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Teachers and pupils prejudice: a study in Italian primary schools

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Abstract

The role that educational contexts play in shaping children's attitudes in society is still under consideration in research. Teachers are considered to play an important role in shaping children's values, attitudes and behaviour. The intergenerational transmission of prejudice has been found in studies involving teenagers, but there is little evidence of the role of primary schools at a younger age. The purpose of this study is to investigate the transmission of prejudice in children between the ages of 8 and 10. The clear and subtle prejudices of teachers are measured and compared with those of their primary school pupils in the city of Reggio Emilia, in northern Italy. In the study, an ad hoc scale of blatant/subtle bias was created, adapting an existing adult scale developed. The results show models of egalitarian attitudes in both adults and children, especially in schools where they spend more time (full-time modules). The importance of educational programs to make a classroom a true learning community is also discussed.

Keywords: prejudice, intergenerational transmission, education, racism.

Introduction

Prejudice is a complex phenomenon to be defined. It is not a one-dimensional construct (Dovidio and Esses 2001). In addition, it is both an individual and a group process (Brown 1997), and it coincides with other variables such as stereo-

types, authoritarianism and social categorization (Smith Castro 2006).

According to Crandall (cited in Nesdale *et al.* 2005), there are two elements in the manifestation of racial prejudice; an implicit and an explicit one. Furthermore, the motivation to suppress racial prejudice can be low or high. People with greater motivation to control their discrimination will exhibit low explicit prejudice measures; however, the more subtle and hidden levels of behavior will remain high. On the contrary, those who have low motivation to obfuscate this attitude will have congruent explicit and implicit prejudice measures. Subjects can generate ambivalent and unstable emotions when trying to satisfy the two conflicting motivations at the same time. Within this latter two-dimensional perspective, Pettigrew and Meertens (1995) highlighted two types of prejudice: one *blatant/evident* and the other *latent/subtle*.

The blatant prejudice corresponds to the traditional racist attitude, not with standing social desirability, explicitly and being overtly directed towards individuals that belong to the out-group. These individuals are perceived as a threat to the community and are openly rejected by the members of the ingroup. On the other hand, the subtle (or latent) form of prejudice denotes a cold and detached trait of personality that is unknown to the subject him/herself. Prejudice here is expressed in acceptable social and moral forms; nevertheless, it reveals negative and discriminatory behaviors.

Studies on the formation of prejudice in children are not copious and have in common the use of visual stimuli depicting different ethnic groups (Bernal, Knight, Garza and Ocampo 1990; Bocchiaro and Boca 2004; Boulton and Smith 1992;

Doyle and Aboud 1996; Yee and Brown 1988, cited in Brown 1997). Furthermore, the existing literature does not provide a definite answer on the role played by adults, parents and caregivers in the formation of children's attitudes; many of the study findings related to parental influence are somewhat discordant (Castelli, Zecchini, Sherman and De Amicis 2005; Dhont, Roets and Van Hiel 2013; Pirchio, Passiatore, Panno, Maricchiolo and Carrus 2018). Besides, to the best of the researchers' knowledge, the research conducted so far does not take into account the weight that the teacher could exert on children.

To elaborate further, Castelli, Zecchini, Sherman and De Amicis (2005) showed that in the early years of life the interethnic attitudes of children are somewhat linked to the implicit type attitudes that parents manifest through non-verbal communication. The authors had built their deduction on a previous study (Castelli and Tomelleri 2004) that had already indicated a close correlation between the attitude of children, even young ones (3-7 years), and that of parents.

Other studies, however, reveal a modest relationship (Carlson and Iovini 1985; Cavalli-Sforza, Feldman, Chen and Dornbusch 1982; Mosher and Scodel 1960; Spencer 1983) or no relationship between parents' and children's attitudes (Aboud 2005; Davey 1983; Doyle and Aboud 1996).

A third group of researchers found a negative correlation between parents' and children's attitudes. In other words, the increase in prejudice in parents corresponds to a decrease in the level of prejudice in children (Branch and Newcomb 1980, 1986). Fishbein 2002 viewed that the lack of consistency in the studies' results bring on the assumption that parents do not seem to have a significant role in the development of their children's intereth-

nic attitudes, which diminishes the importance in the influence process of the parents on their children in this respect.

In the wake of this theoretical framework, the current study work has a twofold objective: 1) to verify the adaptability of an adult tool on a population of children of developmental age; 2) to find out if the prejudice levels of pupils in a class are related to those of their teachers.

Methods

Pettigrew and Meertens (1995) built a scale consisting of twenty items, ten of which reveal the blatant prejudice and the other ten the subtle one. The interviewee must indicate his/her degree of agreement or disagreement regarding the statements presented on the prejudice scale.

