THE LOCAL IDENTITY FUNCTIONS IN THE AGE OF GLOBALIZATION: A STUDY ON A LOCAL CULTURE

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Globalization and the spread of global culture coincide with the emergence of glocalization. Dialogical self theory maintains that globalization offers an increased number of others to which the ego can refer to define the self, while collective identity theory posits that it increases the potential number of ingroups and outgroups the self can identify with or distinguish itself from. The complexity of the dynamics of globalization for identity and culture, can lead to a fragmentation of self and identity , creating a need for stability often found in local identification. This qualitative study compared identity-building strategies between ordinary residents of four villages in the Western Italian Alps and active promoters of Occitan culture living in the same area. Thematic analysis of the interview transcripts revealed that the village residents rely on a deep but narrow sense of place to preserve their local identity and counteract self-fragmentation, whereas the promoters cultivate a broader interest in Occitan identity and self-perception to advance different political goals. The results highlight the different functions of local identities in the globalized world.

***Keyword**s: local identity, social identity, dialogical self theory, insecurity, globalization, community.*

1.   Globalization and localization: the increasing significance of local identities

Historically, the roots of globalization run deep. Since the beginning of human culture, people have moved in search of new opportunities and the meeting of different people and cultures provoked a mix and a standardization of customs and values. Under the Roman Empire, for example, various different populations were united by the same system of government that gave them a common language, currency, and laws. Much of this cultural heritage forms the backbone of Western culture today. Progress in transportation and communications gradually allowed for

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the formation of larger cultural and political entities, such as the British Empire, which in the nineteenth century became a global empire. The transformations of the last century have dramatically increased the speed of globalization. For example, technological innovations have reduced the cost and time of transport, and the development of new types of communication (e.g., telephone, radio, TV, the Internet) has made it possible for information to be spread simultaneously all over the world. Moreover, the increase in socioeconomic status of most of the population of the western world (Held & McGrew, 2007) has meant that a larger number of people can enjoy the benefits of globalization. Today the majority of the population of western countries has access to information and, thanks to mass tourism, can travel the world.

Sociologists investigating the economic, cultural, and human consequences of globalization (Bauman, 1998; Featherstone, Lash & Robertson, 1995; Robertson, 1992) have noted, however, that it also coincides with the emergence of glocalization (Robertson, 1995). Glocalization can be viewed either as a conscious reaction to perceived threats to local identity or as a result of some of the less conscious dynamics present within it. While globalization has produced a widely shared consumer culture (familiarity with global brands and lifestyle orientations), it has also spawned a variety of innovative hybrid practices that local cultures have invented to assert their identity. Through hybridization (Holton, 2000; Nederveen Pieterse, 1995) cultural elements are reconfigured in new forms that are transcontextual but not cosmopolitan. An illustrative example of hybridization is döner kebab, recognized as a typical Turkish food invented in Germany and now a popular take-out snack sold throughout the world (Caglar, 1998).

Global culture modifies local cultures, rendering them simpler and more similar to one another. Traditional distinctions become increasingly blurred as new, instantly recognizable characteristics of the global culture transform the local landscape. The destabilizing effect of this transformation on local identity (Kinnval, 2004) is often counteracted by the reaffirmation of a strong group identity defined, for example, by nationalism or religion. It follows that feelings of strong territorial, religious or ideological attachment conflict with the interconnectedness and interdependence of globalization.

In the last two decades, the relevance of geographically defined territories has declined (Badie, 1995; Caciagli, 2006). Following the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), the division of the world in socialist and capitalist blocs ended and nation-states in central and eastern Europe were re-established or created. The worldwide spread of the free-market model through the liberalization of trade and the free movement of persons, goods and services removed many of the economic barriers that had long hindered global growth and cooperation (Badie, 1995). In the meantime, however, nation-states have had to face a two-front battle against supranational entities, like the European Union (EU), which requires that member states cede certain policy domains, and against regionalist movements demanding greater autonomy in self-governance.

