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### Bella Figura: Understanding Italian Communication in Local and Transatlantic Contexts

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**Bella Figura: Understanding Italian Communication in Local and Transatlantic Contexts** 

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## Summary and Keywords

*Bella figura*—beautiful figure—is an idiomatic expression used to reflect every part of Italian life. The phrase appears in travel books and in transnational business guides to describe Italian customs, in sociological research to describe the national characteristics of Italians, and in popular culture to depict thematic constructs and stereotypes, such as the Mafia, romance, and *la dolce vita*. Scholarly research on *bella figura* indicates its significance in Italian civilization, yet it remains one of the most elusive concepts to translate. Among the various interpretations and references from foreigners and Italians there is not a single definition that captures the complexity of *bella figura* as a cultural phenomenon. There is also little explanation of the term, its usage, or its effects on Italians who have migrated to other countries. Gadamerian hermeneutics offers an explanation for how *bella figura* functions as a frame of reference for understanding Italian culture and identity, which does not disappear or fuse when Italians interact with people from different countries but instead takes on an interpretive dimension that is continually integrating new information into the subconscious structures of the mind.

In sum, *bella figura* is a sense-making process, and requires a pragmatic know-how of Italian communication (verbal and nonverbal). From this perspective, *bella figura* is pre-structure by which Italians and some Italian migrants understand and interpret their linguistically mediated and historical world. This distinction changes the concept *bella figura* from a simple facade to a dynamic interplay among ever-changing interpretations and symbolic interactions. The exploration of *bella figura* is relevant to understanding Italian communication on both local and transnational levels.

Keywords: *bella figura*, international/global communication, cultural literacy, hermeneutics, performance theory, assimilation, Italian American culture, cultural communication

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## Introduction

One of the oldest colloquial expressions in the Italian language is *bella figura*. The combined words produce a performative and symbolic form of communication in Italian soci-

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ety. “Bella figura,” in its literal translation, means “beautiful figure,” and typically follows the Italian verb *fare*—to make. The term is rooted in grammatical variations and subtle nuances of the Italian language (verbal and nonverbal) and can reflect every part of Italian life, although its usage and meaning varies within regional dialects, lexicon, and cultural context. Common practices include matters related to how well individuals uphold social norms, follow local codes of conduct, or display appreciation, respect, and civility (Nardini, 1999). The “making” can also refer to saving face, valuing high culture aesthetic standards, and emphasizing style in one’s appearance, manners, or verbal and nonverbal communication. In everyday conversation, it is more common to use the phrase without the adjective *bella*. For example, one could say, “What a *figura* he made during the meeting.” The beauty or ugliness of the figure is implied in one’s tone and nonverbal communication.

Bella figura is expressed locally and regionally, but its influence is global and its definition is variable. The term and the history of its uses over the centuries are culturally and linguistically heterogeneous. The expectation for beauty and pride within Italian culture is thought to have started in ancient Rome and grown during the Italian Renaissance and Baroque periods (Nardini, 1999). It was the subjects of Renaissance painting, of Baroque architecture, and of opera, for example. Bella figura was integral to the construction of high Italian culture and appealed to the upper classes. It was also located in places that were part of the Grand Tour, when people traveled great distances in the 17th and 18th centuries to experience the aesthetic virtues of Italian culture (art, music, theatre, ceremony, to name a few).<sup>1</sup> Bella figura continues to hold worldwide recognition in the fine arts, culinary arts, and the international fashion industry. One could potentially *faire belle figure* in French or *bella figura machen* in German.

In the 21st century, bella figura is linked to notions of global consumption and international travel. Within global corporate culture, bella figura is a strategic skill set for understanding Italian business customs and etiquette, and even the mindset of Italian professionals (Severgnini, 2006). It is the definitive “good impression” *transcreated* for closing a business deal and making a profit. Similarly, bella figura is a selling point for international luxury trips or tours, and it is sometimes listed in travel guides as a superficial phrase for appreciating Italian culture or the feeling of living an idealized Italian lifestyle (*la dolce vita*).

