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Assessing Anti-democratic Tendencies in Italian Schools: the Case of the “City of People”

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Abstract

The orientation to social dominance stems from the observation that all human societies are based on hierarchical structures that imply relationships of domination and submission. The current study aims at analysing social dominance orientation in schools, by adapting the Italian version of the social dominance orientation scale (SDO6 by Di Stefano and Rocca- to 2005) to children 7-10 years of age. The scale was administered to 556 children attending primary public schools in the province of Reggio Emilia, world-known for its preschool approach. Results show that the new SDO6-C children’s scale, largely maintains its metrical properties and, therefore, it is to be considered reliable for the assessment of social dominance orientation in children of the target group. Moreover, both children and teachers showed a low blatant social dominance. Results point to the tendency to integration and equality in this specific socio-cultural context, where inclusion is not only a value but the foundation for educational programs based on group work.

Keywords: anti-democratic tendencies, prevention, intergenerational transmission.

Introduction

The tendency to anti-democratic attitudes has been long investigated through many of its operational constructs (eg.

the authoritarian factor). The social dominance orientation (SDO) is one of the most interesting of these constructs: it is considered “a general attitudinal orientation toward inter-group relations, reflecting whether one generally prefers such relations to be equal, versus hierarchical” (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, and Malle 1994: 742). It explains anti-democratic attitudes through a sort of social Darwinism related to the hierarchical structure of society. In fact, the tensions that derive from economic surplus/discrepancies create social gaps between the members of a specific community. In this perspective, societies face the struggle of economic and social divides that lead to tensions between strong-dominating parts and vulnerable- submitted others (Massey, Arango, Hugo, Kouaouci, Pellegrino and Taylor 2001). Socio-economical divides have shown to increase with the increasing rates of immigration (Ford 2009). Hence, societies react through two opposing forces: one promotes the hierarchy and the Darwinist strategies, and the other tends to mitigate social stratification, promoting equality between the subjects (Sidanius *et al.* 2004). The latter includes those that, because of the systematic nature of immigration, might be at risk of socialmarginalization.

When we move from a societal perspective to an individual one, social dominance can be considered as a variable of the subject’s personality. It is the individual’s inclination to think in terms of domination and submission, to believe that his social class is superior or inferior in comparison to the others (Guimond *et al.* 2003; Pratto *et al.* 1994).

The factors that determine the development of social dominance orientation can be related to the context to which the

individual belongs. According to Altemeyer (1988; 1998), such orientation can be traced back to early childhood experiences of socialization, when the child learns social conduct from the observation and imitation of others. Allport (1954), on the other hand, considers that often the child learns values and behaviors from the extended network of relations, rather than from the teachings of family members. In other studies (About 2003), the origin of social dominance is linked to the categorical distinctions existing in the social environment: children perceive such distinction at an early age, and consciously try to give meaning to its context. They apprehend general and somewhat lumpy categories (e.g. male or female, friend or stranger) that are associated with their daily situations and with the observation of the people around them. Kiesner and colleagues (2003) emphasized the importance of considering the role of social status of children in their peer relationships at schools. During schooling, in fact, it is important to observe the role of the social status of children in peer relationships. When children suffer of low popularity in their peers' community, they risk being exposed to prejudicial attitudes. In a classroom context, low-status members speak less than others; when they talk, nobody takes their ideas seriously or even listens to what they have to say. In contrast, high-ranking members speak much more than others; their suggestions often become the group's decisions; they know how to speak more than listen. These patterns of inequality in the class group are often the effects of status differences in society (Cohen 1998).

Today's school and social reality underlines the importance of problems related to multicultural coexistence, given that

the increase in cultural exchanges and multi-ethnic coexistence are producing more and more frequent manifestations of intolerance and discrimination (Eibach and Keegan 2006). Some research shows, for example, that children express positive attitudes towards their ethnic group rather than towards the outgroup (Clark, Hocevar and Dembo 1980), or negative behaviors towards subjects of sex and race different from their own (Aboud 1988).

