

## TRADITIONAL FAMILY AND WOMEN'S CONDITION: THE RECIPROCAL PERCEPTION OF TURKISH AND ITALIANS

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*Community psychology considers gender as a central organizing category for understanding power imbalances and directing social change. The geopolitical events of these last years are heightening the contraposition between Islamic and Western countries with significant effects on ethnic prejudices, including the perception of gender roles and women's condition. The present study focused on two different Mediterranean countries, an Islamic and Eastern one, i.e., Turkey, and a Catholic and Western one, i.e., Italy. It aimed at investigating the reciprocal perception concerning family and the women's condition in the two states. Participants were 400 university students, both Turkish (N=199) and Italians (N=201). We performed 2 (Italian vs. Turkish) x 2 (Italy vs. Turkey) mixed ANOVAs for repeated measures testing the differences between participants and between countries. Findings demonstrated an interesting "mirror effect": Turkish and Italians perceived their home country in similar way, and similarly different from the country of comparison. Implications are discussed.*

**Keywords:** traditionalism; family; gender roles; culture.

### 1. Introduction

The perception of other cultures in the globalised contemporary society is an important issue affecting international relations (Burr, Giliberto, & Butt, 2014). During the last 20 years, the contraposition between Islamic and Western (Christian) societies has become salient because of several geopolitical events (i.e., the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the Afghan war, the Iraq war, the terrorist attacks in London, Madrid, and Paris, and the rising of ISIS in the middle East). This fact fostered the development of prejudice toward Muslims and the Islamic countries (Imhoff & Recker, 2012; Panagopoulos, 2006). One of the main differences between many Islamic countries and the European and North American ones concerns the traditional view of society, which comprises the definition of gender roles, women's condition, as well as the preference for

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traditional family. For instance, in Turkey the family structure is more traditional and patriarchal than in Europe (Caffaro, Ferraris, & Schmidt, 2014; O'Neil & Toktas, 2014). In turn, the traditional family, implying the segregated role of women in society, is the basis of the construction of the national identity (Badran, 1996; Özkırmılı & Uyan-Semerçi, 2011). While the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century showed the global destruction of traditional segregated gender roles (Inglehart & Norris, 2003), developments toward women's empowerment and gender equality have largely varied across nations (Kabeer, 2005).

In line with feminist perspectives, community psychology considers gender roles to be socially constructed, as a dynamic dimension along which the world is organized, interpreted, and stratified (Bond & Mulvey, 2000). In this sense, gender influences social behaviours and opportunities and cannot be separated from other aspects of personal identity or from the context of life experiences. The gender roles segregation - through cultural and political subordination - has been documented throughout psychology in general and community psychology specifically (see, for instance, Angelique & Culley, 2000; Mulvey, 1988). Fifteen years ago Angelique and Culley (2003) suggested the necessity to investigate gender-stratified power asymmetries through contextual analyses, especially to challenge the status quo. Since this recommendation, many studies have been conducted in order to analyse the impact of gender roles and stereotypes in different cultures (e.g., Lam, Stanik, & McHale, 2017; Lips, 2016; Rollero, 2016; Tartaglia & Rollero, 2015; Wood & Eagly, 2015). However, to our knowledge, no study has hitherto analysed the reciprocal perception countries may have toward each other in reference to women's condition.

The present study makes a comparison between Turkey and Italy. These countries are both Mediterranean states, but one is Catholic and European (Italy) and the other one is Islamic and historically linked to both Europe and the Middle East (Turkey). Modern Turkey is a nationalist state, and nationalism has grown in the recent years (Özkırmılı & Uyan-Semerçi, 2011), whereas in Italy nationalism has always been lower compared to other European countries and decreased in the last decades (Castellanos, 2010). Our main aim was investigating the reciprocal perception concerning family and women's condition in the two states.

## **2. Family Structure and Women's condition: The Turkish and the Italian Contexts**

Located partly in Europe and partly in Asia, Turkey has gone through important westernizing changes in the last few decades, becoming a modern Western nation rooted in Eastern traditions (Varan, 2005). Gender equality has been considered a salient topic in Turkey since its foundation in 1923, as women's rights were politically central to eschewing the previously theocratic state. In fact, the first president of Turkey, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, publicly addressed women as the category most evidently oppressed by religion through practices such as veiling, seclusion, and polygamy (Tekeli, 1981). However, the historical heritage of the Ottoman Empire is still present in culture, religion, and social practices of the contemporary Turkey. This is especially relevant in reference to the treatment of women, with views and practices related to gender equality varying across the different regions in Turkey based upon dominant religious beliefs (Natali, 2005).

