Youths, Cultural Diversity, and Complex Thinking^

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Abstract: Most people support the idea that we live in a complex society and that complex evaluations and strategies are needed in order to effectively address most societal problems. However, little attention is generally paid to the degree of presence of complex thinking in youths' attitudes towards the most significant issues that characterize contemporary human societies. This paper presents a preliminary analysis of the relationship between youths' "complex thinking" and their evaluations of and attitudes towards one of these issues, namely cultural diversity. It examines some excerpts from anonymous open-ended essays on "multiculturalism" in Italy, recently written by pupils aged 14-18. The paper indicates that youths' low levels of complex thinking are often expressed through a prejudiced and basically negative representation of a multicultural society, and through a scarce awareness and a simplistic description of their personal and others' emotions related to this representation. It also indicates that high levels of complex thinking usually characterize youths' positive relationship with and thoughtful understanding of cultural diversity. The paper underlines the importance of fostering the development of high levels of complex thinking at the educational level, so as to strengthen youths' capability of building a more autonomous and complex outlook on their relationship with cultural diversity, and with diversity in general.

Keywords: Complex thinking, cultural diversity, education, multiculturalism, open-ended essays, youths.

"Complexity is situated at a point of departure for a richer, less mutilating action. I strongly believe that the less a thought is mutilating, the less it will mutilate human beings. We must remember the ravages that simplifying visions have caused, not only in the intellectual world, but in life. Much of the suffering of millions of beings results from the effects of fragmented and one-dimensional thought" [1] (p. 57).

INTRODUCTION

The present research examines the relationship between youths' "complex thinking" and their attitudes towards cultural diversity. The paper draws on a study conducted in an Italian secondary school in the year 2013, and analyzes some extracts from anonymous open-ended essays concerning multiculturalism, written by pupils' aged 14-18. This research work should constitute the first stage of a

deeper and larger study on the interconnections between complex thinking and the relationship with diversity.

Starting from Edgar Morin's [1] conceptualizations of "complex thinking", we especially analyze those components of "complex thinking" that are more relevant to our aim, namely *"multiple perspective-taking"* and *"emotional complexity"*.

The essays were analyzed through qualitative methods including textual analysis, discourse analysis, and content analysis [2, 3], and, more specifically, through the use of some distinctive categories. A few of these categories (e.g., *"concreteness"* and *"honesty"*) were elaborated in previous research of our group [4], while others (e.g., *"unity and multiplicity"* and *"emotional granularity"*) are more strictly related to the specific constituents of "complex thinking".

We will focus on some extracts that differ as far as "complexity" in the representations of cultural diversity is concerned. "Complexity" refers here to "the degree to which participants, in proportion to their age, […] appeared to be aware of the complexity of the issue itself (for example, by analyzing it in at least some of its many different facets, by making a sufficiently thorough and elaborate examination of it and by avoiding simplistic and stereotypical judgments)" [4] (p. 251). We will examine the relationship between complex thinking and attitudes towards cultural diversity among youths in Italy.

In particular, we will see that some psychological constituents of "complex thinking" are essential requisites

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for a constructive relationship with cultural diversity, permitting a more adequate, thorough and, on the whole, empathetically-oriented understanding of diversity itself. More specifically, when, in their conceptualizations of multiculturalism, youths indicate they are lacking in "complex thinking", they are likely to construct prejudiced and basically negative representations of cultural diversity through a generic use of stereotyped ideas and a scarce awareness and simplistic description of personal and others' emotions [5]. On the other hand, when, in their conceptualizations of multiculturalism, youths indicate they are rich in "complex thinking", they seem to be able to construct a more differentiated, accurate, and integrated representation of cultural diversity, in particular through a precise and refined description of their personal and others' emotions, as well as through an autonomous, self-reflective and critical elaboration of personal experiences and ideas.

FORMAL EDUCATION AND ATTITUDES TOWARDS CULTURAL DIVERSITY

Though our research aims to go beyond those studies that examine the relationship between formal education and ethnic prejudice, it may be useful to briefly refer to some of the studies that addressed this issue. Research on ethnic attitudes generally indicates a negative correlation between participants' level of formal education and their prejudice against ethnic minorities [6-8]. For example, in a study conducted by Wagner and Zick [8], the more highly educated respondents showed a lower rejection of the relevant minorities than did the less educated respondents. In these authors' research, formal education was used as a dichotomous variable: a participant's degree of formal education was considered "lower" if she/he had left school before 18 years of age, while it was considered "higher" if she/he had attended school after the age of 18. Besides, given the traditionally accepted connection of formal education with social class membership, Wagner and Zick also considered social class membership as a second independent variable. Their findings indicate that lower class members showed a higher rejection as compared to members of the middle and upper class. These authors also mention some social psychological variables, which might mediate the effect of formal education on prejudice, such as differences in cognitive abilities (e.g., associative flexibility, cognitive complexity, and verbal intelligence), self-esteem, degree of "group deprivation", conservatism, commitment to democratic norms of equality, and contact with foreign people.

