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Cultural identity, interethnic peer relationships, and psychological adaptation among immigrant-origin youth: the role of generational status

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CHAPTER 1

THE MIGRATION CONTEXT IN ITALY

1.1 History and migration context in Italy

Italy is a relatively recent nation of immigration. The first migratory movements towards Italy were recorded during the 1960s and early 1970s: a phenomenon that is closely linked to decolonization, with students, workers and women from Eritrea, Ethiopia, and Somalia, or from other North African countries moving to Italy. These first flows particularly involved women who entered the domestic work sector. However, in the 1960s, other flows concerned the two border areas of Friuli Venezia Giulia (next to the former Yugoslavia) and western Sicily, where many Tunisians were hired to work in fishing boats (Camilli, 2018).

In the late 1960s, political dissidents and exiles fleeing Latin America dictatorships began to arrive, seeking refuge mainly in large Italian cities like Rome, while in the 1980s people of immigrant descent in Italy grew to the point that the first immigration law was created in 1986, even if migration remained a hidden phenomenon that did not interest the Italian population and public debate. The great change in the migration context in Italy occurred between 1989 and 1992 due to the fall of the Berlin Wall, the first mass anti-race mobilizations, the first huge landings from Albania, and increased refugee arrivals. In 2001,

immigration dominated elections, and the 2008 security laws strengthened EU borders and reduced legal entries that almost disappeared (Camilli, 2018).

The migration waves since 2011 have been triggered by events like the Arab Spring and challenged the EU's borders control: these shifts exposed weaknesses in national and international legislation, particularly the Dublin Regulation. In the Italian context, the "Salvini Decree" of 2018 penalized immigrant workers' presence, making it difficult to convert humanitarian permits to work-based ones. A decline in residence permits issued to non-EU citizens was observed between 2011 and 2017, indicating Italy's changing status as a migrant destination (Camilli, 2018).

In the last decade, Italy has witnessed an unprecedented decline in labor flows, a substantial stability in flows for family reunification, and a rapid growth in arrivals of people seeking international protection (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali, 2022a). After the migration "crisis" of 2015, the EU-Turkey agreement of March 2016 and the closure of the Balkan borders, the central Mediterranean route (From Libya to Italy) has become the main route of escape from war, persecution, and despair (UNICEF, 2023).

During the years of the Covid-19 pandemic, the refugee and migrant emergency took on more complex conditions: border closures and travel bans imposed by national governments restricted the mobility of refugees and migrants, many of whom remained stuck along borders or in overcrowded reception centers and informal settlements. The resumption

and increase of arrivals in 2021 and 2022 have further reduced the assistance capacities of receiving countries (UNICEF, 2023).

Despite the Memorandum of Understanding between Italy and Libya on countering illegal immigration and human trafficking, and the restrictions for COVID-19, the number of arrivals in Italy has steadily increased in the last years: 105,131 arrivals in 2022, compared to 67,400 in 2021, which already represented a 95% increase from 34,154 in 2020. In the first seven months of 2023, arrivals in Italy accounted for 74% of the more than 117,600 recorded migrant people on the Mediterranean route. At the end of July, more than 128,900 refugees and migrants were in the Italian reception system: among them, more than 20,900 unaccompanied immigrant minors: from 2014 to now, 100,000 have arrived by sea (UNICEF, 2023).

As regards resident permits, in 2021 there was a resurgence in the granting of new permits (a total of 242 thousand, +127% compared to 2020) and new asylum documents have also returned to growth: almost 31 thousand were issued (+129% in one year). In 2021, most asylum and protection permits were granted to citizens of Pakistan (6 thousand new documents), followed at a distance by citizens of Bangladesh (almost 5 thousand permits) and Nigeria (over 3 thousand) (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali, 2022a).

In 2021, 47% of migrants who entered Italy in 2007 had a valid resident permit, Ukrainians being the most stable on the territory, and Chinese being the least stable. Only 6.9% obtained Italian citizenship between the moment of entry (in 2007) and 2021. For

migrants who arrived in 2012 or 2016, the share of those who still have a valid document in 2021 is around 35%, where the propensity to settle in Italy is lower among those who arrived in the last decade (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali, 2022a).

Based on national statistics, the resident population born abroad in Italy on January 1st, 2023, was 5.50 million, with an increase of 20 thousand individuals (+3.9%) with respect to the previous year. The incidence of people of immigrant origin on the total population is 8.6% (slightly more than in 2022). Almost 60% of them (2 million 989 thousand) reside in the North of Italy (ISTAT, 2023).

The major nationalities of migrants in Italy remain unchanged with respect to the previous years: Romanians prevail among residents, followed, by Albanians, Moroccans, Chinese, and Ukrainians. On the basis of the Ministry of Interior data (updated on 11 June 2022), 132,129 people fleeing the conflict in Ukraine have arrived in Italy: 69,493 women, 20,181 men and 42,455 minors (Caritas Italiana e Fondazione Migrantes, 2022; Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali, 2022a). Generally, people with a migration background are much younger with respect to the Italian population, which is an important resource for an old Italian population (ISTAT 2022).

As of 2022, the Romanian community is distributed throughout the entire Italian peninsula according to a clearly diffusive settlement pattern that overcomes a usual North-South dualism. Albanians are mainly settled in Central Italy and in the coastal areas of Emilia-Romagna, while Moroccans are normally present in the northern and eastern areas,

particularly in Emilia-Romagna and in the Po Valley. Chinese citizens are concentrated in specific areas such as Rome, Prato, Emilia-Romagna, and Veneto (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali, 2022a).

1.2 Youth with an immigrant background

On January 2019, non-EU minors in Italy were 794,618, that is, the 22% of the total number of legal residents (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali, 2020); 1,316,000 are, instead, more generally minors with an immigrant family background. Of these, 75 per cent were born in Italy (991,000 second generation in the strict sense). As age increases, the percentage of minors who have entered Italy for family reunification increases (ISTAT, 2022). Thus, if those born in Italy are more than 90 per cent among those under 5 years of age, they are 37.5 per cent among minors aged between 14 and 17. The differences between communities are significant: the proportion of Italian-born immigrants exceeds 89 per cent for China and falls to 55 per cent in the case of Pakistan. The highest proportions of those born in our country are found especially among communities with a longer history of immigration to Italy, and which over time have given rise to family reunification or establishment (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali, 2020).

In addition, non-accompanied immigrant minors were 20,089 in 2022, a number that has seen a strong increase from 2021 due to the humanitarian crisis in Ukraine since February 2022. In the European context, these minors are defined as children and adolescents under

the age of eighteen who are citizens from a non-European Union state or stateless people, who are in the national welcoming territory without the legal assistance and representation of parents or other adults legally responsible for them (Ministero del Lavoro e delle Politiche Sociali, , 2022b).

1.4.1 Multiculturalism at school

In 2021, there was a significant and unique decrease in the number of students of immigrant descent as well as Italian students on a national level. Specifically, there was an annual reduction of 11,400 pupils of immigrant origin in Italian schools during the academic year 2020/2021, with kindergartens being particularly affected (IDOS, 2022). Overall, in school year 2020/2021, students of immigrant background were 865, 388 with a decrease of over 11,000 compared to the previous year (-1,3%) (Ministero dell'Istruzione, 2022a).

The schooling rates of students with non-Italian citizenship are close to those of Italians both in the 6-13 age group (around 100%, corresponding to the first cycle of education) and in the 14-16 age group, corresponding to the first three years of secondary school, where they drop to 94.1%. At 17-18 years of age, on the other hand (last two years of secondary school), the schooling rate of students with non-Italian citizenship decreases to 77.4% compared to 83.3% of Italian students. However, the interruption of school attendance between the ages of 17 and 18 leads almost a quarter of students with non-Italian citizenship not to complete secondary education. Early school leaving affects more boys than girls, for whom the decline

in the schooling rate is significantly lower, falling from 91.8% to 81.8%, whereas for 17-year-old boys the index drops from 96.2% to 73.8% (Ministero dell'Istruzione, 2022a).

The territorial representation of pupils with migration background is not homogenous: at the level of geographical areas, there is a great concentration in the northern regions (65.3%), followed by the central regions (22.3%) and finally the South (12.5%). Lombardy is the region with the highest number of students with an immigrant background (more than a quarter of the total), while Emilia-Romagna, Veneto, Lazio, Piemonte and Tuscany absorb a share of immigrant descent students between 8.3% and 12.1% (Ministero dell'Istruzione, 2022a).

The context of school is an essential place that can enhance the integration of minors with migration background. Entrance at school is usually the first contact for young people with the welcoming society and culture. For this reason, school performance indicators are achieving a great importance in the inclusion measures in literature (ISTAT 2022).

OECD results (2022) provide important information on the academic performance of immigrant-origin students. From these results, it has been highlighted that being placed in a class with younger students, and facing language barriers will lead to a high difficulty in reaching the formative objectives for non-Italian youth. In fact, only 49% of students of immigrant background are part of a class with people of the same age: almost 40% is inscribed in the previous class, and 12.2% in classes with people who are 2 years younger than them (INVALSI, 2022; ISTAT, 2022).

Regarding primary school and the beginning of secondary school, first-generation immigrant students generally score lower than the average Italian student in all tasks of the INVALSI test (except the foreign language task). This effect was also found for second-generation students. However, in the latter case the gap is significantly reduced. These results highlight the compensatory effect of Italian language knowledge in immigrant-origin students' school performance (INVALSI, 2022). Nevertheless, it appears that from the end of secondary school and in high school, the gap of the first generation narrows considerably, whereas the compensation for the second generation normally takes more time. This phenomenon has not been sufficiently analyzed in the literature and needs further investigation. However, it seems that the grades of students with an immigrant background and Italian ones tend to be the same in high school, but this may be also due to a selection effect (INVALSI, 2022; ISTAT, 2022).

By analyzing migrant backgrounds, considerable differences can be observed: while Albanians, Moroccans and Ecuadorians have on average a smaller gap between age and class of first enrolment (more than 90 per cent are enrolled regularly or at most in the previous class), for Moldovans, Filipinos and Chinese the opposite situation occurs. Pupils of immigrant descent are rejected more frequently than Italian ones at the end of the school year: whereas only 14.3 per cent of Italian pupils had to repeat one or more school years, for their peers of immigrant origin the percentage rises to 27.3 per cent (ISTAT, 2022).

Regarding relationships with other classmates and teachers, and family attitude towards school, immigrant-origin students have less frequent relationships with classmates with

respect to Italian students: 21.6 % of pupils of immigrant descent in secondary schools do not interact with classmates outside school hours, compared to 9.3 % of Italian students (ISTAT, 2022). Generational status has a significant impact on social behaviors: the acquaintance of Italian pupils decreased by almost 12 percentage points from those who arrived in Italy between 0 and 5 years to those who arrived in Italy after the age of 10; conversely, acquaintance of compatriots or other pupils of immigrant origin increases by about 6 percentage points between those born in Italy with an immigrant background, and those born abroad who arrived after the age of 10. Overall, 13.8% of pupils of immigrant descent spend time with only non-Italian students, and more than 37% see both Italian and students with immigrant background. Adolescents who born abroad and arrived in Italy at age 11 or older have the lowest percentages of exclusive friendship with Italian classmates and higher percentages of classmates with immigrant origin (ISTAT, 2022).

Students from migrant backgrounds are present today in all high school curricula, but they mainly choose the technical-professional sector and are over-represented in the three-year professional training. It has been found that the guidance counselors in schools sometimes direct students of immigrant origin toward this sector, even when they have the abilities and interests for attending different and longer schooling (Ministero dell'Istruzione, 2022b). In addition, in many Italian first cycle schools (especially in metropolitan areas), there is an accentuating process of segregation, that is a concentration of pupils from migrant backgrounds in some specific schools, whereas the Italian pupils tend to choose schools with fewer students of immigrant descent (Ministero dell'Istruzione, 2022b).

1.3 Intercultural relationships: ethnic bullying and inter-ethnic friendships

Peer intercultural relationships represent the interactions and bonds between individuals from different ethnic or cultural backgrounds within the same peer group or social context (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Social relationships are fundamental milestones in adolescence, that is a developmental period in which the creation of independence and mature friendships occur (Havighrust, 1952). Various functions are served by peer relationships, which can be categorized into the broader areas of providing social support, facilitating learning and the development of norms and skills, experimenting with interpersonal behaviors, and shaping personal identity (Fine, 1981; Rubin, 2004). As a result of offering concrete opportunities for self-reflection, peer interactions have been termed a "social laboratory" (Sherif & Sherif, 1964). This is because they allow adolescents to engage in self-examination, interact, learn from these interactions, and assess themselves – activities through which adolescents develop their repertoire of social skills (Bina & Graziano, 2010; Gini, 2012).

In a multicultural environment like the Italian school system, these skills also encompass intercultural competencies. It is essential to clarify the terminology regarding these two seemingly overlapping concepts: "multicultural" views cultures as entities that are related but distinct and autonomous from one another. On the other hand, "intercultural" interprets cultures dynamically as systems of resources with fluid and open boundaries for exchange (Mantovani, 2006). Intercultural competencies are defined as a higher-order

construct that translates into a set of problem-solving skills enabling effective interaction with languages and cultures different from one's own, influenced by the individual's environment (Albiero, 2012). These components encompass intercultural sensitivity, effectiveness, responsiveness, and ethnocultural empathy. Prior studies have highlighted how these competencies are promoted by cultural identity, with a more significant relationship observed in individuals with a migration background (Phinney et al., 2007). Furthermore, they have proven to be relevant for adolescent adaptation and well-being, fostering open-minded and accepting attitudes towards the "other" (Gibbons, 2000).

Adolescence is a pivotal period for the development of intercultural competencies, given that the developmental tasks and challenges faced during this stage contribute to the ability to interact with peers from diverse cultural backgrounds. Cognitive and emotional maturation also leads adolescents to take an interest in political and social issues while enhancing their understanding of others' experiences and emotions (Albiero, 2012). Cultural differences in communication and understanding can pose significant obstacles, often requiring sensitivity and open-mindedness to navigate (Berry, 2005). Furthermore, individuals involved in interethnic relationships may grapple with their own cultural identity within this context, leading to personal identity struggles (Phinney & Ong, 2007). In some cases, social resistance from society or peers may present challenges, leading to stress or discrimination (Pettigrew & Hewstone, 2001).