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Government policies based on the principles of “modernization” and “westernization” promoted sex equality in employment (Ozbilgin, Tatli, & Kusku, 2005) and Muslim family law was challenged in order to improve women’s empowerment (Çarkoğlu, Kafescioglu, & Mitrani, 2012). Although these significant measures, Turkey is still characterized by supportive, closely integrated and tight-knit family structures (Gürmen & Rohner, 2014; Sunar & Fisek, 2005), and by a traditional gendered hierarchy (Sunar & Fisek, 2005). According to such hierarchy, mothers have to be more involved in care roles than fathers, who, in turn, preserve their superiority and authority by maintaining a certain distance from children (Erkman & Rohner, 2006). As Gol-Guven (in press) reports, the majority of children of preschool age stay home under their mother’s care, noting that in 2011 only 25.6% of mothers were working. In sum, despite the societal changes and the campaigns for equality, the socio-cultural system remains essentially patriarchal, and the main role of women is to have children and to take care of the house.

Turkey shares similarities with Italy, but also shows specific differences. Regarding similarities, Italy presents as well important gender inequalities. According to the Gender Gap Index (Hausmann, Tyson, & Zahidi, 2012), both Italy and Turkey occupy very low positions in the classification of equal gender opportunities among the 44 countries of Europe and Central Asia. Specifically, Italy is at the 35<sup>th</sup> place, whereas Turkey occupies the lowest ranking. Moreover, patriarchy played a significant role in the history of both countries, even though nowadays Italy is no more considered a patriarchal society (Caffaro, Ferraris, & Schmidt, 2014). Indeed, until the 1960s Italian families were founded on a rigid division of gender roles and were characterized by a hierarchical system dominated by men (Cantarella, 2010), but the economic boom and the development of feminist movements challenged this traditional system, leading to more flexible and less hierarchical gender roles (Bimbi & Trifletti, 2006). In Italy, 57% of women have successfully completed high school, whereas in Turkey only 27% of women earned an equivalent degree (OECD, 2013). Considering the employment rates, 47.8% of Italian women and 28.7% of Turkish women are in paid work (OECD, 2013). In 2013, 3.2 marriages per 1,000 inhabitants took place in Italy, in line with the downward trend that began in 1972 (Italian Statistical Institute, 2014). In the same year, the marriage rate in Turkey was 7.9‰ (UNSTAT, 2014). The divorce-marriage ratio, which indicates the number of divorces to the number of marriages, is 25 in Italy and 20 in Turkey (UNSTAT, 2014).

### **3. The Current Study**

Starting from the differences between the two countries, we aimed to study the perception of Turkey and Italy concerning traditional family and women’s condition in a sample of participants of the two countries. To our knowledge, this study represents the first attempt to investigate the reciprocal perception of such countries. Indeed, research about these constructs normally tests attitudes toward other ethnic groups (e.g., Jankowiak, Gray, & Hattman, 2008) or gender roles within a country (e.g., Lam et al., 2017; Lips, 2016; Rollero, 2016), without considering the perceptions of the target group.

In line with actual social indicators, we expected that both national groups of participants perceived a higher diffusion of traditional family, worst women’s condition, and more segregated parental roles in Turkey than in Italy.

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Moreover, because of the prejudice toward Muslims, Italians were supposed to perceive Turkey as a more traditional society than Turkish did. Indeed, research has shown that prejudice toward Muslims and the Islamic countries involves the idea that such countries are traditionalist, patriarchal, and sexist (Imhoff & Recker, 2012; Panagopoulos, 2006).

## **4. Method**

### **4.1. Participants**

A sample of 400 university students participated in the study. Their average age was 21.94 years ( $SD = 2.19$ ). Among them 199 were Turkish (89 male and 110 female; average age 21.43,  $SD = 2.12$ ) and 201 Italians (91 male and 110 female; average age 21.44,  $SD = 2.15$ ).