Accordingly, this study is based on the consideration that school is a main source of influence for a child's social dominance, that shapes her/his anti-democratic attitude. School here refers specifically to the class-group, where teachers play a significant role in setting up and implementing programs that intend to challenge the social-cultural divide at the basis of any social dominance orientation. The present study satisfies a twofold objective: 1. to verify the adaptability of an adult tool (SDO Scale - version 6) on a population of children age 7-10, in order to assess their social dominance orientation; 2. to explore the levels of social dominance of a class of children in relation to those of their respective teachers.

The research hypothesis is that social tensions, based on economic divide and different accessibility to resources such as jobs, education and health care, are reduced in territories like that of the current study. Democratic societies are lower in SDO measures. The more that a society encourages citizens to cooperate with others and feel concern for the welfare of others, the lower the SDO in that culture (Fischer, Hanke and Sibley 2015). In other words, schools that are highly involved in multicultural inclusive group programs should show low

scores of social dominance orientation and more democratic and egalitarian tendencies.

Method

The current study is composed of two phases: the first one is concerned with studying the content of the Italian version of the Social Dominance Orientation Scale (SDO6 by Di Stefano and Roccato 2005) for its adaptation to a children's target group; the second one is the study of correlation patterns between teachers and children.

The Italian adult scale SDO6 was adapted to the specific age of the young target group. The critical issues in the language of the questionnaire were highlighted: a researcher, sitting with each child, extracted and reformulated the items that generated ambiguities and difficulties in her/his understanding of the tool. In this pre-test phase, the necessary changes were made to improve the accessibility and clarity of the scale to the Italian student population. The questionnaire was administered individually. In this individual setting, each subject was invited to express her/his doubts and misunderstandings, difficulties in reading and ability to evaluate the statements.

In the second phase of the research, the new children's version of the social dominance orientation scale (SOD6-C) was administered to the sample of primary school children included in the study. Then the adult version of the instrument (SDO6) was used to assess the levels of social dominance in their respective teachers.

Prior to administration, children's parents were asked to fill in and sign an informed consent. Once the consent forms were

returned signed, the purpose of the research was also illustrated in each class. Hence, the different self-administered questionnaires were filled in individually by each student and each teacher.

The sample

A pre-test was prepared to redesign the instrument, based on the skills and knowledge of the children's target group. It was carried out into two administrations, for a total of 40 children aged between 7 and 10. Children were recruited from the same eight schools chosen for the broader research, from the 3rd, 4th and 5th grade classes.

They were not included in the sample selected for the later adaptation study. Half of the children in those pre-test classes were involved in the detection, extraction and reformulation of the items that appeared to be difficult for the young pupils. The other half were then involved to run a first check on the new items' formulation.

The adapted children's scale (SDO6-C) was then administered to a sample of 556 children (M and F = 50%) from the 3rd, 4th and 5th grade classes. Children were recruited from 8 primary schools in the Reggio Emilia area. Each school was randomly chosen in one of the eight districts of the city. Two were the criteria for the selection: half of them offered long-hours/full-time modules and that they all offered activities/contents on inclusion and multicultural integration (as expected in public school's programs of the Minister of Education). Seventy percent of the children came from families where both parents worked. The sample of classes within each of the eight schools, was selected on the basis of two parameters:

- The incidence of immigration rates among students: half the sample (50%) with high immigration rate (35% or higher) and the other half (50%) with low rates (equal or lower than 15%).
- The duration children spent at school in a week: half the sample (50%) with 'normal' modules (from 8.00 am to 1.00 pm) and the other half (50%) with full-time modules (from 8.00 am to 4pm).

The teachers' sample is based on that of the Italian school's system. In Italian primary schools, the organization consists of two main teachers (usually humanities and math/science), and another set of teachers (physical education, English, religious studies, special needs). The latter work only for a few hours per week in the class. The SDO6 adult version was administered to the couples of main teachers in each of the 24 classes (N = 49 as in one of the classes there was a third main teacher).