Emerging findings point to the intricate dynamics of cultural diversity and intercultural contact in educational settings, where they can simultaneously pose challenges and offer

protective factors (Bellmore et al., 2012; Closson et al., 2014). On the one hand, a recent systematic review by Basilici and colleagues (2022) revealed that cultural diversity in schools may be linked to the perpetration of bullying. For example, in the Italian context, recent data from ISTAT (2020) indicate that 49.5% of second-generation immigrant adolescents reported experiencing at least one offensive, disrespectful, or violent incident within a month, surpassing the 42.4% reported among their Italian peers. This phenomenon, often labeled as "ethnic bullying", specifically targets individuals based on their ethnic or cultural background, manifesting in various forms of aggression, including verbal insults rooted in racial stereotypes and exclusionary behaviors (Basilici et al., 2022). Ethnic bullying can leave victimized adolescents feeling inadequate and inferior, leading to challenges in internalization and externalization and hindering their adaptation to the environment (McKenney et al., 2006).

Conversely, a diverse cultural composition seems to act as a safeguard against victimization within secondary schools. Basilici et al. (2022) also revealed that 39% of the studies established a negative correlation between diversity and bullying (victimization). As indicated by Graham's research (2014), highly diversified school environments without any dominant cultural majority and cultural groups share more equitable relationships, report lower levels of victimization, reduced anxiety, and a heightened sense of security (Basilici et al., 2022). Grounded in Allport's Contact Hypothesis (1954), prolonged contact between diverse groups, supported by situational and social elements, fosters a sense of belonging and cooperation, reducing prejudices and tensions. The literature also illustrates that diversity

helps address various challenges faced by adolescents, not only those from minority and marginalized backgrounds, by promoting improved mental health, fostering positive attitudes toward outgroups (Schwarzenthal et al., 2017), and enhancing school adjustment (Graham, 2018).

Interethnic friendships play a pivotal role in this context (Graham, 2018). Friendship is a foundational peer relationship that provides individuals with the basis to develop a social understanding of the world. During adolescence, friendships gain particular significance due to the heightened importance of peer groups, the need for intimacy, and the desire for emotional validation. For adolescents of immigrant backgrounds, friendships significantly contribute to their acculturation (Oczlon et al., 2023). These friendships often involve the sharing of personal experiences, common interests, and emotional connections (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Beyond friendships, interethnic connections can also be found in the form of acquaintanceships, where individuals interact in more casual contexts, such as classmates or coworkers (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). Additionally, peer groups may sometimes form along ethnic lines, signifying the presence of cultural groups within the broader social landscape. Unpleasantly, conflictual relationships can emerge due to interethnic differences, which can significantly impact the dynamics of these relationships (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

A research by Pettigrew and Tropp (2006) demonstrated that friendly contact effectively reduces prejudice. The experience of a close friendship, characterized by intimacy and reciprocity with someone from a different ethnic group, tends to challenge stereotypes and promote more positive intergroup attitudes (Killen et al., 2022). Reducing prejudice and

discrimination is essential as these factors negatively impact the psychological and academic adaptation of young people with migrant backgrounds, leading to anxiety, stress, sleep disturbances, and lower academic success (Killen et al., 2022; Priest et al. 2013).

Numerous factors influence the formation and dynamics of peer interethnic relationships. One pivotal influence is socialization, whereby early exposure to diversity and cultural norms within the family can significantly impact an individual's willingness to engage in interethnic relationships (Berry, 2005). Furthermore, the composition of schools and communities plays a crucial role as it can either facilitate or impede opportunities for interethnic interactions (Pettigrew & Hewstone, 2001). Personal attitudes, such as prejudice and stereotypes, are essential determinants that shape an individual's propensity for engaging in interethnic relationships (Pettigrew & Hewstone, 2001). Additionally, shared interests and activities, whether in the realm of hobbies or extracurricular pursuits, can provide the foundation for interethnic friendships (Phinney & Ong, 2007).

The nature of peer interethnic relationships undergoes significant transformations across different developmental stages. During childhood, children often form interethnic friendships more organically, as they are less influenced by biases and stereotypes. However, as individuals transition into adolescence, they may face greater challenges in these relationships, owing to factors like peer pressure and identity development. Interestingly, in adulthood, individuals may become more open to interethnic friendships, particularly through their work, social networks, or community involvement (Phinney & Ong, 2001).

The presence of ethnic diversity in schools presents both challenges and opportunities. Recent guidelines from the Italian Ministry of Education advocate for an intercultural education approach that values the multicultural heritage of all students, irrespective of their immigrant background. This approach shifts from viewing cultures and identities as fixed and unchanging to a more constructivist perspective, recognizing diversity as socially constructed through social interaction. The aim is to create an inclusive environment where different cultural backgrounds are respected, and shared values foster harmonious coexistence (MI, 2022a). Schools can serve as a unique space for citizenship, coexistence, and the transformation of organizational structures to accommodate diverse cultural identities.

1.4 First- and second-generation migrants

Categorizing migrants into two different generations is not an easy task, and it may lead to contradictory affirmations. Many definitions of migration generations have been used in the literature.

Rumbaut (2004) was one of the first scholars who proposed a precise classification of migrant generations, proposing a decimal categorization by considering the age of arrival of migrant children: A "G2 generation" refers to children who were born in the country of migration from a family of immigrant descent, a "G 1,75" generation comprises individuals who have migrated in pre-school age (0-5 years old) and have attended the entire school path

in the country of destination; "G 1,5" generation refers to people who started school in the country of origin, but will finish it in the destination country (6-12 years old). Finally, a "G 1,25" generation is formed by people who migrated to a new country when they were aged between 13 and 17 years (Rumbaut, 2004).

In these definitions, Rumbaut (2004) considered many factors that are essential in this field (i.e., sociology), such as nativity, age, life stage and historical experiences, that are important criteria affecting acculturation, in particular language, accent, educational attainment, and social mobility. Thanks to this approach, the author highlights that the conventional division of first and second generation oversimplifies the complexity of immigrant experiences, as they normally do not account for variations in age, life stages, and historical contexts.

Four factors are considered crucial in considering the migrant generation and experience: firstly, the age of arrival in the destination country that strongly influences the cultural, linguistic and acculturation patterns. Secondly, life stages such as childhood, adolescence, and adulthood intersect with generational status to shape an individual's identity and integration process; for instance, second-generation children might shape different challenges and opportunities with respect to second-generation adults (Rumbaut, 2004). Thirdly, the historical context of immigration must be taken into account as unique political, economic and social conditions affect the integration process. Finally, an element that must be considered is the generational cohort: instead of treating first and second generations as homogeneous groups, Rumbaut suggests breaking them down further into cohorts based on

historical periods of immigration. This approach recognizes the diversity of experiences within each generation (Rumbaut, 1997). The author aims to enhance our understanding of the complexities surrounding immigrant integration and adaptation, underscoring the need to move beyond simplistic categorizations and consider the interplay of age, life stage, historical context, and generational cohort to gain a more accurate insight into the immigrant experience in the United States (Rumbaut, 2004).

Despite this important definition that must be always considered, the "second generation of migrants" in the literature generally refers to children born in the country of immigration from parents born abroad, while "first generation migrants" are those who were born in a different country than the one in which they are living. In many cases, we speak of the second generation in a broader sense, also meaning the population who immigrated while they were minors (ISTAT, 2020). Studying migrant generations is a difficult process also because the definition problem is something that affects the statistical and empirical study. This is why it is not always easy to find accurate findings on this part of the population.

The second generation ("seconde generazioni") of migrants, considered as individuals who were born in Italy from parents born abroad, are more than 1 million, 22,7% of whom has obtained the Italian citizenship (Caritas Migrantes, 2022).

Regarding the Italian context, second-generation migrants are not only increasing in numbers, but also in complexity. In fact, this part of the population concerns a new typology of subjects who develop expectations of their families and of the society in which they live,

ways of life, skills, and values similar to those of the native population, yet presenting specificities and problems (Tirabassi, 2021). In particular, it has been found that the major difficulties of second-generation migrants refer to the identity formation process, school failure, social and occupational marginalization, more difficulty in accessing opportunities for socio-economic mobility than native citizens; lack of personal space (determined by poorer conditions) in which to find refuge and autonomy (Tirabassi, 2021).

However, positive findings have also been highlighted for this part of the population (in comparison with first-generation migrants): their condition normally leads to a greater stability in the Italian society and to a more positive attitude towards the future, which is very close to the Italian ones. However, the second generations often direct themselves towards the near-term attainment of conditions of economic security. Second-generation young people also seem unwilling to accept the socio-economic integration profile of their parents and are oriented towards more qualified professions that enjoy greater social recognition (Tirabassi, 2021).

In 2018, in Italy, second-generation youths were 1.316.000, 75% of whom was born in Italy: around 13% of minors in Italy are second-generation migrants (ISTAT, 2022). A surprising element of the last years is the increasing number of youths of immigrant descent and young second generation migrants that obtain the Italian citizenship: almost 50% of new citizenships has been transmitted to people younger than 30 years (ISTAT, 2022). However, the possibility of autonomous decision about citizenship for young immigrant youth in Italy is very limited: the current legislation allows immigrant-origin youth to acquire citizenship

only by transmission of this rights by their parents. The only autonomous decision in this field can be made by young migrants when they live their entire life in Italy, from their birth to their eighteenth birthday (ISTAT, 2022).

Second-generation migrants normally face complex pathways of integration: on the one hand, they generally know the national language and can better communicate and connect with people than those of the first generation; on the other hand, the contrast between the culture of the national context and the one of their migrant family is an additional element of complexity that can negatively affect the process of integration (Tirabassi, 2021).

The formal process for the recognition of Italian citizenship does not guarantee the absence of discrimination for second-generation migrants. In fact, second generation migrants normally face the same difficulties of their first-generation counterparts, with an additional challenge that regards their cultural identity, that must be balanced between the one of their family and country of origin, and their country of birth (Ambrosini, 2019). The daily challenge of young people of immigrant origin in their relationship with their parents also regards the fact that emigrating families may have to overcome periods of separation of varying lengths, or phases of reunification that can lead to different reconstructions and renegotiation of gender and generational roles and competences (Ambrosini, 2019).

In addition, the different members of the immigrant family must also get to know and recognize the features of the host country's culture and social rules and roles, that sometimes clashes with the ones of the original culture: a frequent phenomenon for second-generation

migrant youth is the so called "parent's parents", due to the fact that children are sometimes more integrated than their parents and have to face an informal role of cultural mediators. This sometimes negatively affects the relationship with the first-migrant parent, whose parental figure and authority may no longer be recognized by the child (Ambrosini, 2019). Portes and Rumbaut (2001, 2006) referred to this phenomenon as "dissonant acculturation", that is, a different speed in the acquisition of skills and social behavior by parents and children, which not only leads to a divergent ability of reading the surrounding reality, but can also produce weakened parental ties and authority, as well as an inter-generational conflict.

CHAPTER 2

CORRELATES OF PSYCHOLOGICAL ADAPTATION AMONG IMMIGRANT-ORIGIN YOUTH

2.1 Cultural Identity

Identity formation is a critical developmental task that is typically faced during adolescence. Cultural identity[1], referred to as "ethnic-racial identity" (ERI) in the North American scientific literature, is an important part of the multiple social identities that characterize everyone's Self. It constitutes a facet of social identity stemming from one's affiliation with a cultural group and the significance attributed to this affiliation. A cultural group can be defined as a group who shares history and cultural traits, such as food, art, literature, and language (Umaña Taylor et al., 2014).

Most of the scientific literature on cultural identity has originated from the three-stages model of cultural identity (Phinney, 1993), which is itself based on the works by Marcia

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[1] In this thesis, the term "cultural identity" instead of "ethnic-racial identity" is employed to align with the European literature on this topic, which considers the atrocities committed during the Second World War driven by "racial laws", rendering the latter term less suitable for the present context (Juang et al., 2020).

(1966, 1980) and Erikson (1968). In a nutshell, Erikson has postulated a psychosocial identity-theory according to which an identity crisis during adolescence is necessary to achieve a whole sense of self. The pursuit of a holistic self-identity necessitates the exploration of one's inherent capabilities, interests, and available pathways, culminating in a dedicated commitment to their evolving persona, which subsequently serves as an internal compass guiding future action. Conversely, Marcia identified four possible ego-identity statuses (identity diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium, identity-achievement) depending on the presence or absence of commitment and exploration of personal identity (Erikson, 1968; Phinney, 1993).

Phinney's "three-stage model" of cultural identity proposes three developmental phases of identity formation (all of which are determined by the variables of identity commitment and exploration): firstly, the person does not explore his/her culture and/or accepts it passively ("unexamined identity"); secondly, the individual starts looking for cultural meanings and begins to interiorize them ("moratorium/search"); finally, the person achieves a whole, clear, and integrated sense of cultural identity ("achievement") (Phinney, 1993; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2009).

According to Phinney (1993), it is essential to differentiate between "content" and "process" of cultural identity. Process encompasses the ethnic actions individuals engage in and their perspectives towards their ethnic group (e.g., the interiorization of cultural values). Content concentrates on how individuals perceive the significance of their ethnicity and its place in their lives and selves. These two posits are interconnected (e.g., the process of

exploration can shape individuals' attitudes), even if they are conceptually separated (Umaña Taylor et al., 2009). Cultural identity is a multidimensional, psychological construct that evolves and changes during one's lifetime. It does not represent a self-identity endpoint, but rather a continuous process of identification choices at different stages of life, influenced by both maturation and the surrounding environment. This development occurs as individuals explore their cultural heritage, its personal significance, and accept and internalize their cultural traits (Phinney, 1993; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014).

Cultural identity formation starts during late childhood, involving the development of self-categorization and labeling abilities. However, social-cognitive maturity and interpretative meaning-making are essential to develop an integrated cultural identity, and these processes are typical milestones of adolescence. In fact, adolescence is the period of life in which personal identity emerges from a synthesis and exploration of potential goals, values, and beliefs, that is itself based on the cultural self-identifications that developed in childhood (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). During adolescence, a significant aspect influencing cultural identity formation is the recognition of a 'common destiny' based on ethnic group membership, distinct from other cultural groups. This awareness becomes possible through the development of cognitive abilities and increased social exposure, which facilitate abstract and hypothetical thinking skills typically maturing after childhood. Adolescents possess the capacity to shift perspectives, harmonize their personal identity with that of their cultural reference group, and nurture a sense of ethnic group consciousness. As age increases, during late adolescence and young adulthood, the improvement of these skills leads to a further

exploration of what a cultural identity means for adolescents/young people with respect to their cultural group (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2004; 2014).

Exploration is a fundamental construct that characterizes and defines much of cultural identity. However, at this stage of development, exploration acquires even more importance, as it refers to gathering information about one's cultural group, as well as participating in cultural activities and conversations on this topic. These activities lead adolescents to a new awareness about their cultural heritage (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2009; 2014).

Cultural/ethnic socialization is another important component of cultural identity: adolescents start their exploration also because of their environmental context: for instance, it has been found that parents prepare their children for racial discrimination and multicultural encounters, as well as to daily life in their cultural community. Other important agents of socialization regard the more general surrounding society, especially the school context and the peer social context. Both positive and negative social experiences strongly influence cultural identity formation (Hughes et al., 2006; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014).