### **4.2. Procedure**

We recruited participants among undergraduate and graduate students of arts and science schools in three different Universities, one located in Turkey and two in Italy. We contacted participants in their Universities and invited them to participate in a study about psychosocial issues. They were informed that participation in the study was voluntary and that their responses were anonymous. The recruitment process was analogous in both Turkey and Italy.

### **4.3. Measures**

We gathered data by means of a self-report questionnaire. Participants took about 15 min to fill out the questionnaire. Native speakers translated the questionnaire into Turkish and Italian and a back-translation was done to ensure correctness. The instrument included different sets of indicators. Specifically, the variables used in our analyses were:

- 1) The participants' perception of the importance of the traditional family in Turkey and in Italy. Four items measuring the perception of the importance of marriage, the importance of family, the spread of divorce, and the spread of cohabitation. The items were rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much). Each item was repeated asking participants to evaluate both Turkey and Italy.
- 2) The participants' perception of women's condition in Turkey and in Italy. Two items measuring the perception of the level of women's freedom and the importance of career for women. The items were rated on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much). Each item was repeated asking participants to evaluate both Turkey and Italy.
- 3) The participants' perception of the level of segregation of marital roles in Turkey and Italy. Three items measuring the perception of the spread of the families with both parents working, the spread of collaboration of both partners in housework, and the spread of collaboration of both partners in children education. The items were rated on a

5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much). Each item was repeated asking participants to evaluate both Turkey and Italy.

- 4) A brief list of sociodemographic items.

## 5. Results

Table 1 reports descriptive statistics for the perceptions of the importance of the traditional family, women's condition, and the level of segregation of marital roles in Turkey and in Italy. The table shows means and standard deviation separated for Turkish and Italian participants. We performed a 2 (Italian vs. Turkish) x 2 (Italy vs. Turkey) mixed ANOVA for repeated measures for every socio-cultural feature considered. These analyses allowed us to investigate the significance of the differences between participants and between countries. Table 2 reports the within and between subjects effects for all the socio-cultural features.

**Table 1. Descriptive statistics: Means and Standard Deviations in brackets.**

	In Turkey		In Italy	
	Turkish	Italians	Turkish	Italians
<b>Importance of the traditional family</b>				
How important is marriage	3.30 (.97)	3.06 (1.09)	2.05 (1.11)	2.06 (1.07)
How important is building a family	3.36 (1.02)	2.88 (1.11)	2.38 (1.11)	2.68 (1.01)
How widespread is cohabitation	2.76 (1.23)	.98 (.86)	1.96 (1.19)	3.15 (.96)
How widespread is divorce	2.46 (1.16)	1.08 (.94)	2.83 (1.08)	3.40 (.76)
<b>Women's condition</b>				
How much freedom have women	2.02 (1.08)	1.03 (.83)	3.10 (1.12)	3.09 (.77)
How important is the working career for women	2.58 (1.19)	1.29 (1.00)	3.20 (1.02)	3.20 (.74)
<b>Level of segregation of marital roles</b>				
How widespread is that in a family both parents are worker	2.15 (1.02)	1.15 (.97)	3.11 (.99)	3.14 (.76)
How widespread is the collaboration of both partners in housework	1.62 (1.07)	.93 (.96)	2.92 (.95)	2.16 (.86)
How widespread is collaboration of both partners in children education	1.90 (1.13)	1.56 (1.07)	2.91 (.97)	2.71 (.90)

Concerning the importance of the traditional family, for all the four variables we found a significant effect of the country. Participants evaluated marriage and building a family as more important in Turkey whereas cohabitation and divorce more widespread in Italy. The strongest effects of country were on the spread of the divorce ( $\eta^2 = .49$ ) and on the importance of marriage ( $\eta^2 = .35$ ). We found three significant interaction effects. Turkish participants evaluated building a family ( $\eta^2 = .06$ ) to be more important in Turkey than in Italy whereas Italians did not. The second interaction concerned the spread of cohabitation ( $\eta^2 = .48$ ). Both nationality groups considered cohabitation more frequent in their own country. The third significant interaction was on the spread of divorce ( $\eta^2 = .34$ ). In this case, all participants perceived divorce more widespread in Italy but the effect was greater for Italians.