A similar point of view was also expressed by Ezekiel [6] when he discussed his fieldwork with neo-Nazi and Klan leaders and followers. The neo-Nazi and Klan youths, whom this ethnographer periodically met and interviewed over a four years' period, were described by him as "poorly educated" (p. 64), as they had left school early. Among the followers he was knowledgeable about the school history of 16 of them: six had abandoned school in the 9th grade, three in the 10th, and four in the 11th. The three who had completed high school had attended a community college only for a semester or two.

A study on the relationship between level of formal education and stronger commitment to the democratic norm of tolerance was conducted by Jackman [7]. Her research findings indicated that: a) the well educated seemed to be more inclined to support relatively abstract and general principles of racial integration; b) no clear difference was found between the well educated and those with less education when support for government action to promote integration was considered. These results contribute to underlining the particularly complex nature of the relationship between formal education and non-prejudicial and democratic attitudes.

A NEW PERSPECTIVE IN THE STUDY OF YOUTHS' RELATIONSHIP WITH CULTURAL DIVERSITY

This paper proposes a more comprehensive analysis of youths' cognitive and emotional processes characterizing their attitudes towards cultural diversity.

Most people apparently support the idea that we live in a complex society, a point of view that at least in principle inevitably leads to the conviction that complex evaluations and strategies are needed in order to effectively address the various problems presented by society itself. In particular, in the light of the complexity of cross-cultural encounters in people's lives, there is a growing need to develop psychological skills that might help individuals to better orient themselves in the relationship with diversity. However, little attention is generally paid to the concrete role that some psychological processes, which are here described as the main constituents of "complex thinking", can play in understanding and responding to diversity in a more constructive and complex way. Instead, this perspective might be useful for many reasons. One of these would be that moral judgments that often accompany educators' analysis of youths' racist and violent beliefs and feelings could be enhanced by a more sophisticated critique where cognitive and emotional processes can be examined *per se* and in all their structural relationships.

In line with these considerations, our study aims to underline the importance of analyzing and understanding youths' conceptualizations and emotions regarding multiculturalism, especially on the basis of the presence of complex thinking that might characterize them. It also stresses the importance of fostering the development of complex thinking so as to strengthen youths' capability of building a more personal, autonomous, and complex outlook on their relationship with cultural diversity and with diversity in general.

"Multiculturalism" is usually referred to in its normative and political meaning, that is as the public recognition of cultural pluralism and as a set of policies and programs designed to promote tolerance and respect for group identities, particularly of immigrants and ethnic minorities [9]. Here the term is employed in its demographic and descriptive usage [10-11] to broadly indicate the changing composition of the population and the complexity of emergent forms of diversity in society, constituted by the interplay of different and overlapping ethnic, socio-economic and other cultural variables [4, 12].

COMPLEX THINKING AND COMPLEXITY THEORY

"Complex thinking" can be defined as the combination of certain cognitive and emotional processes through which individuals try to understand themselves, the others, the world and, in general, all the aspects of reality they may be interested in. These processes include, among others, "*self-awareness*", "*multiple perspective-taking*" [13-16], "*acceptance of uncertainty and incompleteness*" [1], "*openness to experience*", "*creativity*", and "*emotional complexity*" [17-19]. In this context, we will especially focus on three of these processes, namely "*multiple perspective-taking*", "*emotional complexity*", and "*self-awareness.*"

When "*multiple perspective-taking*" is at work, individuals try to identify, analyze, understand, distinguish, compare, and, in many cases, integrate the various perspectives through which an "object"[1] can be conceptualized. In particular, by "integration" we mean the awareness of the existence of different perspectives together with the awareness of the possibility of creating a new perspective, which is something more and beyond the sum of the different existing perspectives (the "emergent property" in complexity theory, see below). In fact, since "complexity is different from completion" [1] (p. 45), "*multiple perspective-taking*", as a constituent of complex thinking, can be accompanied by the recognition of the incompleteness even of the multiple perspectives considered and, therefore, by the awareness of the possibility of questioning, changing or even renouncing perspectives when they do not suffice to understand something new, unknown or apparently inexplicable.