For American tourists or student travelers, bella figura is a cautionary term for avoiding various degrees of cultural miscommunication and perpetuating the “ugly American” stereotype. Outsiders seeking to experience authentic culture are not privy to the duplicitous nature of spatial customs of old European societies or Italian outdoor culture. Public space appears unrestricted, especially when Italians seem noncompliant with some official regulations. Local communities, however, can be more observant and rigidly controlling of their members’ public behavior. Bella figura, in this context, is understood as the code of proper social conduct that governs individuals’ private and public behavior (Gardaphé, 1996). The rules, concealed from outsiders (De Salvo & Giunta, 2002), even permeate Italian bureaucracy and politics. It is rare for foreigners to have insider knowledge

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or firsthand experience of these cultural norms, unless they find themselves in violation of the code. Henry James's classic novel *Daisy Miller* is a cautionary tale for American travelers who disregard traditional Italian norms or codes of behavior. The fictional character's avant-garde attitude leads her to a tragic end. One does not have to be Italian to be held accountable for upholding this standard or making an ugly, *brutta*, or bad, *mala figura*. Life imitated art in 2009 when an American exchange student, Amanda Knox, stood trial for murdering her roommate in Perugia, Italy. The case was highly sensationalized in the Italian media and received global attention. The Italian prosecutor, Giuliano Mignini, convinced an Italian court of Knox's guilt by persistently focusing on a series of ugly figures she made in public following the death of Meredith Kercher. Amanda Knox spent four years in prison for essentially violating the codes of bella figura (Scannell Guida, 2013). Ignorance or defiance of the code can lead to mortal danger or legal peril.

## Locating Bella Figura

La bella figura and its presence in Italian civilization is one of the most difficult expressions to locate within scholarly work, and its acknowledgment does not guarantee a comprehensive translation. No specific definition captures the complexity of bella figura as a cultural phenomenon, or its usages, and its effects on Italians who have migrated to other countries.<sup>2</sup> Scholars who mention bella figura include a number of sociologists, anthropologists, and historians, but few cultural theorists. American scholars often link bella figura to assimilation and adaptation to describe the national characteristics of Italians or Italian Americans or to document the behavior patterns of Italian immigrants before World War II and after the demise of little Italies across the country.<sup>3</sup> Adaptation theories and cultural models are prevalent in the communication field, yet the phrase "bella figura" is absent from the literature. Italian Americans represent an assimilated group in our long-standing paradigm, which arguably contributes to the lack of communication research into bella figura and the experience of Italian Americans.

In Italian American literature, bella figura manifests in memoirs, autobiographies (De Salvo, 2002; Di Prima, 2001; Giunta, 2002; Herman, 2011), and material culture of immigrants and their children (Sciorra, 2015). Some writers draw attention to aspects of Italian life that uphold codes of bella figura as a way to authenticate their experiences growing up in an Italian family or enclave, while others describe collective occurrences that "politicize" their ethnic identity (Gardaphé, 2000). Bella figura also emerges in the consequences of assimilation, such as de-ethnicization (Tamburri, 1998), dual identities (Barolini, 1997), and cultural schizophrenia. Within the realm of interpretive scholarship, bella figura can be observed through qualitative methodologies that reveal cultural patterns, performance, and cultural identity (Goffman, 1963) or linguistic representations and the negotiation of shared identities (Philipsen, 1975). Gloria Nardini's (1999) leading text, *Che Bella Figura! The Power of Performance in an Italian Ladies' Club in Chicago*, is an ethnographic exploration of how bella figura influences Italian American identity formation and self-presentation. Drawing from Goffman's (1963) dramaturgical theory of self-presentation, Nardini contends that a person is never dissociated from the act of making

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or expressing a beautiful figure because he or she is the figure. Nardini defines *bella figura* as a central metaphor for understanding Italian life. She places it within the framework of self-presentation, performance, and display, all of which depend on an audience to produce meaning and approval. This distinction changes the beautiful figure concept from a simple facade to a dynamic interplay between ever-changing interpretations and symbolic interactions.