Finally, cultural identity resolution is a key concept when referring to this topic and can be defined as the process through which individuals develop a clear and coherent understanding of their cultural identity. It involves the integration of cultural values, beliefs and practices into one's self-concept and overall identity (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014).

2.1.2 The role of generational status

The development of one's cultural identity is a pivotal task in the psychosocial adaptation of adolescents from all cultural backgrounds, closely intertwined with their psychological well-being and other crucial factors affecting their overall quality of life. Nevertheless, individuals from ethnically mixed families or those who have experienced international relocations may have cultural identities that encompass connections to multiple ethnic groups and multiple countries (Tartakovsky, 2009).

Adolescents belonging to ethnic minorities often encounter unique challenges and resources not shared by their peers without a migration background. Research indicates that immigrant adolescents tend to experience a more pronounced identity crisis and actively engage in identity exploration and commitment processes, particularly in relation to their ethnic, educational, and personal commitment aspects (Erentaité, 2018). However, specific cultural heritage, encounters with discrimination, societal policies, individual and familial characteristics widely influence these experiences (e.g., the general income of the host country, the languages that are spoken in the family context etc.) (Erentaité et al., 2018). Negotiating cultural identity can be particularly challenging for second-generation migrants, as they need to decide which elements of each culture to retain and integrate into their sense of identity, and simultaneously maintain their links with their family and achieve full citizenship (Erentaité et al., 2018; Sabatier, 2008).

In a systematic review of 1.5 and 2nd generation Asian-American migrants in high-income countries (Dizon et al., 2021), the authors examined factors influencing cultural identity formation, categorizing them into macrosystem, microsystem, and individual factors based on Bronfenbrenner's theory (1977). Regarding macrosystem influences, host country policies and attitudes significantly impacted how immigrant adolescents perceived their culture of origin. Stereotype internalization often obstructed cultural identity exploration and commitment, and experiences of ethnic discrimination were linked to feelings of disconnection with the host country. Within the microsystem, family, school, and interpersonal interactions played critical roles in the negotiation of cultural identity for Asian-American youth. There were similarities between parents' and children's cultural identities, yet participants often felt pressure related to family expectations and faced challenges in reconciling the diverse cultural demands of society and family. School experiences also influenced cultural identity formation, particularly in how students were perceived by their peers, leading to stereotyping and division within the class based on cultural groups. Interactions with peers tended to affect cultural labeling, with stronger identification with the Asian culture when the reference group was more closely associated with it. Finally, individual factors came into play, with heritage language usage facilitating a connection with the original culture. Age and generational status also had an impact, with older individuals and those belonging to the 1st generation typically engaging in more extensive exploration and commitment to their cultural identity (Dizon et al., 2021).

In a study by Ison et al. (2023) on cultural identity among American adolescents with an immigrant background, it was demonstrated that an important factor which differentiated the cultural identity development of first- and second-generation migrants was family-ethnic socialization (FES). FES practices can be defined as the mechanisms through which parents convey information, values, and perspectives regarding cultural identity to their children (Park et al., 2020). These practices encompass the transmission of values, behaviors, lifestyle in accordance with the culture, ways of expressing emotions; more practical components such as cooking, language, participation in associations; and finally, contextual elements like home decoration and the ethnicity of the neighborhood in which one resides (Sabatier, 2008). Ison et al. (2023) showed that parents' generational status influences how children relate to the dominant culture and their cultural identity, as the environment that parents create to guide their children's growth probably mirrors their own cultural identities influenced by their generation. Indeed, the authors found that a more recent history of immigration often led to a stronger motivation and opportunities for transmitting cultural messages to their children, possibly due to a stronger connection to the original cultural group. In fact, the more family members come from the country of origin, the greater the ethnic socialization and the exploration and resolution of one's cultural identity (Ison et al., 2023).

Overall, these findings suggest that first generation immigrants tend to maintain a stronger connection to their culture of origin, including the language, traditions, and cultural practices. In contrast, the second generation may have a more distant connection or a partial understanding of these cultural roots, and this inevitably influences cultural identity

development (Ison et al., 2023). However, the literature has yielded contradictory results on this topic. For instance, a study of national identification and multicultural policy effects in the U.S. demonstrated that national cultural identity was not influenced by the generational status of migrants, even if both first and second-generation migrants had a higher positive national identification when multicultural policies were present (Igarashi, 2019).

In the European context, few studies have investigated this topic, and the available ones tend to emphasize that being born in the host country can lead to less exploration and more resolution of one's cultural identity. For instance, a study on generational differences in cultural and religious identities for Muslim minorities (Dutch Turks and Moroccans) in the Netherlands showed that second generation youth reported weaker cultural and religious identities and engaged less in ethno-cultural practices than their first-generation counterparts (Maliepaard et al., 2014). The authors showed that the weaker cultural identity observed in the second generation of migrants could be attributed to several factors. Firstly, the second generation is more inclined towards higher education in the host country, which exposes them to the norms and values of the host society, potentially leading to a stronger identification with the host culture. Secondly, growing up in the host country exposes them to mainstream culture and values, gradually instilling a sense of belonging to the host society. Finally, improved structural integration, including access to employment opportunities, further reinforces their identification with the host society (Maliepaard et al., 2014).

In a study on first- and second-generation Moroccan immigrants in Western Europe (Van Heelsum & Koomen, 2016), second-generation migrants exhibited more resilience in

their national identification compared to the first-generation group. Specifically, second-generation individuals were less likely to let negative circumstances or ascription (the act of attributing characteristics to individuals based on their ethnicity or background) weaken their national identification, indicating a possible higher level of cultural identity resolution. Overall, the second generation seemed more confident in embracing multiple identities and better equipped to cope with any negative effects of ascription. However, it's important to note that public discourse and the level of perceived acceptance in society have a significant impact on the religious and national identification of both first- and second-generation Moroccans (Van Heelsum & Koomen, 2016).

In the Italian context, Salvini and Romaioli (2016) found that first-generation individuals of immigrant origin normally face stronger obstacles in integrating their original and host country cultures than their second-generation counterpart. In particular, the authors highlighted the fact that first-generation individuals usually base their cultural identity on their cultural group's traditions, language, and religiosity, while second-generation subjects may embrace more easily the host country cultural identity and oppose more to their original migration history. This is explained by the fact that second-generation individuals of immigrant descent spent more time in the host society than first-generation individuals. Consequently, first-generation migrants tended to explore and question their cultural identity more, due to their oppositional identification with the host society, while second-generation individuals experienced less of a challenge, which decreased their curiosity in exploring cultural identity (Salvini & Romaioli, 2016).

2.2 Peer ethnic-racial processes

In scholarly literature, the term "ethnic-racial socialization" is commonly used to refer to the varied inputs into children's and adolescents' developing awareness and understanding of ethnicity and culture. This concept has been studied extensively in the familial context, but not yet as widely in the domain of peer relations (Ruck et al., 2021). During the period of adolescence, young people normally spend most of their time with peers. These relationships are extremely influential for youth development, as adolescents' behaviors, values and beliefs are shaped by those of their peers (Chen et al., 2020). At the same time, ethnicity, cultural identity, and cultural-related discrimination, as well as prejudice, have been found to be risk factors for adolescent growth (Wang et al., 2021).

Starting from these considerations and from the existing literature about the role of family-ethnic socialization, the term "peer-ethnic socialization and peer-ethnic racial processes" have been coined. The latter concept refers to adverse peer discriminating encounters related to ethnicity or race, as well as celebration and promotion of pride in adolescents' cultural heritage, support, and preparation to potential discrimination experiences among peers (Wang et al., 2021). Peers often align with familial values and mainstream socialization practices, promoting discussions about the significance of preserving one's heritage and engaging with the broader mainstream culture in a more immediate and direct way than family members. They actively encourage young individuals to associate with peers from their own cultural background as well as those from diverse cultural groups. Additionally, they support attendance of cultural events, including concerts

featuring artists from both their heritage and the dominant cultural milieu. All these components regard the concept of "peer-ethnic socialization" (Wang et al., 2016). Hughes et al. (2011) have found five mechanisms through which peer-ethnic-socialization occurs: behavioral display (i.e., behaving in a way that reflects one's culture); peer pressure and behavioral reinforcement (i.e., pressuring adolescents that share the same culture to act in a culturally relevant way and reinforce this behaviors); antagonistic behavior (i.e., teasing peers when they do not act in accordance with their cultural background); and structural opportunities (i.e., creating chances to learn more about their culture) (Wang & Lin, 2023).

It is possible to distinguish negative dimensions of peer-ethnic processes including teasing, discrimination, and victimization, whereas positive dimensions comprise cultural socialization, and support against discrimination. Preparation for bias is another fundamental component that have been found to lead to both positive and negative effects, as it often happens in the familial context (Wang et al., 2021). Peer-ethnic socialization is strongly related to school/academic outcomes, identity formation, and socioemotional moods, both in a positive and negative way. It has been found that positive peer-cultural socialization has positive influences on adolescents' well-being, such as better academic adjustment, less depressive symptoms, as it has been demonstrated for family ethnic-socialization. Furthermore, adolescents demonstrate the most optimal conditions when both familial and peer cultural socialization are at high levels (Aldana & Bird, 2015). For instance, some studies have posited that peers' positive cultural socialization can promote adolescents' positive view towards their cultural group. Moreover, multiple proximal contexts of youth's

daily lives (e.g., peers, family, school) can interactively influence development (Chen et al., 2020). In fact, peer ethnic socialization can happen in multiple places, such as inside the familial context, in classrooms (both in structured and extracurricular activities), on social media, and so on.

Recent evidence has demonstrated that these practices may vary depending on the context: in structured environments like classrooms and extracurricular activities, peer-ethnic socialization often involves teaching each other about ethnic and cultural histories, knowledge, and traditions (Sladek et al., 2022 cited in Wang & Lin, 2023). These contexts offer opportunities for culturally affirmative messages. In more casual settings like lunchtime and hallways, peers may convey more complex ethnic/racial messages, possibly promoting mistrust or reinforcing marginalized cultural identities (Aldana & Byrd, 2015 cited in Wang & Lin, 2023). Social media has also become a context for peer ERS, with adolescents engaging in discussions about culture online. Research in this area is essential to understand when and where interventions are needed to promote positive ethnic/cultural messages (Wang & Lin, 2023). Literature also showed that factors like peers' closeness and social status are significant. Close friends can influence adolescents' understanding of culture through frequent interaction, while distant peers may practice this less frequently, but their influence may be significant, especially when endorsed by popular adolescents, who shape social norms (Wang & Lin, 2023).

In a study by Chen et al. (2020), the authors found that friends' support in positive cultural socialization can replace the missing role of parents with ethnic pride and values:

when the family does not support their children in facing discrimination, the peers' role becomes increasingly important and can act as a buffer against perceived discrimination. In addition, both the family and peers' positive socialization are important factors that normally lead to higher academic resilience and outcomes. A hypothesis that can explain this finding is that immigrant-origin individuals that face devaluation in the host society may strongly identify with their cultural group and consider education as a primary way to achieve social mobility, with discrimination as a motivator to work hard.

A study of peer cultural socialization in Germany (Vietze et al., 2019) has evidenced cultural minority students' benefits from sharing cultural experiences with both peers from the same culture and those with a different cultural background. In addition, cultural socialization in schools has been found to be effective in promoting cultural dialogue among peers in school, such as increased support among classmates from cultural minorities.

Regarding negative outcomes for adolescents' development, behaviors such as discrimination, victimization, and teasing can have significant and lasting effects on youth's lives. Research suggests that peer discrimination normally leads to increased levels of stress, anxiety, and depression; this can harm their self-esteem and potentially leads to mental health issues (Benner et al., 2018) Moreover, academic performance can be negatively affected by negative peer processes: adolescents may face a disrupted ability to concentrate and succeed academically, as well as decreased motivation and performance at school (Benner et al., 2018).

Experiences of ethnic discrimination can also impact cultural identity exploration and the acculturation process for youth with an immigrant background (Benner et al., 2018). For instance, acceptance from peers is an essential factor that generally leads to positive peer relationships, such as peer support, which in turn favors youth's self-worth and sense of identity. Thus, social exclusion during this developmental stage is particularly concerning because it coincides with an increased need for peer affiliation, and marginalization can seriously undermine adolescent's well-being, school adjustment and health (Plenty & Jonsson, 2017).

2.2.1 The role of generational status

As previously mentioned, there is a limited literature on studies related to peer-ethnic processes, especially in relation to adolescents' generational status. The few available studies suggest that the process of peer-cultural socialization may hold significant relevance for second-generation adolescents, given their typical need to identify with more than one culture (Vietze et al., 2019).

However, in a study by Wang et al. (2023) on the role of peer and familial ethnic socialization in everyday life of young American immigrant adolescents, the authors failed to find differences between first- and second-generation youth, with a similar influence of familial and peer ethnic socialization on participants' lives. Similarly, Kim et al. (2017) did not find any significant differences between first- and second-generation adolescents in the

role of Mexican peers in cultural socialization. Specifically, the study suggests that the role of peer relationships, particularly the cultural orientation of best friends, in shaping cultural identity was consistent across generational status. Both first-generation and second/third-plus generation Mexican-origin youth benefited from friendships with peers who share a strong Mexican cultural orientation, which contributes to their exploration and resolution of cultural identity. The authors suggested that the reason why friendship influences cultural identity may be attributed to the enduring and powerful role of peer relationship during adolescence, despite of the generational status (Kim et al., 2017).

Nevertheless, research on social exclusion in Swedish classes (Plenty & Jonsson 2017) has revealed that generational status can be an influential factor in peer relationships. In particular, first-generation adolescents had a higher risk of being excluded, rejected, victimized, and isolated by their classmates than their second-generation migrant peers, especially if they were non-European descendants. The authors hypothesized that this finding was due to acculturation (e.g., language skills, cultural values…) and time spent in the host country, which might act as a protective factor against social exclusion for second generation adolescents.

However, follow-up studies (Plenty & Jonsson, 2017) highlighted that the social exclusion and victimization index tended to decrease over time, highlighting the positive influence of acculturation and language acquisition for first-generation migrants. This hypothesis is supported by the fact that adolescents with a more recent history of migration were the ones with more experiences of social exclusion (this demonstrates the importance

of identifying the time of migration, irrespective of the generational status). In any case, both first- and second-generation youth reported a higher risk of isolation with respect to the majority of their classmates.