Another important component of complex thinking is "*emotional complexity*" [17-19]. It refers not only to the quantity of emotions that pertain to an individual's conceptual system but also to the individual and intraindividual variations in the experience, and thus in the conceptualization, of a specific emotion. In particular, Lindquist & Barrett [19] argue that emotional complexity, which can be reliably examined and assessed through verbal reports, involves two specific aspects: dialecticism and granularity. Dialecticism refers to the presence of different, and mostly opposite (especially pleasant and unpleasant), emotions that are experienced as they relate to each other within an emotional episode. Emotional granularity refers to the ability to represent such experiences with accuracy. In this case, accuracy refers not only to the ability to distinguish a particular emotion from a wide range of emotions but also to represent this emotion in a refined, precise, and even "idiosyncratic" fashion. For example, people low in emotional granularity describe their emotional experiences in global and generic terms (e.g., angry, happy), whereas people higher in emotional granularity make use of more elaborated and precise terms [17]. In sum, emotional complexity can be defined, as suggested by Kang and Shaver [18], as having emotional experiences that are broad in range and well differentiated.

"*Self-awareness*" implies the understanding of one's own knowledge and emotions. It is clearly related to introspection. As will be discussed later in the paper, Morin [1] strongly underlines the importance of the "interior monologue" (p. 38), as a constituent of "complexity". In particular, in this context he mainly focuses on the awareness of the multiplicity of roles, identities, and personalities of each human being, on her/his "world of fantasies and dreams" (p. 38), and on her/his realization of "how little one knows oneself" (p. 38).

The definition of complex thinking provided at the beginning of this section inherently relates back to some of the main theses of complexity theory, a theory that was especially elaborated in such scientific fields like mathematics, biology, economics, physics, computer science, sociology, and organizational studies [20, 21]. For reasons of brevity, suffice it here to mention just a few of the basic concepts on which complexity theory is grounded, such as non-linear systems, networks, emergent properties, evolution, multiplicity of causes, time dimension, and antireductionism. Some of these concepts will be touched when analyzing the extracts from participants' open-ended essays.

METHODS

The present study was conducted in a high school in Rome. Anonymous open-ended essays were written and collected in 4 classes with pupils (N=79, 41 girls and 38 boys) ranging in age from 14 to 18. Participants were asked to indicate only their gender and were not requested to specify whether they were immigrant or Italian. Like in our previous studies [4, 22], some participants explicitly stated they were Italian, immigrant or with parents of mixed nationalities. Sometimes, when no explicit mention was made of their cultural background, it was possible to infer from the text whether a pupil was Italian or immigrant. It is worth mentioning here that in the last few years the number of immigrant pupils enrolled in Italian schools has considerably increased, with 9% in the 2011/2012 school year [23]. The participants' age could be inferred from the grades they were attending, as their essays were collected separately from each class. One of the authors illustrated the principal activities of the Institute of Cognitive Sciences and Technologies and the aim of the study to the pupils. Teachers were asked not to be present in order to avoid any kind of interference with the research work.

Each pupil received a brief note with the following instructions:

> *For a long time now, Italy has been inhabited not only by Italians but also by many immigrant [2]. We*

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1 By "object" we mean any element of reality that can be actually or potentially known.

2 It is important to point out that "immigrants" is the translation of "stranieri", the Italian term we used in this brief note. As a matter of fact "stranieri" has a slightly broader meaning than "immigrants", as it includes the meaning of "immigrants" but also the more general meaning of "foreigners", which in its turn includes tourists from abroad, immigrants (a category of foreign people usually associated with a low socio-economic class) and other foreign people working here from various, including high, socio-economic classes. However we can state that, as a general rule, for these pupils the word "stranieri" immediately and above all echoed the idea of immigrants.

are interested in what you think about this topic. Tell us about your experiences and the experiences of others, also referring to what happens both at school and in society in general.

Pupils were given 1 and 1/2 hours to complete their assignment. They were assured that their essays would not be read by their teachers nor be graded; they would not be judged for what and how they wrote, but that they should rather try to express their views and feelings freely. Besides, we told them that if they wanted to, they would be informed about the results of the research and that we could organize a new meeting with them for further discussion. As a matter of fact, we met each class some time afterwards and discussed with the pupils those points that seemed to be most relevant for them.

As said above, the methods used basically referred to principles of textual analysis, discourse analysis, and content analysis.