## **Self-Presentation and Performance**

Italy has a long-standing reputation as a performance culture, and Italians are often characterized by their ability to make a dramatic spectacle (Barzini, 1964). As a result, performance is a highly valued and interactive mode of communication in Italian society. Life in public, *piazza della vita*, permeates everyday living, and even overlaps regional distinctiveness. The demands of social interaction (in a Goffmanian sense) require a learned appropriateness, so individuals can project a positive impression of themselves, which in this case is situated in the presentation of *bella figura*. A successful figure requires one's private principled qualities to be reflected in his or her front-stage behavior (Gardaphé, 1996; Nardini, 1999; Reich, 2004). The construction of self-presentation emerges in communal space, where individuals are judged according to community codes of honor and shame (Anolli & Pascucci, 2005; Nardini, 1999). The Latin word *onore* (honor) represents respect and approval, whereas *verecunida* (shame and dishonor) signifies standards of purity, modesty, and dignity (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998). The degrees to which individuals experience and adhere to these codes vary by class, region, and generation. Silverman's (1968) research illustrates how *bella figura* is also connected to Catholicism and the agricultural world, where family honor and shame are linked to female virginity. Within the framework of traditional Italian male and female gender roles, men must prove themselves in public by displaying acts of honor, whereas women are expected to avoid shame at all costs. It is important to note that "honor" (*onore*) is not a word that Italians use on a regular basis, whereas shame, *vergogna*, is made public and attached to notions of making the ugly figure, *brutta figura*. The latter is more commonly used in everyday conversation than making the beautiful figure. Studies on Italian class structures and knowledge of social rules are grounded in Habermas's (1991) theory of the public sphere and civility. Silverman (1968) extends the notion of Italians' civic sense of self by explaining that putting on a good face, even when confronting adversity, is necessary for communicating a beautiful figure. *Bella figura* and self-presentation is a manifestation of symbols and spectacles of outdoor European Mediterranean cities in general.

## **A Sense-Making Process**

Drawing from Hans-Georg Gadamer's (2004) understanding of self-consciousness and what connects us to the human world, *bella figura* is a representation and a sense-making process. Since conceptualizations of *bella figura* are subjective and contextual, the code of public behavior is best understood as an ongoing interactive hermeneutic experience.

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Contemporary hermeneutics (in a Gadamerian sense) draws on phenomenological principles to further develop the ideas of translation, meaning, and interpretation. Hermeneutics demonstrates that identity is never without contradictions, multiple realities, and infinite possibilities. The nature of the *bella figura* phenomenon requires an understanding (interpretation and practical know-how) of Italian communication (verbal and nonverbal). *Bella figura* becomes the prestructure by which Italians and some Italian migrants understand and interpret their linguistically mediated and historical world (Scannell Guida, 2013). *Bella figura* is their worldview, a frame of reference for understanding culture and identity, which suggests that it does not disappear or fuse when Italians or some Italian Americans interact with people from different cultures. The figure is invented and reinvented in every sentence and every interaction, because the act is a mode of being, not something individuals consciously do or do not do. *Bella figura* is about multiculturalism, which resonates in living language and communication practices.

Hermeneutics also demonstrates that identity is never without contradictions, multiple realities, and infinite possibilities. Hermeneutics is only one means of exploring *bella figura*. Many find its apparatus difficult to use because it does not present a specific methodology, but instead provides an explanation of human comprehension and an alternative context of knowledge. Understanding and knowledge are dependent on culture, history, and context, which is why *bella figura* is frequently misconstrued. Since the expression appears in different aspects of Italian culture and language, we can assume that the figure-making act carries societal norms governing both Italian communication and other elements of Italian social life.