The statements related to *blatant* prejudice are organized around two conceptual nuclei towards the outgroup. The first concept is that an outgroup represents a *threat* to one's own ingroup. The second is that one should avoid any contact with members belonging to communities others than one's own. This latter *anti-intimacy* component focuses on emotional resistance against any real contact with different cultures. In its openly racist form, the blatant prejudice includes the belief of the genetic inferiority of the outgroup.

On the other hand, the components concerning *subtle* prejudice differ in three thematic areas. The first is the *defense* of traditional values. According to these values, the members of the outgroup are seen to act in an unacceptable way and not to behave according to the values and beliefs expressed by the group to which the welcoming/ingroup society belongs. Only the traditional values of the ingroup are seen as acceptable and

necessary to achieve success, in accordance with the beliefs of ingroup's members. The second element concerns the *exaggerations* of cultural differences among communities. Such differences are perceived as real disadvantages in the outgroup, and frequently create stereotypes of inferiority and backwardness of other peoples compared to the ingroup. Finally, the third component implies the *denial* of positive emotional responses to the outgroup, without necessarily expressing negative conceptions. According to Pettigrew and Meertens, the Subtle and Blatant Prejudice scale classifies individuals into three different types:

- The *bigots* (or fanatics) obtain high marks on both scales, revealing themselves as rigid and dogmatic, reluctant to contact with members of other communities, not fearing to openly manifest their racial negative behaviors, and supporting restrictive and discriminatory measures against the outgroup;
- The *subtle* (or latent) show low results in the blatant prejudice scale, but obtain high scores in the subtle one. These subjects tend to conceal their aversion towards the outgroup, for example by opposing social policies in favor of the marginalized and the poor;
- The *egalitarians* show low results on both scales; they are free from hostile and negative racial attitudes, and in favor of extending civil rights to all groups.

In the Italian version, adapted by Arcuri and Boca (1996), the agreement/disagreement items are evaluated with a Likert scale with six intervals, excluding the possibility of a neutral opinion; in the last three questions on similarities the Likert scale has five intervals.

The items are divided into two categories based on subtle and blatant prejudice and are grouped into further sub-categories.

For blatant prejudice, the threat is measured in item 2, 3, 5, 9, 8 and 17; the anti-intimacy is measured in item 12, 20, 11 and 7. Subtle prejudice is investigated through three factors: suppression of positive emotions towards the outgroup in items 1, 19, 18; the defense of traditional values of the ingroup in item 6, 4, 10; the exacerbation of differences in item 13, 14, 15 and 16.

Measures

The first part of the research is concerned with the adaptation of the content of the items of the original scale to the target age: the research team highlighted the critical issues in the language of the questionnaire that could have generated ambiguity and difficulty of understanding. Through a pre-test phase, the questionnaire was modified in a way that improves the accessibility and clarity of the scale. Children were assisted in understanding the statements of the items and the Likert scales for answering. The pre-test was carried out with a total of 40 children aged between 7 and 10 years, attending the 3rd, 4th and 5th grade and not included in the main sample of the study. During such phase, the researcher sit next to each child, noting all her/his difficulty understanding the questions, asking her/him to point out things that were not clear. The researcher confirmed that the child understands the meaning/ connotation of each item. The same was carried out for the answer scales, to understand the adequateness of the Likert's intervals.

The pre-test phase of the study was of a more qualitative nature, aiming at finding ways of addressing the children's understanding of the items and the tool in general. It was not intended to measure their levels of prejudice.

After this qualitative phase, the new questionnaire consisted of a sociodemographic sheet to collect data on the sex, age, class,

school and profession of the parents. Instructions were given to facilitate the subject to fill it in.

Despite the changes in the wording of some of the 20 items and the change in the number of intervals in the Likert scale of 15 items (3 versus 6 of the adult version), the questionnaire maintained a structure similar to that for adults elaborated by Manganelli Rattazzi and Volpato.

In the first 12 and the last 3 items, subjects are not asked to express the degree of agreement or disagreement, but to respond on the basis of their life experiences and their desires.

From item 13 to item 17, the child must carry out a comparison between Italians and foreigners, indicating the level of similarity and difference between the two groups with respect to some characteristics expressed in the statements. In this case, he will have a six-interval Likert scale (as in the original), which represent the different degrees of similarity and diversity between the two groups. The adapted tool included the following variations, which were shown to be more adequate and immediate for children, in the pre-test phase:

- The term non-EU for children of 7 and 8 years generally means “poor person” or “black person”, while for those of 9 years it is associated with a “homeless person”. This concept then implies a disadvantageous economic condition for the subjects, or a salient racial characteristic. For this reason, the term non-EU was replaced by “foreign” in all items, so that the child did not identify the immigrant through the use of stereotypes and preconceptions.
- Some statements have been simplified and abbreviated, without changing their meaning, so as to favor concentration (Item 3, 4, 6).