Consistent with the notion that second-generation immigrants tend to adapt more effectively to the host society than their first-generation counterparts, the existing literature indicates that second-generation adolescents tend to cultivate a larger circle of friends, experience reduced social exclusion, and exhibit fewer antisocial behaviors compared to their first-generation peers. In the Italian context, Cavicchiolo and colleagues (2022) found that second-generation immigrant adolescents in Italy displayed a heightened level of peer acceptance and friendship when compared to their first-generation counterparts. Alvernini et al. (2019) reported similar findings pertaining to peer friendships. However, their study also revealed that second-generation students in Italian schools manifested a diminished level of positive affect in comparison to their first-generation peers. Notably, the investigation did not uncover any significant disparity in peer acceptance contingent upon generational status.

However, according to the "Rejection Identification Model", second-generation individuals may be more vulnerable to the adverse effects of discrimination because, despite being born in the host country, they often experience being labeled or perceived as foreigners due to their cultural or ethnic heritage, leading them to intensify their group identification as a coping mechanism (Leach et al., 2008).

2.3 Psychological adaptation

In this thesis, the concept of psychological adaptation draws from Berry's and Ward's theories of cultural adaptation and is operationalized using two important indicators of an individual's psychological well-being: self-esteem and depressive symptoms.

It is possible to define self-esteem as an individual's sense of self-worth and self-respect, and an evaluative dimension of the self-concept. Self-esteem is strongly linked to well-being and life satisfaction in addition to positive emotional states, work engagement, and job satisfaction. Conversely, it exhibits an inverse relationship with negative emotional states, such as depression and anxiety (Monteiro et al., 2022).

Adolescence is a critical period for evaluating self-esteem, as it is a time of heightened self-awareness, identity formation, peer influence, body changes that can affect self-image perceptions, and high social comparison. (Monteiro et al., 2022). According to Rosenberg (1965), adolescents start developing a perception of themselves in terms of personal worth and self-appreciation by forming an internal evaluation of themselves influenced by their social and personal experiences. This largely depends on youth's perception of self-efficacy, that is, their confidence in their abilities and competencies. This development is possible thanks to the abstraction and self-reflection abilities that are specific developmental abilities gained during adolescence.

Regarding depressive symptoms, research has highlighted that adolescents undergo a period of rapid change and transition in which many individuals may experience depressive symptoms. The latter are important factors even when they are considered "subclinical", i.e., they do not refer to a clinical psychopathological diagnosis of depression. In fact, isolated depressive symptoms in adolescence are associated with impaired cognitive functioning and interpersonal instability (Auerbach et al., 2011).

A recent meta-analysis (Shorey et al., 2022) showed that 34% of adolescents aged between 10 and 19 years have faced elevated depressive symptoms, with a peak for individuals aged 18 to 25 (Shorey et al., 2022). In addition, a survey by the World Health Organization demonstrated that almost 50% of mental health issues arise by age 14, but most of the cases are not detected or misdiagnosed (Shorey et al., 2022). Young females have a greater tendency to develop depressive symptoms than their male counterpart, and they normally face it earlier in their development. This finding has been confirmed cross-culturally and existing literature explain it by referring to different dimensions, such as biological vulnerabilities, (i.e., genetic, and hormonal factors), and socio-cultural reasons such as gender roles and inequalities among societies. In addition, Hankin and Abramson's cognitive vulnerability-transactional stress theory of depression (2001) explain this gender difference in terms of female adolescents' greater cognitive vulnerability to depression, along with being more exposed and reactive to stress, body-image and weight-related concerns, which are positively associated with depressive symptoms (Auberbach et al., 2011; Shorey et al., 2022). Negative affectivity, poor physical health, rumination, low parents' mental

health, and lower self-concept are also associated with a higher probability of developing depression during adolescence. Moreover, minority group membership is an important risk factor for many adverse mental health outcomes; for instance, in the United States, Black, Hispanic and Asian minorities generally face higher levels of depressive symptoms in early life compared to Whites (Carter et al., 2016).

As already mentioned, to better contextualize psychological adaptation in the migration context, we will consider Berry's and Ward's studies.

Berry (2005) introduced the concept of psychological adaptation within acculturation, defining four primary acculturation strategies. Integration, one of these strategies, involves individuals maintaining ties to their original culture while actively engaging with the new culture. This strategy is associated with higher self-esteem, reduced depressive symptoms, and a sense of cultural continuity. Assimilation, on the other hand, entails fully embracing the new culture, potentially boosting self-esteem when successful but causing lower self-esteem or depressive symptoms in cases of struggle. Separation prioritizes the original culture, often leading to a strong identity but potential isolation and depressive symptoms. Marginalization, where individuals disengage from both cultures, can result in low self-esteem and higher depressive symptoms due to a lack of identity and belonging. These strategies illuminate how individuals from different cultural backgrounds adapt to new environments (Berry, 2003; 2005; 2006).

Influenced by Berry's work, Ward has conceptualized immigrant youth's adaptation in terms of psychological and sociocultural adaptation. The first term refers to the person's well-being and mental health including self-esteem and life satisfaction, while the second one regards the person's social competence in managing daily life in the intercultural setting, such as the ability of undertaking the tasks of everyday life in the hosting society and the success in employment and school (Abu-Rayya et al., 2023; Berry, 2006).

In line with Berry and Ward's conceptualization of psychological and sociocultural adaptation, it has been found that a major inclination toward original cultural heritage normally favors a better psychological adaptation, while a major inclination towards the hosting national culture generally leads to a better sociocultural adaptation. As a consequence, the best situation for immigrant people is a point of contact of these two cases, that is, when individuals use integration as the main strategy of acculturation (Berry, 2006; Ward, 1996). A recent meta-analysis (Abu-Rayya et al., 2023) confirmed the "Integration Hypothesis", positing that integration has the most positive effects on both psychological and socio-cultural adaptation for several reasons. Firstly, the authors demonstrated that this acculturation process allowed to maintain a strong connection to both heritage and host cultures, which in turn provided a sense of belonging and continuity, reducing stress and identity conflicts (often associated with assimilation or marginalization). Secondly, integration promoted a balanced approach to acculturation, fostering cultural competence and open-mindedness. Individuals who integrate are generally more likely to develop intercultural skills and build positive relationships with members of both their heritage and

host cultures, reducing feelings of isolation and discrimination. Additionally, integration provides behavioral flexibility, allowing individuals to adapt to changing cultural contexts without completely abandoning their heritage. This adaptability enhances psychological resilience and socio-cultural competence, contributing to overall well-being and successful adaptation.

2.3.1 The role of generational status

In accordance with a generational perspective within Berry's psychological adaptation framework, it is commonly posited that individuals who have spent more time residing in the host country tend to exhibit greater adaptation, particularly in terms of sociocultural adjustment. In line with this perspective, second-generation migrants could be presumed to have advantages in the acculturation process, potentially resulting in a reduced occurrence of depressive symptoms and a heightened level of self-esteem (Garcia et al., 1996). However, several studies have demonstrated that first-generation migrants report lower levels of mood disorders, anxiety, and personality disorders than their second-generation and native peers (Salas-Wright et al., 2014).

These findings are in line with the "immigrant paradox", the phenomenon according to which immigrants often exhibit better mental health compared to native-born individuals in their host country despite facing various socio-economic and cultural challenges. This effect is particularly true for first-generation migrants because it has been demonstrated that as

individuals and families become more acculturated to the host society's culture (typically seen in the second generation), the protective health advantage tends to diminish or even revers, leading to potentially poorer health outcomes (Marks et al., 2014). In fact, in the first generation of immigrants, integration is often linked to better mental health. These immigrants may experience less cultural conflict and greater emotional stability due to integrating cultural resources and a sense of belonging to both cultures. These factors contribute to reduced depressive symptoms and represent one aspect of the "immigrant paradox," where immigrants show better mental health outcomes than native-born individuals (Marks et al., 2014).

Conversely, in the second generation of immigrants, the positive effect of integration may diminish. These individuals grow up in an environment more influenced by the host country's culture and often face challenges related to bicultural identity. Pressure to fully adapt to the host country's culture can lead to higher acculturation, in some cases resulting in a disconnect from their cultural roots. This more advanced acculturation process may increase the risk of depressive symptoms, blurring the initial benefit of integration (Garcia et al., 1996; Salas-Wright et al., 2014). For instance, it has been found that second-generation immigrant youth in the US reported 19% more depressive symptoms than their first-generation peers. These differences have been observed in adolescence, with a higher risk related to racial and ethnic minorities with respect to the White counterpart (Espinosa, 2021). However, the "immigrant paradox" has mostly been documented in the North American context, whereas evidence in the European context is limited and more controversial.

Regarding self-esteem, Rumbaut's (2008) work has provided valuable insights into the experience of second-generation migrants in Southern California. In his work, he highlights that while second-generation adolescents may initially face self-esteem challenges due to acculturation stressors, their self-concept tends to improve over time as they navigate the dual cultural worlds of their heritage and the host society. Importantly, Rumbaut emphasizes the importance of considering longitudinal trends, highlighting that second-generation individuals' self-esteem evolves as they adapt to their unique cultural context.

Mereish et al. (2016) also suggest that self-esteem and depressive symptoms are higher in second and third generation migrants. In their study in the United States, they explain that these findings are mediated by discrimination: the more time Afro-Caribbean Americans spend in the host country (in this case in the United States), the more they face discrimination, and consequently manifest lower mental health and self-esteem with respect to their first-generation counterparts. In addition, ethnic group membership served as a protective factor for the maintenance of self-esteem against discrimination.

In the European context, the literature has reported contrasting findings which only partly confirm the "immigrant paradox". For instance, Mood et al. (2016) conducted a study in the UK, Germany, Netherlands, and Sweden that supported this phenomenon, as the study showed fewer internalizing (e.g., depressive symptoms) and externalizing problems in young first and second-generation immigrants than in the host population, without any significant differences between the two generations. Conversely, Stevens et al. (2015) compared 10 European countries and demonstrated that both first- and second- generation immigrant

adolescents experience higher levels of emotional and behavioral problems, including lower life satisfaction and increased physical fighting and bullying, compared to their native peers. However, the authors did not find significant differences in mental health outcomes depending on generational status.

In Italy, Borraccino et al. (2018) found some differences in psychological adaptation between first- and second-generation immigrants in Italy by examining internalizing and externalizing behaviors: the study showed that second-generation migrants generally exhibited higher risk of reporting low life satisfaction and more health complaints than the first-generation group, which instead reported higher levels of externalizing behaviors. The latter phenomenon is explained by authors referring to a greater sociocultural adaptation of second-generation immigrants. In addition, in a systematic review of emotional outcomes in migrant children and adolescents in Europe, Kouider et al. (2014) demonstrated that first-generation children reported higher levels of depressive symptoms compared to their second-generation counterpart: the authors hypothesized that these findings were due to the impactful effect of the migration experience and the difficulty to integrate in the host society.

2.4 Associations among cultural identity, peer ethnic-racial processes, and psychological adaptation

Several studies have examined the associations of the constructs that we have introduced in this thesis. In this paragraph, we will firstly analyze the associations between cultural identity

and peer-ethnic processes; secondly, we will examine how peer-ethnic processes are related to psychological adaptation. Thirdly, we will review studies addressing the associations between cultural identity and psychological adaptation, followed by the relationships among all the abovementioned constructs.

Peer ethnic processes are strongly related to cultural identity formation, both in a positive and negative way. For instance, when youth experience more discrimination at school, adolescents tend to explore more their cultural identity, which becomes more central, even if their awareness of negative public regard (i.e., how one thinks others see one's cultural group) increases. Moreover, peer discrimination at school has been found to be an obstacle to the development of dual cultural identities, for both first and second-generation Turkish and Moroccan immigrants in Belgian schools (Kende et al., 2021) This is because discriminating experiences do not make people with a migration background feel part of the national membership, and so national identity is negatively affected (Kende et al., 2021).

However, the presence of positive peer support and validation in the school environment is strongly correlated with the validation and exploration of cultural identity, along with a sense of harmony between one's national and heritage cultures. This holds particularly true when a significant proportion of students in the classroom belongs to minority groups (Kende et al., 2021). For instance, a qualitative study revealed that minority friends often engage in joint exploration and construction of multiple identities within the school setting for second-generation adolescents (Hoare, 2019). This suggests that having understanding minority peers can facilitate the integration of national and heritage cultural

identities, especially for second-generation immigrants. Similarly, Santos et al. (2017) highlighted the fact that frequent contact with peers of the same ethnicity was positively associated with higher levels of cultural identity affirmation, belonging, and exploration. More specifically, the authors found a pattern of cultural identity co-regulation among peers, following a similar pathway over time with a reciprocal influence in almost all the cultural identity components (i.e., public and private regard, centrality and exploration)

Wang et al. (2023) also confirmed the important role of peer-ethnic socialization in everyday cultural identity formation activities (especially in centrality, private and public regard), probably due to the variety of school activities that may influence cultural identity development (e.g., class activities). Likewise, a study by Nelson et al. (2018) has shown that peer preparation for bias predicted cultural identity commitment, and that peer-socialization was particularly important in conveying messages about prejudice in the development of cultural identity during young adulthood.

Cultural socialization consistently correlates with improved adolescents' adjustment, as it communicates affirmative messages regarding race/ethnicity and raises positive sentiments about their cultural identity and self-worth (Wang & Benner, 2016). Socialization with minority peers plays a significant role in reducing the harmful impacts of discrimination and is thus closely linked to psychological adaptation. For instance, in a study conducted by Benner and Wang (2017), friendships among minority adolescents acted as a protective buffer against the adverse effects of school-based discrimination on the well-being and sense of belonging in a group of Latinx adolescents. Additionally, Bianchi et al. (2021) reported

that peer acceptance and positive relationships among young immigrants living in poverty in Italian schools were protective factors against school dropout (a component of sociocultural adaptation) and negative self-esteem. Peer acceptance also promoted a positive general well-being in immigrant students.

In a study by Chen et al. (2020), peer-ethnic socialization in US middle schools has been shown to be a protective factor against discrimination, promoting better socioemotional outcomes, well-being, and school engagement. However, peer-ethnic socialization buffered discrimination effects and lowered depressive symptoms only in low-risk conditions, so that when discrimination experiences were more serious, the positive effect of peer support decreased. This is probably because in front of high-risk discrimination experiences, cultural socialization may not be enough, and adolescents may become more vigilant and sensitive to the negative treatment they receive. Wang and Benner (2016) confirmed these findings, reporting that peer socialization was related to fewer depressive symptoms and better academic adjustment for adolescents in the North American context.

In a meta-analytic review, Benner and Wang (2018) also revealed that stronger perceptions of racial/ethnic discrimination in cultural minorities were associated with higher levels of depressive and internalizing symptoms, increased psychological distress, diminished self-esteem, lower academic performance and involvement, reduced motivation for academics, heightened involvement in externalizing behaviors, risky sexual behaviors, and substance use, as well as a higher likelihood of associating with delinquent peers. Hence, peer-ethnic processes may be the cause and the remedy of depressive symptoms depending

on their valence; the relationship between this construct and psychological adaptation is complex and involves different variables.

