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**The Language of Adolescents in Depicting Migrants**

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### **Abstract**

This study ( $N = 161$  Italian adolescents attending 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grade of secondary school) investigated how adolescents linguistically portray migrants. Over a year and a half, the study considered whether positive factors known to reduce social discrimination – i.e., multiple categorization of migrants and/or the degree of identification with the human group – are associated with relatively unbiased linguistic descriptions of migrants. The coding system had three categories of terms referring to the outgroup: generalized/categorical definitions, individuating piecemeal information or membership in the human group. We found that adolescents who used multiple categorizations to describe migrants and self-identified with the human group (at T1) also linguistically described migrants in human and individuating terms (at T2). The findings are discussed underlying the implications of defying the self and outgroups in multiple complex ways through language, as an ecological means used by adolescents to communicate their views of others.

### **Keywords**

inclusive language, intergroup biased language, multiple categorization, identification with the human group, adolescents

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Migrants are a crucial issue for governments and society (International Organization for Migration, 2022). Wars, economic crises, and political or ethnic persecutions are frequent reasons for people to flee their country of origin, but recently we have witnessed a worldwide call to raise barriers against “foreigners” and defend our nations against migrants (Annan, 2006). These representations of migrants are created by language, as a fundamental tool for “construing reality” (Rubini et al., 2014; Semin, 2000). Language forms the basis of communication and is coupled with social cognition (Semin, 2000). Given this fundamental role of language, it is worth investigating how minority groups such as migrants are described by adolescents who form the next generation that can help build more inclusive societies. Our study analyzes the language that adolescents use to describe migrants by focusing on factors – such as multiple categorization of groups (Crisp & Hewstone, 2007) and identification with the human group (Albarello & Rubini, 2012a) – that are known to play a potentially positive role in challenging prejudice and social discrimination. To achieve this aim, the Study considered multiple categorization of migrants and respondents’ identification with the human group (both assessed at T1) and their associations at a later time (T2) with linguistic descriptions of migrants that were freely formulated by adolescent respondents.

### **Developmental Accounts of Social Discrimination Tendencies**

Adolescence is a crucial stage, characterized by steady development in cognitive and social perspectives (Benish-Weisman et al., 2015). As they develop through this stage, adolescents acquire more sophisticated cognitive abilities (see Kuhn, 2009) that enable them to think in abstract terms and go beyond simplified dichotomous ingroup-outgroup categorizations in their perception of the self and others (cf. Aboud, 1988; Sani & Bennett, 2011). Specifically,

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developmental literature has stressed that social discrimination tendencies are already formed in early childhood, reach a peak in mid-childhood, and slightly decrease in late childhood (Raabe & Beelman, 2011) and early adolescence, as a consequence of individuals' steady development in cognitive and social perspectives (Benish-Weisman et al., 2015). Nonetheless, a recent meta-analysis (Crocetti et al., 2021) showed that prejudice against immigrants does not change significantly during adolescence, probably as the consequence of opposing trends in cognitive development and life experiences in this period. As social-cognitive developmental theory of prejudice (Aboud, 1988) maintains, increased cognitive competences coupled with greater powers of moral reasoning could reduce prejudice because adolescents move beyond dichotomous view of "Us vs. Them", have more complex views of their own and others' identities (Albarello, Crisp, & Rubini, 2018; Albarello, Crocetti, & Rubini, 2018; Knifsend & Juvonen, 2014) and are more likely to value diversity, tolerance, and equality (Rutland & Killen, 2015; van Zalk & Kerr, 2014). This has also been highlighted in the Intergroup Developmental Theory (Bigler & Liben, 2006) according to which children tend to attribute social meaning to categories that they perceive as contextually relevant (e.g., color of the skin, gender, ethnicity, etc.), as a consequence of being repeatedly exposed to adults' explicit linguistic label use. Along these lines, Bigler and Liben (1992) experimentally showed that children's use of rigid social categorization could be challenged by exposing them to unexpected categorical combinations. Their results highlighted that the adverse effects of dichotomous social categorization in leading to social discrimination could be reduced by training children to think in terms of more flexible unexpected category combinations (e.g., female mechanic). Relatedly, Albarello et al. (2020), focusing on adolescents, provided longitudinal evidence that adolescents' use of multiple categorization to define migrants was associated with lower prejudice towards them at a later time, which in turn led to their higher perceived inclusiveness expressed in terms of high identification with the human group. Such developmental evidence suggests that the extent to

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which adolescents endorse complex views of self and others can affect the outcomes of intergroup relations. Recently, Bobba et al. (2022), in another longitudinal study, examined the development of affective and cognitive prejudice towards migrants by late adolescents and showed that cognitive prejudice slightly decreased over time, whereas affective prejudice remained stable. However, notwithstanding the importance of these findings, behavioral dimensions of prejudice, such as linguistic discrimination, remained neglected.