- The concept of politics (item 5) was incomprehensible, and was found to be too far from their intellectual understanding. The children reported that they knew the politicians through parents' discussions, but they are unable to express their opinion on the matter. For this reason, the item has been changed, eliminating this word and highlighting the immigrant's condition.
- Children of all ages could not grasp the sense of item 8. Hence, the question was transformed expressing the content through a comparison between immigrants and Italians, evoking the child's beliefs on the skills of the two groups.
- The term habits was replaced with the expression "ways of behaving" (item 15).
- Some children did not know the word "honesty" (item 17), frequently associated with certain correct behaviors (such as not telling lies). The word was therefore substituted by "truthfulness".
- The concept of "solidarity" (item 18) was understood only by two 10-year-old children. For this reason, the term was changed into being "friend."

The second part of the research consisted in the administration of the new tool to 399 children ($F = 50\%$), with an average age of 9 years ($s.d. = 1.05$), attending 8 schools in the Reggio Emilia area.

Furthermore, the adult version (Manganelli Rattazzi and Volpato 2001) was administered to the relative teachers (43), with an average age of 40 years ($s.d. = 8.88$).

The sample was selected on the basis of two parameters:

- High or low incidence of immigrants in schools;
- Normal or full-time school.

Results

The psychometric properties of the instrument

The factorial analysis was conducted starting from the statistical procedures and the results obtained by Manganelli, Rattazzi and Volpato in the adult version. An exploratory factorial analysis was carried out separately for the two scales (blatant and subtle prejudice) with the method of the main components and the orthogonal rotation system (Varimax).

Both analyzes revealed that in the case of *blatant prejudice*, a bifactorial structure is highlighted (total variance explained 35.541%). As can be seen from table 1, the first factor interpretable as “anti-intimacy”, consisting of 4 items, explains 23.663% of the variance and the second factor, interpretable as “threat”, consisting of 4 items, explains 11.879% of the variance.

Table 1: Rotated Component Matrix - *Blatant Prejudice*. Items grouped into two factors (1= anti-intimacy; 2= threat) for the Blatant Prejudice.

	Component	
	1	2
PET_7	.834	
PET_11	.783	
PET_17	.497	
PET_2	-.445	
PET_12		.606
PET_8		.588
PET_9		.528
PET_20		-.520
PET_3		
PET_5		

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization. a. Rotation converged in 3 iterations.

In the case of *subtle prejudice* (table 2), the emerged structure is trifactorial (total variance explained 42.983%).

The first factor, highlighted as “suppression of positive emotions”, made up of 3 items, explains 19.262% of the variance. Consisting of 3 items, the second factor “exasperation of differences between groups” explains 12.052% of the variance. Finally, the third factor that can be interpreted as “defending one’s group values,” includes 3 items, and explains 11.668% of the variance.

Table 2: Rotated Component Matrix - *Subtle* Prejudice. Items grouped into three factors (1= suppression of positive emotions; 2= exasperation of differences between groups; 3= defending one’s group values) for the Subtle Prejudice.

	Component		
	1	2	3
Item 19	.704		
Item 18	.624		
Item 10	-.547		
Item 16		.770	
Item 15		.712	
Item 13		.475	-.431
Item 6			.760
Item 4			.561
Item 1			.411

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization. a. Rotation converged in 5 iterations.

Based on the factorial saturations formulated by Manganelli Rattazzi and Volpato, it is possible to note some differences

between the questionnaire prepared for adults and that for children:

- In the children's version, 3 items have a factorial weight of less than 0.40.
- The subtle prejudice scale is more faithful to the adult version than the blatant prejudice version (Adult version: Subtle Prejudice - "suppression of positive emotions" 1, 19, 18; "exasperation of differences between groups" 13, 14, 15, 16; "defense of one's group values" 6, 4, 10; Blatant Prejudice - "anti-intimacy" 12, 20, 11, 7; "threat" 2, 3, 5, 9, 8, 17).
- The fidelity of the two scales was assessed by calculating the Cronbach α coefficient, obtaining insignificant coefficients.

The comparison between children and their teachers

Data analysis revealed that the average score of subtle prejudice is higher than that of blatant prejudice in both children (28.16 vs. 17.52) and teachers (26.16 vs. 16.33).

In the group of children, the mean score of subtle prejudice is significantly higher than the theoretical median ($\mu = 28$ vs. $Me = 26$; $t = 10.168$, $p \leq 0.01$). The average score of the blatant prejudice is significantly lower than the theoretical Me ($\mu = 17.5$ vs. $Me = 21.5$; $t = 22.718$, $p \leq 0.01$).

In teachers, the average subtle prejudice score coincides with the theoretical median (26). The average blatant prejudice score is significantly lower than the theoretical median ($\mu = 16$ vs. $Me = 21.5$; $t = 9.974$, $p \leq 0.01$).