Regarding the associations between cultural identity and psychological adaptation, research has demonstrated that a strong cultural identity is often related to better psychological adjustment. For example, Brance and colleagues (2023) published a meta-analytic study in which they demonstrated that high levels of social identity (including cultural identity) were related to lower depressive symptoms and anxiety. However, the relation was not very strong, and this effect was not consistent within all the examined studies. This is probably due to the "immigrant paradox" phenomenon, and to the wide variability of migration experiences that can influence people's well-being and cultural identity. Noteworthy, generational status was not an influential variable in this relation.

In a study by Cavdar et al. (2021) on second-generation Turkish adolescents in the UK, cultural identity was positively associated with positive mental health, in line with previous research showing that a stronger cultural identity facilitates self-confidence and abilities to cope with ethnicity-related stressors which, in turn, contribute to a better self-esteem and happiness (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2009). Furthermore, Cavdar et al.'s study (2021) delved into the various components of cultural identity (exploration, resolution, affirmation) and their distinct associations with life satisfaction, self-esteem, psychological well-being, and depression. Exploration, for instance, was found to be linked solely to life satisfaction. Affirmation, reflecting positive sentiments towards cultural identity, exhibited positive associations with self-esteem and psychological well-being, while displaying a negative

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relationship with depression. Identity resolution, on the other hand, was positively associated with self-esteem and psychological well-being, supporting previous research findings that connect resolution to positive socialization (Umaña-Taylor & Updegraff, 2007; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2013).

Cavdar and colleagues' (2021) study aligns with Berry's acculturation theory, demonstrating that a strong cultural identity is associated with better mental health in youth. This strong cultural identity also discourages the adoption of assimilation, which is linked to increased stress and depression (Berry and Kim, 1988 cited in Cavdar et al., 2021)

In a recent literature review, Balidemaj and Small (2019) have shown that cultural identity, acculturation, and mental health are all related one to another, affecting individuals and communities. More specifically, a stronger cultural identity was linked to greater acculturation levels which, in turn, were positively associated with increased psychological well-being.

Existing research suggests that cultural identity is positively associated with important outcome variables such as individuals' strategies for coping with discrimination and well-being (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). For instance, Santos and colleagues (2017) have outlined that peer support and alignment with peer cultural identity foster a positive self-concept and self-esteem, and thus a better general well-being. In addition, heritage and mainstream identity have been shown to mediate the link between peer cultural socialization and psychological adaptation outcomes: Vietze et al.'s study (2019) demonstrated that peers as

socialization agents helped promoting cultural identity, leading to positive adjustment and mental health. Similarly, Nelson et al. (2018) found that peer-ethnic socialization was positively related to cultural identity development - specifically in terms of preparation for bias and identity exploration - which, in turn, was related to better well-being.

In a study of Chinese American youth, Rivas-Drake et al. (2008) found that adolescents who perceived a more favorable cultural identity public regard from others reported fewer depressive symptoms. Moreover, when considering peer discrimination and cultural identity together, positive public regard acted as a protective factor for Chinese American youth against depression. The link between peer discrimination and depression was less pronounced when Chinese American youth reported higher levels of positive public regard. This finding contrasts with previous research on African American adolescents, where lower public regard was seen as potentially protective (Romero & Roberts, 2003) suggesting that a stable sense of group devaluation could reduce the impact of individual instances of discrimination on well-being. These results imply the need for further exploration of the connections between cultural identity, discrimination, and depression among middle school students, considering the context of adolescents' lives. In the same study, self-esteem was associated with higher levels of private regard, even if it did not act as a protective factor against peer discrimination and its negative psychological consequences for Chinese American youth, in contrast to what was found for Afro-American students.

Extant research has rarely studied these associations in terms of comparing youth based on their generational status. An exception is a study by Giuliani et al. (2018) on first and

second-generation Muslim migrants in Italy, who investigated the relationship among perceived discrimination, identity processes and psychological well-being. Results revealed that for second generation immigrants, perceived discrimination was linked to weakened national identity and heightened religious identification, which influenced their satisfaction with migration but not depression. Direct links between discrimination and psychological outcomes were found for both generations, with second-generation immigrants experiencing greater psychological impact. Factors contributing to these differences included exposure to discrimination experiences, linguistic competence, family ties, and generational conflicts among second-generation immigrants. The study also highlighted the intricate relationship between identity dimensions and their impact on well-being, emphasizing the importance of national identity for psychological well-being, especially among second-generation immigrants.

CHAPTER 3

THE STUDY

3.1 Aim of the study and research questions

The present thesis is part of a broader research project called "Identity Project" (IP), coordinated by Prof. Moscardino and PhD candidate Chiara Ceccon at the University of Padua (Italy), in collaboration with Prof. Umaña-Taylor from Harvard University (United States) and Prof. Maja Schachner from the Universität of Halle-Wittenberg (Germany). Specifically, the study is a randomized controlled trial with a waitlist control design aiming to assess the efficacy of a school-based intervention designed to promote cultural identity in adolescents from different ethnocultural backgrounds.

Using data collected at pretest (i.e., 1 week prior to implementation of the intervention), the present study aimed to compare cultural identity, peer-ethnic socialization, and psychological adaptation across first-generation, second-generation, and mainstream Italian adolescents, as well as to examine possible associations among these constructs in the three groups.

The following research questions were addressed:

1. *Are there any differences or similarities in cultural identity among Italian non-immigrant, first-generation, and second-generation immigrant students?*

Based on the available literature, immigrant (Erentaité et al., 2018; Sabatier, 2008) and generational status influence cultural identity development. In particular, the more recent the history of immigration, the higher the levels of cultural identity exploration, whereas second-generation immigrants seem to face more obstacles in their cultural identity development both in the North American context (Dizon et al., 2021; Erentaité et al., 2018; Ison et al., 2023; Sabatier, 2008) and in the European context (Ambrosini, 2019; Maliepaard et al., 2014; Salvini & Romaioli, 2016; Tirabassi, 2021). However, a study by Igarashi et al. (2019) did not find any effect of generational status on cultural identity formation, while Van Heelsum and Koomen (2016) demonstrated that second-generation immigrants in Western Europe showed higher resilience and national identity than their first-generation counterpart.

Even though all studies previously mentioned showed that immigrant status is linked to more cultural identity exploration, and that first-generation immigrants normally engage in a more active cultural identity exploration, there is no agreement on the role of generational status in cultural identity resolution. As a consequence, we expected that immigrant first-generation students would show greater levels of cultural identity exploration, followed by second-generation, and, lastly, non-immigrant students. Due to the mixed findings concerning cultural identity resolution, no hypothesis was made about the possible associations between immigrant and generational status and cultural identity resolution.

2. *Are there any differences and/or similarities in peer ethnic-racial processes among Italian non-immigrant, first-generation, and second-generation students?*

The literature on peer ethnic-racial processes is still limited and has mainly focused on the US. Several studies did not find any differences in peer-cultural socialization between first and second-generation immigrant youth, with researchers reporting that this construct was important for both groups (Kim, 2017; Wang, 2021). Regarding the negative components of peer-ethnic processes (discrimination, teasing, and victimization), the literature reports that people of immigrant origin often experience more episodes of discrimination, victimization, and teasing (Plenty & Jonson, 2017). In addition, it seems that negative interethnic relationships with peers are more frequent for first-generation (vs. second-generation) adolescents, especially as regards discrimination (Alvernini, 2019; Cavicchiolo, 2022; Plenty & Jonson, 2017). This result has been explained in terms of adaptation since second-generation youth tend to face fewer difficulties in adjusting in the host society.

On the basis of these results, we expected that non-immigrant students would report lower levels of discrimination, teasing, victimization, and cultural socialization compared to their immigrant-origin counterparts, and that first-generation youth would report more episodes of peer discrimination, teasing, and victimization than their second-generation peers. In addition, we expected that first-and second-generation adolescents would report more peer-ethnic socialization than their Italian, non-immigrant peers.

3. *Are there any differences and/or similarities in psychological adaptation (operationalized as self-esteem and depressive symptoms) among non-immigrant, first generation, and second-generation students?*

Research on this topic is controversial. While early studies about acculturation and psychological adaptation posited that acculturation and length of residence the host country are strongly related to better psychological adaptation (Berry, 2005; Garcia, 1996; Rumbaut, 1997; Ward, 1996), subsequent research did not confirm these results. In fact, more recent studies have found that first-generation immigrants normally experience fewer depressive symptoms and higher self-esteem than their non-immigrant counterpart (Espinosa, 2021; Mereish, 2016; Salas-Wright, 2014; Zhan, 2014). This can be explained via the "immigrant paradox" described in the US, which implies a higher motivation and life satisfaction among first-generation (vs. second-generation and mainstream) immigrants. This phenomenon has been explained by referring to the complex challenges that second-generation individuals have to face in the host society (i.e., conflicting identities and cultural values), which can lead to lower life satisfaction.

In the European context, findings related to the "immigrant paradox" are mixed, with some studies providing evidence for this phenomenon (e.g., Mood et al., 2016), and others failing to do so (Stevens et al., 2015).

Regarding the role of the generational status, the literature is scarce, and the studies previously presented showed opposite ideas: while first-generation may face greater challenges in the integration process, and thus have lower levels of life satisfaction (Koudier et al., 2014), it is also reasonable to postulate that second-generation individuals may feel more challenged and less psychologically satisfied due to the difficult integration of the host society culture and their family's one (Borraccino et al., 2018).

Given the mixed findings in the literature, no specific hypotheses were made in relation to the role of immigrant background and generational status in adolescents' self-esteem and depressive symptoms. However, based on previous empirical evidence reported in the Italian context, it was reasonable to expect that first-generation students of immigrant descent will show greater levels of psychological adaptation with respect to their second-generation counterpart (Borraccino et al., 2018).

4. *What are the associations among cultural identity, peer ethnic-racial processes, and psychological adaptation among Italian non-immigrant, first generation, and second-generation adolescents?*

Several studies have examined the relationships among these constructs, especially in the U.S. In this context, for example, there is evidence of a positive association between peer-ethnic socialization and support and cultural identity commitment and exploration in both first- and second-generation immigrants (Kende, 2021; Nelson et al., 2018: Santos et al., 2017; Wang, 2023). However, second generation immigrants may face more difficulties in exploring dual identities when facing peer discrimination with respect to first-generation immigrants (Kende, 2021).

Regarding the relationship between peer-ethnic racial processes and psychological adjustment, similar associations of these variables were reported among first- and second-generation immigrants (Bianchi, 2021). Specifically, studies have found that more peer-ethnic socialization was linked to fewer depressive symptoms and higher self-esteem,

whereas peer discrimination was associated with less psychological well-being (Bianchi, 2021; Wang & Benner, 2016, 2018). Research on the association between cultural identity and psychological adaptation suggests that a strong cultural identity is related to greater mental health. Like in the previous research question, it seems that first and second-generation migrants experience similar pathways (Balidemaj & Small, 2019; Brance et al., 2023; Cavdar et al., 2021; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2009).

In light of these findings, we expected that peer-ethnic socialization would be positively associated with cultural identity dimensions (exploration and resolution) and psychological well-being (self-esteem and low levels of depressive symptoms). Conversely, we hypothesized that peer teasing, victimization, and discrimination would be negatively associated with psychological well-being and cultural identity. In addition, we also expected that cultural identity would be positively associated with psychological adaptation. No specific hypothesis was made as regards possible differences across immigrant generations. However, based on previous studies suggesting that identity conflicts for second-generation immigrants may lead to a lower life satisfaction that is also related to more perceived discrimination (Giuliani et al. 2018), it was reasonable to expect that the associations among these variables would be stronger for second-generation youth.

3.2 Participants

Participants in the present study were recruited in three public high schools in the city of Padua (Veneto, Italy). A total of 720 students from 29 classes (24 ninth grades, 5 tenth grades) were invited to participate in the project. Of these, 96% returned informed consent signed by their parents. Nine students were subsequently excluded from the study due to certification of learning disabilities, while six were exempted from completing the survey due to language difficulties, although they still participated in the activities to ensure inclusivity. An additional 4 students were excluded from the analyses due to age reasons (one was 18 years old, 3 were 17 years old), and another 37 students did not complete large parts of the survey; hence, the final sample was composed of 635 participants who had complete data in the pre-test survey.

The average age of participants was 14.2 years (SD = .71, range= 13-16), with 53.4% identifying as female, 44.3% as male, and 2.4% as non-binary. Approximately 40.2% had an immigrant background, meaning that at least one parent was born abroad. Among immigrant-origin students, 78% were second-generation (born in Italy from at least one parent born abroad), while the remaining participants with an immigrant background were first generation (born abroad with at least one parent born abroad). The participants represented 41 countries of origin, with Romania (17%), Morocco (13%), Moldavia (10%), China (8%), and Albania (8%) being the most prevalent ones.

Regarding socioeconomic status (SES) as measured by the Family Affluence Scale (FAS; Boyce et al., 2006), the mean score was 6.9 ($SD = 1.8$, $range = 1$-9). In terms of parents' educational level, the majority had obtained a high school diploma (41% of fathers and 44% of mothers), 17% of fathers and 26% of mothers were university graduates, while 18% of fathers and 14% of mothers had obtained a middle school diploma.

Preliminary analyses indicated that participants with an immigrant background had a lower SES and were slightly older than their non-immigrant counterparts, $t(633) = 8.69$, $p = .004$ and $t(633) = -1.52$, $p < .001$, respectively. Moreover, there were fewer boys in the immigrant-origin compared to the Italian, non-immigrant group, $\chi^2 = 5.85$, $p = .016$.

Personally, I participated in all phases of data collection and intervention, including the distribution and collection of informed consents, the delivery of intervention sessions, and the administration of questionnaires both in the intervention group and the control group, with a total of 108 sessions.

3.3 Procedure

The Ethics Committee of the School of Psychology at the University of Padova granted approval for the study protocol and procedures (protocol number 3871). After establishing informal contacts with the schools, we obtained approval from relevant authorities, such as school principals and teachers. We also secured written informed consent from parents. Each

school had a designated teacher who coordinated the intervention schedule to align with existing activities.

Before starting the project, we provided information sheets to all recruited participants, outlining the study's purpose, data handling, protection measures, and their right to withdraw from the study without any consequences. These information sheets were available in multiple languages (Italian, English, Arabic, French, Portuguese, Chinese, and Spanish). Students were asked to take the brochure home and return it signed by their parents if they wished to participate. Additionally, we conducted a comprehensive online meeting with adolescents' parents, explaining the study procedures and sharing the results of the pilot study conducted in the past school year.