### **Challenging Social Discrimination and Intergroup Biased Language**

Social psychological research has repeatedly shown that complex social categorization, such as *multiple categorization* or inclusive *common ingroups* (e.g., Crisp & Hewstone, 2007; Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000; Prati et al., 2021) can discourage social discrimination tendencies.

#### *Multiple Categorization*

Multiple categorization, as using more than four categorical dimensions to define others (Crisp & Hewstone, 2007), is a powerful social cognitive device that can reduce social cognitive biases towards outgroups. There is consistent evidence that when people use multiple categorical dimensions to speak of others, category-oriented processes are no longer an efficient or meaningful way of making judgments and end up blurring intergroup boundaries and reducing intergroup discrimination (e.g., Prati et al., 2015). For instance, Albarello and Rubini (2012a; Albarello, Crisp, & Rubini, 2018) considered multiple categorization and common ingroup identity (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000) with the goal of increasing “optimizing factors in derailing dehumanization” (p. 876). They hypothesized

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that multiple categorization and human identity could form an optimizing factor in reducing dehumanization (i.e., the tendency to deny partial or full humanity to others; Albarello & Rubini, 2008; Haslam, 2006). Results showed that in the simple categorization condition, a Black target was dehumanized to a greater extent than a White one. Interestingly, dehumanization was lower in the multiple than simple categorization condition. The optimal condition for reducing dehumanization was the multiple and human categorization condition. Such evidence is particularly striking given the combination of multiple and human categorizations as a joint intervention for reducing discrimination and dehumanization.

Importantly, the process that underlies the effects of multiple categorization in reducing social discrimination is considered *decategorization* (i.e., perceiving the targets more as individuals than as group members; Prati et al., 2021), leading in turn to target individuation. That is, using more than four categories to define a target leads people not to rely anymore on categorical dichotomous ingroup-outgroup information, ending in decategorization and individuation of the target.

### *Identification with the Human Group*

Looking at others from a multiple categorization perspective reduces social discrimination and intergroup biases, but looking at the self in a complex way can also lead to decreased discrimination tendencies (Roccas & Brewer, 2002). Other contributions focused on *identification with the human group* as a psychological bond related to “the feelings of belonging, affiliation and correctness to a group, coupled with the sense of commonality with fellow ingroup members” (Miller et al. 2015, p. 340), that is, all other human beings.



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It has been shown that identification with the human group is positively associated with various attitudinal and behavioral outcomes such as less prejudice, and greater concern for human rights and global crises (McFarland et al., 2019). It is also negatively associated with right-wing authoritarianism (Altemeyer, 1981) and social dominance orientation (Sidanius & Pratto, 2001). Similarly, Albarello and Rubini (2012a) showed that when participants' human identification was salient and the target was portrayed in multiple categorization terms, he was dehumanized to the lowest extent.

Overall, the evidence reviewed so far shows that viewing self and others' in multiple terms does help to reduce prejudice and social discrimination. This is coherent with Turner et al.'s (1987) theory that the most abstract level of categorizing self and others as human beings hinders intergroup discrimination.

### **Language Use in Portraying Migrants**

Social psychological literature includes some contributions on the role of language in decreasing intergroup discrimination (e.g., Albarello & Rubini, 2018; Li & Hills, 2021; Rubini et al., 2007, 2017). Some studies analyzed the structural properties of language, such as linguistic abstraction (for an exception, see Li & Hills, 2021). Along this line, Prati et al. (2015) portrayed migrants in multiple categorization terms. Specifically, they addressed whether multiple ingroup categorizations (e.g., youngsters, students, without children, living in the same town, and of the same gender as the participants) reduced the abstraction of negative terms used to describe immigrants in contrast to simple outgroup categorization (i.e., immigrants). Results showed that multiple categorization of immigrants decreased the level of abstraction of the negative terms used, thus reducing outgroup linguistic derogation. Furthermore, the multiple versus single categorization

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effect on linguistic derogation toward immigrants was mediated by decategorization of immigrants and moderated by intergroup contact.

However, the studies addressing descriptions of outgroups such as migrants are very few (e.g., Block, 2010), and there is a need to understand what factors can lead to relatively unbiased depictions of this target group. This study aims to contribute to this neglected issue by examining adolescents, who – given their young age – have the vital role of helping to create more inclusive societies.