Paradoxically, the expanding power of the EU actually fosters conditions favorable to regionalist movements within traditional nation-states. This has resulted in variegated patterns of regionalism throughout Western Europe (Caciagli, 2006). Regional assertiveness values identity over territory in defining borders and justifies differential treatment between ingroups and outgroups, thus setting the stage for identity conflicts (Thual, 1995). Though national governments are sandwiched between supranational challenges to their sovereignty and regional demands from within to protect group interests, nationalism still persists in its banal form. According to Billig (1995), banal nationalism is a daily reminder of nationhood by means of symbols so familiar that they are not consciously recognized as nationalistic. This form of

nationalism can be exploited by nation-states as a way to maintain allegiance and by regions to wrest power from centralized governments.

The recent resurgence of local and ethnic identities in Europe, particularly in wealthier regions with an interest in gaining more control over their own affairs, parallels the rise in nationalistic sentiments and a common social identity. The appeal for a common language and identity aptly forged by the regionalist movement in Catalonia to mobilize regional interests and policies provides a good example (MacInnes, 2006). Whether exploited for political purposes or promoted in response to psychological needs, local identity harbours emotional and symbolic meanings people ascribe to a sense of self and attachment to place.

2.   Identity in the age of globalization

Self and identity are related to the social world in which individuals live (James, 1890; Mead, 1934) and are constructed within social relationships. We draw on notions from social identity theory (Tajfel, 1981), collective identity theory (Ashmore, Deaux, & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004), and dialogical self theory (Hermans, 2001; 2002).

Social identity theory posits that there are two different constituting parts of identity: the personal and the social. The personal refers to the characteristics that one believes to be unique to the self, and the social derives from the knowledge of membership to social groups that have emotional significance for individuals (Tajfel, 1981). Tajfel emphasized the importance of comparison between the ingroup (i.e., us) and outgroups (i.e., them) in promoting a positive social identity. For Tajfel, identifying strongly with one group implies the contraposition of another group. This assumption has been criticized by Hinkle and Brown (1990) who pointed out that a high identification with a group is not always built on the creation of an outgroup. In their work on group diversity, Brown and colleagues (Brown et al., 1992) make the distinction between autonomous and relational groups: relational groups are based on the comparison with an outgroup, whereas autonomous groups need no outgroup to affirm their identity. A different point of view to account for the different meanings of group membership was proposed by Deaux and colleagues (Deaux, Reid, Mizrahi & Cotting, 1999), who emphasized that identification with social groups serves different functions for individuals. For example, in our desire to achieve a positive social identity we identify ourselves with a group and we make social comparisons between our group (the ingroup) and another group (the outgroup) to establish the superiority of ours; the ingroup will then discriminate against or otherwise discredit the outgroup to enhance its own self-image. At the same time we identify ourselves as members of another social group in order to increase the personal self-esteem by means of a downward social comparison with the group members. From this perspective, social identity is a multidimensional and multifunctional process (Ashmore et al., 2004). People identify themselves with several groups for different reasons and at different times.

Dialogical self theory (Hermans, 2001; 2002) posits that the self is founded on a dialogue between the ego and a multiplicity of others. Hermans and Kempen (1998) proposed that culture is a multiplicity of dialogical positions. Inspired by the work of Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) and George Mead (1934), within this framework the self is considered as emerging from a continuous interchange with other individuals and groups. As defined by Hermans and Dimaggio (2007), "both the cultural groups to which one belongs and those to which one is emotionally

opposed can be part of an extended, multivoiced, tension-laden dialogical self" (p. 37). Despite the differences between this theory and social identity theory, "the existence of multiple voices in dialogical self theory corresponds to the notion of multiple internalized group memberships in social identity theories" (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010, p. 74).

Also, dialogical self theory sees globalization as an opportunity to increase the number of others to which the ego can refer to define the self, while collective identity theory views it as a means to increase the potential number of ingroups and outgroups to identify with or to distinguish from. In any case, the sprawling complexity of the globalized social world can engender fragmentation and instability of self and identity, which, in turn, increase individual and social needs for stability and reassurance in the face of change (Falmagne, 2004). One way such needs may be satisfied is through stronger local identification, the psychological underpinnings of which can be explained by the significance attributed to place and place attachment.

Place carries emotional and symbolic meanings for residents. It can be considered a social category whose members are a group of people defined by their geographical location (Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996). Membership derives from a sense of community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). The feeling of being part of a community is based on boundaries that define who belongs to it and who does not. For local communities, these boundaries are delineated by the geographical territory within which the community is located (Tartaglia, 2006). Moreover, people may develop affective ties with the place where they live; these affective ties are captured in the notion of place attachment (Fried, 2000; Lewicka, 2008). Place identity, sense of community, and place attachment are all interrelated. According to Rollero and De Piccoli (2010), "place attachment and identification are part of the same overarching self-in-place psychological framework with emotional and cognitive aspects, all contributing to the individuals' bonding to an environment" (p.203). Given the significance of self-in-place and related theories, local identification may still be important, or arguably even more important, in the age of globalisation.

