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Italian children's ethnic stereotyping: Age differences among 4-10 year olds

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The aim of the present study is to investigate children's attitude towards different ethnic groups in Italian society where interaction with minority groups is still limited but is increasing rapidly. The perception of the own group and two minority groups has been measured in 4-10 year-old children using the *Multi-response Racial Attitude* (MRA). Data show early emergence of ethnic prejudice and its gradual decline during the development; stereotyped answers are frequent between age of 4 and 6, they reduce with time and nearly disappear around age of 10. Results are discussed in the relation to the two different theoretical approaches in the field, giving evidence to implications tied to the Italian society.

Key words: Ethnic stereotypes, childhood, age differences; measurement, Italian school children

From a developmental point of view, the tendency to attribute positive features to the in-group and negative features to the out-groups has been widely documented in the literature (see reviews by Aboud, 1988; Brown, 1995; Dovidio, Glick, & Rudman, 2005; Fishbein, 1996; Oskamp, 2000; Stangor, 2000). Young children reveal increasingly strong bias towards their ethnic group and display an increase in an in-group positivity/out-group negativity in their trait attributions from 3 to 4 years of age. This bias actually peaks at around 6 to 7 years, and then gradually declines during the middle childhood.

According to the cognitive-developmental approach, originally inspired by Piaget (Piaget & Weil, 1951), Aboud (1988) posits a three-stage model following the assumption that social attitudes might correspond to the development of cognitive abilities. She states that from the age 3 to 6, instinctive emotions and reactions guide child's behaviour. At this stage, children think about themselves in an excessivly positive way and their strong preference for the in-group depends on the fact that they are focused on themselves. Considering that, from a cognitive point of view they have difficulties in decentrating their own perspective and in making it different from the other's one. Moreover, they are strongly led by perceptual data (colour of skin and hair, dresses, language spoken) and their judgements are set up upon the external similarity/difference between people. Starting from the age of 6-7, they operate with rigid categorisation that exaggerates resemblances and differences between in-group and out-group members. In-group identification is based on the extreme perceived similarity inside their own group.

At the age of 7-8 children achieve ethnic constancy, that is to say they understand that ethnic features are stable and unchangeable and the acquisition of more flexible cognitive processes allows them to notice differences and resemblances inside each ethnic group. From the age of 9-10, children are able to focus their attention on individuals, appreciating them for their own personal characteristics, and they understand that being different does not necessarily mean being worse. At this stage, with the development of the ability to classify using multiple attributes, children start to establish differences among subjects of the same ethnic group and similarities among subjects of different ethnic groups (Doyle & Aboud, 1995; Linville, Fisher, & Salovey, 1989).

Inconsistent with Aboud's claims, Nesdale proposed the Social Identity Developmental Theory (SIDT; Nesdale, 1999, 2004) drawing upon Social Identity Theory (SIT; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). He posits that ethnic prejudice is the end-point of a process that involves four sequential phases. These phases vary in terms of social motivation and behaviours which characterize them. Children living in multiethnic societies learn very early which groups are socially approved and respected, and exhibit favouritism towards

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them. Ethnic identification, acquired around the age of 6-7, produces positive bias towards the in-group and negative bias towards the out-group although at this stage, according to Nesdale, it is not possible to talk about prejudice in its real meaning. Later on we witness the transition from simply preferring the in-group to an aversion towards others. This is due to the role played by social factors, which dominates the strictly cognitive processes included in Aboud's model (1988). In other terms, development of prejudice reflects the social context to which the child belongs and the attitude gets stronger and better defined when supported by the in-group agreement. Since, according to the author, preference associated with ethnic group depends mostly on non-cognitive factors, we shall expect stability (Teplin, 1976; Weiland & Coughlin, 1979) or even an increase of prejudice (Rice, Ruiz, & Padilla, 1974; Vaughan, 1987) during the childhood.