To pursue this goal, we referred to the model by Fiske and Neuberg (1990) that tackles how social impressions are formed based on a “continuum”. According to this model, the impressions are formed basically focusing on categorical information (e.g., gender, social class, age, ethnicity, etc.). Frequently, categorical information can be enough for one to form an impression (e.g., Albarello & Rubini, 2011; Albarello et al., 2017, 2019), but under other circumstances, the individual might be motivated to go beyond categorical information and focus on personalized details to reach a more accurate impression. If this is true, language – as the privileged means that mediates and influences social cognition (Rubini et al., 2014; Semin, 2000) – should reveal whether individuals hold generalized/categorical versus individuating impressions of a given target group.

Another way to arrive at definitions of self and others is the self-categorization theory (Turner et al., 1987), which states that individuals can define themselves (and, consequentially, also others) using three levels of self-categorization hierarchically organized in terms of abstraction: that is, the individual level based on personal characteristics, the social level based on group characteristics, and the most abstract human level based on human characteristics. The human level is thought to challenge the cognitive bases of intergroup differentiation/hostility that make use of the intermediate

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level of ingroup versus outgroup categorizations (Albarello, Crisp, & Rubini, 2018; Albarello & Rubini, 2008, 2012a, 2012b), thus dismissing the cognitive bases of intergroup biases and social discrimination tendencies.

In the light of the models reviewed in this section, it is plausible to expect that migrants can be portrayed in either categorical (i.e., generalized group membership definitions) or individuating terms (i.e., individuals, persons) or human terms (i.e., humans), and that this may depend on whether adolescents hold complex views of self and others in terms of adopting multiple categorization to define migrants or high identification with the human group.

### **The Current Study**

This study focused on free descriptions of migrants in order to examine biased or unbiased language, as an indicator of the behavioral component of prejudice, that is, intergroup biased language (Allport, 1954; Rubini et al., 2014) towards migrants, as a neglected component of prejudice in the adolescence literature. It focused on how adolescents define migrants in order to address the possible social consequences of their increased cognitive ability to develop complex views of self and others (Kuhn, 2009; van Zalk & Kerr, 2014), as reflected in verbal descriptions of migrants.

Considering the evidence by Albarello and Rubini (2012a; see also Albarello, Crisp & Rubini, 2018) that multiple categorization and multiple human categorization are the best optimal strategies to challenge dehumanization, the study focused on multiple categorization and identification with the human group as possible factors influencing linguistic descriptions of migrants.

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In order to go beyond the temporary effects of experimental manipulations, long-term associations between such definitions of self and others (i.e., multiple categorization; identification with the human group) and linguistic portrayals of migrants were assessed<sup>1</sup>.

At baseline (T1) participants rated how applicable multiple categorizations of migrants were and rated the extent to which they identified with the human group. One year and half a later (T2), they were asked to describe migrants freely. Their descriptions were coded in terms of whether they related to generalized/categorical terms versus decategorized/individuating terms or human terms.

Drawing on decategorization as the processes underlying the effects of multiple categorization on reduction of social discrimination (Crisp & Hewstone, 2007; Prati et al., 2021), and based on Fiske and Neuberg's (1990) continuum model of impression formation and Turner et al.'s (1987) self-categorization theory, we expected that the high rate of applicability of multiple categorization to migrants at T1 would be associated with individuating terms to describe them rather than generalized/categorical terms at T2 (*Hypothesis 1*). Moreover, in view of the evidence on the positive effects of identification with the human group (e.g., McFarland et al., 2019) and in the light of Turner et al.'s theory, we hypothesized that participants' identification with the human group at T1 would be associated with human terms rather than generalized/categorical terms to describe migrants at T2 (*Hypothesis 2*).

### **Method**

#### *Participants*

Participants were 161 Italian adolescents (62.42% females;  $M_{\text{age}} = 17.24$ ,  $SD_{\text{age}} = 0.75$ ) attending baseline secondary schools (i.e., 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades) in the North-East of Italy (i.e., in the region of Emilia-Romagna). Most participants (75.95%) came from two-parent

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families, 18.35% reported that their parents were separated or divorced, and 5.70% reported other family situations (e.g., one deceased parent). The educational level of adolescents' parents was heterogeneous: low (i.e., less than high school diploma) for 46.79% of fathers and 31.21% of mothers; medium (i.e., high school diploma) for 42.95% of fathers and 56.69% of mothers; and high (i.e., university degree) for 10.26% of fathers and 12.10% of mothers, respectively.

All adolescents in the sample participated in two waves of data collection. The percentage of responses was very high with only 2.17% of missing data on any study item. The results of Little's (1988) Missing Completely at Random (MCAR) test were non-significant,  $\chi^2(600) = 616, p = .317, \chi^2/df = 1.03$ , indicating that data were completely missing at random. Therefore, all participants were included in the analysis and for each informant we estimated missing data in SPSS using the EM procedure.