3.   New localism; instrumental use and identity needs

Sociologists (e.g., Badie, 1995; Thual, 1995) have interpreted the rise of local identities in the last few decades as a matter of geopolitics. Ethnic identification has replaced territory in defining the political and economic actors who actively promote specific cultural markers (e.g., common language and history), to distinguish them from others, and to justify local demands for more autonomy from larger entities. Following this interpretation, identity is a multifaceted tool for regionalist movements in Europe to advance their political agenda and garner popularity and support. Unlike other new regionalisms in Europe, Occitan identity in Italy is less bound by political or economic interests.

Occitania spans three countries in a broad east to west swath from 14 valleys in the western Alps in Italy, across the south of France, to one valley in northern Spain. Defying definition by geographic borders, Occitan territory is a patchwork of dialects all descending from the medieval French *langue d'oc*. The literary rediscovery of Occitan at the end of the 19th century was mainly due to the works of Frédéric Mistral, a writer and poet awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1904. Mistral wrote in the Provençal dialect, but present-day supporters of Occitan

consider it a variety of the same language. In Italy, although the Occitan dialect has been spoken in the Western Alps since the Middle Ages, Occitan identity is a fairly recent creation. Up until the late 1970s, Italian Occitan speakers did not refer to their dialect as Occitan and were largely unaware of the fact that similar dialects are spoken in the Occitan areas of France and Spain.

About 30 years ago, a group of writers, musicians, and tourist agents began to promote the Occitan culture and history of the local mountain communities where Occitan is spoken; the group has also been active in raising awareness of an Occitan identity among people who do not speak the dialect. In Italy, Occitan identity has no political agenda or activist platform. Its spendable use is limited to the development of local tourism and businesses catering to this expanding market. Therefore, Occitan identity offers a good example of non-politicized local identities that have emerged in last few decades. The present study focuses on Occitan identity in Italy and its definition with respect to the two functions of local identity.

4.   Research questions

We hypothesized that, within the context of globalization, the construction of local identity serves at least two functions: a political one expressed in banal nationalism (Billig, 1995); and a psychological function that satisfies a need for certitude and stability for relational self definition as explained by social identity and dialogical self theories. Arguably, the ways in which local identities are constructed will vary depending on whether political or identity needs predominate.

The basic assumption of this study is that the meaning attached to local identity will hinge on whether it is used to counteract self-fragmentation or to support a group interest, for example, for economic or political gain. The study involved two groups of participants: a group of residents of the Occitan valleys and a group of active promoters of Occitan culture living in the same area. We expected that Occitan identity would mainly serve a psychological role in the residents' lives and provide a reference for self-definition and stability, whereas for the promoters we expected that local identity would be an instrument they use to affirm the specificity (and superiority) of the group and justify the existence of Occitania. Furthermore, we expected that these two different functions would be reflected in different argumentative strategies in defining Occitan identity. For the residents, it may be more important to emphasize the similarity with the group they want to identify with, whereas for the promoters, it may be more important to stress the differences with others from which they want to distinguish themselves.

5.   Method

For this qualitative study we conducted standardized interviews. Consistent with qualitative methodology, we used a theoretical sample and did not seek to generalize the findings.

5.1.   Participants

The study sample was composed of 30 participants in total. The residents group included 20 adults (ten men and ten women; age range 18-71 years; occupational status: three students, twelve workers, and five retirees), living in four small villages located in several Occitan

valleys. The villages (Bellino, Elva, Pietraporzio, and Castelmagno) were chosen because of their common features: all are mountain communities (altitude 1150-1637 m.) with a small population (range 90-158 inhabitants). Five residents from each of the four villages were chosen by means of a snowball sampling procedure.

The promoters group included ten adults (seven men and three women; age range 36-74 years; occupational status: two writers, one linguist, one musician, and six members of local and cultural associations) living in the Occitan valleys. Through cultural and artistic activities and events, they promote knowledge of Occitan culture and identity among people living in the Occitan area and in Italy. The promoters were contacted with the help of the residents.