## **Metacommunication**

The beautiful figure is linked to three cultural constructs that appear throughout Italian language and culture: *virtuosismo*, performing with great style (Barzini, 1964); *sprezzatura*, displaying an “artful artlessness” (Berger, 2000); and *disinvoltura*, exhibiting a graceful and inscrutable demeanor (Del Negro & Berger, 2001). All three terms are used to describe various forms of spectacles, illusions, or embellished truths. They also emphasize the virtues of appropriate manners and Western European humanism. It is necessary to briefly address these concepts in order to fully understand the *bella figura*.

### **Virtuosismo**

To perform with great style suggests a grand spectacle, an act of *virtuosismo*. Grandiose spectacles and ceremonies and the value placed on such spectacles and ceremonies are easily identifiable in the Colosseum of Rome, the Sistine Chapel, and countless other examples of ornate artistic productions, architecture, festivals, pageantry, and processions. Human beings, in their attempt to make life acceptable, often strive for effects that combine forces of nature and majestic landscapes or include the authority of the Catholic Church (Ferraro, 2005). Catholicism, with its magnificent cathedrals and stained-glass windows, papacy and magic ritual, is the archetype of *virtuosismo*. The performance of

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virtuosismo involves various degrees of applied skill. Such a performance may be as simple as strolling along a piazza, or as difficult as performing an operatic aria. Regardless of the skill required, it involves a heightened sense of self-presentation and performance (Del Negro & Berger, 2001). Thus, virtuosismo is experienced in both the grandest spectacles and most ordinary social interactions.

### **Disinvoltura**

The act of *disinvoltura* is a subtler spectacle, one that requires the graceful, yet mysterious display of social behavior. Del Negro and Berger's (2001) study of the *passeggiata* (promenade strolling rituals) describe *disinvoltura* as an "aesthetic of reflexivity." A strolling performance allows the audience to judge individuals' clothes, hair, walk, appropriate eye contact, and other bodily movement. The performer relies on the audiences' reflexive awareness of social norms, gender roles, power relations, and truths and contradictions that are central to Italian culture. In a Bakhtinian (1981) sense, the performer has an acute awareness of being both the spectacle and the spectator, in that he or she must be mindful of both self-pageantry and audience without drawing undue attention to either. The success of this self-conscious performance depends on a reflexive understanding of self-presentation.

### **Sprezzatura**

In 1528, Baldassare Castiglione published his guide to successful courtier behavior, *Cortegiano*. The book received international recognition and was translated into six languages by the end of the 16th century. According to Castiglione (2003), a skillful courtier should transcend the mundane experiences of everyday life by making them appear slightly mysterious, crafty, and natural (Burke, 1995). This skill is referred to as *sprezzatura* (nonchalance), which is the appearance of effortless effort. A successful courtier can conceal the work it took for him to learn how to do things without showing exertion in music, dance, rhetoric, etiquette, and athletics (Burke, 1995). For Castiglione, *sprezzatura* is the virtue of true art. In the Italian language, *sprezzatura* can follow *disinvoltura*, in that a courtier can perform a *disinvoltura sprezzata*. Each term contains distinct meanings and usages, but the combined manifestation of charm and trickery is a form of metacommunication, and is essential to forming a *bella figura*. Machiavelli's writing on ethics and morals, however, forewarns of the dangers of using *sprezzatura* for personal gain (Gardaphé, 2000). Public and private morality is situated within highly complex and performative traditions of Italian communication.

To foreigners, Italy may seem an unpredictable and duplicitous society. The rules reflect ancient symbols and spectacles that date as far back as the 16th century. As a result, many outsiders have miscalculated Italian sociopolitical perspectives (Barzini, 1964). Dean Peabody's (1985) research reveals an undertow of social distrust within Italian society, which creates a discrepancy between appearance and reality. The discrepancy that Peabody observes is grounded in centuries of turbulent economic, political, and social conditions. Italians learned to conceal their misery by subscribing to proverbs, such as

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*“chi dici il tuo segreto, doni la tua liberta: to whom you tell a secret you give your freedom”* (Gardaphé, 2000, p. 48). They also learned to conceal their concealment. As a means of survival, Italians have learned how to perform favorable appearances. Bella figura is tied to the code of silence, *omerta*. Gardaphé (2000) explains that silence allows individuals to control their self-presentation and conceal their true self from outsiders.