Measures

The pre-test was carried out for the children in two stages:

1. The first half of the interviewees were given a simplified version of the SDO6, readapted 'intuitively' by the researcher so as to encourage immediate understanding of the items.
2. Twenty more children were presented with the version of the SDO6 modified on the basis of the answers obtained in the previous administration, to highlight further difficulties that had not emerged in the first instance.

The main changes made to SDO6 mainly refer to the first administration that has put the incomprehensible items and difficult words into an understandable form for children. The

second administration was necessary to verify the degree of understanding of the adapted tool.

The socio-personal data sheet attached to the questionnaire was subject of modification in the final draft. For example, as the children did not know or remember the information related to the parents' educational qualification, this item was eliminated from the questionnaire. Moreover, for the information about the profession, the word "*official*" was replaced by "*employee*", the latter being more used and familiar to the interviewees.

While maintaining the 17 statements of the adult version, for which the child must express his or her degree of agreement or disagreement, the new tool (SDO6-C) was subject to the following changes:

- Children of 7 years did not know the meaning of the word *conditions*; considering the word in terms of economic well-being, it was replaced by the term *money* (item 2).
- Children aged 7 and 8 did not understand the expression *opportunity*, the term *possibility* was used instead (item 3).
- The word *group* appeared to be abstract and its meaning was often misunderstood or confused. Children presented difficulties in concretizing this concept and associating it with their life experiences (item 5, 9, 13). For example, some subjects the term *group* meant *family* for some subjects. Researchers thought to illustrate the different peculiarities of the members of such groups (i.e. through skin color, religion or language) with the aim of facilitating the understanding of the concept of *ethnic* groups. At the end the word *group* has been replaced with the word *people*;

- The word *inferior* was replaced with the expression *less important*. The latter was shown to be more direct and natural for the subjects, especially for those aged 7 and 8 (items 4, 12);
- The term *estimate* was replaced by the word *best* (item 6);
- Due to the difficulty of the terms *equality* and *ideal*, in addition to the complexity of the statement, item 7 was simplified as “*we should wish that all people are the same*”;
- The expression *are simply lower* was changed in *they live worse* (item 9);
- The adjective *positive* was replaced with the word *good* (item 10);
- Especially for children of 7 and 8 years old, the concept *Italy* as a synonym of Italian population has proved abstract and detached from their reality. As it was frequently subject to explanation, the word *Italy* was then changed to *Italian* (item 15).

Finally, answers were subject to a reduction from 5 to 3 intervals on the Likert scale, in order to facilitate the choice of responses for children.

Results

The adaptation to children aged 7-10 of the Social Dominance Orientation scale (SDO6)

The factorial analysis (ACP method, Promax rotation) confirms the bifactorial structure of the adult version:

- Factor 1, measuring the tendency of subjects to demonstrate dominant attitudes towards other individuals, is made up of 7 items and explains 16,092% of the variance;
- Factor 2, measuring the social equality, consists of 6 items and explains 11.177% of the variance.

Tab. 1. Underlying factors of the SDO: tendency to Dominate others vs. social Equality.

	<i>Dominance</i>	<i>Equality</i>
Item 6	0.610	
Item 13	0.543	
Item 12	0.531	
Item 1	0.523	
Item 9	0.485	
Item 15	0.477	
Item 11	0.401	
Item 14		0.690
Item 2		0.672
Item 16		0.626
Item 17		0.534
Item 7		0.502
Item 3		0.483

Based on the factorial saturations formulated by Di Stefano and Roccato (2005), it was possible to record differences and similarities between the questionnaire prepared for adults and that for children:

- Both ‘tendency to dominate others’ and ‘social equality’ were quite faithful to the adult version; in both instruments, the *dominance* factor saturates items 1, 6, 9, 11, 12, 13 and 15; the *equality* factor saturates items 2, 3, 7, 14, 16 and 17;
- In the children’s version, four items have a factor weight of less than 0.40 and therefore have been eliminated (items 4, 5, 8 and 10). On the other hand, even if the items of the tool are balanced and are able to cover a rather wide range of orientation to social dominance, other authors note that the

difference in terms of “affective value” in some statements is zero (Di Stefano and Roccatò 2005);

- The fidelity of the two scales was assessed by calculating the Cronbach’s α coefficient: a coefficient of 0.57 was obtained for the first factor and one of 0.64 for the second, which denotes a good reliability of the adapted instrument.