5.2.   *Data collection*

Individual, one-on-one interviews lasting about 30 minutes were conducted. Some questions required a simple yes/no answer (e.g., "Do you speak Occitan daily?"), while others were open-ended. The participants were allowed to speak freely for the full 30 minutes and encouraged to continue talking if they fell silent. The interview guide consisted of 10 questions. The first four investigated what it means to be an Occitan person and whether the participants included themselves in this category.

1.   *"Do you feel Occitan?"*
2.   *"Who are the Occitans, what are the features that characterise them?"*
3.   *"If any, what are the differences between the Occitans and the Piedmontese[1]?"*
4.   *"If any, what are the differences between the Occitans and Italians?"*

Question no. 5 presented the classical definition of community as given by Tönnies (1887); the participants were asked if they thought this definition was applicable to Occitans. Recent studies (e.g., Tartaglia, 2009) have suggested that this classical definition remains relevant.

5.   *"In the literature, a community is defined as «a group of people spontaneously united, linked by close friendship based on sympathy, solidarity, and a feeling of common belonging». In your opinion, is this definition applicable to the Occitan group?"*

Question no. 6 was about attachment to place.

6.   *"How attached do you feel to your village?"*

Question no. 7 involved indicating and ranking in order of importance the groups they identified with most.

7.   *"With which of the following groups do you identify the most?"* The groups were listed in random order: Occitans; Italians; village resident (name of the village); valley resident (name of the valley); Piedmontese; and *Cuneesi[2]*. After choosing the one group with

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[1] Piedmont is the region in northwest Italy where the Occitan valleys are located.
[2] Italian, denotes residents of Cuneo, the administrative seat of the province where the Occitan valleys are located.

whom they identified most, the participants were asked to rank the others in descending order of identification.

The last three questions were about the participants' knowledge of Occitania and the Occitan language.

8. *"Could you tell me what the geographic borders of Occitania are?"*
9. *"Do you speak or simply know the Occitan language?"*
10. *"Do you speak Occitan daily?"*

The interviews were audio-recorded with the permission of the participants and later transcribed for analysis.

5.3. Analysis

The interview transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis, which entailed searching for common themes by successive transcript readings. This method has been used in studies investigating place identity (Chow & Healey, 2008; Possick, 2004; Twigger-Ross & Uzzell, 1996). The analysis proceeded in two stages. The first author classified the responses to each question by creating a list of inductive categories and then grouped the categories into common themes. The second author analyzed the transcripts to enhance the reliability of the interpretations. In instances where the interpretations differed, the authors discussed the case and agreed on its interpretation. In presenting the themes constructed from the thematic analysis, we refer to the two groups as 'Residents' and 'Promoters'. The main themes are the definition of Occitan identity, the evolution of the idea of Occitan community over time, and the hierarchy of different identifications.

6. Definition of Occitan identity: between mountain homeland and language

The first part of each interview focused on the participant's definition of the Occitan group and to what extent he/she identified with belonging to the group. We considered the responses to these first questions as representing a unique way of speaking about Occitan identity. Almost all the participants saw themselves as Occitans. All ten Promoters stated that they identify as Occitan, whereas three out of the twenty Residents did not. Many participants justified their feeling Occitan even when it was not explicitly requested. The motivations referred mainly to two categories: place and language (Extracts nos. 1 to 3).

> Yes, I feel Occitan because I have always lived in this village […]. The Occitans are those who have lived here in the mountains for a long time and always lived this way and spoken this language. […] [*compared to other Piedmontese people*] I don't see a big difference... the language more than anything... we always speak our dialect, while, on the other hand, Piedmontese is a bit different.
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> Extract 1. Interviewee No. 1, female, resident.

Yes [*I feel Occitan*], of course, because since I was a child I have always spoken this language, even if I became aware of it only later […] The Occitans are those who speak like me and live in these territories.

<div align="right">Extract 2. Interviewee No. 15, male, resident.</div>

Yes [*I feel Occitan*], surely, because my parents were born here, have always spoken Occitan and, therefore, I, too, speak Occitan. In my opinion, what characterises the Occitans is really the dialect.