### *Procedure*

The Ethics Committee of the University of Bologna approved the study. Before initiating the research, we obtained permission from the school principal to administer a questionnaire during class time. Then, we contacted all adolescents attending the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades to present the study and ask for their active consent to participate. They received oral and written information about the study and were asked to sign the informed consent form. For minors, parental consent was also obtained (all contacted parents provided their active consent by signing the forms).

Data were collected at two time points. At T1, conducted in November 2016, all participants completed the same paper-and-pencil questionnaire in their classrooms, during school hours, in the presence of the researchers. All teachers were informed by the school (through a written digital circular) about the project and the scheduled time of data

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collection. They could then decide whether to remain in or leave the classroom during the questionnaire administration. Participation in the study was voluntary. Students could choose not to fill in the questionnaires and do other school activities instead.

At T2, conducted in May 2018, thus one year and a half after the first data collection, participants who were still in high school filled the questionnaire following the same procedure used for T1, while those who graduated in the meantime received by email a link to the online version of the questionnaire.

### *Measures*

*Multiple Categorization.* At T1, participants rated the extent to which four descriptions of migrants in terms of multiple categorization applied to the target group on a 5-point Likert type scale from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*) (e.g., “To what extent do you think that each of the following descriptions applies to migrants?”; a) “Migrants, males, fathers, old people, workers”; b) “Migrants, females, mothers, old people, workers”; c) “Migrants, males, sons, young people, students”; d) “Migrants, females, daughters, young people, students”). This scale was originally developed in Italian (Albarello et al., 2020). Relying on the definition of multiple categorization, each of the provided descriptions consisted in a string of five categorical dimensions (e.g., “Migrants, males, fathers, old people, workers”). Cronbach’s Alpha was .96.

*Identification with the Human Group.* At T1, to assess identification with the human group, the four-items identification with the human group scale (Albarello & Rubini, 2012a) was employed. Also this scale was originally developed in Italian. A sample item is: “I am like all human beings, irrespectively of ethnic, political, religious, social or ideological differences”. Participants rated the items on a 5-point Likert type scale from 1 (*completely false*) to 5 (*completely true*). Cronbach’s Alpha was .83.

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*Descriptions of Migrants.* At T2, drawing on Albarello and Rubini's (2015) procedure, participants were asked to describe the outgroup of migrants and were provided with an empty form to fill in. In order to help participants formulate the descriptions, two questions were also added. The questionnaire included the following statements: "Please focus on the group of migrants<sup>2</sup> and describe them in your own words. In their life, in general, what are their feelings? What do they think?" (see Albarello & Rubini, 2015).

Descriptions of migrants were coded by two independent coders, blind to the research aims, into three categories. In the light of Fiske and Neuberg's (1990) continuum model of impression formation and Turner et al.'s (1987) Self-Categorization Theory, they coded terms as pertaining to: a) decategorized/individuating descriptions (i.e., descriptions of migrants as people, individuals; e.g., "They are *persons* who choose to leave their country of origins" (italics added); "They are normal *persons* that are changing country"; "They are *individuals* like any others"); b) generalized/categorical descriptions (i.e., descriptions of migrants as belonging to a specific social group; e.g., "The *group of migrants* is a problem for our country and for the EU"; "Not all *migrants* are well-integrated within society"; "*Migrants*, coming to Italy, expect great things but then complain about what they get"; "Now Italy is owned by the *group of migrants*"; "*Migrants* produce wealth for the Italian nation"); c) human descriptions (i.e., descriptions of migrants as part of humanity just like everybody else; e.g., "They are *human beings*"; "*Humans*").

In order to form a clear concept of these three content categories, coders were invited to give examples distinguishing the three categories, before the coding phase. Within each description, each time a word could fit into one of these categories, a point was assigned to the category. Thus, points represented the frequency of use of each category of content. A cluster analysis was then performed on the frequency scores. When

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linguistic coding materials, intercoder agreement was high (Cohen's  $\kappa = .86$ ), and disagreement between coders was solved by discussion.

### Results

#### *Preliminary Results*

At T1, the mean score of applicability of multiple categorization to migrants ( $M = 3.34$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ ) was higher than the mid-point of the scale, as revealed by a one-sample  $t$ -test,  $t(160) = 4.29$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .338$ . Also the mean score of identification with the human group ( $M = 3.15$ ,  $SD = 0.91$ ) was higher than the mid-point of the scale,  $t(169) = 2.08$ ,  $p = .040$ ,  $\eta^2 = .164$ . This means that, overall, adolescents considered multiple categorizations as a plausible way to define migrants (Albarello et al., 2020) and they displayed high identification with the human group (cf. Albarello et al., 2020, 2021). Interestingly, these two scores were also positively correlated ( $r = .211$ ,  $p = .007$ ).