Following the pre-consultation and recruitment phase, classrooms were randomly assigned to either the intervention or waitlist control group. Students were unaware of their class's group assignment. For ethical reasons, all students eventually received intervention. However, those in the intervention group received it during the first semester, while their peers in the waitlist control group received the program during the second semester.

Data collection took place at four time points: One week before the intervention (pre-test, T1), one week after the intervention (post-test, T2), and approximately 6 weeks after the intervention (follow-up, T3).

The pre-test was administered to all participants (both intervention and control group) 1 week prior to the intervention to assess students' initial levels in the constructs of interest.

The survey included questions related to demographic information and individual psychological constructs.

After one week, the cycle of 8 sessions for the intervention group started, with each session scheduled a week apart over the span of two months. These sessions lasted one school hour (approximately 50 minutes) and were conducted by a team of facilitators (two per class), consisting of master's students and psychology interns who had received extensive prior training and regular supervision. The first session delved into the concept of identity in general, followed by the second session exploring stereotypes and the third focusing on discrimination. The fourth session was led by a linguistic-cultural mediator who elucidated their professional role, and the discussion also revolved around the link between language and identity. The fifth session centered on the topic of family, while the sixth delved into the theme of symbols. In the seventh session, participants were introduced to the journeys people undertake to explore their cultural identity. Lastly, the eighth session revisited all the topics covered throughout the curriculum by presenting the materials produced by the students themselves (see also Umaña-Taylor et al., 2018).

Each session began with revisiting previously covered subjects and the presentation of new topics through practical activities, which also included the utilization of multimedia supports (e.g., word clouds, videos, internet image search), engaging in small group discussions, reading stories, drawing family trees, conducting cultural interviews as assignments, and writing personal reflections at the end of each session.

One week after intervention end (T2), we newly administered the survey to all the involved classes. On this occasion, we collected the names of 6 volunteers from each intervention class for participating in a focus group meeting six weeks after the last session. During this meeting, students could share their thoughts about the experience. We also invited teachers to participate in a similar meeting online. In January 2022, a follow-up assessment (T3) took place in all classes and, starting from February 2022, the waitlist control group received the 8 sessions described above. After all participants concluded the sessions, a final assessment (T4) was conducted for all classes. Subsequently, focus groups were held for control group classes and teachers.

The survey consisted of an online questionnaire utilizing QualtricsXM and providing students with a QR code option. If requested, students could complete paper-based surveys, which accounted for 20.5% of the total sample. The surveys were administered during class hours in the presence of the facilitators and typically took approximately one hour to complete. To ensure participant anonymity, every student received a unique numeric code comprising the school's initials, the class-specific letter, and a unique number based on the alphabetical order in the class register. This identifier remained consistent throughout all surveys, except in cases of class membership changes, where it was updated according to the new alphabetical order. Prior to data collection, all field staff underwent thorough training; additionally, weekly online supervision meetings led by program coordinators were held to monitor progress and address any classroom-related issues.

3.4 Measures

In terms of quantitative tools, students were administered a battery of questionnaires assessing various constructs, including family socioeconomic status, cultural identity, cultural intelligence and intercultural competence, overall identity cohesion, self-esteem, depressive symptoms, peer-ethnic-racial processes, family ethnic socialization, and academic engagement. As for qualitative methods, separate focus groups were conducted with students and teachers to gather general feedback on the different sessions, the most engaging topics, and any potential modifications to the intervention.

For the purpose of this thesis, we considered sociodemographic information and questionnaires related to cultural identity, peer-ethnic-racial processes, depressive symptoms, and self-esteem.

- *Sociodemographic data*

In the final section of the questionnaire, students provided various sociodemographic information, which included age, gender, date and country of birth, years spent in Italy, spoken language, and details about their family, such as the number of cohabitants, the presence of siblings, their parents' country of birth, educational qualifications, and occupation. To analyze family socioeconomic status (SES), the FAS (Boyce et al., 2006) was used, consisting of four items: "Does your family have a car?" (0, 1, more than 1); "Do you have a room of your own at home?" (no, yes); "How often do you go on vacation with your family each year?" (never, 1 time, 2 times, more than 2 times); "How many computers do

you have at home?" (0, 1, 2, more than 2). The total score is obtained by summing the scores for each item: a score between 0 and 2 indicates low SES, a score between 3 and 5 indicates medium SES, and finally, a score between 6 and 9 indicates high SES.

Numerous studies have confirmed the reliability and validity of the scale, also with samples of adolescents from different cultures (Hobza et al., 2017; Kehoe & O'Hare, 2010; Lin, 2011; Liu et al., 2012).

- *Cultural Identity*

In this study, cultural identity was measured using the Ethnic Identity Scale (EIS) (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2004), which was translated into Italian using the translation-back-translation method by our research team. The EIS consists of 17 items divided into 3 subscales: Exploration (7 items, e.g., "I have had experiences related to my culture, such as eating typical foods, watching films, and listening to music from my cultural background"), Resolution (4 items, e.g., "I am aware of what my culture means to me"). Scores for items 1, 2, 7, 9, 10, 13, and 16 are reversed. Exploration refers to the extent to which individuals have explored their cultural identity; resolution pertains to the degree to which individuals have resolved the meaning of their cultural identity; and affirmation relates to the positive or negative feelings associated with one's cultural identity.

Participants are asked to respond to each item on a 4-point Likert scale, where 1 corresponds to "does not describe me at all" and 4 corresponds to "describes me very well"

(Umaña-Taylor et al., 2004). The final score is calculated by averaging the scores for each of the three subscales. In this study, we focused on the exploration and resolution subscales.

The good psychometric properties of the EIS have been confirmed by Umaña-Taylor and colleagues (2004). In this study, Cronbach's Alphas for students with and without a migration background were respectively .80 and .76 for exploration, and .75 and .79 for resolution.

- *Peer-ethnic-racial processes*

To analyze peer-ethnic-racial processes, an instrument developed by Wang (2021) was utilized. This scale assesses three negative dimensions (ethnic/racial teasing, discrimination, and victimization), along with three positive dimensions (cultural socialization, preparation for bias, and support against discrimination) with a total of 26 items adapted from prior research. Participants responded to each item on a three-point scale: 0 = never, 1 = sometimes, 2 = often. For coding purposes, we calculated the mean scores.

For this thesis, we considered one positive (i.e., cultural socialization) and all three negative dimensions. The ethnic-based teasing by peers comprised 4 items (e.g., "I was teased by other kids") from Douglass and colleagues' 2016 study on ethnic processes in the context of humor; ethnic discrimination was assessed with 5 items (e.g., "I was treated with less respect by other kids") taken from a daily discrimination assessment scale (Yip et al., 2019); for ethnic victimization there were 7 items (e.g., "Other kids stole things from me")

belonging to the Discriminatory Victimization Scale (Kim et al., 2011); finally, peer cultural socialization was assessed using 6 items (e.g., "[My friends] participate in activities specific to my cultural background") from the Cultural Socialization across Contexts Scale (Wang et al., 2015).

These measures have demonstrated reliability with McDonald's omega at both the intra-personal level (ωs = .81 to .86) and the inter-personal level (ωs = .97 - .99) (Geldhof et al., 2014). Additionally, their validity has been supported by prior studies that linked these measures to various aspects of adolescents' daily lives.

In our study, Cronbach's Alphas for the 4 subscales of teasing, discrimination, ethnic victimization, and cultural socialization were .83, .80, .81, and .63, respectively for non-immigrant students, and .85, .74, .80, and .79 for students of immigrant origin.

- *Self-esteem*

Self-esteem was measured by using Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale (RSES; Rosenberg, 1979) in the Italian version (Prezza et al., 1997). It consists of 10 items measuring global self-esteem, considering both positive (e.g., "In general, I am satisfied with myself") and negative (e.g., "Sometimes I feel completely worthless") feelings of individuals about one's self-concept. The scale, which was originally designed to measure self-esteem levels among high school students, is currently used with various groups (APA, 2006). Participants respond on a 4-point Likert scale, where 1 corresponds to "does not describe me at all" and 4 corresponds to "describes me very well". The scores of items 2, 5, 6, 8, and 9 are reverse-coded. The

scoring system involves summing the scores assigned to each of the 10 items, resulting in a total score ranging from 10 (low self-esteem) to 40 (high self-esteem).

Numerous studies have demonstrated the validity and reliability of the RSES, also among adolescents from diverse cultures (Amahazion, 2021; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2004). In the present study, Cronbach's alpha of the scale was .89 for immigrant-origin students, and .90 for non-immigrant youth.

- *Depressive symptoms*

Depressive symptoms were assessed using the Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (CES-D) (Radloff, 1977; Italian version by Fava, 1983) in its abbreviated form (CES-D-10; Andresen et al., 1994). In this version, the CES-D comprises 10 items categorized into 3 subscales: Somatic Symptoms (5 items, e.g., "I worried about things that usually don't worry me"), Negative Feelings (3 items, e.g., "I felt depressed"), and Positive Feelings (2 items, e.g., "I felt happy"). Participants are asked to respond to each item on a 4-point Likert scale, reflecting feelings experienced or behaviors exhibited in the past week, where 1 corresponds to "not at all" and 4 corresponds to "very much." The final score is computed by summing all item scores, with a possible range from 0-30.

Several studies have confirmed the validity and reliability of the CES-D-10 (Bradley et al., 2010; Kilburn et al., 2018), even in culturally diverse samples (Moscicki et al., 1989; Roosa et al., 1999; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2018). In the present study, Cronbach's Alpha for students with and without a migration background was .85.

3.5 Data Analysis

To address the research questions, the following analyses were conducted using SPSS statistical software (version 28.0.1.0):

- To assess possible similarities and/or differences among Italian non-immigrant, first-generation, and second-generation students in cultural identity, we conducted a multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA), including generational status (non-immigrants, first-generation, and second-generation students) as independent variable, gender and SES as control variables, and cultural identity exploration and resolution as dependent variables.

- In order to compare Italian non-immigrant, first-generation and second-generation students in peer-ethnic-racial processes, we conducted a multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA), considering generational status as independent variable, gender and SES as control variables, peer teasing, discrimination, victimization and cultural socialization as dependent variables.

- To assess any similarities and/or differences among the three groups of adolescents in self-esteem and depressive symptoms, we conducted two univariate analyses of covariance (ANCOVA) considering generational status as independent variable, gender and SES as control variables, and the total depressive symptoms and self-esteem scores as dependent variables in the two models.

- To assess the presence of any associations among the dimensions of cultural identity, peer-ethnic processes, and psychological adaptation (depressive symptoms and self-esteem), a correlational analysis was carried out separately in the three groups of adolescents using Pearson's coefficient.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

4.1 Descriptive statistics

This chapter presents the results of the data analysis carried out to answer the research questions. Descriptive statistics of the variables under investigation are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Mean, standard deviation, and range of study variables under investigation.

	Italian non-immigrant $n = 378$			1st generation $n = 57$			2nd generation $n = 198$		
	M	*SD*	*Range*	*M*	*SD*	*Range*	*M*	*SD*	*Range*
Cultural Identity									
Exploration	2.42	.61	1.14-4	2.8	.61	1.29-4	2.74	.64	1.14-4
Resolution	2.74	.67	1-4	3.17	.72	1-4	3.15	.67	1-4
Peer-ethnic processes									
Cultural Socialization	.61	.39	0-2	.76	.54	0-2	.61	.44	0-2
Teasing	.31	.44	0-2	.65	.59	0-2	.48	.52	0-2
Victimization	.22	.32	0-2	.48	.47	0-1.7	.3	.33	0-1.57
Discrimination	.42	.44	0-2	.68	.47	0-1.8	.53	.45	0-1.8
Self-esteem	26.95	6.67	10-40	26.63	7.02	12-40	27.43	6.91	10-40
Depressive symptoms	11.33	6.04	0-29	12.75	6.6	0-27	11.26	6.34	1-29

4.2 Group comparison

4.2.1 Cultural identity

The first research question aimed to investigate if there were any differences and/or similarities in cultural identity (specifically, in exploration and resolution) across the three groups of students based on their generational status.

At the multivariate level, the MANCOVA revealed a significant effect of generational status, Wilks' Lambda = .91, $F(2,632) = 15.5$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .05$. There were no significant effects of SES or gender.

At the univariate level, this effect concerned exploration, with $F(2,632) = 21.19$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .06$, and resolution, with $F(2,632) = 26.80$ $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .08$. Specifically, the Bonferroni post-hoc test showed that Italian non-immigrant youth had lower levels of both exploration and resolution than their immigrant-origin counterparts, with first-generation and second-generation students reporting similar levels of these variables (see Figures 1 and 2).

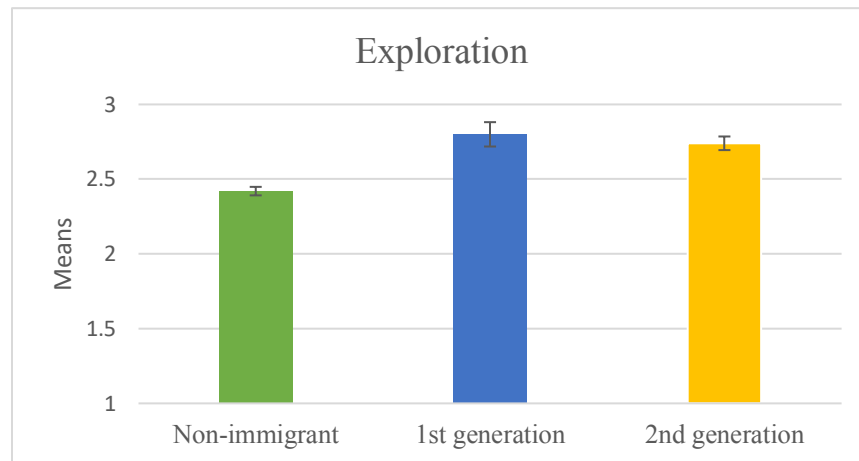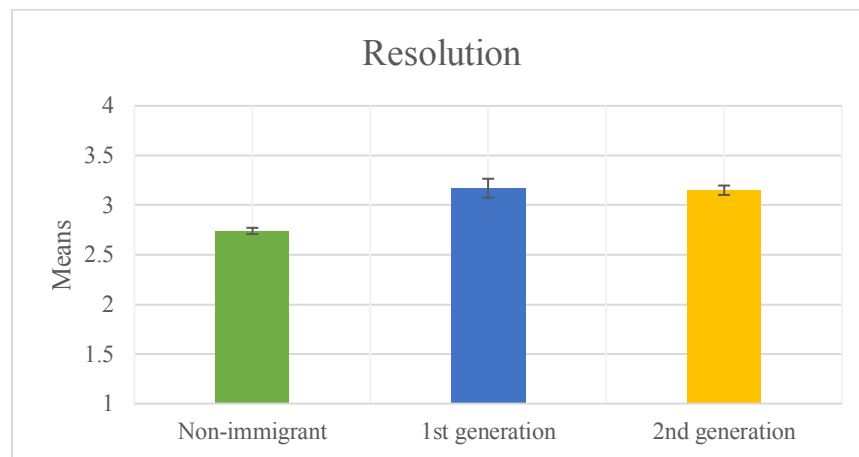**Figure 1**. Exploration in Italian non-immigrant, first-generation and second-generation students

Figure 2. Resolution in Italian non-immigrant, first-generation and second-generation students.