<div align="right">Extract 3. Interviewee No. 12, female, resident.</div>

Language and place were the two most widely used dimensions to define what it means to be Occitan and to differentiate this group from Piedmontese and Italians. An Occitan is someone who speaks Occitan. Half of the Residents and nine out of ten Promoters stated that language is a cardinal feature of Occitan identity. Language was also used to differentiate the ingroup from the outgroup. Several participants from both groups said that the main difference between Occitans, Piedmontese, and Italians is that they speak different languages. Of note is that the Residents and the Promoters used different expressions when speaking about Occitan. The Promoters consistently referred to it as a "language", whereas the Residents seemed to use the terms "language" and "dialect" interchangeably (Extract nos. 1 to 3). In Extract no. 1, the speaker (a Resident) uses the two words synonymously in the same sentence. The different wording seems to reflect the greater importance that the Promoters give to Occitan, which they consider a language and not just a dialect. Interviewee no. 26 (a Promoter) stated that "being Occitan is a matter of language, I am Occitan, just like other people feel French, Italian or other things". This particular participant compares Occitans with other national groups that have a national language.

Place also figured prominently in the Residents' responses, particularly in reference to the mountain environment: the Occitans are mountain people and this sets them apart from the Piedmontese and other Italians. The Residents depicted their mountain homeland as being an integral part of Occitan culture: traditions, customs, and character all appear to be forged by mountain life and by the trades typically practiced in alpine environments. The idea of closely knit community (discussed below) often came up in the nostalgic stories of helping each other when hardships struck. The fact that many other Piedmontese and Italians also live in mountainous areas appears to be largely disregarded; this may be a classic effect of categorization of accentuating intercategory differences. In contrast, the Promoters did not talk about a mountain homeland to define Occitans. One of the few references the Promoters made to the mountain environment seems more like a counter argument against the idea that the Occitans are mountain dwellers (Extract no. 4).

[…] what characterizes the Occitans is mainly the language. The mountain, the fact that they live in the mountains, is a secondary element, also because not all of Occitania is a mountain environment. For example, *Alto Atesini*[3] and Occitans are both mountain populations but they are very different […]

<div align="right">Extract 4. Participant 26, male, promoter.</div>

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[3] Residents of the region Alto Adige/Southern Tyrol in northern Italy.

Occitan territory in Italy is, in fact, entirely mountainous, so the reference to this feature made by several Residents reveals that for them Occitania is no larger than the Alpine valleys where they live. In contrast, because the Promoters see Occitania as a much larger region encompassing the south of France, which is partially mountainous, they did not highlight this feature as characterizing Occitan culture. Furthermore, all the Promoters knew the real geographical extension of Occitania, whereas only half of the Residents (eleven out of twenty) did.

For the Residents, the Occitans are defined by their language and by their territory, which they identify with their mountain homeland, and they believe it influences their culture and way of life. Both territory and language are classical "borders" that define an ethnic or a national group (Anderson, 1991). We can hypothesize that the Residents and the Promoters alike prefer to use one or the other more, depending on their principal identity motivation. For the Residents it is more important to identify strongly with the environment they live in, whereas for the Promoters it is more important to identify with a larger socio-cultural unit. The Occitan language for the Residents seems to be proof of the cultural diversity of their local community, whereas the mountain homeland is the origin of that diversity. For the Promoters, language is the origin of the cultural similarity shared among all Occitans (Italian, French, and Spanish). Language is used to set the boundary between ingroup and outgroup, whereas the mountain environment seems to have a symbolic meaning of place identity (Proshansky, Fabian & Kaminoff, 1983).

Continuity is another topic that kept coming up during all the interviews, and this was particularly evident when the participants talked about the Occitan community. For example, Extract nos. 1 to 3 show that the participants said they were Occitan because "I have always lived here" or "I have always spoken the language". Occitan identity is constructed over time, albeit in somewhat contradictory ways, with several participants admitting that this identity is a recent invention.

7.   Community history, past, and present

Are the Occitans a community? The participants were explicitly asked this question using Tönnies' (1887) classical definition as an example of community. The Residents and the Promoters answered this question in different ways. Almost all the Residents stated that the Occitans are a tightly knit and supportive community, though they also frequently mentioned that community togetherness was once stronger than now (Extract nos. 5 and 6). This reference to a mythical past when talking about community is quite common in the social sciences literature, for example, in classic American sociology (Wirth, 1938), network analysis (Wellman, 1979), sense of community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986), and in works by Bauman (2001).