As in previous studies of our group [4, 22, 24], where some preliminary analyses from different perspectives were conducted on youths' attitudes towards multiculturalism, the analysis was especially focused on the implicit meaning of the texts. This includes beliefs and emotions that participants do not express directly but that can be inferred through a thorough examination not only of the content but also, and above all, of the structure and the form of the text. For example, when writing about immigration, some youths might explicitly want to present themselves in a favorable manner to avoid a negative judgment, and thus might make positive comments so as to demonstrate they are conforming to socially acceptable values. On the contrary, others might apparently rely on generic stereotypes, express indifferent or even racist attitudes and clearly state they are hostile to immigrants. At the same time these pupils might, indirectly, also reveal a personal profound vulnerability (this specific topic will be touched on later in this article), deep and more or less generalized feelings of fear, and a strong need to adhere to the beliefs of their ingroup. In other cases, the same pupils that manifest hostile attitudes toward immigrants, when considered as a general category, can at the same time express sincere interest in and sympathy for a specific immigrant, like a friend, a school-mate or an acquaintance, without being aware of the contradictions of their views and of the importance of trying to integrate these different attitudes.

The essays were analyzed through the use of some categories, the most relevant of which are: "*concreteness*", "*honesty*", "*unity and multiplicity*" and "*emotional granularity*". These categories are strictly related to the specific constituents of "complex thinking" (e. g., "*multiple perspective-taking*" and "*emotional complexity*") and are especially significant in order to evaluate, through the analysis of the content and of the structure of the texts, youths' level of positive relationship with cultural diversity and their level of complex thinking.

"*Concreteness*" indicates the extent to which participants make reference to specific direct or indirect experiences in support of their own argumentations [4]. It is clear that here "*concreteness*" has especially to do with personal involvement and creativity.

"*Honesty*" refers to the extent to which an argumentation is supported by a frank, sincere, and direct expression of personal views and attitudes [4].

"*Unity and multiplicity*" relates to the degree to which participants are able to extend their understanding of a situation by looking into its various elements and different perspectives, and to see the multiple relations among all these aspects. It also refers to the possibility of reaching a unifying integrated perspective, which is something more and beyond the sum of the different existing perspectives, as it was said above when the various constituents of complex thinking were discussed [1].

Finally, "*emotional granularity*" [17, 19], as already mentioned, refers to the extent to which participants identify and verbally describe various emotional experiences in precise and differentiated terms.

ANALYSIS OF SOME EXTRACTS FROM PARTICIPANTS' ESSAYS

In order to support our thesis regarding the relationship between complex thinking and understanding of diversity, some extracts from participants' essays are examined[3]. These extracts are especially interesting as they present different levels of complex thinking and different representations of cultural diversity. Different levels of complex thinking will be illustrated through reference to the above-mentioned categories (i.e., "*concreteness*", "*honesty*", "*unity and multiplicity*" and "*emotional granularity*"). Whereas the presence of complex thinking is expressed through a more differentiated, accurate, and integrated representation of cultural diversity and of personal and others' emotions, a relative lack of complex thinking is expressed through a prejudiced and generic representation of diversity and of personal and others' emotions.

The following extract is from an essay written by a 16-year-old girl, which is characterized by a scarce presence of complex thinking and a very scarce acceptance and understanding of immigrants. These lines will be analyzed especially through the use of two categories, namely "*unity and multiplicity*" and "*emotional granularity*":

> *I would start by saying that in my opinion every country must exclusively have its own people like Italy has the Italian people, Africans have their own homeland that is called Africa and America has Americans. All the time I hear in the news that illegal immigrants arrive at the Italian coasts I feel disgusted...*

The participant refers to a single perspective ("*every country must exclusively have its own people*") and to stereotyped and abstract ideas to express a deep sense of belonging to her ingroup, to account for her non-acceptance of cultural diversity and to justify her negative emotions

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3 In the quotations from participants' essays we did not eliminate spelling, grammatical, syntactic, and lexical mistakes or any other "idiosyncratic" element in the form and in the content of the texts.

towards immigrants. One of these stereotyped ideas consists in the belief that peoples such as Italians, Africans and Americans are homogeneous entities characterized by clear-cut cultural identities. This belief is all the more incorrect, given that Italians are actually characterized by a strong internal cultural diversity, as a student enrolled in an Italian secondary school should know well. Moreover, since both Africa and America are large continents characterized by strong internal cultural diversity, it follows that the idea of an "African people" or of an "American people" is, at the very least, bizarre. Besides, the girl seems to believe that homelands, which are abstract entities, have "natural" rights, namely the right to host a specific population, and consequently, by virtue of its birth in a certain territory, every "people" is the natural owner of its "homeland".