In sum, the *cognitive-developmental approach* stresses the role of the acquisition of cognitive abilities on prejudices and theorises the decline of ethnic stereotype during development; the *social identity developmental theory*, giving evidence to the role of social factors, proposes a different developmental trend. At the moment, research results support both of these approaches.

Since these studies have been carried out in countries with a long history of multiethnic societies (e.g. USA, UK) the present work is concerned with the Italian society which is not fully comparable with them. Italy does not have a a long history of ethnic group relations, or a clear and more or less institutionalized pattern of ethnic segregation. Nevertheless, minority groups can be characterized as having low social status and relative disadvantage in several areas. By researching children living in Italy, the present study attempts to extend the previous research conducted in the USA and UK to a cultural context where there is not a large and homogeneous presence of minority groups.

Four to10 year-old children's in-group and out-group perceived characteristics were investigated. It was anticipated, according to the previous work (Primi & Chiesi, 2001), that children would all like the in-group more than the out-group and that age related differences could be expected. Referring to the two theoretical approaches briefly introduced before (cognitive-developmental theory vs. social identity developmental theory) it was predicted that inside a context in which interactions with different ethnic group are very infrequent, age changes in prejudice of majority group children must be more related to the acquisition of cognitive abilities and less to the gaining of social information derived by comparisons with different out-groups. In other words, a developmental trend in prejudice similar to the one described by Aboud (1988) was expected.

To investigate age changes in prejudice, the Italian version (Chiesi & Primi, 2003) of the *Multi-response racial attitude* (MRA) (Aboud & Doyle, 1996; Doyle & Aboud, 1995) was employed. This instrument was particularly useful for the purpose of this work. First, it provides independent measures of positive and negative evaluations of different ethnic groups avoiding a forced choice among groups. Second, MRA has been proposed in two forms, one for 4-6 year olds and one for 7-12 year olds, and so it can be used to measure prejudice through a large age span.

METHOD

Participants

The investigation has been carried out on a sample of 615 children (mean age 8.4, $SD = 2.1$) living in Siena, Pistoia and Firenze districts, in a middle-class areas with a slight presence of minority ethnic groups. Participants were 52 pre-schoolers (mean age 4.5, $SD = 0.4$), 52 kindergarten children (mean age 5.2, $SD = 0.3$) and 511 school-age children; respectively 52 first graders (mean age 6.2, $SD = 0.3$), 114 second graders (mean age 7.6, $SD = 0.3$), 96 third graders (mean age 8.7, $SD = 0.4$), 85 fourth graders (mean age 9.8, $SD = 0.4$) and 164 fifth graders (mean age 10.7, $SD = 0.4$). Number of girls and boys was balanced within subsamples. All children participated with the informed consent of their parents.

Instruments and procedure

Using the *Multi-response racial attitude* (MRA) (Aboud & Doyle, 1996; Doyle & Aboud, 1995), we measured children's perception of the in-group and two minority groups existing in Italian society: North African and Asian people (mostly Chinese). The questionnaire, translated in Italian following the two forms proposed by the authors (one for children aged from 4 to 6 and one for those aged from 7 to 10) was composed of 24 adjectives: 10 positive (e.g. kind, friendly, smart), 10 negative (e.g. mean, selfish, stupid) and 4 fillers (e.g. he/she likes sports, he/she likes TV). In the version for younger children these traits were graphically represented (for example, the adjective "selfish" was represented by a picture of a boy who did not share his toys with others), while for older children these were written on thin cardboards. Taking into account children's comprehension differences related to age, slightly different terms and examples were employed in the two form of the questionnaire.

The MRA requires that children allocate positive and negative attributes among boxes representing three different ethnic groups. Each box has a picture with a White/Black/Asian boy or a girl (same-sex of the participant) in order to facilitate group identification. Children were handed three identical cards for every adjective and were instructed to place them in the box or boxes of people having that attribute. For example: "Some children are friendly and fun to be with. Who is friendly? The White boy, the Black one,

the Chinese[1] one, or more than one of them is friendly?" To answer, children had to distribute cards in the boxes corresponding to ethnic groups (cards could be put all in one box, or in two boxes or in all boxes). In this way, children were given the opportunity to allocate each attribute to one, two or all groups considered.