#### *Cluster Analysis*

To classify participants into different groups based on their use of decategorized/individuating, generalized/categorical or human descriptions the two-step clustering procedure suggested by Gore (2000), that combines the advantages of hierarchical and k-means clustering algorithms, was used. In the first step, a hierarchical cluster analysis was conducted on the standardized scores of each group of frequencies using Ward's method on squared Euclidian distances. In the second step, the initial cluster centers obtained in the hierarchical cluster analysis were used as non-random starting points in an iterative k-means clustering procedure.

A three-cluster solution in line with the theoretical background was selected. Each cluster includes participants who used a specific configuration of terms to describe



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migrants. The final clusters are displayed in Figure 1. Within each cluster, scores around the zero line indicate that the mean of terms is around the average yielded in the sample, whereas positive and negative scores indicate that the terms used deviate from the average, with more or less frequent use, respectively. Thus, individuals classified in each cluster can use all categories of terms, but they differ in their predominant frequency of use.

The first cluster consisted of 64 participants (39.8% of the sample) using mainly decategorized/individuating descriptions and, therefore, seeing migrants primarily as individuals. The second cluster included 86 respondents (53.4%) using mainly generalized/categorical descriptions and therefore viewing migrants primarily as outgroup members. The third cluster comprised 11 participants (6.8%) strongly formulating human descriptions and therefore seeing migrants mostly as human beings. Although one can argue that participants in this cluster and those in the second used generalized/categorical terms to a similar extent, what is more important is that the participants in the human cluster were the ones that used human terms the most and also used more human terms than decategorized/individualizing or generalized/categorical terms.

### **INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE**

#### *Multinomial Logistic Regression*

Multinomial logistic regression was performed to test whether applicability of multiple categorization (*hypothesis 1*) and identification with the human group (*hypothesis 2*) were associated with adolescents' language to define migrants one year and a half later. Hence, the dependent variable was a categorical variable with three levels, corresponding to the three cluster profiles (i.e., respondents who described migrants in individualizing, categorical, and human terms) obtained at T2 based on the predominance of

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decategorized/individuating, generalized/categorical, or human descriptions of migrants. In this analysis, a level of the categorical variable is contrasted with the other ones. Given the hypotheses of the study, the cluster profile of adolescents who described migrants as outgroup members was set as the group to be compared to the other two clusters separately. Thus, the results of multinomial logistic regression display two separate comparisons: the comparison between the group of participants mainly using decategorized/individuating terms in contrast to those using generalized/categorical terms, and the comparison between the group of participants mainly using human terms in contrast to those using generalized/categorical terms.

Results of the multivariate analysis indicated that overall the predictors explained a significant amount of variability in the outcome (Likelihood Ratio Test,  $\chi^2(4) = 23.66, p = .000$ ). The model reported a good fit, as indicated by non-significant results of the Pearson statistic,  $\chi^2(186) = 188.61, p = .433$ , and the Deviance,  $\chi^2(186) = 161.53, p = .902$ , testing whether the predicted values from the model differ significantly from the observed values (Field, 2014). Notably, likelihood ratio tests highlighted that both multiple categorization,  $\chi^2(2) = 6.54, p = .038$ , and identification with the human group,  $\chi^2(2) = 12.85, p = .002$ , were significant predictors of the participants' likelihood of being in one of the three linguistic groups one year and a half later.

### **INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE**

The results of the analysis (see Table 1) did not support *hypothesis 1*: that is, the use of multiple categorization to define migrants at T1 did not predict higher use of individualizing rather than categorical terms at T2, Wald  $\chi^2(1) = 0.00, p = .980$ . Conversely, results also showed that participants who rated higher applicability of multiple

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categorization at T1 were more likely to be classified at T2 in the group that described migrants as human beings than in the group that described migrants as outgroup members, Wald  $\chi^2(1) = 4.96, p = .026$ .

Additionally (see Table 1), adolescents with higher identification with the human group at T1 were more likely to be classified at T2 in the group that described migrants as individuals than in the group that described migrants as outgroup members, Wald  $\chi^2(1) = 5.47, p = .019$ . Most importantly, as expected (*hypothesis 2*), adolescents with higher levels of identification with the human group at T1 were more likely to be classified at T2 in the group that described migrants as human beings than in the group that described migrants as outgroup members, Wald  $\chi^2(1) = 8.46, p = .004$ .