**Table 2. Mixed ANOVA for repeated measures: within and between subjects effects.**

<i>Dependent variable</i>	<i>Source</i>	Type III sum of squares	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>Partial Eta squared</i>
<b>Importance of the traditional family</b>					
<i>How important is marriage</i>					
	Turkey or Italy	250.80	214.15	.00	.35
	Turkey or Italy*Participant Nationality	3.18	2.71	.10	.01
	Participant Nationality	2.51	2.32	.13	.01
<i>How important is building a family</i>					
	Turkey or Italy	69.30	61.83	.00	.14
	Turkey or Italy*Participant Nationality	30.40	27.13	.00	.06
	Participant Nationality	1.71	1.51	.22	.00
<i>How widespread is cohabitation</i>					
	Turkey or Italy	95.14	78.41	.00	.17
	Turkey or Italy*Participant Nationality	439.05	361.84	.00	.48
	Participant Nationality	17.23	16.16	.00	.04
<i>How widespread is divorce</i>					
	Turkey or Italy	360.10	385.49	.00	.49
	Turkey or Italy*Participant Nationality	189.59	202.95	.00	.34
	Participant Nationality	33.56	32.13	.00	.08
<b>Women's condition</b>					
<i>How much freedom have women</i>					
	Turkey or Italy	493.46	504.37	.00	.56
	Turkey or Italy*Participant Nationality	47.30	48.34	.00	.11
	Participant Nationality	48.57	55.97	.00	.12
<i>How important is the working career for women</i>					
	Turkey or Italy	318.39	323.36	.00	.45
	Turkey or Italy*Participant Nationality	82.26	83.54	.00	.17
	Participant Nationality	81.74	79.82	.00	.17
<b>Level of segregation of marital roles</b>					
<i>How widespread is that in a family both parents are worker</i>					
	Turkey or Italy	432.42	488.70	.00	.55
	Turkey or Italy*Participant Nationality	53.48	60.44	.00	.13
	Participant Nationality	46.83	52.44	.00	.12
<i>How widespread is the collaboration of both partners in housework</i>					
	Turkey or Italy	332.24	332.19	.00	.46
	Turkey or Italy*Participant Nationality	.28	.28	.60	.00
	Participant Nationality	105.70	119.09	.00	.23
<i>How widespread is collaboration of both partners in children education</i>					
	Turkey or Italy	232.55	257.34	.00	.39
	Turkey or Italy*Participant Nationality	.97	1.07	.30	.00
	Participant Nationality	14.79	12.47	.00	.03

Concerning women's condition, we found a strong effect of the country. Participants evaluated that in Italy women have more freedom ( $\eta^2 = .56$ ) and working career is more

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important for women ( $\eta^2 = .45$ ). The interaction effects were significant too, indicating that Italians, compared to Turkish participants, rated lower both freedom ( $\eta^2 = .11$ ) and career importance ( $\eta^2 = .17$ ) in Turkey.

Regarding the level of segregation of marital roles, participants considered more frequent in Italy the job holding for both parents in a family ( $\eta^2 = .55$ ), their collaboration in housework ( $\eta^2 = .46$ ) and in children education ( $\eta^2 = .39$ ). There was only one interaction effect: all the participants perceived higher frequency of job involvement for both parents in Italy but this perception was higher in Italian respondents ( $\eta^2 = .13$ ).

Looking at the between subjects effects, with the exceptions of the importance of marriage and building a family, Turkish participants expressed higher evaluations than Italian participants did. This is probably due to a different use of the response scale.

## 6. Discussion

The present study aimed at investigating the reciprocal perception concerning family and women's condition in two different countries. Although with significant gender inequalities, Italy is characterized by a culture historically deeply rooted in Western values. On the contrary, Turkey has gone through important westernizing changes only in the last decades. Indeed, there have been rapid changes in Turkish culture, including mass migration from Eastern rural villages to urban centres with increased exposure to Western norms and values (Raney & Cinarbas, 2005; Rogers-Sirin, Yanar, Yüksekbaş, Senturk, & Sirin, 2017). These changes have created a complex and diverse society offering a unique opportunity to examine how culture-related variables may relate to the Western traditions that are rapidly expanding into Islamic countries (Mocan-Aydin, 2000; Raney & Cinarbas, 2005; Poyrazli, Doğan, & Eskin, 2013). Nevertheless, as community psychologists suggest (Bond & Mulvey, 2000), gender in context is a central organizing category for understanding power imbalances and directing social change for women as well as for men and children.