Sojourners, newcomers, and global corporate individuals often lack knowledge of important historical context, and of the metacommunication for understanding and adhering to the social norms. They do not have access to insider knowledge of ancient social rules (which vary from region to region) or of figure-making. To examine bella figura, we need to understand how the act of displaying favorable appearances has evolved as part of Italian national identity and linguistic history.

## **Performing a National Identity**

For nearly three centuries leading up to the Republic of Italy (1861), people identified themselves, not as Italians, but as members of provincial and, more often, local societies. They spoke different Italic dialects. Italy’s provincial and local differences were tied to socioeconomic outcomes and inequalities throughout the southern regions. Compared to central and northern Italian societies, southern Italian and Sicilians societies were undeveloped and stagnant, a phenomenon that led to the so-called Southern Question (Gramsci & Forgas, 2000; Schneider, 1998), which addresses to the issue of how to modernize the South. Many saw the distinctions between these regions as being between high culture (North) and low culture (South). This perception, in turn, created a nationalist discourse that instigated antisouthern and antinorthern biases that Italian emigrants carried to America (Alba, 1985; Del Giudice, 2000). The idea of merging the cultural regions was initially met with opposition (Di Scala, 1995). Italy’s late achievement of a national identity and a centralized government in relation to European nations testifies to the strength of regional identities. The southern provinces vehemently opposed losing their independence and shedding their regional distinctiveness. In 1861, Garibaldi and his army of red shirts conquered the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies to force it into the *Risorgimento* (unification) of Italy (Di Scala, 1995).

Italy acquired a national flag, armed forces, currencies, and embassies, but in reality, the unified state was not what people had hoped. The young nation’s fragile structure rested on citizens who lacked an organic sense of national identity but desperately wanted to believe in one (Barzini, 1983) as a means of projecting a bella figura to the world. Since World War I, Italy has had to look like a prosperous power within the European Union and in competitive global markets, even if the appearances of a well-organized nation belie regional realities. The competing realities have produced a dichotomy of private truths and public lies (Barzini, 1983). Ending ancient biases and economic obstacles has impeded the acceptance of a national identity.



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Few other countries have experienced such profound linguistic and cultural changes (De Mauro, 1963). The *Risorgimento* had widespread effects on culture and communication, including the fusion of standard Italian and ancient vocabularies, the development of new regional vernaculars, and drastic changes to the communication landscape (Hall, 1964). The *questione della lingua* (question of language) was delayed (Hall, 1964) for decades after the unification. People continued to speak local dialects at home and standard Italian in public or on paper, a habit that immigrants transported to the new world. According to Italian linguist Tullio De Mauro (1963), only 2.5% of the population could speak standard Italian in 1861. The preservation of intervillage relations and local identities sustained dialects, lexicons, and ceremonies. The language reform of 1923 did little to suppress the use of local vernacular. The official percentage had risen to 87% in 1951, but this statistic did not account for prevailing illiteracy. By the 1990s, sociologists and anthropologists believed the growing influence of upward mobility, urbanization, secularization, and migration throughout Italy would slowly weaken the practices of local tongues and a village consciousness, or *companilismo*, but this did not seem to be the case (Tak, 1990). In spite of changing political and social trends, bilingualism remained the rule. Standardized Italian continues to meet linguistic challenges in the 21st century.

Significant linguistic and cultural changes occurred around the world in the last decades of the 20th century. Italy's population reached 60 million in 2010, which included nearly 3 million non-European Union migrants from Romania, Albania, Ukraine, China, and Morocco. The rise of new linguistic communities that intersected with Italian dialect communities, does not appear to have had a significant effect on the use of local vernaculars within Italy (De Mauro, 1963).