Within this perspective, the arrival of immigrants represents a threat to the ones who are supposed to own the country, thus following that immigrants should be necessarily rejected. This is also expressed by her emotional reactions, one of these being "disgust", as can be seen in the above quotation, another being "fear" ("to be assaulted and robbed" by immigrants), which she amply describes in other parts of her essay.

The experience of feeling disgusted –from Latin *dis* (expressing reversal) + *gustus* (taste)– recalls the experience of the infant or the small child when they are fed -a situation of dependence– and realize that the taste of the food that is given to them is awful and unacceptable. A frequent reaction on the part of the infant or of the child can be spitting it out, in few cases against the "caregiver", or, though very seldom, even vomiting it up. Feeling disgusted is thus a primeval emotional experience, especially if the infant has not yet fully conceptualized a representation of it. In these few lines and in the rest of her essay the girl does not explain or justify her use of the term "disgusted" in this context. Hence, it appears that she uses this term, which etymologically refers to a very specific physical emotion, to represent a broad and global negative emotional state, namely her strong hostility toward immigrants. According to Lindquist & Barrett [19], people who do so -that is, who can experience and communicate only the most general and broad aspects of their internal states and do it by using specific emotion terms- are low in granularity, which means that they are low in emotional complexity [17].

In sum, a relative lack of complex thinking is here expressed through the girl's uncritical reliance on a single perspective, based on external, stereotypical and scarcely personal ideas, and the simplistic and generic description of her emotional responses. In other words, she is not engaged in a thorough and accurate analysis of her thoughts and emotions regarding her relationship with culturally diverse people.

As Morin [1] points out, the "internal monologue", which he also calls "inner speech" or "constant talk" (p. 38), is a particularly distinctive characteristic of the complexity of a human being. This girl seems to be rather lacking in this introspective attitude. According to Kang and Shaver [18], individuals may become more capable of understanding others' emotions if they are used to identify, attentively consider and analyze their own emotions. Hence,

unavoidably, the girl's scarce tendency toward introspection strengthens her non-acceptance of immigrants, because she does not know them and is not interested in knowing them.

What is more, as said above, other lines in her essay clearly indicate that she is overwhelmed by a deep fear of being assaulted and robbed by immigrants, a fear that can be labeled as mostly "unjustified", as it is not grounded on real, concrete and verifiable circumstances [4, 5, 24, 25]. This fear can also partly explain the girl's deep sense of property, especially manifested in her words "[…] *every country must exclusively have its own people like Italy has the Italian people* […]". We are not able to know through which experiences she developed this strong tendency to feel fear. It is a fact that the competitive life pattern, now prevailing in our societies, certainly contributes to fuelling this emotion. In one way or another the competitive life pattern affects all interpersonal relationships, which means that in most cases people consider "the other" a rival, a competitor, an enemy, someone to be basically feared and who tries to overpower them and whom, in their turn, they may try to overpower [4, 5, 26].

Another essay, by a 15-year-old girl, expresses a refusal to understand other perspectives concerning cultural diversity, and presents an inaccurate and poor description of personal emotions. Her essay reveals that she does not accept "*other races*"; that, like the other girl, she feels "*disgusted*" by immigrants; and that, although someone may think she is wrong, she firmly believes in her opinions. This is a particularly important point in her argumentation:

> *I firmly believe in my opinions, someone may think that I am wrong, but I do not change my mind for sure. We are often like this because of the context we live in. All my family thinks this way, my parents, my uncles, my aunts, my relatives, and so after all I could not help but think the same way.*

It is interesting to point out here that in this essay the girl explicitly denies the possibility of change in the course of time. This attitude clearly contradicts some of the tenets of complexity theory, whereby a system – and in this girl's case the whole of her attitudes towards multiculturalism can be regarded as a system- is dynamic, transformational, open to different perspectives, and is characterized by emergent phenomena, and thus by the possibility of change [20].