> I come from […], where there was some sort of mutual help for accidents involving animals. If a cow died, every inhabitant of the village would buy from the owner a quantity of meat proportional to the number of cows he owned. In another example, if there was a war widow in the village, the other residents would carry out the manual work for her.
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> Extract 5. Interviewee No. 6, male, resident.

[…] yes, but less than it used to be. Once here there was more cooperation, even if there were more people, now there is still friendship and solidarity but it is not the same as in the past.

<div align="right">*Extract 6. Interviewee No. 15, male, resident.*</div>

The nostalgic depiction of an ideal rural community placed somewhere in the past contrasts with the present experienced as a time of awareness of identity. Several Residents went on to explicitly say that the label "Occitan" is a recent invention: people would not have referred to themselves as Occitan in the past or to their dialect as Occitan either (Extract no. 2). As mentioned above, the idea of community is based on traditional communal activities (Extract no. 5) that are no longer performed but still somehow significant and given meaning.

It might seem quite surprising that the Promoters stated that Occitans are not a community (Extract nos. 7 and 8); however, given that Occitania in their view encompasses a heterogeneous socio-cultural landscape, the Promoters move from the constraining idea of a local community to the vision of a supranational entity that includes the citizens of three countries living in very different physical environments. We can interpret the Promoters' rejection of the idea of an Occitan community as being consistent with their preferential use of the term "language": Occitan is not a dialect but rather a language; Occitania is not a community but rather a nation.

[…] I do not think we can say that of Occitania, because it is so big… we can talk of a series of communities.

<div align="right">*Extract 7. Interviewee No. 22, male, promoter.*</div>

[…] the definition of community is too indefinite in my opinion […] the sense of belonging to a community of the Occitans is very weak, very fragile.

<div align="right">*Extract 8. Interviewee No. 25, male, promoter.*</div>

The roots of Occitan identity run deep. Though all participants often referred to the past, their accounts differed significantly. The Residents mainly told stories about family or neighbourhood life (Extract no. 5), whereas the Promoters often referred to historical events (Extract no. 9) to legitimize the existence of an Occitan national community.

Historical proof of this common sense of belonging is that in 1944, in the middle of World War Two when Italy *stabbed France in the back*, our people still went to the French Occitan valleys every day to buy salt.

<div align="right">*Extract 9. Interviewee No. 29, male, promoter.*</div>

In any case, both groups in different ways described Occitan culture as a threatened heritage; Occitania once had tangible borders, but people were largely unaware of them. Now, paradoxically, as the borders increasingly blur, people have begun to recognise an Occitan identity (Extract no. 10).

… once the difference between Piedmont and Occitania was very clear, when we did not know that we were Occitan the border was clear. Today, while we know that we are Occitan, paradoxically the border is hazier, because today, like for everything else, we also have the globalization of Occitan… and because nowadays

Piedmontese culture is arriving more and more into the valleys and is replacing the Occitan culture, so much so that in the villages in the lower valleys they have not only lost the language, but also all those mindsets that were typical of their being Occitan.

<div align="right">Extract 10. Interviewee No. 23, female, promoter.</div>

Extract no. 10 exemplifies the idea of the development of Occitan identity as a response to a culture under siege. As pointed out by Giddens (1991), modernity tends to break down the protective framework of the small community and its traditions; going back to an imagined past could be a response to this (Kinnval, 2004).

Another difference between the Residents and the Promoters is that the former spoke informally in reference to themselves, that isi, "Occitans are people who speak like me and live in this place", whereas the Promoters often used impersonal sentences and the third person, i.e., "Occitans are those who live… The thing that better characterizes them is…". Although both groups stated that they feel a strong sense of belonging to the Occitan group, the Residents spoke as members of the ingroup, describing the group from inside, while the Promoters frequently talked about the Occitans from an external point of view.

8. Occitan, villager, Piedmontese or Italian? The hierarchy of identification

The participants were asked to choose from among six identities the one they identified with most and then to arrange the others in descending order of identification. The social categories were ranked from one to six in order of choice. Because of the small number of participants, we did not make any statistical comparison between the groups and we make no claim that the data can be generalized. Nonetheless, we do think that a comparison between Residents and Promoters could aid in interpreting the qualitative data. Table 1 lists the average ranking the two groups assigned the social categories. We found interesting differences between Residents and Promoters.