Every society maintains some connection with its linguistic history while dealing with the language challenges of the present and future. Variations of any expression tend to evolve and fuse with newcomers, but some aspects of Italian language, such as old colloquialisms, endure as discursive practices of Italian talk. Like Italian dialects, *Bella figura* survives, in part, because it remains a central mode for understanding and performing provincial and local culture within Italy.

## **Italian Americans *Fare Bella Figura***

It is estimated that between 1880 and 1920 more than three million Italians and Sicilians entered the United States (Mormino & Pozzetta, 1998). In general, these immigrants did not trust governments or clergy and held no real sense of an Italian national identity (Bona, 2003). They imported their distinct values, regionalisms, and ancestral customs to their new world, including the codes of *bella figura* and *omerta* (Gardaphé, 1996). Both codes of public conduct crossed the Atlantic, but changed through assimilation practices that left immigrants dissociated from the imperatives of their original cultures. In general, these codes upheld rules in Italian shame culture, but the specific meaning created out of their original purpose was no longer intelligible or necessary. In the United States, *bella figura* became a heightened sense of dignity, grounded in the fear of being seen as

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less than fully assimilated and less than human (Philipsen, 1990). Over the decades, Italian immigrants faced the uncertainty of deportation, discrimination, and even violence. *Bella figura* allowed them to conceal their fears from outsiders (De Salvo & Giunta, 2002). For some Italian immigrants, *bella figura* created inner conflicts regarding the limitations and attachments to their ethnic identity in American society. Living between dual and dueling identities can cause *chiaroscuro*, a word Italians use to describe a state experienced by many Italian Americans (Barolini, 1997). *Chiaroscuro* is a form of what Du Bois (1973) refers to as double consciousness. The inner conflict results in cultural confusions and expressions (Bona, 2003; Kramer, 2003) that manifest in the performance (verbal and non-verbal) of both the *bella figura* and *brutta figura*.

Notions of *bella figura* were reimagined in popular culture and media, specifically in reference to the Mafia. Gardaphé (1996) contends that mob narratives appeal to Americans because they are about resistance to assimilation. The godfather, in a traditional western heroic fashion, controls the homogenous forces of society and recreates conditions of the old world. This sort of control, Gardaphé argues, is the real American dream. The western hero and the godfather represent the *bella figura* of American masculinity. The beautiful figure is also embodied by other thematic constructs and stereotypes, such as the overly sentimental lover, romance (*amoré*), and *la dolce vita*. Italian Americans are generally sensitive to media stereotypes; especially those that portray them as violent criminals, sexual predators, or ill-mannered disgraces (*vergognoso*). Italian Americans, especially business owners, have tried to distance themselves from illegitimate images of their ingroup, although it is not always possible. In many situations, just having an Italian surname is enough to bring forth suspicions of Mafia affiliation, for example. In August 2019, CNN journalist Chris Cuomo went into a rage after a heckler called him “Fredo” (a character in Mario Puzo’s novel *The Godfather*; Gold, 2019). Cuomo’s “Fredo meltdown” (a *brutta figura*) and his comparison of the epithet to the N-word quickly drew criticism from the African American community and many members of the Italian American community.

Italian American youth culture, in contrast, has embraced the spectacle of less dignified behavior, as it is associated with partying, physical beauty, and Guido Culture (Tricarico, 2019). In the MTV shows *Jersey Shore* and *Growing Up Gotti* there is a sense of pride in “being Guido” and embracing Italian characteristics that reflect ostensibly low culture. The unconventional display of public behavior has sparked a national debate between individuals on social media and within organizations, such as the National Italian American Foundation and the Italian American Studies Association. The disagreement over what constitutes appropriate behavior (*bella figura*) is relevant to how Italian Americans define their ethnicity outside of Italy.<sup>4</sup>