### Discussion

This study addressed whether applicability of multiple categorization to migrants and the human identification of respondents at T1 were associated with the linguistic descriptions of migrants at T2. A cross-fertilization approach that combined adolescents' social and developmental perspectives was used, assuming that higher multiple categorization and higher identification of respondents with the human group would be associated with more inclusive language.

Findings showed that respondents' identification with the human group at T1 was associated to higher use of human terms rather than generalized/categorical ones at T2 (*Hypothesis 2*). Moreover, respondents who were highly identified with the human group used individuating terms in portraying migrants rather than categorical ones. Findings did not support the expected association between the applicability of multiple categorization to migrants and individuating terms in describing migrants (*Hypothesis 1*), but an association

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between the applicability of multiple categorization and human terms in the descriptions of migrants was shown. The lack of evidence to support *hypothesis 1* might be due to the fact that the effect of multiple categorization in eliciting individualized/decategorized impressions of migrants weakens over time, but its role in activating the human group might be more resistant over time. In other words, it could be that the individuating effect of multiple categorization vanishes over time due to a memory effect that tends to render the stored information more abstract (Semin & Smith, 1999). Nevertheless, it should be considered that choosing the human group implies acknowledging the full humanness of all its members yet being aware that this superordinate group includes very heterogeneous members (Prati et al., 2015). This is reflected in the association between the human identification of respondents at T1 and more personalized descriptions of migrants at T2.

### *Theoretical Implications*

Overall, the results of this study are noteworthy for various reasons. First, they show that adolescents can go beyond dichotomous social categorizations to define themselves and others in complex terms as those related to human belongingness (cf. Albarello et al., 2021; Crocetti et al., 2022).

Second, our results emphasize for the first time that it is crucial to consider target groups and the self in complex ways as simultaneous strategies to reduce social discrimination and intergroup biased language. If Albarello and Rubini (2012a) showed that the combination of multiple categorization of a target and human identity salience led to reduced dehumanization, in this study we were able to gather evidence that defining others in multiple terms as well as self-identifying with the human group lead to portraying the group of migrants – a group usually marginalized, stigmatized, and dehumanized – as

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worthy human beings. That is, those adolescents who were capable of thinking about migrants in terms of their multiple belongingness and identified with the human group to a high extent were those who consistently used human terms to define migrants a year and a half later. Research is needed to ascertain the underlying process by which considering others in the light of multiple categorization leads to attributing human belongingness to them. This could be due to the augmented cognitive capacity of adolescents to realize that differences rather than just similarities characterize human belongingness of people (cf. Albarello et al., 2020). More specifically, the evidence obtained on the association between applicability of multiple categorization and the later use of human terms is in line with that previously highlighted by Prati et al. (2021; see also Albarello et al., 2020), who stressed the “humanization power” that multiple categorization has.

Third, by contrast to the documented relative stability of prejudice in adolescents (Crocetti et al., 2021) and from studies addressing the effect of school context or other socialization agencies on adolescents’ prejudices and intergroup biases (Albarello et al., 2022; Eckstein et al., 2021; Miklikowska et al., 2019), these findings suggest that, by adopting effective social psychological strategies of inclusivity, biased language use can be challenged. This is particularly demonstrated by the fact that respondents provided “humanized” portrayals of migrants a year and a half after having assessed the applicability of multiple categorization and their human identification.

Fourth, the study goes more deeply into the relatively underexplored role of human identification (for exceptions, see McFarland et al., 2019), conceived as acceptance of different others within the human group (Albarello et al., 2020; Albarello & Rubini, 2022). Previous evidence from Albarello et al. (2021) showed that identification with the human group mediated the effects of identification with classmates and friends on how able

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adolescents felt to contribute positively to society (Keyes, 2005). This study adds that the extent to which adolescents identify with the human group leads them to develop inclusive portrayals of discriminated outgroups over time, with all this might entail in terms of how language shapes the attitudes and actual behaviors (e.g., acceptance or avoidance) towards them.

Overall, it is very noteworthy that the humanizing power of multiple categorization of others and human identification of the self is reflected in an ecological, natural medium like adolescents' free verbal expression. This can be conceived as a very good news given that language use derives from a personal and yet social property through which individuals and groups build their representation of the current world.

### *Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research*

Here we showed that positive factors such as the applicability of multiple categorization and identification with the human group are mirrored in adolescents' inclusive language use later.

It should however be acknowledged that the number of participants in each of the three clusters, depending on predominant use of individuating, generalized, or human terms to define migrants, varied considerably and those using human terms were limited. Regarding the limited number of participants in this cluster and the implications of the use of this content category, the evidence is nonetheless very informative. Even though one could argue that participants in this cluster and those in the categorical cluster used generalized terms to a similar extent, participants in the human cluster consistently adopted terms belonging to the human category the most (see Figure 1). However, further research

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is needed to tackle the process underlying the associations found a year and a half later. In particular, future studies might profitably consider mediating factors such as decategorization (cf. Prati et al., 2021).