Children distributed non-evaluative stimuli (photos of ethnic group members, drawings of T-shirts) to practice two types of distributions of three identical pictures (i.e. members of the same ethnic group all to one box, and T-shirts to more than one box). At the end of this training MRA was administered using the three cardboards for each of the 24 adjectives, asking children to put them inside the boxes, and remembering every time they could indicate one or more groups.

Children were tested individually outside the classroom. To guarantee anonymity and confidentiality, participants were assured that only a name code would appear on their data sheet. They took about 15 to 20 minutes to accomplish the task.

RESULTS

The analysis was carried out not using the MRA standard scoring but a different coding that has been tested in a previous work (Chiesi & Primi, 2003). Each answer was transformed into a dichotomous item indicating presence/absence of stereotype, and we obtained a single index of ethnic prejudice. Specifically, not taking into account the filler items, a score of 0 or 1 was attributed to the remaining 20 items (10 positive and 10 negative) according to the following criteria: for positive adjectives 1 point was given when associated to Whites and 0 point when associated to Black or Chinese; 0 was assigned to answers including Whites and Black or Chinese, or both, considered as non-stereotyped answers, since positive traits were associated to the in-group as opposed to the out-group; for negative adjectives, 1 point was assigned when associated with Black or Chinese (or both) and 0 point when associated to White or group combinations including the White group, considered as non stereotyped answers since child gave the same negative attribute both to own the group and to others.

The scores obtained through this coding made it possible to compute an overall prejudice score (*Prejudice Measure*). This measure, being calculated out of 20 dichotomy items, ranged from 0 to 20: high scores indicated the tendency to attribute positive features to the in-group and negative features to others; low scores gave evidence to the absence of such response bias. Moreover, considering the 10 positive and 10 negative items separately, two different indices have been calculated (*Positive Attributes Measure* and *Negative Attributes Measure*) ranging from 0 to 10. These scores were used to stress the possible differences in the response bias related to the two types of features.

Prejudice Measure: Means for each age group describe a particular trend in prejudice (Figure 1): the high scores in younger children were followed by a strong decrease at the age of 7; low scores were found among 7 and 9 year-olds followed by a further decrease at the age of 10. The one way ANOVA indicated a significant difference among groups ($F(6,608) = 72.1$, $p < .001$). *Post-hoc* comparisons (Scheffè) revealed homogeneity in children belonging to the 4-6 age span, and a strong difference between younger and older children. Youngest children scores' differed from 7-10 year-olds ($p < .001$). The same results were obtained for 5 year-olds compared to 7 and 8 year-old children ($p < .01$) and to 9 and 10 year-olds ($p < .001$); and for 6 year-olds compared to the older groups ($p < .01$). Seven year-olds and 8 year-olds, besides differences when compared to younger children, obtained scores similar to 9 year-olds, but higher compared to 10 year-olds ($p < .05$). Nine year-olds and 10 year-olds did not differ from each other.

Positive Attributes Measure: Means of each group gave evidence to the progressive decrease of the attribution of positive items only to the own group and not to other groups (Figure 2). The one way ANOVA underlined a difference among the age groups ($F(6,608) = 65.55$, $p < .001$). *Post-hoc* analysis (Scheffè) revealed a significant difference between youngest children and 5-6 year-olds ($p < .05$), 7-9 year-olds ($p < .01$) and 10 year-olds ($p < .001$). While 5-year olds did not differ from 6 year-olds, both differed from the children 7-9 years of age ($p < .05$), as well as from 10 year-olds ($p < .01$). Seven year-olds, besides the mentioned differences compared to younger children, did not show any differences compared to the older ones. In 8 year-olds, we observed a difference compared to 10 year-olds ($p < .05$). No differences were found between 9-10 year-old children.