## **Bella Figura in the Wake of Identity and Assimilation**

Intergroup communication is the extent to which individuals perceive themselves as in-group members and the ways in which they respond to group identification (Kashima, Kashima, & Hardie, 2000). Intergroup communication appears to be situational, in that individuals compare their group's position in society with that of other groups and seek to obtain positive distinctiveness for their ingroup (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). The concept of intergroup identity is grounded in Tajfel's (1974) social identity theory (Harwood, Giles, & Ryan, 2004). These positive comparisons provide individuals with positive social identities, which in turn bolster their self-esteem (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Social identity theory is an extension of Erikson's (1959) individual self-concept theory, which posits that self-identity comprises two parts: personal identity and social identity. For example, an Italian American might seek information or hold beliefs that suggest that Italian Americans are a valued ethnic group in American society. Combining social-psychological perspectives with intergroup communication reveals the dualistic nature of one's social and personal self-concept. Intergroup communication is relevant because it may provide insights to understanding the complex identity issues of Italian Americans and the construction of *bella figura*.

Ting-Toomey et al. (2000) explain that people communicate their ethnic identities through conflict styles and negotiation. Maoz (2004) contends that intercultural encounters may contain power struggles and processes of identity construction; therefore, intergroup communication reveals various styles of conflict and power that influence the collective identity and collective action of an ethnic group. Melucci (1996) believes that Italian Americans must rethink the concept of group identity, even if doing so requires confronting the tension between structure and meaning. Identity conveys the idea of permanence, which is lost in Western notions of linear progress. The permanence of identity, according to Melucci, lies in the continuous process of its reconstruction. The label "Italian American" provides the certainty of a unique past while still allowing room for fluctuation.

The immigrants who fled to America after Italy's unification did not consider themselves Italian or American, but within a hundred years they had established an Italian American identity and an assimilated status (Bona, 2003; Verdicchio, 1997). In the United States, the label "Italian American" collapses both Italian and Sicilian cultures into one category, a practice that acknowledges the cultural traits of the *higher* of the two cultures and the traits that Italian and Sicilian immigrants share instead of the ones that set them apart (Alba & Nee, 2003). This conflation occurred, in part, because many Americans overlooked the distinction between Italians and Italian ethnicity. Northern Italian immigrants were more established in the United States and therefore reluctant to unite with the newly arrived southern Italians or Sicilians, whom they had long considered inferior (Orsi, 1985). Many earlier Italian immigrants struggled to disassociate themselves from the Sicilian immigrants, and some moved out of neighborhoods that Sicilians populated. They

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saw Sicilians as dirty, diseased anarchists who were unwilling to assimilate, and accused them of introducing the Mafia to the United States. The Southern Question and prejudices regarding the “lower other” followed Sicilian immigrants to America.

### The White Question

As migration increased, perceptions of Italians as not fully white produced prejudices and suspicions against their “dark white,” “white ethnic,” or “less than white” appearances (Alba & Nee, 2003, p. 2). The Southern Question became “the white question,” because ethnic and racial differences varied by degrees of whiteness in America. In 1945, W. Lloyd Warner and Leo Srole’s research findings on assimilation supported the notion that fair-skinned people assimilated quickly but darker complected people, including Armenians and Sicilians, the process took much longer. Warner and Srole (1945) developed a timetable that placed “English speaking protestants at the top and ‘Negroes and all Negroid mixtures’ at the bottom” of society (Alba & Nee, 2003, p. 2). According to the timetable, Italian assimilation was expected to take six generations. Since nearly 80% of the three million Italians that migrated to the United States were from the *lower* (southern Italy) and the *lowest* (Sicily) regions of Italy (Del Giudice, 2000), this adjustment to American life and American identity was dubious.