Comparison between groups

The average age of children was 9 years ($ds = 1.05$). The average age of teachers was 40 years ($d.s. = 8.88$).

For the group of children ($\mu = 31.7$ vs. $Me = 34$; $t = 11.835$, $p \leq 0.01$) and teachers ($\mu = 47.4$ vs. $Me = 51$; $t = 4.825$, $p \leq 0.01$), the average scores for social dominance were below the theoretical median.

Regarding the group of children, their orientation towards social dominance increased as their age increased ($F = 10.047$, $p \leq 0.001$). Finally, the results showed that the time the children spent at school, either full-time or normal-time, did not affect the levels of orientation towards social dominance.

Discussion

The formation of attitudes of social dominance in children is often traced back to studies on the expression of prejudice. According to Brown (1997), this could depend on two inaccurate beliefs on the anti-democratic tendencies of children. The first belief considers children as innocent subjects, hence, there would be no evidence of prejudice and diversity, except if shown by figures of reference. The second belief is that children develop hostile and unfavorable behaviors towards other ethnic groups following the teaching and modelling of their parents.

As a consequence of these theories, the investigative approach towards social dominance orientation in children may have faced various methodological difficulties: most of all the challenge is related to finding the most suitable tool of measure for children. As a result of such challenges, scholars have abandoned the idea of using questionnaires, to favor the adoption of graphic-visual stimuli (for example, the technique of Clark and Clark's photos, used since 1947) or sociometric tools (eg. Lease *et al.* 2002). In fact, children are believed to be unable to focus enough, to understand correctly, or to answer verbal items of an adult questionnaire.

When applying the adapted Social Dominance Orientation scale (Di Stefano and Roccato 2005) to children of 7-10 years of age, the results have shown that the tool largely maintained its metric properties (exploratory factor analysis and Cronbach's α).

Therefore, the SDO6-C scale proved its reliability as an assessment tool of social dominance orientation in the age 7-10 children's group.

The slight metric discrepancies between SDO6-C and the adult version could depend on two factors. On the one hand, the changes made to the items (not only in the wording but also in the reduction by 4 items of the original number of statements) would have partially diminished the discriminating power in the detection of the theoretical construct. On the other, confirming what is already present in the literature, the verbosity of the tool could have made it difficult for a target that prefers formats richer in graphic-visual elements. These considerations do not lessen the reliability results of the scale, which was also a result of the change in the responses' intervals. The research aimed at exploring the potential influence ap-

plied by teachers towards the very young pupils. No significant correlations were recorded, but both groups showed low SDO scores: that is, they did not have a manifest social dominance but showed instead an egalitarian orientation. The common trend of both teachers and children (in both groups, the μ was below the *Me* point) suggests that they live in a leveller context that favours personalities with low orientation towards social dominance (Herry *et al.* 2005; Pellegrini *et al.* 2007). In fact, social contexts that promote narratives favorable to social equality have low levels of social dominance (Foels and Pappas 2004; Sidanius *et al.* 2004). Hence, the low scores on the dominance factor recorded in this study highlight the role of the school in this respect. In other words, the well-known emphasis of Reggio Emilia primary schools on team work and multicultural programs seems to play a role in creating and nurturing a climate that is conducive to integration and equality.

If we move the focus from that of the general class context to that of the role of the teacher, previous studies have revealed that, second only to the family, the teacher represents the undisputed leader who inspires all the modeling strategies (Backstrom and Bjorklund 2007; Bandura 1977). The low SDO scores obtained by the teachers in the sample are in line with the existing literature: it shows that when teachers engaged in multicultural programs are committed to reduce discrimination and social stratification they obtain SDO lower scores. It is this vocation for the egalitarian attitude and the promotion of diversity as a value (against the idea of a crystallized hierarchy of society and groups), that makes teachers crucial players in the dissemination of equal and democratic models (Edwards 1993).

