groups on dimensions which demonstrate the superiority of their in-group: the more one identifies with groups that are valued, the more one can maintain a positive feeling about the self, a sense of pride and self-respect. It is, in fact, a typical characteristic of in-group bias to ascribe more positive features to oneself and one's own group in order to evaluate belonging to it as more valuable. A sense of pride and admiration of one's own group for possessing qualities such as early bilingualism, an aptitude to learning languages and mastering them with proficiency, respect and openness to diversity, mental flexibility, empathy, etc., were noticeable across the entire data set.

> Even though I do not know many Italians, as a Slovene I have never felt discriminated or downgraded among them. This year I am a volunteer, I work with elderly people, and that in a completely Italian environment. I was positively surprised by the fact that as soon as my colleagues and also the elderly people with whom I work got to know that I was a

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Slovene, they started to ask me with interest to translate something for them, or they asked me if they pronounced certain Slovene words correctly. The interest that they had towards my language gave me the impression that knowing Slovene in the Italian environment is an enrichment, and not a reason for discrimination.[17]

The contact hypothesis (Allport 1954; Brown & Hewstone, 2005; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006) posits that greater contact with an out-group is generally associated with less prejudice. More frequent opportunities of intergroup contact in the right conditions, together with the promotion of studies of ethnicity, may help the larger society to be aware and better understand the situations and feelings of ethnic minorities, encourage respect of diversity, empower ethnic minority group members to value the positive aspects of their ethnic identities and make them feel more self-confident.

5. Conclusions and Directions for Further Research

This study provides empirical evidence that is in accordance with the theoretical frameworks of social identity perspectives and identity process theory, namely that Slovene minority adolescents in Italy adopt a range of strategies for coping with the perceived ethnic identity threat that they experience in their everyday life.

The qualitative thematic analysis of students' written narratives summarizes and reconstructs experiences, opinions, feelings and behaviours of individuals belonging to this particular ethnic group. Particular emphasis was given to the active construction of self-image through plural complex identity, the seeking and maintaining of distinctiveness, the blending in and the identity enhancement practices as coping strategies in response to perceived ethnic identity threats. The interpretations of the data are consistent with the theoretical framework adopted, and confirm the finding of the few similar studies conducted on ethnic identity issues in (post)adolescents at the Italian-Austrian borderland (Merkač 1983; Vavti 2009) or in the territory analyzed here (Juric Pahor 2000; Mendarič 2009).

"People can be understood by others in particular ways, and people act toward one another depending on such understandings and positionings" (McCarthey & Birr Moje 2002, 228–229). Given the data discussed in this paper, two main directions may be envisaged. The first is the promotion of studies of ethnicity for majority groups. Given that it has been demonstrated that a strong ethnic

identity may act as a buffer against multiple stressors, the second is the promotion of ethnic identity exploration and ethnic identity achievement among young people, paying attention to (un)conscious identity motives; this may help to equip minority adolescents with skills that would allow them to have higher levels of mastery over stressful situations and to indirectly address other related issues, improving, e.g., their academic careers, intergroup relations, linguistic behaviour, physical health and psychological well-being (Jaspal and Cinnirella 2012, 504).

Crocetti et al. (2008, 994) suggest that people from ethnic minority groups should be a priority target for interventions aimed at promoting a healthy adolescent development. We would further suggest that people from both ethnic majority and minority groups should be a priority target for interventions aimed at promoting a healthy ethnic identification and a mature positive intergroup relational attitude, with a view to their feeling empowered and free to represent their ethnic identities in the most constructive and creative way, facilitating and promoting the construction and perception of multiple complex identities composed of different characteristics.

Regarding further directions for research, we believe it is important to develop a better understanding of the impact of ethnic identity threat on self-identification of different age groups, including younger adolescents and young adults.

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[1] "Sem sin domače zemlje, Goričan. Pol Slovenec, pol Furlan, pa tudi ne morem reči, da sploh nisem Italijan. Človek je in ima pravico biti to, kar se čuti, na podlagi narodnih vrednot, ki jih je dobil v zibelki ali ki jih je kasneje odkril."

[2] "… so tudi ostali, ki te kategorizirajo. Ni samo, da se ti sam opredeliš..."

[3] "Zamejski Slovenci nismo v Sloveniji upoštevani kot Slovenci, temveč kot Italijani."

[4] "Nekaj pa me je zelo razočaralo. Ko sem bila pred leti v Kranjski Gori zaradi športnih priprav, smo se z drugimi puncami pogovarjale s sovrstniki iz Slovenije in začudeno so nas gledali, ko smo jim rekle, da smo pripadniki slovenske manjšine v Italiji; oni sploh niso vedeli, da mi "obstajamo"."

[5] "V hipu sem začutila vse bližnje, popolnoma razprte oči, ki bulijo vame. "Ma sei russa?", "No, non sono Russa, sono Slovena!", "Ah, sei Slava quindi …", "E perché sei in Italia?"… Beseda "Slava" me še dandanes moti. Naveličana sem odgovarjati na vedno ena in ista vprašanja, naveličana sem tistih presenečenih in zbeganih pogledov, naveličana sem biti tujka. A prav tako sem se počutila, ko sem pred leti odhajala na dvotedenske počitnice po Italiji. Vsakič sem morala ponovno navesti razloge, zaradi katerih poznam tako čudaški jezik, zakaj ne živim v Sloveniji, zakaj obiskujem slovenske šole. Počutila sem se kot nenavadna, nova živalska vrsta v zoološkem parku, katero si vsi z zanimanjem ogledujejo, analizirajo ter primerjajo. To sem bila jaz, poseben primer. Končno sem se ponovno vrnila domov. Vrnila sem se v prostor drugačnih, posebno obravnavanih Slovencev."