Her opinions are described as the mirror of the opinions of her family and relatives. The doubt that her beliefs may be wrong surfaces when she insinuates the idea that her beliefs may be the product of the beliefs of her social milieu, with the consequent implication that they might be wrong: a perspective that she immediately discards. She affirms that she does not accept any other opinion different from her own, and that she is not interested in taking other perspectives into consideration and in exchanging opinions with people who think differently, since, according to her, trying to explain personal points of view would not make any sense. Elsewhere, in her essay she writes:

> *[…] I think that if I argued with who thinks differently, we would be saying all the time: I am right and you're wrong […], and in my opinion the conversation would have no more place nor sense.*

In this essay, "diversity" seems to be an occasion for competition, both with immigrants, in terms of socio-economic privileges, and with people who think differently, in terms of opinions and emotions. The girl's scarce accuracy in presenting her views and in describing her feelings, as well as her rejection of and disinterest in anything that is diverse from her, seem to be instrumental in safeguarding her from being defeated in this competition. A weak sense of the self and, in particular, a low self-confidence, implicitly expressed in her lines, indicate that her opinions mostly and forcibly rely on external sources, these being mostly her family and her relatives, but probably, though she does not refer to it, also a substantial portion of society. Underneath her apparent assertiveness, there seems to be a fragile understanding and acceptance of herself.

On the contrary, emotional complexity and capacity of multiple perspective-taking can be associated with a more elaborated understanding of cultural diversity and can be expressed by questioning stereotypical views on multiculturalism. This is well illustrated in other extracts by youths whose views and attitudes are characterized by the presence of complex thinking. The categories we will here especially refer to are "*unity and multiplicity*", "*emotional granularity*", "*concreteness*", and "*honesty*".

Questioning stereotypical beliefs on multiculturalism is expressed in the following excerpt by a boy of 14 who lives in Rome:

> As I came from a little town, I was scared and intrigued by a multi-ethnic city. I was scared by the rumors on immigrants and intrigued by the many cultures I was coming across. As I started living here I found out that the rumors were all wrong, instead the opposite was true.

The participant acknowledges he has been influenced by different perspectives. Through experience he also acknowledges that some of these perspectives are wrong and thus creates a new and personal perspective ("*the opposite was true*"). He even goes further on so that his perspective becomes even richer, more expanded and more complex. This is especially made possible by his including in it a definition of "stranger"[4] that he has autonomously and concretely elaborated:

> As I was born in a big city and then moved to a little town, the people there saw me as a stranger but then, as I came here people coming from other states became the strangers, I can say that the definition of stranger depends on the perspective from which someone sees the situation so I cannot express a real opinion on this subject.

The last sentence ("*so I cannot express a real opinion on this subject*"), which concludes the essay, constitutes a sort of climax. Indeed, through these words the boy implicitly indicates that the generally accepted concept of multiculturalism shows some signs of limitedness: as a matter of fact, the clear distinction between natives and

strangers becomes blurred, since in some circumstances natives can be considered strangers and strangers, in other circumstances, can be considered natives. Hence, in the end, he argues that he "*cannot express a real opinion on this subject*". Apparently this conclusion might sound as a failure. But it is not. It is the result of a new, higher level perspective, whereby, as we said above, the meanings conventionally attached to "natives" and "strangers" can be interchangeable. This new perspective is thus based on the recognition of the frequent incompleteness and incorrectness of common knowledge and on the awareness that opinions can change and that a certain amount of uncertainty should generally be accepted. When explaining the various phases of his views on immigrants, the boy directly and frankly (thus showing a high level of "*honesty*") reports his concrete experiences (thus showing a high level of "*concreteness*").

In the analysis of the essays collected on the occasion of this study, as well as in those collected in our previous studies [4, 22], it has been observed that, in describing their views and emotions regarding multiculturalism, many youths use a dichotomous and Manichaean language (e.g., "*good/bad*" and "*honest/dishonest*", referring to immigrants), interpreting multiculturalism in a dichotomous way (pros and cons of immigration, being against or in favor of multiculturalism). At times, a third category, namely "*bad and dishonest Italians*" as explicitly or implicitly opposed to "*good and honest Italians*", is introduced by participants in order to present their opinions in a desirable manner and try to manifest a form of acceptance of immigrants. This Manichaean language [27] reflects a socio-cultural context in which dichotomous forms of representation of reality and of linguistic expressions (*right/wrong, good/bad, honest/dishonest*) are common. These youths seem not to be aware of the complexity of the whole range of meanings between the two extremes of these dichotomies.

On the contrary, this boy is not interested in taking a side between being or not being in favor of immigration. He seems primarily interested in identifying himself as involved in the issue, and he does so in a very personal fashion, both as regards the content and the linguistic form. He describes his experience first in a little town and then in a big city, and identifies himself both as a stranger and as an autochthon depending on the context, as self and other, and finally as none of these. He also implicitly indicates that as an individual he is aware of the uniqueness of his ideas and emotions, and, accordingly, of his own diversity.