The perception of the two countries seems to be consistent with our hypotheses; both national groups thought that in Turkey marriage is more important, divorce is less widespread, the women's condition is worst, and the marital roles are more segregated. Overall, participants agreed in considering family structure and gender roles more traditional in Turkey, consistently with literature describing Islamic societies as more patriarchal than Western Europe societies (O'Neil & Toktas, 2014; Caffaro et al., 2014). The only discordant opinion between Italians and Turkish concerns the cohabitation, as each national group believed that it is more widespread in its home country.

Concerning the perception of the importance of traditional family, the opinions of participants about one's own country were mirror-like. Both groups thought that in their country building a family is more important and at the same time the cohabitation and the divorce are more widespread. Turkish and Italians perceived their home country in similar way, and "similarly different" from the country of comparison. This finding seems to be in line with literature stemming from the Social Identity and Social Categorization Theory (Brewer, 1991; Tajfel & Turner, 1979): in an intergroup context, individuals tend to emphasize differences between ingroup and outgroup in order to maintain social distinctiveness. However, all social and ethnic groups perform this process in similar way.

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Concerning women's condition and the segregation of marital roles, we did not find this "mirror effect". Participants had similar opinions about Italy but different about Turkey. Both groups considered Turkey more traditional than Italy but the Italians perceived Turkey as significantly more traditional than Turkish did.

Both national groups perceived the family more important (a traditional value) and the divorce more spread (an indicator of crisis of traditional values) in their homeland. This datum suggests that traditional family was not necessarily viewed as a positive or negative feature of the country. On the contrary, both national groups perceived Turkey more sexist, consistently with indicators of gender inequalities (Hausmann, Tyson, & Zahidi, 2012; OECD, 2013), but only Italians emphasized the outgroup sexism. This may be an effect of the raising of prejudice toward Muslims and the Islamic countries (Imhoff & Recker, 2012; Panagopoulos, 2006), which implies the idea that Islamic countries are traditionalist, patriarchal, and sexist. Moreover, Italians may consider sexism, differently from traditional family, a negative outgroup feature increasing the positive distinctiveness of the ingroup. We should remember that, on the ground of the indicators of gender inequalities, Italy is more equalitarian than Turkey but less than the majority of the other countries considered. It is possible that when asked to compare their country with a supposedly more sexist one, Italians underestimate the degree of gender equality in their nation.

Our study represents one of the first attempts to investigate the reciprocal perception of Islamic and Western countries. Indeed, studies on gender roles normally test stereotypes in different cultures (e.g., Lam et al., 2017; Lips, 2016; Rollero, 2016; Tartaglia & Rollero, 2015; Wood & Eagly, 2015). Of course, the present study shows some limitations, which suggest directions for future research. First, our participants were university students, who are usually more liberal and *politically correct* in prejudice-related attitudes than the general adult population (Henry, 2008). This kind of sample limits the external validity of the results. Future research should consider also different age cohorts, as well as other relevant individual characteristics, such as the educational level or the political orientation. Moreover, since this was a first attempt to study the reciprocal perception of two cultural groups, we used few measures: it should be interesting to extend the investigation of reciprocal perception to other related domains, such as sexism or stereotypes concerning gender roles and leadership aspirations. Another limitation pertains to the cross-sectional research design, which makes it difficult to draw predictive conclusions. Finally, the dramatic contemporary political situation might increasingly affect the attitudes of each country toward other ethnic or national groups. It could be interesting to explore how specific events (i.e., the terrorist attacks in France or the failed Turkey's putsch) influenced and probably changed such attitudes.

In the globalised world, the comparison between national, ethnical, and cultural groups is more and more frequent, even in the absence of a direct contact. Cultural prejudices, like the one towards Muslims and Islamic countries, may emphasise the intergroup discrimination effect. In turn, the discrimination effect may have negative outcomes worsening intergroup relations and making people underestimate negative characteristics of the ingroup. For these reasons, it is important that social scientists and practitioners try to reduce prejudice by promoting the awareness that at least some of the alleged outgroup negative features occur also within the ingroup. This aim requires interventions at the cultural and group level, where prejudices and shared beliefs are shaped, as the framework of community psychology properly suggest.



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