4.2.2 Peer-ethnic-racial processes

The second research question aimed to investigate if there were any differences and/or similarities across first-generation, second generation, and Italian non-immigrant students in peer-ethnic-racial processes, particularly as regards the subscales of teasing, discrimination, victimization, and cultural socialization, considering SES and gender as control variables.

At the multivariate level, the MANCOVA revealed a significant effect of generational status, Wilks' Lambda = .94, $F(2,633) = 6.151$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .04$. There were also significant effects of gender, Wilks' Lambda = .96, $F(2,633) = 6.141$, $p<.001$, $\eta^2_p = .04$ and of the interaction between gender and generational status, Wilks' Lambda = .97, $F(2,633) = 2.807$, $p<.004$, $\eta^2_p = .02$.

At the univariate level, the effect of generational status concerned teasing, $F(2, 633) = 2.54$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .04$, discrimination, $F(2, 633) = 40.95$, $p = .002$, $\eta^2_p = .02$, victimization, $F(2,633) = 14.88$, $p <.001$, $\eta^2_p = .045$, and cultural socialization, $F(2, 633) = 5.378$, $p = .005$, $\eta2\ p = .017$. Furthermore, the significant interaction effect of gender and generational status concerned victimization, $F(1,633) = .360$, $p = .014$ and $\eta^2_p = .014$, whereas no main effect of gender was found at the univariate level.

In Bonferroni post-hoc tests, teasing and discrimination were significantly higher in immigrant-origin vs Italian non-immigrant youth, with first-generation and second-generation students reporting similar scores (see Figures 3 and 4). In contrast, victimization was highest in first-generation adolescents, followed by their second-generation peers and by

Italian non-immigrant youth (see Figure 5). Furthermore, cultural socialization was higher among first-generation students compared to their Italian non-immigrant and second-generation counterparts, with the latter two groups showing similar levels of this variable (see Figure 6).

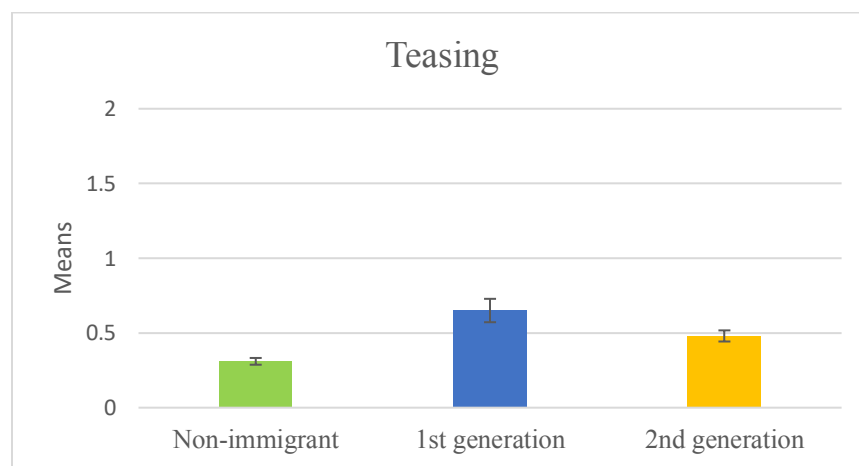**Figure 3**. Teasing in Italian non-immigrant, first-generation and second-generation students

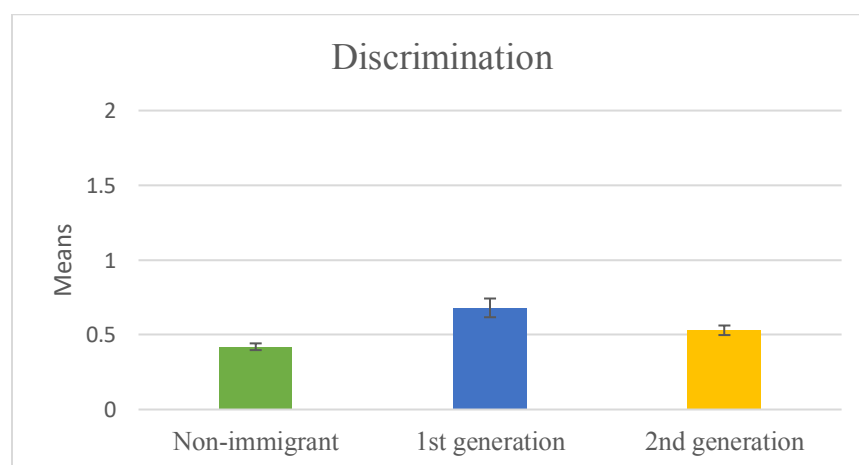**Figure 4**. Discrimination in Italian non-immigrant, first- and second-generation students

Figure 5. Victimization in Italian non-immigrant, first-generation and second-generation students
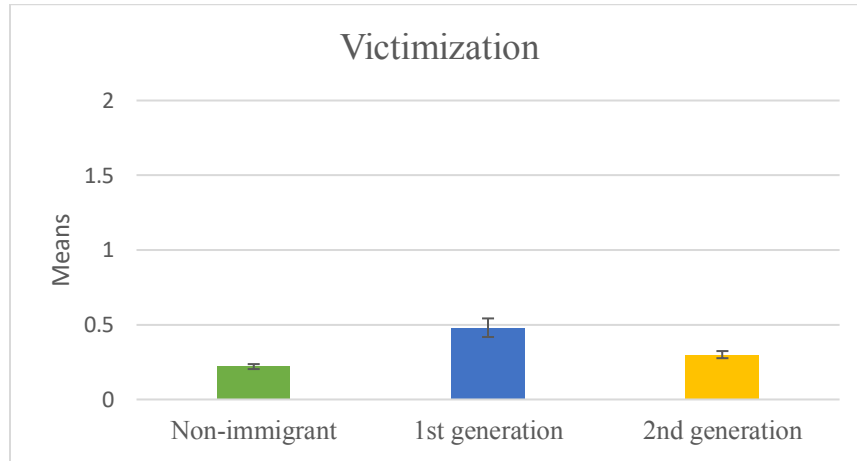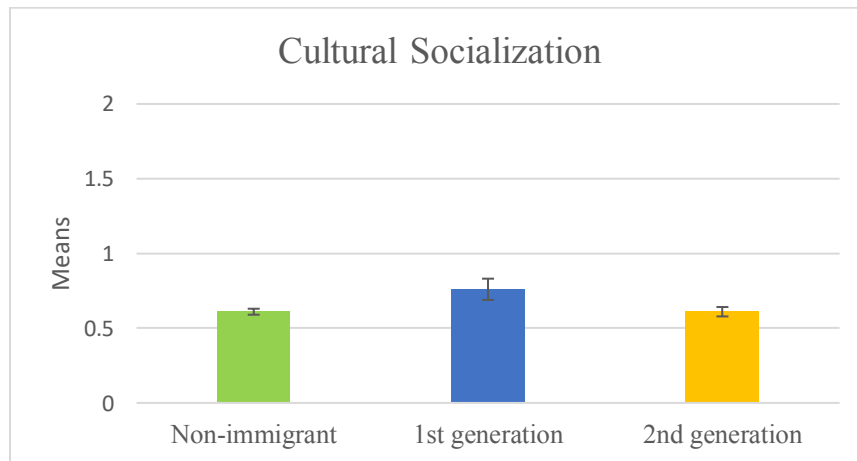

Figure 6. Cultural socialization in non-immigrant, first-generation and second-generation students of immigrant descent

As regards the interaction effect between gender and generational status on victimization, perceived victimization was more pronounced among first-generation adolescents of male (vs. female) gender (see Figure 7).

Figure 7. Interaction effect of gender and generational status on victimization
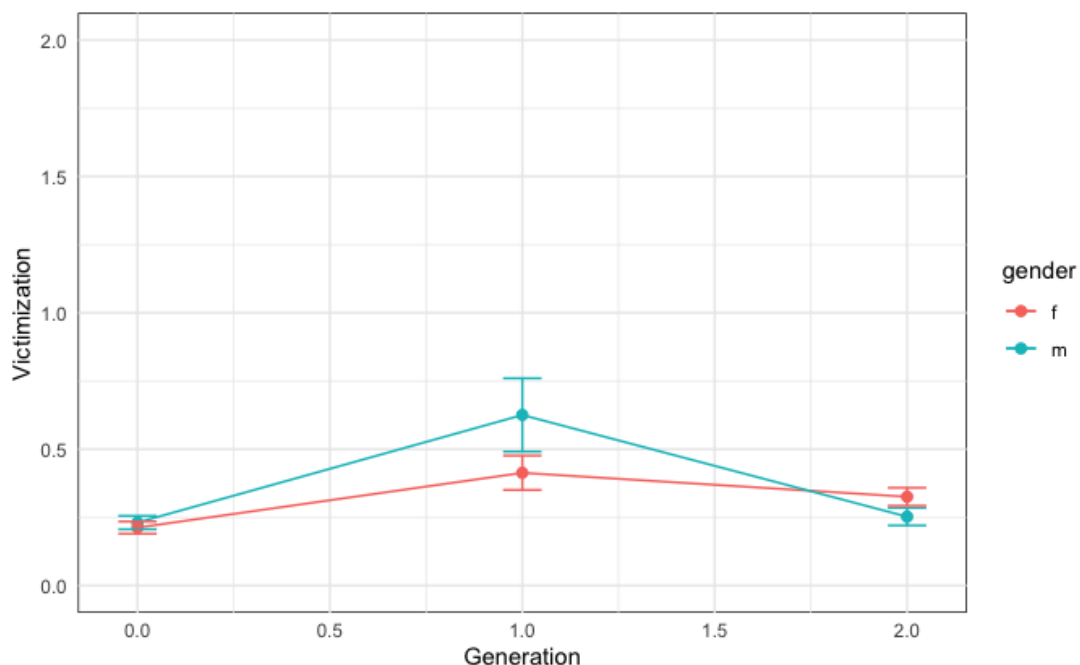

4.2.3 Psychological adaptation

The third research question aimed at evaluating if there were any differences or similarities across Italian non-immigrant, first-generation, and second-generation students in terms of psychological adaptation operationalized as self-esteem and depressive symptoms, taking both SES and gender into account.

Regarding self-esteem, the ANCOVA revealed no significant effect of generational status, with $F(2,633) = 2.02$, $p = .134$, $\eta^2_p = .006$. However, a gender effect emerged, with $F(1,633) = 31.90$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .048$. No significant effect of SES was observed. Hence, the three groups did not differ in levels of self-esteem (see Figure 8), whereas girls reported lower self-esteem than boys (irrespective of generational status).

Figure 8. Self-esteem in non-immigrant, first-generation and second-generation students of immigrant descent
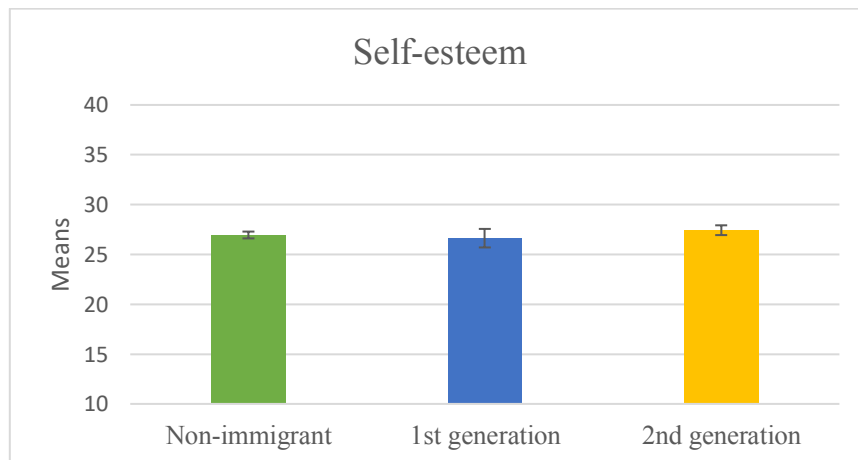
The same pattern was found for depressive symptoms, $F(2,633) = 1.426$, $p = .241$, $\eta^2_p = .005$; with gender showing a significant effect, $F(1,633) = 48.34$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_p = .072$. Specifically, the three groups reported similar levels of depressive symptoms (see Figure 9), and girls scored higher than boys on this variable.

Figure 9. Depressive symptoms in non-immigrant, first-generation and second-generation students of immigrant descent
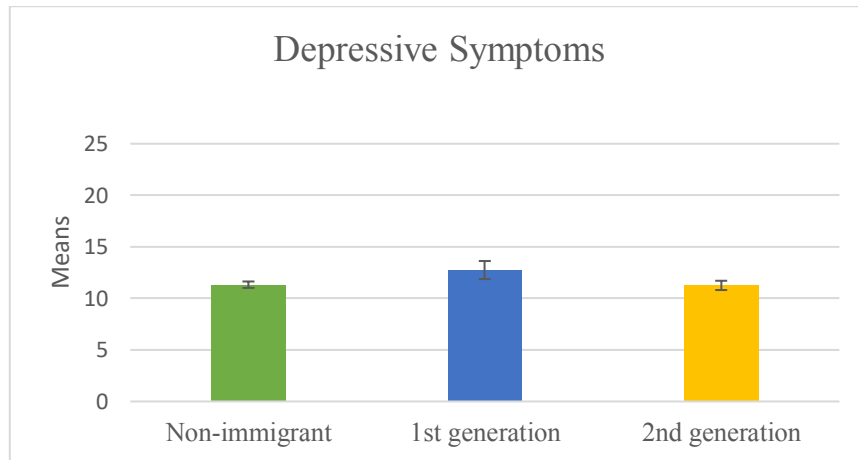
4.3 Associations among study variables

The fourth research question aimed at investigating if there were any associations among study variables in the three groups of adolescents. Results are reported in Table 2.

Table 2. Correlations among study variables in non-immigrant students and first- and second-generation students.