As we said above, his essay is characterized by a high degree of "*concreteness*". Focusing on his concrete experiences helps him to avoid stereotypes and to find out for himself the relativity and limitedness of the various points of view. In addition, the expression of his personal views in a frank and honest manner demonstrates his deep involvement in the issue. The participant seems to dialectically reason about his simultaneous opposite emotions ("*scared*" and "*intrigued*") by identifying, differentiating, and conceptually integrating both emotional states. The simultaneous presence of two opposite emotions indicates the presence of "dialecticism" [19], which is one of the fundamental characteristics of emotional complexity. The integration of these two opposite emotions is indicated by his

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4 Here, we decided to use the term "stranger" as a translation of the word "straniero", as we inferred that the term "straniero", as it was used by the boy, encompassed the meanings both of "stranger" and "foreigner".

envisaging the possibility of giving up a complete understanding of the issue on the basis of traditionally accepted categories, and by the acceptance of his inability to express a final opinion on the basis of these categories. His accurate and elaborated differentiation and description of his emotions contributes to underlining his acknowledgement of the complexity of the issue itself.

In sum, the boy's attitudes and ideas can be regarded as a "complex system" [21]. He is well aware of the importance of contexts (definitions can change depending on the context), and of the various interconnections of his emotions and beliefs in different periods of time (interconnections that support the idea of a network). And, above all, his considerations are topped off with a surprising concluding remark (the "emergent phenomenon") by the boy himself, according to which no clear view of the issue is possible at the moment, a remark which implicitly opens to potential new views and perspectives. It can be clearly seen that the boy's considerations echo some basic principles of complexity theory, such as the role of the environment, the evolutionary aspect of phenomena, the constantly interacting status of "agents" so as to form a network, and the surprising non-linear emergent properties exhibited by systems themselves [20, 21].

Another extract from a 16-year-old boy's essay also illustrates the participant's awareness of the complexity of the issue he is dealing with:

> How many times have I talked about this subject, about what is happening in Italy and in the world, how many other times have I discussed about that with other people, with friends, with my family and how many times have I changed my mind on this subject, many times.

This boy expresses a personal involvement in the issue and acknowledges the difficulty in having a single and unifying opinion and emotion about it. He describes the changes in his attitudes towards cultural diversity, from "*coming to blows with gypsies*" and "*singing stupid songs on niggers and Jews*" in the past, to "*not caring if someone is from another country*" and "*being indifferent to the issue*" in the present. He identifies his own transformations in relation to his attitudes, and confronts the internal obstacles encountered during this process ("*it's true when people say that everybody changes with time, but change is not always positive*"). In this sense, he demonstrates a high level of emotional complexity both by distinguishing his ambivalent emotions and contradictory attitudes and by regulating them through the awareness of his personal changes and diversity. Like in the previous 14-year-old boy's essay, also in this participant's essay the last sentence constitutes a sort of climax:

> I must tell you I do not care about what people are like on the outside but only about what they are like "inside".

Hence, in the end also this boy seems to have been able to elaborate a new and more personal perspective once he has discarded the old ones, which are associated with various phases of his psychological development.

CONCLUSION

These excerpts indicate that encouraging youths to address the issue of cultural diversity through a frank, honest, and deep self-reflection and the expression of intimate views and emotions, and not to rely only on generic ideas uncritically borrowed from external sources (e.g., television, adults, friends) or on generic descriptions of their and others' feelings, might help youths to reconsider personal attitudes and to understand their and others' diversity.

In fact, our study can help educators to be aware of the importance of fostering youths' development of complex thinking. In this way, youths will be more capable of building a more mature, complex, and autonomous relationship with cultural diversity and with diversity *tout court* [28].

In particular, the paper indicates that there is a relationship between levels of complex thinking (especially in terms of richness in "*multiple perspective-taking*", "*concreteness*", "*honesty*", and "*emotional complexity*") and greater complexity and understanding in the representation of cultural diversity. On the other hand, negative, stereotyped and prejudiced representations of cultural diversity are characterized by a relative lack of complex thinking (especially in terms of poverty in the parameters mentioned above).

In general, youths' opinions and emotions about cultural diversity do not merely mirror common stereotyped discourses [29]. Although stereotyped ideas of "cultures" and "ethnic groups" and their simplistic representations can be common in the dominant and more proximate vernacular (e.g., media, adults, families, and friends) youths are exposed to, there are also other communication channels on which they can rely. For instance, educational curricula in Italian schools usually include, among other things, more elaborated and detailed information about historical, geographical and cultural characteristics of different contexts and may help pupils to personally challenge some general assumptions about cultural diversity. Positive experiences with immigrant peers at school or in the neighborhood can help youths to develop a more positive relationship with cultural diversity in general. However, the tendency to easily internalize stereotyped ideas and, on the contrary, the capability to elaborate a more complex representation of diversity, are obviously also strictly related to the specific characteristics of these youths' personalities and to their personal experiences.