In the study, the positive correlation between the age of the children and their social dominance tendencies was in line with literature. Aboud (2003) has found that, at an early age, children are already attentive to the categorical distinctions in force within the social environment. Only around five they start exhibiting a real interest for the ingroup. The favoritism regarding the ingroup seems to develop through a feeling of attachment towards one's group, without the child feeling dislike towards the outgroup. Brown (1997) stated that the process of categorization and identification with the ingroup seems to require a simple method of recognition and generalization, from the individual himself to the members of the community. In the following years, however, the preference for one's group is accompanied by hostility towards the outgroup: this evolution takes place because the prejudice regarding the subjects that are considered different requires a more complex social comparison and a more in-depth evaluation (Allport 1954). Discrimination attitudes, therefore, originate more slowly (from 7-8 years), in relation to the emotional experiences that the individual lives in extra-family contexts. It is noteworthy that during the elementary school period, the interest of the child passes from being self-centred to being attracted to the group of peers, whose characteristics are represented through deeper and less evident aspects of the simple physical categories (age, gender, color of the skin etc.). Early interventions on preventing social dominance traits might stop the replication of the broader social divide into the pupils' class: differences would become richness and resources of the class instead of dominance-submission patterns.

The study also revealed that the high or low incidence of foreigners in the classes did not determine differences in the average SDO scores. The schools in the sample had been selected on the criterium that they all offered in their curricula some group activity to confront and discuss multicultural issues and opportunities. This proved crucial, according to the authors, to explain the irrelevance of the presence of immigrants in the level of social dominance. In fact, the findings of the study confirm that it is not only by contact (Allport 1954) that development of discriminatory attitudes or traits can be avoided. It is also through a well-designed and evidence-based education on differences that one can establish the most suitable conditions for the specific and effective reduction of anti-democratic attitudes. This is in line with the research of Wagner and colleagues (1989) who showed how the increase in cooperative and non-competitive activities, the commonality of aims and the equal status promoted by the teacher in the classroom favored integration, rather than the simple co-presence of subjects belonging to different ethnic groups.

The main result that emerge from the data analysis of this study is a photograph of the Reggio Emilia public school that works effectively as a privileged setting for the reduction of social stratification and discriminatory behavior. Reggio Emilia's slogan is "the city of people" and its main social-political investment in the last 70 years has been towards people's inclusion. The Reggio approach to education had already shown great effectiveness with younger children (Vakil, Freeman and Swim 2003; Hendrick 1997; McCarthy 1995). Its strength being, among others, the focus on the educational alliance between school and community. In 1916, Dewey had already

discussed that the reason for certain major failures of the educational systems laid precisely in the fact that most schools underestimated their community value. The author suggested that community values should be considered in the foundation of any school program, stressing on the fact that a school must primarily be “a way of life together, an experience of communicative sharing”. The study results support Winch and Gingell’s (2004) view that educating for inclusion is equivalent to the education for democracy, i.e. an education free from relations of dominance.

On another note, the study findings highlight the need for research to further exploration of the application of the SDO6-C scale on different children populations.

The translation of the tool to the English language would invite further broadening and diversity. Furthermore, the translation of the items into images is worth to be considered, and is actually being attempted. Images would be used to accompany the administration of the verbal questionnaire with graphic representations. Researchers are exploring a version enriched with vignettes and photographs that make explicit the content of the statements in the scale. Eventually, the mixed version of the scale will have to be tested and its results compared to the current study findings. This hybrid form aims at evaluating the potential of a mixed verbal and visual instrument for the study of the construct in children of different ages.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the current research highlights the need of a reliable tool for assessing social dominance orientation in group work with children. It invites further work on the adapted

SDO6-C scale on different children population. It suggests that it is crucial to act early upon ingroup-outgroup differences in the children's school contexts, to help avoiding the social divide. Finally, it supports the view that, if a school exists to promote community and democratic values, it would not fail to remove existing authoritarian tendency.

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