Italian non-immigrant (*n*=378)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Exploration	1							
2. Resolution	.461**	1						
3. Teasing	.031	-.070	1					
4. Discrimination	.070	-.083	.668**	1				
5. Victimization	.063	-.045	.611**	.705**	1			
6. Cultural socialization	.424**	.314**	.031	.075	.072	1		
7. Self-esteem	.104*	.244**	-.260**	-.239	-.210**	.070	1	
8. Depressive symptoms	-.104*	-.153**	.296**	.238**	.213**	.016	-.789**	1

1st generation (*n*= 57)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Exploration	1							
2. Resolution	.660**	1						
3. Teasing	.240	.095	1					
4. Discrimination	.160	.253	.620**	1				
5. Victimization	.285*	.120	.746**	.598**	1			
6. Cultural socialization	.539**	.393**	.147	.032	.249	1		
7. Self-esteem	.051	.230	-.225	-.281*	-.143	.332*	1	
8. Depressive symptoms	-.094	-.121	.188	.444**	.145	-.374**	-.720**	1

2nd generation (n= 198)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Exploration	1							
2. Resolution	.574**	1						
3. Teasing	.044	-.106	1					
4. Discrimination	.145*	-.062	.698**	1				
5. Victimization	.036	-.109	.706**	.684**	1			
6. Cultural socialization	.360**	.324**	.060	.091	.089	1		
7. Self-esteem	.007	.268**	-.240**	-.357**	-.283**	.037	1	
8. Depressive symptoms	.004	-.245**	.391**	.490**	.440**	-.011	-.710**	1

*p < .05; **p < .01

As shown in Table 2, cultural identity exploration was positively related to self-esteem and negatively related to depressive symptoms in the Italian non-immigrant group, while this correlation was not observable among immigrant-origin students. Resolution was positively related to self-esteem and negatively related to depressive symptoms in the Italian non-immigrant and in the second-generation group, but not among first-generation youth.

Regarding peer-ethnic racial processes, cultural identity exploration and resolution were significantly and positively associated with cultural socialization in all the three groups, but not with the negative dimensions. Moreover, higher exploration was associated with more victimization in first-generation adolescents, and with more discrimination in their second-generation counterparts.

Teasing, discrimination, and victimization were significantly associated with lower self-esteem and more depressive symptoms in all groups. In addition, cultural socialization was related to higher self-esteem and less depressive symptoms, but only in the first-generation group.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

5.1 General comment

The current thesis aimed to investigate the similarities and/or differences across Italian non-immigrant, first-generation, and second-generation adolescents of immigrant descent in cultural identity, peer-ethnic racial processes, and psychological adaptation. Moreover, we analyzed if there were any associations among these study variables separately for each group. To this end, survey data collected at the pre-test assessment was analyzed as part of the implementation of the Italian version of the Identity Project, a school-based intervention aimed at promoting cultural identity in adolescents attending multicultural classrooms (Ceccon et al., 2023; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2018).

The first research question addressed possible differences and/or similarities among the three groups (Italian non-immigrant, first-generation, and second-generation students of immigrant origin) in the dimensions of cultural identity exploration and resolution. For the first dimension, we hypothesized that first-generation students would have greater levels of exploration, followed by their second-generation counterparts, and, lastly, by their non-immigrant peers. Our results only partly confirmed this hypothesis, reporting significant differences between non-immigrant students and adolescents with migration background, with greater exploration in first-generation students, who reported similar levels of their second-generation counterpart. The literature has widely acknowledged and demonstrated

that the migration experience leads to greater levels of cultural identity exploration, as the approach to different cultures makes cultural differences with the surrounding world much more salient (Tartakowsky et al.,2009; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). Regarding generational status, it is possible that first-generation and second-generation youth differ in cultural identity content rather than processes, with immigrant background being more salient than generational status (Igarashi, 2019, Phinney, 1993ˌ Umaña Taylor et al., 2009).

With regard to the resolution dimension, no specific hypothesis was made because the literature reported mixed results, especially with regard to differences between first-and second-generation groups. As for exploration, our results showed significant differences between non-immigrant and immigrant students, with first- and second- generation reporting similar levels of cultural identity resolution. These results may be explained in light of the importance of cultural identity in defining one's own identity for ethnic minorities as well as the greater complexity of cultural identity formation for adolescents with a migration background, which leads them to question this construct in a more active way (Tartakowsky, 2009). As some researchers have suggested, immigrant status might be more salient than generation, leading to different, but equally significant processes of resolution and exploration (Igarashi, 2019).

The second research question aimed to explore the possible differences and or similarities across the three groups in ethnic-racial processes. Based on the literature findings, we expected to find a difference between Italian non-immigrant students and their first-and second-generation peers in the negative dimensions, with the highest levels for first-

generation students of immigrant background. Moreover, we anticipated to find similarities in cultural socialization results between first-and second-generation students, and a difference between these two groups and their Italian non-immigrant counterparts, with the latter group reporting the lowest levels of this variable.

Results demonstrated a significant difference in all negative dimensions between Italian non-immigrant youth and their immigrant-origin peers, who scored higher on teasing, discrimination, and victimization, as was hypothesized. These findings are in line with the extant literature, which indicates that being part of a minority group is a risk factor for being excluded and discriminated against by the majority group (Alvernini, 2019; Plenty & Jonson, 2017; Wang et al., 2021). Generational status was not significant for discrimination and teasing, with first-generation and second-generation adolescents reporting similar levels of these variables. However, the two groups differed in victimization, with first-generation youth being more victimized than their second-generation peers. This result can be explained in relation to the integration process: in fact, some studies have highlighted that the time spent in the host country may be a protective factor against victimization (Plenty & Jonson, 2017).

Regarding peer-cultural socialization, our analysis revealed a significant difference between Italian non-immigrant students and first-generation youth of immigrant descent, with the latter being more socialized in their peer context. This finding is attributable to the stronger link with the heritage culture observed among first generations of immigrants, who are closer to their traditions and engage more in maintaining them (e.g., Maliepaard et al.,

2014). Interestingly, second-generation students resembled their Italian non-immigrant peers in levels of peer ethnic socialization. This finding may be explained in terms of acculturation: second-generation adolescents tend to adopt the cultural values of the host society, therefore experiencing lower levels of cultural socialization with respect to their first-generation peers who personally experienced the migration process (e.g., Salvini & Romaioli, 2016; Van Heelsum, & Koomen, 2016).

Moreover, a significant interaction effect between gender and generational status was found on victimization, with first-generation adolescent boys experiencing more victimization with respect to their non-immigrant and second-generation counterparts. While previous research indicates that first-generation students tend to be more discriminated than their second-generation peers due to lower time passed in the host country, potential language barriers and lower familiarity with the hosting culture (e.g., Plenty & Jonsson, 2017), the gender difference is attributable to differences in acculturation patterns. For example, a study by Klein et al. (2020) has shown that among first-generation adolescents, girls more often showed an integration pattern, whereas boys more likely endorsed separation and marginalization.

The third research question aimed at investigating if there were any similarities and/or differences across Italian non-immigrant, first-generation and second-generation students of immigrant descent in self-esteem and depressive symptoms. No effect of generational status emerged for either dimension, partially supporting the "immigrant paradox". This unexpected finding might reflect the new multicultural school context as a protective factor

for both first- and second-generation individuals of immigrant descent in psychological adaptation (IDOS, 2022) and is consistent with Allport's Contact Hypothesis (1954) and other previously mentioned studies (Basilici et al., 2022; Graham, 2014; Schwarzenthal et al., 2017) according to which cultural diversity at school may increase psychological well-being and positive relationships. Indeed, our sample refers to the school context of Veneto, which houses a substantial proportion of students with immigrant background (65.3%) within the Italian context (Ministero dell'Istruzione, 2022a).

However, a significant effect of gender emerged, with girls faring less well than boys on both esteem and depressive symptoms irrespective of immigrant background (or generational status). This finding is consistent with prior research which explained this phenomenon in terms of hormonal factors, socio-cultural dimensions (such as gender roles and inequalities), greater vulnerability to depression, and greater tendencies of weight-image issues and body-related stressors for the female gender (Auberbach, 2011; Shorey et al., 2022; Westermann et al., 2009).

The fourth research question of this thesis aimed to explore the possible associations among the study variables in the three groups of adolescents. Mixed research findings did not allow us to make explicit hypotheses regarding generational status. However, we postulated different expectations depending on the specific association.

Regarding the association between peer cultural socialization and cultural identity dimensions, we expected to find a positive relation among these constructs in all groups. Our

results confirmed this hypothesis, proving the important role of peer cultural socialization in fostering cultural identity formation irrespective of migration and generational status. This finding is consistent with previous research and could be attributed to the concept of cultural identity co-regulation among peers, which has been found to enhance better problem-solving and collaborative cultural identity exploration in contexts involving cultural exchange and everyday cultural activities (Hoare, 2019; Kende et al., 2021; Nelson et al., 2018; Wang et al., 2023).

In addition, we hypothesized a negative association between peer teasing, discrimination, and victimization, and cultural identity dimensions (exploration and resolution). Our results revealed only two significant associations that contradicted our expectations. Specifically, we found a positive association between cultural identity exploration and victimization in the first-generation group, and a positive relation between cultural identity exploration and discrimination in the second-generation group. No significant associations were observed in the Italian sample. These findings can be understood in terms of acculturation and prejudice: it appears that individuals with a migration background who explore their original cultural identity may experience increased discrimination because of the consequent detachment from the hosting society culture (e.g., Benner et al., 2018). Nevertheless, it is also possible to interpret these results by considering exploration as a consequence of being discriminated against or victimized, as some researchers suggest (e.g., Kende et al., 2021). Indeed, it is possible that experiences of

discrimination or victimization prompt self-questioning and examination of the reasons for such treatment, ultimately leading to cultural identity exploration.

Concerning peer-ethnic racial processes and psychological adaptation, we found a significant association between the three negative dimensions (teasing, discrimination, victimization) of this construct and worse psychological adaptation in all groups (i.e., lower self-esteem and higher depressive symptoms), as we hypothesized. This finding is consistent with the existent literature and can be explained by referring to the emotional distress and feelings of inferiority that are related to experiences of discrimination, teasing, and victimization, which seems to be independent with respect to the migration and generational status (Benner & Wang, 2018; Chen et al., 2020; McKenney et al., 2006). Cultural socialization was expected to be positively related to better self-esteem and lower depressive symptoms. However, we only found this relation in the first-generation group, with no significant associations for the non-immigrant and second-generation peers. This result may be related to the effect of the migration experience and the stronger need for first-generation students of immigrant origin to talk about cultural practices with their peers.

Regarding cultural identity and psychological adaptation, we hypothesized to find a positive relation between these two constructs. The results only partly confirmed our hypothesis, showing that increased exploration was related to higher self-esteem and fewer depressive symptoms in the Italian non-immigrant group, while this association was not found in their first- and second-generation counterparts. This result may be explained in terms of the psychological costs of exploration since individuals with an immigrant

background normally need to face the challenges of integrating different cultures. Concerning resolution, we found a significant association between this dimension and a good psychological adaptation in the non-immigrant and second-generation groups, while no significant relation emerged for first-generation students. This result seems to support the idea that the identity formation process is different on the basis of generational status, and that gaining a clear sense of one's own identity may have a protective role in second-generation (vs. first generation) individuals of immigrant descent (Berry, 2003; 2006).

5.2 Limitations and future directions

Despite its strengths, the current study has several limitations that need to be considered when interpreting the results.

A first limitation pertains to the exclusive reliance on self-report instruments, which may be susceptible to biases due to fatigue, memory call, and social desirability. Future studies may include peer, teacher, or parent reports to confirm the results obtained through self-report instruments.

A second limitation concerns sample composition, as the proportion of first-generation students was limited (9%) if compared to second-generation (31%) and Italian non-immigrant youth (60%). Although these percentages reflect national statistics in relation to the immigrant-origin school population (ISTAT, 2022), further research should include more first-generation students to increase the robustness of results.

A third limitation regards the measure to assess peer-ethnic racial processes (Wang, 2021), which did not allow us to analyze the dimensions of preparation for bias and protection against mistrust. This was due to the fact that the first dimension consisted of only one item, whereas the three items on the second dimension were answered by a small proportion of students (25% of total sample). To address this limitation, it is desirable to develop an instrument that can more extensively investigate all dimensions of peer-ethnic-racial processes, as well as to administer the questionnaires in a more multicultural context.

Finally, the study was conducted in the Veneto region, which is characterized by high economic prosperity, high population density and a high share of immigrants (ISTAT, 2022). These characteristics may have influenced the results of the analysis. Furthermore, different nationalities were represented, preventing us from analyzing any nationality-based differences in our study variables due to lack of statistical power. Hence, replicating the study in other geographical contexts and with large ethnic minorities is warranted to increase the generalizability of results.

5.3 Conclusions and practical implications

The present thesis had the aim of comparing levels of cultural identity, peer-ethnic-racial processes, and psychological adaptation across Italian non-immigrant, first-generation, and second-generation adolescents of immigrant descent. The number of second-generation individuals is growing in Italy and other countries (ISTAT, 2022), but there is still a scarcity

of studies which explicitly explore the role of generational status in the selected study variables, especially in the European context.

The current study contributed to fill this gap, confirming that second generations face different challenges with respect to first-generation youth, as observed in the differences among groups found in our work. For instance, second-generation students of immigrant descent faced lower levels of victimization with respect to their first-generation and non-immigrant counterparts and reported less peer cultural socialization than their first-generation counterparts. Moreover, boys were particularly discriminated against when belonging to the first-generation group as part of a minority, while girls experienced a more constant level of victimization across groups.

Another contribution of this concerns peer-ethnic-racial processes, which is a relatively new construct that has not been widely studied in literature. This study confirmed the importance of peer cultural socialization in enhancing psychological adaptation, especially in the first-generation group of immigrant descent, as well as the role of peer negative relationships, which were related to negative psychological outcomes in all the study groups. In addition, this thesis confirmed the important role of peer-cultural socialization in enhancing both exploration and resolution of cultural identity, irrespective of the migration and generational status, and revealed two positive associations between cultural identity exploration and victimization for first-generation students, and between cultural identity exploration and discrimination for second-generation students. These findings may be considered in future research in order to better understand this complex relationship.

From a theoretical perspective, this thesis offers some additional support for the "immigrant paradox", since our results indicated that immigrant youth (both first- and second-generation) did not differ significantly from adolescents without an immigrant background in terms of depressive symptoms and self-esteem. Interestingly, our results revealed that higher cultural identity resolution was related to greater self-esteem and lower depressive symptoms in all groups except first-generation students of immigrant descent, revealing, once again, the different paths of cultural identity formation based on generational status. Further investigation is desirable in this field. A possible explanation can be related to acculturation, that may be the key protective factor that differentiates the two generations.

With regard to the applied implications of our results, it is desirable to take into account the different needs and experiences of the groups analyzed when considering psycho-educational interventions. For example, within the Identity Project, more activities related to peer relations could be proposed to foster peer culturalization for students with an immigrant background. Furthermore, teachers could be involved in psychoeducational activities and interventions to limit the damaging effects of the negative dimensions of inter-ethnic peer relations on psychological health.

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