In the course of this paper it has often been referred to these youths' low tendency to introspection, scarce self-awareness, low degree of individuation, and proneness to be uncritically affected by the opinions and emotions pertaining to the social context they feel they belong to. This is perfectly in line with Ezekiel's discussion on his ethnographic fieldwork with neo-Nazi and Klan leaders and followers [6]. These youths' generally low degree of formal education has already been mentioned. Here, two more significant points in Ezekiel's analysis should be underlined. One relates to these youths' tendency to construct rigid, absolute, and usually erroneous categorizations of some aspects of reality. Often, the result is a sort of reification of

abstract concepts. In one of the extracts quoted above, written by a 16-year-old girl, a similar tendency was found. As said above, her words implicitly indicated that homelands, which are abstract constructions, are "natural" entities, endowed with "natural" rights, one of these being the right to host a specific population ("*Italy has the Italian people, Africans have their own homeland that is called Africa and America has Americans.*"). In Ezekiel's Nazi youths, not only the conceptual representation of "race" is erroneous, but it's the specific quality of its erroneousness that deserves particular attention, in that race is considered as something "real", "natural", and "undisputable." In sum, to use Ezekiel's words, "Race is seen [by these youths] in 19th century terms: race as a biological category with absolute boundaries, each race having a different essence –just as a rock is a rock and a tree is a tree, a White is a White and a Black is a Black." (p. 53) It goes without saying that this particular cognitive attitude, characterized as it is by authoritarian, dogmatic, and unscientific connotations, is antipodal to complex thinking, which substantially lies in sophisticated cognitive strategies, in multiple perspective-taking, in the acceptance of a certain degree of uncertainty and incompleteness, in creativity, and in openness to experience.

Since emotional complexity is another essential constituent of complex thinking, it is particularly important to refer to some of Ezekiel's comments on the emotional aspects of Nazi youths' attitudes. The core of these aspects is constituted by fear and a feeling of vulnerability. We may remember that fear was also clearly present in the 16-year-old girl's essay. Ezekiel's words offer an incisive description of Nazi youths' emotional life:

> *Very early in the interviewing, I sensed an underlying theme of fear. At an unspoken but deep level, the members seemed to feel extremely vulnerable, that their lives might be snuffed out at any time like a match flame in the wind* (p. 58).

It is important to point out that they do not seem to be aware of these emotions, as also Ezekiel suggests ("At an unspoken, but deep level"). This supports our thesis of the presence of a low level of self-awareness and emotional granularity in these youths. Ezekiel himself indirectly reinforces our point, especially when he describes their world as "impoverished of half the range of human feeling and thought – like the Army, like prison" (p. 57), characterized as it is by "*spiritual poverty*" (p. 62, in italics in the original text). The idea of these youths' "shaky-self image" (p. 63) vividly synthesizes the poverty and limitedness of their cognitive and emotional processes.

Also the 15-year-old girl, who states she refuses to discuss with those that think differently from her, seems to be extremely vulnerable and fearful. Not only does she fear immigrants but also any kind of confrontation with people who do not share her views as if they might threaten her, probably shaky, self-image. It is clear that these youths' psychological characteristics negatively affect the potential accuracy through which they might describe their relationship with cultural diversity, and negatively influence their interest in, and acceptance of, diversity in general.

Creating a space in the school in which youths can freely talk with adults about themselves, their attitudes toward, and their emotional experiences related to, cultural diversity, would help educators to better understand youths' conceptualizations and emotional experiences [4].

In this sense, we concur with Ezekiel [6] when he argues that education about racism should take into consideration those conceptualizations and emotions about race that pupils bring with them from their own lives into the classroom:

> *I would suggest that education about racism should begin with respect for the constructs and emotions that the students bring with them into the classroom. The students have ideas and emotions about race that are the product of their own lives. They have heard their parents, their neighbors, and their friends, and they have had their own experiences. To ignore their emotions and constructs around race is to ignore the sense that they make of their own experiences* [6] (pp. 65-66).

But creating such a space would help students as well so as to become more self-aware and in particular more aware of their own and others' diversity.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors confirm that this article content has no conflicts of interest.

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