Table 1. Average rank of identification with social categories by residents and promoters.

Residents	Rank	Promoters	Rank
Villager of …	1.80	Occitan	1.70
Occitan	2.85	Villager of …	2.40
Resident of the valley …	3.00	Resident of the valley …	2.80
Cuneese	4.05	Italian	3.60
Piedmontese	4.60	Piedmontese	4.80
Italian	4.65	*Cuneese*	5.20

Occitan identity was ranked second in importance by the Residents, who primarily saw themselves as members of their own village. Identification with the other categories seems to follow a logic of proximity. As the category of identification broadens, identification decreases, so that the Residents identify most with the villager category and least with the national category. For the Promoters, instead, the preferred group identification is Occitan, which is not surprising. By a similar logic of proximity, they ranked the smaller and closer category of villager next,

followed by the only slightly larger category of valley residents. Nevertheless, after the smaller territorial categories, the proximity logic is inverted: first the country (Italy) then the region (Piedmont), and finally the province (Cuneo). We hypothesize that the Promoters' preference for the more distant categories is justified by their need to distinguish themselves as Occitan from their non-Occitan neighbours, which is more important for them than for the Residents, who probably do not see the other local identities as threatening their territorial Occitan identity. Just as the regional movements appeal to the European Union for help to support their demands for more autonomy from nation-states, so, too, the Promoters seem to identify more with the higher level category (Italians) than with the lower level categories.

In general, the Residents did not compare the Occitan group with other groups to assert their identification (Extract no. 11).

> … I see myself as Occitan and Italian too, and I would like to think of myself as European as well… I think of Occitan as something more that what a person has in their DNA but surely I want to be open to Italy and most of all to Europe. In my opinion being Occitan means to have something more.
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> <div align="right">Extract 11. Interviewee No. 3, female, resident.</div>

9.   Discussion

The different ways in which Italian Occitans define their identity offer insights into how identity is built, projected, and practiced. While anchored to a local dimension, Occitan identity is a relatively recent phenomenon that coexists in a world moving closer to a global culture. Furthermore, because Occitan identity lacks a clearly articulated economic or political agenda, the Occitan valley residents do not necessarily share the same interests with those who promote Occitan culture. This difference highlights the various identity-building strategies the two groups use. Occitan identity is important for both groups; as explained by social identity theory (Tajfel, 1981), both groups distinguish the differences between ingroups and outgroups but they do it in various ways that are sometimes similar in some yet also dissimilar in others.

Language is a key criterion of identification: all the participants know Occitan and use it regularly. The majority recognized that it is a defining characteristic. For the Promoters, however, language is the most important defining feature, whereas territory is more relevant for the Residents. They recognize themselves as mountain dwellers and differentiate themselves from other groups on this basis. Social identity theory (Tajfel, 1981) states that people need to clearly differentiate social groups. This need was also emphasized by McMillan and Chavis (1986) in their definition and theory of a psychological sense of community. The feeling of being part of a community is based on boundaries that define who belongs to it and who does not. These boundaries can be real or symbolic. For local communities the geographical territory where they live delineates the boundaries. In contrast, symbolic boundaries are set by the sharing of a common language, dialect or slang, that is, a common symbol system (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

Political scientists have pointed out that, at the macro-social level, language and territory are essential dimensions to define political units (Badie, 1995) and are key components of nationalist ideologies (Anderson, 1991). The Residents and the Promoters set different boundaries to the Occitan community they want to refer to. The Residents delimited their group locally to the

environment. The Promoters, instead, set much wider boundaries for the Occitan group to include all the people living in Occitania. The Residents think of the Occitans as a social group and they consider it a community because its members share a place and interact directly with one another. Differently, the Promoters refer to a broader social category that comprises people who do not share a place and have few direct interactions. Interestingly, the Residents accepted Tönnies' (1887) definition of community as applicable to the Occitans while the Promoters rejected it. The former reaffirm their local belonging, whereas the latter elevate local identity to a higher level. Consistent with this interpretation, the Residents identified more with the social categories they felt were closer to their own, whereas the Promoters preferred to distance themselves.