As for the multiple categorization measure that we used (cf. Albarello et al., 2020), one might argue that the term “migrants” was consistently used in the multiple categorization descriptions of migrants, and that this might have led participants to agree that such definitions were suitable. It could be argued that we did not include a simple categorization measure of migrants as a control, but respondents had the opportunity to give low ratings on the answer scale if they thought that the definitions comprised in the measure assessing applicability of multiple categorization to migrants were not suitable to define the group. Moreover, variability in answers to each item was acceptable, as revealed by standard deviations. Future studies might examine these issues more closely and introduce the application of a simple category to migrants just as a control.

Additional studies should consider other factors that might affect the use of inclusive or generalized/categorical language towards stigmatized outgroups, besides those tackled in this contribution, and focus both on positive (e.g., positive contact with outgroupers; Allport, 1954; acknowledgment of human rights; Albarello, Crisp & Rubini, 2018) and detrimental (e.g., right-wing authoritarianism, Altemeyer, 1981; belief in a just world; Lerner, 1980) factors. For instance, examining the effects of contact on language use can be very useful, since we know that it leads to individuation (cf. Fiske & Neuberg, 1990) of outgroupers. Along the same lines, the combined effects of contact and human identification on language towards migrants still need to be examined. Drawing on the literature it is also possible to argue that the effects of multiple categorization on language towards migrants could be overridden by contact (cf. Prati et al., 2021). In addition, a

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thorough examination of the combined effects of multiple categorization, human identification, intergroup contact and intergroup biased language towards migrants might be particularly interesting, as it might provide useful insight for planning activities in the school context, the crucial domain where adolescents meet others different from themselves and shape attitudes towards outgroups (Eckstein et al., 2021; Miklikowska et al., 2019).

### **Conclusion**

Social cognitive resources such as the use of multiple categorization and identification with the human group emerged as positive factors that can, over time, help to change future societies and turn them into more inclusive communities. This contribution suggests that it is possible to “plant the seeds” of social inclusion in adolescents through the language that they, the next generation of adults, use. If language creates reality (Semin, 2000), it can also affect intergroup relations in a beneficial manner: Unbiased language use, that is, inclusive words are the foundation stones on which we can foster social inclusivity by going beyond simplification of categorical thinking -- expressed through intergroup biased language -- and shaping renewed relations with stigmatized outgroups.

Encouraging children and adolescents to use individuating terms instead of categorical ones might lead to unbiased perceptions of others (cf. Fiske & Neuberg, 1990). Also, promoting the use of human terms, and enhancing the salience of common human belongingness, will contribute to overcoming restricted intergroup barriers. If these propositional, deliberate linguistic processes become automatic – that is, associative (cf. Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006) – language use and communication will then transmit a renewed and more inclusive view of others by varying how outgroups are described by



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the young. Repeated communicative exchanges might thus change the perceptions of migrants; through language use, the views of others can be profoundly challenged.

**Notes**

1. A year and a half time lag was considered to examine how complex definitions of self and others at the beginning of one academic year are related to linguistic descriptions of migrants at the completion of the next. This time lag is considered appropriate to tackle the implications of definitions of self and others in intergroup views in a crucial phase of individual development (cf. Eckstein et al., 2021).
2. We focused on the group of migrants without specifying subgroups, given that in Italy biased political discourse and attitudes target this generalized group that comprises people with different nationalities, religions, or ethnic minorities (Campani, 2013).