Negative Attributes Measure: Group means revealed homogenous high scores from 4 to 6 years of age and the progressive decrease during the following ages until reach-

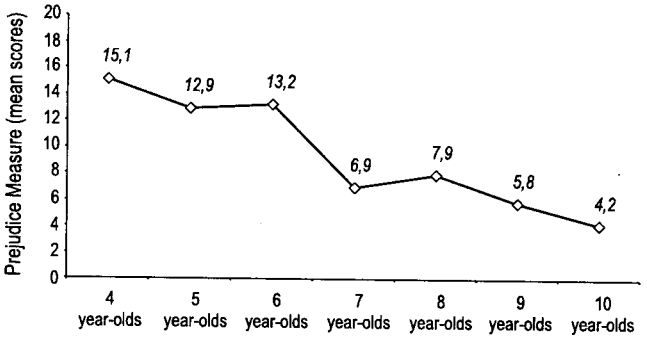

Figure 1. Prejudice Measure (derived from *MRA*) across the age groups.

[1] The label "Chinese" was used because it is more understandable to children compared to the term "Asians"

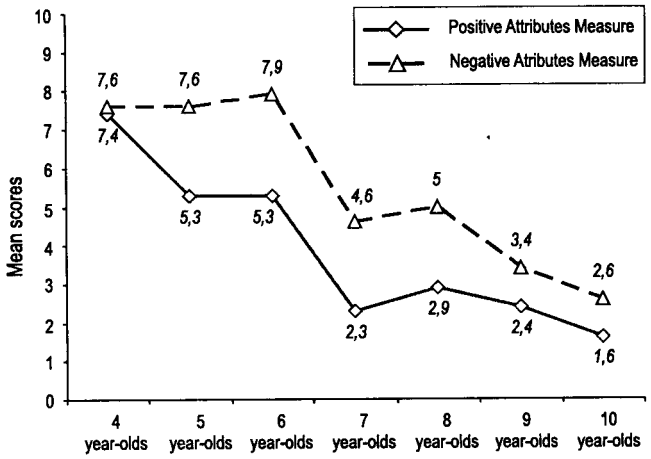

Figure 2. Positive Attributes Measure and *Negative Attributes Measure* (derived from MRA) across the age groups.

ing 10 year- olds' low values (Figure 2). The ANOVA shows a significant difference among groups ($F(6,609)= 54.79$, $p <.001$). *Post-hoc* comparison (Scheffè) revealed homogeneity among children aged from 4 to 6. Children belonging to this age span differ from 7 and 8 years old children ($p <.05$) and to 9 and 10 year-old children ($p <.01$). Seven year-olds differed from the 10 year-olds children ($p <.05$), and 8 year-olds differed from 9 year-olds ($p <.05$) and 10 year-olds ($p <.05$). No differences were found between 9 and 10 year-old children.

Comparing *Positive* and *Negative Attributes Measures* for each age group we observed the same number of stereotyped answers (about 7 out of 10 questions) for the two kinds of items in younger children; from the age of 5 the two scores significantly differed from each other ($t(51) = -6.48$, $p <.001$ for 5 year-olds; $t(51) = -7.64$, $p <.001$ for 6 year-olds; $t(113) = -10.84$, $p <.001$ for 7 year-olds; $t(95)= -6.48$, $p <.001$ for 8 year-olds; $t(84) = -4.63$, $p <.001$ for 9 year-olds; $t(163) = -7.41$, $p <.001$ for 10-year-olds) and, more specifically, the mean score for negative attributes was always about 2 points higher than the one for the positive attributes (Figure 2).