[6] "Zgodovina se kaže še v današnjih dneh. Že od malega sem žrtev besednega nasilja. Italijani nas imenujejo "sciavi", kar je zelo žaljivo. Večkrat se izve, da je prišlo do popisa spomenikov in drugih javnih krajev. Iz lastnih izkušenj vem, da Italijani ne marajo Slovencev, obstajajo pa tudi izjeme. /.../ Med kakimi športnimi srečanji je prišlo do uporabe žalitev, včasih pa je prišlo tudi do pretepov."

[7] "Vedno se predstavim kot Slovenec in pojasnim, da sem s Trsta. Predstavitev sicer moraš menjat odvisno s kom govoriš, a le v smislu, da poudarim nekaj..."

[8] "Opredeljujem se kot Slovenka. Samoopredelitev posameznika se seveda lahko spremeni glede na okoliščine, običajno pod različnimi tipi pritiska, težje zavestno in popolnoma svobodno."

[9] "Imam visoko samozavest in ustaljeno identiteto: sem Slovenec in Furlan. Skušam postajati čim bolj odprt do ostalih, toda mislim, da bom vedno ostal to, kar sem. Okolje ne bo spremenilo moje etnične-nacionalne identitete, čeprav se v različnih okoliščinah različno predstavim. Na primer.... če se predstavim Italijanu, mu bom povedal, da sem Slovenec in Furlan in seveda italijanski državljan, če pa se predstavim tujcu, mu bom najprej povedal, da prihajam iz Italije in da imam italijansko državljanstvo, potem pa mu bom pojasnil svojo identiteto."

[10] "Ne čutim velike pripadnosti 'matični' domovini (Sloveniji). Seveda imamo iste korenine in precej skupne zgodovine, toda veliko je tudi razlik. Veliko mi pomeni 'zamejska' oz. 'primorska' kultura. Moja domovina je Goriška in delno tudi Tržaška."

[11] "...biti zamejski Slovenec ne pomeni biti slovenski Slovenec. Smo drugačni, čeprav imamo iste korenine."

[12] "Noi giovani usiamo sempre di più parole italiane o inglesi. Ma anche in pubblico, con gli amici, preferiamo parlare l'italiano che lo sloveno. E questo perché? Perché abbiamo paura di cosa

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dice la gente di noi, della minoranza slovena. Abbiamo paura che la gente non ci accetti, perché sente parlare una lingua che non è l'italiano, abbiamo paura di cosa pensa di noi. Per questo noi giovani molte volte preferiamo parlare l'italiano che lo sloveno. / … / A Trieste e a Gorizia ci sono scuole con insegnamento in lingua slovena. Molte volte queste scuole, specialmente le superiori, vengono danneggiate da persone che si divertono a scrivere insulti ed a disegnare svastiche sui muri dell'edificio scolastico. Ecco un altro motivo per cui molte volte noi giovani ci vergogniamo a parlare lo sloveno in pubblico."

[13] "Izgubiti se v večini je, po mojem mnenju, stvar, ki ni ne slaba ne dobra. Slaba ni zato, ker je najlažji izhod iz morebitnega trpinčenja s strani večine, ker tako postaneš enak vsem ostalim, nisi drugačen in si le eden v množici. / … / Teh ljudi ne obsojam, niti jim ne čestitam. Razumljivo je, da iščejo v svojem življenju le mir, da se ne želijo počutiti kot outsiderji. So pa tudi tisti ljudje, ki se manjšini odrečejo in se sramujejo tega, da so del nje. To je izredno grdo, je obsojajoče, ampak vsako mnenje je treba upoštevati. / … / To ni prav, ker mislim, da je to neko zavračanje samega sebe in laganje o tem, kdo v resnici si."

[14] "Biti manjšina ni slabo, prinaša svoje prednosti in teh bi se morali zavedati vsi. Nekje sem bral, da je znanstveno dokazano, da so zamejci bolj odprti za tuje jezike, da so bolj strpni do drugačnosti in da so bolj altruistični in sočutni. Po mojem mnenju to drži, kajti logično bi bilo, da zamejci oziroma ljudje, ki se z zamejstvom srečujejo, lažje razumejo drugačnost in razumejo to, kako je biti zatiran s strani neke drugega večinskega naroda."

[15] "Noi appartenenti alla minoranza siamo secondo me avvantaggiati non solo perché conosciamo un lingua in più, ma anche perché abbiamo già in partenza un bagaglio culturale più ampio. Essendo noi stessi un mix di culture diverse siamo più predisposti al rispetto e all'accettazione della gente diversa da noi. / … / A dir la verità, spesso succede che noi stessi, facendo parte della minoranza ci isoliamo dagli altri. Forse questo è solo un modo di proteggerci che ci evita di stare a disagio."

[16] "Pozitivna plat manjšinske stvarnosti je predvsem poznavanje dveh jezikov. Zaradi tega smo miselno bolj prožni in se lažje znajdemo v različnih situacijah."

[17] "Čeprav ne poznam mnogo Italijanov, se med njimi kot Slovenka nikoli nisem počutila diskriminirana ali manjvredna. Letos delam prostovoljno delo, se ukvarjam z ostarelimi ljudmi, in to v totalno italijanskem okolju. Pozitivno presenetilo me je to, da ko so moji sodelavci in tudi starejši, s katerimi delam, izvedeli, da sem Slovenka, so začeli z zanimanjem spraševati, naj jim kaj prevedem, ali so me spraševali, če pravilno izgovarjajo nekaj slovenskih besed. Zanimanje, ki so ga imeli do mojega jezika, mi je dalo vtis, da je poznanje slovenščine v italijanskem okolju obogatitev, nikakor pa razlog diskriminacije."

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