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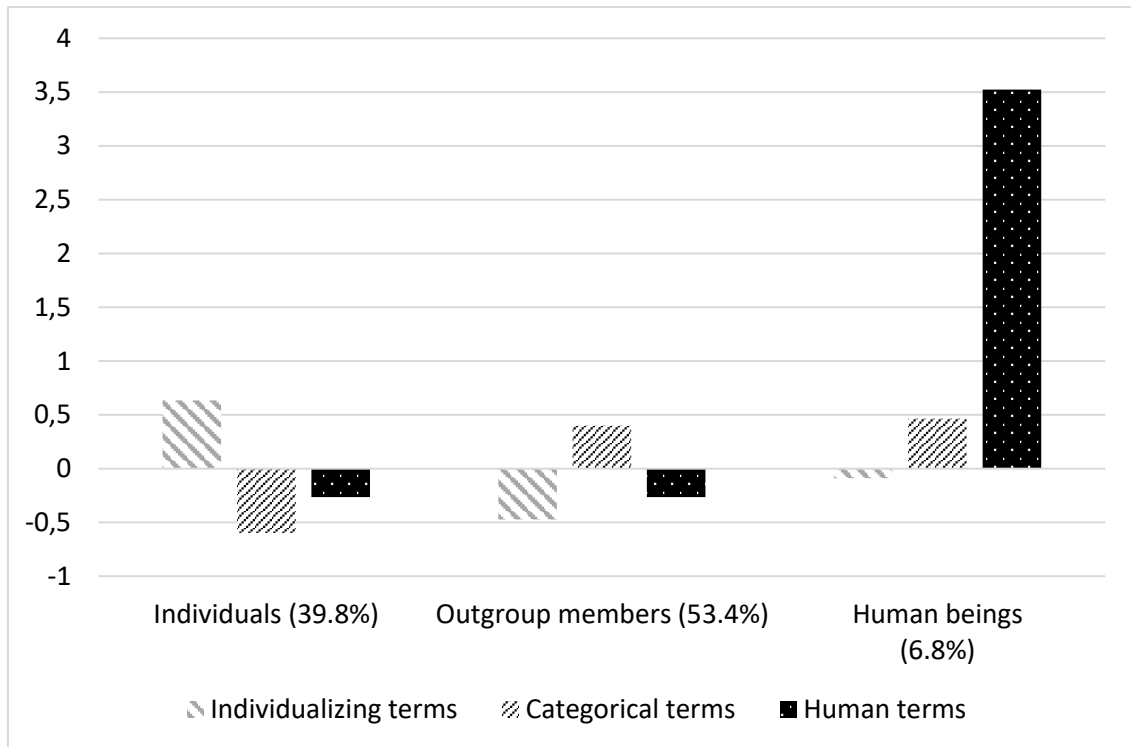
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**Table 1.** Results of Multinomial Logistic Regression

|   | Migrants described in<br>individuating terms vs.<br>Migrants described in<br>categorical terms at T2 |                      | Migrants described in<br>human terms vs.<br>Migrants described in<br>categorical terms at T2 |                      |
|---|--|----------------------|--|----------------------|
|   | <i>B (SE)</i>  | OR [95% CI]          | <i>B (SE)</i>  | OR [95% CI]          |
| Multiple<br>categorization<br>at T1             | 0.00<br>(0.18)   | 1.00<br>[0.71, 1.42] | 0.93*<br>(0.42)  | 2.52<br>[1.12, 5.69] |
| Identification<br>with the human<br>group at T1 | 0.47*<br>(0.20)  | 1.60<br>[1.08, 2.38] | 1.34**<br>(0.46)   | 3.83<br>[1.55, 9.45] |

*Note.* *SE*= standard error; OR = Odds ratio; CI = confidence interval.  $R^2 = .14$  (Cox & Snell), .16 (Nagelkerke). \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .



**Figure 1.** Z-Scores for migrants’ descriptions based on the three clusters (i.e., individuals, outgroup members, human beings)

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**Appendix: Extracts from Participants' Descriptions of Migrants***Individualizing Descriptions*

Participant#14: "First of all, a distinction has to be made: there's the person from whatever nation that migrates to Italy to attend university or because he/she had been offered a job by an Italian enterprise. That is a resource for the country, being well-educated and able. Then, there's the war or political refugee. He /she is a desperate person in need, and has the right to be protected and helped and supported."

Participant#15: "I believe they are normal persons with bad luck due to being born where they were born, who do not come to Italy for futile or criminal reasons, but because they have the real need to flee their country. In general, I do not know how they behave: there are good persons as well as those who perform crimes."

Participant#31: "They are persons that come to 'breathe fresh air', since in their country of origins life conditions are bad, but it is difficult for them to integrate."

*Categorical Descriptions*

Participant#5: "Migrants are exploiters, thieves, ignorant, unskilled, with too much claims."

Participant#40: "They are illegal immigrants, capable of dealing with challenges, but it should be better to bring them home."

Participant#7: "They are 'escapers' from their own country to find a certain degree of stability since there is a war or a tyranny in their country. For sure, there are migrants with differential personalities and abilities, as well as those who steal, etc. There are also those who have the strength and will to do things. Other ones instead expect that we have to help them and give them something to eat or a job while they complain. Other ones take advantage of the

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goodness of volunteers as those belonging to Caritas or 'friends' canteen' and often sell food bags or clothes they receive as a present."

*Humanizing Descriptions*

Participant#6: "Humans."

Participant#27: "In my opinion, they are like every human being, honest, criminals, not working, etc. honest or they do nothing or are criminals or good fellows."

Participant#37 "We are all human beings; they are like me."

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