DISCUSSION

Results revealed young Italian children's stereotyped attitude in evaluating different ethnic groups and the decrease of these attitudes during their development. Using a measure obtained with the MRA (Aboud & Doyle, 1996; Doyle & Aboud, 1995), we observed a sharp prevalence of stereotyped answers at the age of 4, 5 and 6, and the subsequent decline to a minimum occurrence of it around the age of 10; from the age of 6-7 half of the attributes presented were attributed in a stereotypical manner, and from 7-9 years of age only a third of them.

Taking into account the attribution of positive and negative features separately, we observe a strong in-group favouritism of youngest children that attribute most of the positive traits only to themselves. From 5 years of age this response bias reduces: 5 and 6 years old children give half of the positive attributes exclusively to the in-group and only third of the positive attributes is given to the in-groups after the age of 7. For the negative attributes, a strong tendency to ascribe negative traits to others is observed until the age of 6 and it begins to decrease only at age 7: half of the negative attributes is given to the out-group by 6 and 7 year-old children and with the 9 year-olds is only about one third. Except for the youngest children, the attribution of negative traits solely to the out-group is higher then the attribution of positive ones only to the in-group.

Concerning younger children, this finding could be explained by the cognitive developmental approach (Aboud, 1988; Piaget & Weil, 1951) that views stereotyping as an information-processing error due to young children's insufficient cognitive ability to perceive people in individual terms. This means that younger children attribute positive traits to themselves and negative to the others because they can not process multiple information and they can only see the world in *bipolar* terms.

The cognitive-developmental theory also reported a decline in ethnic bias after 7 to 8 years of age when children should develop the ability to decentre and to simultaneously attend to more different perspectives. The present results corroborate the assumption about a decline of stereotypical judgements with age; however this decline seems to happen earlier than previous researches assumed (see Aboud, 1988). In other words, and differently from Aboud's model (1988), we did not find a peak around the age of 7 but it is right at that time that we observed a passage towards a less prejudicial attitude.

At the same time, we doubt that the acquisition of cognitive abilities is the only cause of the observed developmental trend. Findings suggest that other factors also exert an influence on whether this attitude declines: we argue that school-age children learn to recognise opinions that are not socially approved and, therefore, they learn to answer on the basis of the *social desirability* criterion. This hypothesis leads to the conclusion that parents, teachers, and the social context in which children live, transmit the message that we can not state that being different means being worse. In other terms, it is probable that children follow a criterion of social desirability that indicates that they know that is neither acceptable to judge others negatively because they are different, nor to consider themselves better than others just because they are similar to majority. If consolidating the prejudice requires the approval of one's social environment, as Nesdale states (2004), we can assume that children live in an environment which does not promote that attitude.

Even if the stereotype decline described by the present results appear inconsistent with the Social Identity Devel-

opmental Theory (Nesdale, 1999; 2002) that proposes an increase of the stereotype during development, SIDT statements can be taken into account to explain these data. SIDT also assumes that prejudice would normally be unlikely to occur in children because their social motives and social knowledge would not be sufficiently developed to support their own feelings of the in-group and out-group like or dislike. Indeed, older children (and adults) may never display ethnic prejudice if the group with which they identify themselves does not foster prejudicial attitudes towards ethnic minority groups. Within the Italian society, where contacts with minority groups are quite limited, it can be assumed that the slight presence of ethnic stereotype in children from 8 years of age depends on the absence of strong social reinforcements and the lack of well-established interactions with minority groups.

These findings have two important implications. On the one hand, according to the cognitive-developmental approach, children as young as 4 years of age are able to use social category above their personal ethnic membership even if they exhibit a rigid way of categorization. On the other hand, consistent with SIDT, we observe that in the absence of resilient social conflicts young children up to 8 years of age simply do not have prejudicial attitudes.

Obviously, only future research can assess the robustness of this finding. To better understand the obtained results a multifactorial approach to the phenomenon is needed: the ability of classifying on multiple dimensions, the ability of conceive different points of view, different levels of exposure to information concerning social groups mediated by culture, family and school have to be investigated in order to explain the definition of prejudice and its trend during development.

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