Precious little research addresses the complex manner in which immigrants of Italian descent have adopted or resisted assimilation, or how their codes of conduct have factored into their experiences. Southern Italians and Sicilians did not perceive themselves as belonging on a black/white axis (Bona, 2003; Gabaccia, 2003). The social classification left them with little control over their sense of self or the ability to project a positive public impression, *una bella figura*. The code of silence, which shields private identity from outsiders, gained new momentum in American society. The white question also instigated racial discrimination, blame, and self-righteousness within the Italian community, and subjected them to violence with other groups (two famous episodes of violence occurred in Harlem in 1945 and Bensonhurst in 1989; Guglielmo, 2003; Sciorra, 2003). Lighter-skinned Sicilians often passed for Northern Italian in public, but since people knew each other from the old country, concealing identities was extremely difficult in Italian American society. Others rejected notions of whiteness and the indoctrination of American racism (Gennari, 1996). For example, Sicilian jazz singer Louis Prima, whose identity was often questioned, challenged being “made black” in America (Gennari, 1996). Prima’s stage humor mocked notions of whiteness and ethnicity, while his musical performances frequently blurred race lines (Guida, 2005). Like many immigrants, Prima’s ethnic identity was simply an expression of the fused African, Sicilian, and American culture in which he lived and worked. Anglo-Italian cultural relations were also strained by remarks in the media that referred to Italians as “nonwhites” or “dagoes” (Mormino & Pozzetta, 1998). To make matters worse, Italians were deemed a national threat during World War II (Carnevale, 2003). These instances, coupled with the lynching of Italian immigrants in Louisiana and Florida, complicated how Italians came to view themselves racially. Thus, it was necessary for immigrants to consider ethnic difference in terms of the melting-pot at-

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titude and, therefore, to strive for an assimilated status and for whiteness (Tamburri, 1998).

Italian immigrants transported their language and customs and used them to adapt to American society, where notions of whiteness are equated with social superiority. The practice of *bella figura* and performative communication created the perfect conditions for a superficial performance of assimilation, *bella assimilare*, and the performance of whiteness. Naturalization and race, however, did not guarantee a fixed Italian American identity. The “white question” lurks in the shadows of Italian ethnicity and is still relevant among some Italian Americans today (Guglielmo, 2003). No one really fits into the grand narrative, and according to Tamburri (1991) the hyphenated Italian-American label is only a reminder that Italian Americans forgot what it meant to be Italian.

## Conclusion

In the United States, most people of Italian heritage do not use the term “*bella figura*” in everyday conversation, or know the history of the expression. They do, however, maintain traditions that involve aspects of making a beautiful figure, whether they involve cooking, celebrating, worshipping, or displaying body images. It is reasonable to infer that any type of translation requires comprehension of Italian civilization and Italian communication. Further exploration of the code is required for our relations with Italy as well as our understanding of Italian culture within our own society and in other parts of the world. This discussion can only aid us in understanding the dialectical tensions of Italian American identity and how *bella figura* figures into an assimilated status.

Nardini (1999) is accurate when she states that the term is too complex for a single definition or for one cultural understanding. As human beings, we find meaning, identity, and truth through a world of multiple languages and cultures. Truth manifests in our daily lives, and reveals itself in both high Italian culture (the arts) and low Italian culture (Guido identity), as demonstrated in *bella figura*. As a mode of truth, *bella figura* cannot always be discovered in its definitions, but instead through life experiences that do not exist in monolithic human experience and minimal possibilities. *Bella figura* is an extraordinary fusion of dialogical communication and unpredictable, transnational cultures and identities.

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### **Notes:**

(1.) During the 17th and 18th century, it was common for young gentlemen to take a cultural trip to Europe, as part of their education. The trip was referred to as the Grand Tour.

(2.) The primary focus of bella figura is in the United States. Future research should explore the term in South and Central America, Asia, Africa, and Oceania.

(3.) Critical literary texts and case studies include the works of Richard Alba (1985); Luigi Barzini (1964); Richard Gambino (1974); Herbert Gans (1962); Oscar Handlin (1951); Dean Peabody (1985); Gerry Philipsen 1975); Mario Puzo (2002); Stendhal, 1991) and Gino Speranza (1966). These authors attempt to capture the mannerisms, languages, and customs of Italian immigrants, but most only allude to the bella figura.

(4.) Recent controversy over the term “guido” and Jersey Shore is documented by the Italian American Studies Association.

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