Continuity of culture in time is another important criterion in the definition of Occitan identity. Both the Residents and the Promoters depicted Occitan culture as something rooted in the past, traditional, and continuous in time, though both groups recognized that the identity label is a fairly recent invention. Here, again, differences emerged between the two groups. In the Residents' view, community embodies a place where people go about their daily business much like the generations before them did. This view matches the local community as defined by Tönnies (1887). The Promoters, on the other hand, think of community as something ideological and less concrete that can be traced back to historical events. Their community reflects the imagined political community that constructs national identities (Anderson, 1991; De Cillia et al., 1999).

Nationalism arose as European countries intensified their contacts with different and far-away cultures (Anderson, 1991). According to Anderson (1992), the two major factors that generate nationalism and ethnicity are mass communication and mass migration, which are the primary forces driving globalization today. Confronted with diversity, Europeans developed their specificity along lines of national ideologies. The idea of community as an ideal form of social aggregation emerged in times of change. Tönnies (1887) defined the community when German society was rapidly being transformed by industrialisation. In America, the Chicago School of Sociology emphasized the importance of the local community by studying how a city is dramatically forged by significant flows of migration. A decade ago, Bauman (2001) talked about the need of community in an increasingly globalized world.

Both nation and community are useful ideas that can put order in a complex social world. From a psychological point of view, Kinnval (2004) suggested that strong group identifications like nationalism or religious fundamentalism can help people cope with the feelings of insecurity created by increasing complexity. We think local identities can also have this function. As proposed by dialogic self theory, "in the present era, self and identity can only be properly understood when extended to the global and local environment" (Hermans & Dimaggio, 2007, p.49). These two levels are not incompatible; the uncertainty created by the global extension of the self can increase the importance of the local level.

The Residents stated that they strongly identified themselves with the Occitan group and recognized that an awareness of Occitan identity is a recent phenomenon. In addition, they depicted their community as being rooted in the past but that it is not as cohesive as it once was. In their words, there was a strong community in the past but no identification, while now there is strong identification but no longer a strong sense of community. This paradox recalls Anderson's definition of long-distance nationalists (Anderson, 1992). He noted that "the vast migrations produced over the past 150 years by the market, as well as war and political oppression, have profoundly disrupted a once seemingly 'natural' coincidence of national sentiment with lifelong

residence in fatherland or motherland" (Anderson, 1992, p.13). This break, according to his interpretation, fostered the emergence of nationalist feelings in people who had never lived in the imagined homeland. For them, the idea of a nation is not linked to actual everyday life and everyday relations. From this, we can conclude that it has a purely psychological meaning. Similarly, we note that for the participants in our study their imagined community is something far away not in space but in time. We can call them long-distance communitarians.

In brief, the Promoters employ the same strategies as nationalist movements do (Billig, 1995); they see themselves primarily as an ethno-cultural group without nationalistic aspirations or a political agenda. They use language as criterion for drawing a "natural" boundary rather than other physical, religious or political boundaries and they cite historical references to affirm the traditional existence of the entity they support. The Promoters have been successful in their efforts to raise an awareness of Occitan identity. One possible explanation for their success in promoting Occitan culture is that it taps into a need to rediscover a common identity.

Identification along traditional national, religious or political lines has lost importance in competition with the endless variety of new fluid identifications that globalization offers. Nationalist movements often follow economic interests and use identity as a means to naturalize and justify devolution and self-governance. Present day local identity movements, like the Italian Occitans, can perhaps be better explained in psychological terms as a reaction to the self-fragmentation associated with globalization (Kinnval, 2004; Hermans & Dimaggio, 2007). The promotion of identity in this case is the aim and not the means. Nationalism also satisfies identity needs and local identity can be sold and monetized in the modern mass tourism market. The difference lies in the importance of one kind of need or the other.

Research into Italian Occitan identity needs to be contextualized. Our study offers several insights that may be useful for understanding other local identities. A future area of focus could be to compare the psychological meaning of politicized identities within identifiable geopolitical territories, such as Spanish or Belgian regionalism, or identities lacking any clearly identifiable territory, such as the northern identity promoted by the Northern League political party in Italy. Strong ties with the local community have been shown to have beneficial effects on personal and social wellbeing (Rollero & De Piccoli, 2010; Tartaglia, 2013); however, as pointed out by Wiesenfeld (1996), the negative side to strong community identification is that it can foster discrimination and group conflict. Community intervention should try and foster the positive effects of local identities avoiding the negative effects of intergroup bias.

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