Considering the classification into categories (fanatic, egalitarian and subtle), the majority of both pupils' and teachers' groups are distributed under the egalitarian typology, that is, with a low propensity to describe prejudice both in a blatant and subtle way.

Table 3: Children's and teachers' types according to their prevalent kind of prejudice.

			TYPOLOGY				Total
			Fanatics	Egalitarian	Subtle	Errors	
ID_PERS	Students	Number	81	215	81	22	399
		% within ID_PERS	20.3	53.9	20.3	5.5	100.0
		% within TYPOLOGY	96.4	90.3	83.5	95.7	90.3
	Teachers	Number	3	23	16	1	43
		% within ID_PERS	7.0	53.5	37.2	2.3	100.0
		% within TYPOLOGY	3.6	9.7	16.5	4.3	9.7
Total		Number	84	238	97	23	442
		% within ID_PERS	19.0	53.8	21.9	5.2	100.0
		% within TYPOLOGY	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Overall, the children attending full-time school have a naver age lower score on both blatant and subtle scales, compared to those that spend less time at school. However, such a difference is of no significance if we look at the subtle prejudice ($t = 2.33$, $p = 0.020$). Nevertheless, the difference in time spent in school determines a significant difference in the average of the scores achieved by the children ($t = 3.275$, $p = 0.001$) when it comes to blatant prejudice.

The high or low incidence of foreigners does not determine any difference in the scores of the two scale.

Discussion

Research has shown that the tool does not maintain its metric properties (exploratory factor analysis and Cronbach's α) when applied to a different target. Accordingly, two different hypotheses could be formulated. Firstly, the linguistic changes made to simplify the instrument could have led to a shift of some items from the original subscales to others. Secondly, the questionnaire might reveal its intrinsic weakness for the detection of this construct in children, in favor of instruments richer in visual stimuli.

Despite the limitations of the tool, and going along with the theoretical assumption, the data has confirmed its ability to discriminate individuals through the two forms of prejudice, blatant and subtle. In both teachers' and pupils' groups, there was a tendency towards subtle forms of prejudice. This trend coincides with that reported by Manganelli Rattazzi and Volpato and Hamberger and Hewstone (1997). Moreover, such results confirm the assumption that the most extreme prejudice is replaced by a more subtle one in western societies (Brown 1997). In Crandall's words (cited in Nesdale *et al.* 2005), there is a pervasive motivation in western societies to control the blatant manifestation of antidemocratic attitudes towards minorities. This is a result of a certain widespread false respectability that tries to camouflage visible forms of prejudice by generating hidden and veiled patterns. It is therefore the tension between these two tendencies, to express and to suppress discriminatory behaviors and ideologies, that characterizes most modern expressions of prejudice (Akrami and Ekehammar 2005).

The data showed that the time variable significantly moderates the levels of prejudice in children (Bellomo and Vegetti

Finzi 1978; Wagner *et al.* 1989; Catarsi 2004). In fact, based on educational projects that emphasize integration, respect diversity and endorse social and cultural diversity, schools following Reggio Emilia system of education stand as an element of protection and defense against prejudice. The classroom is the privileged space in which cultural reciprocity is practiced, hence, the awareness of being part of a larger community is developed.

The added value of full-time school translates into the possibility of working more effectively and for longer duration in a group, which activates higher levels of cooperation, socialization, integration and development of social identity (Mineo and Perricone 2007). It is a living model where exchange and transformation can take place (Bruner 1977). In Van Dick *et al.*'s view (2004), it is a milieu that prolongs intergroup contact, transforming it into a real opportunity for prejudice reduction. On the basis of the study results, further adjustment of the adult tool and in-depth statistical analysis would add to the evaluation of its adaptation for children. Translating the scale's items into images is also worth to be considered. The administration of the graphic version of the questionnaire, and the comparison of the obtained data with those of the verbal tool, would help in evaluating which tool is more suitable for studying the construct in children. Rather than using experimental paradigms (e.g. studies on the minimum groups of Nesdale 2001, 2004), which are difficult to compare with the data collected in adult samples, the future, in our opinion, is to standardize non-intrusive attitude measures, which correlate positively with the tools already existing in the literature for the detection of prejudice constructs.

Conclusions

Since the scores obtained at both scales are in their mean, both children and teachers, in the present study, can be defined as egalitarian or democratic. Although not being translated into statistically significant correlation data, the tendency to show similar attitudes between teachers and children supports the hypothesis that, as privileged caregivers, teachers play an essential role in the formation of discriminatory attitudes in the early years of age. Such conclusion emphasizes the need for teachers to be aware of their role model in the class, when it comes to non-biased attitudes: this should consequently stress the importance to carry out educational programs, where biases and prejudices are addressed and adequately processed.

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