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Black or White? Ethnic stereotypes and prejudicial attitudes in Italian children

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore ethnic stereotypes and prejudicial attitudes in 368 Italian children aged 4-12. The ethnic traits choice (35 cards) and the ethnic jobs choice (32 cards) to attribute to photos of Black or White target child were used to analyze ethnic stereotypes. The choice of best friend, playmate, addressee of a toy, and attribution of pen stealing to photos of Black target child, White target child or both target children were used to study ethnic prejudicial attitudes. Results: above 50% of children chose White target children as best friends, both target children as playmates, and Black target children as authors of pen stealing, in all cases with significant differences for age. Children mainly attributed positive traits to White target children (e.g. honest) while negative traits to Black target children (e.g. ignorant) and assigned jobs linked to very lowly relevant activities to Black target children (e.g. house servant).

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1. Introduction

The theoretical models which supported the analysis of ethnic attitudes have been focused on several aspects of developmental age, as well as cognitive growth (Aboud, 1988; Powlishta, Serbin, Doyle, & White, 1994; Black-Gutman & Hickson, 1996; Kowalski & Lo, 2001), social identity (Tajfel, Nemeth, Jahoda, Campbell & Johnson, 1970; Cameron, Rutland, Brown, & Douch, 2006; Abrams & Rutland, 2008), moral judgement (Killen & Stangor, 2001), intra- and inter-group dynamics (Abrams, Rutland, & Cameron, 2003), and so on. According to the findings deriving from the Cognitive-Developmental Theory (Aboud, 1988), ethnic prejudice toward outgroup members tends to decline with age consistently with cognitive development in children. This phenomenon is related to the ability to recognize that individuals belonging to different ethnic groups are very similar, regardless of ethnic differences in external appearance (also in relation to ethnic constancy: Aboud, 1984; Rutland, Cameron, Bennett, & Ferrell, 2005). The developmental trend in the expression of ethnic attitudes follows the shift from self-identification (before 5 years of age in terms of “ethnic awareness”) to group-identification (between 5 and 7 years of age in terms of “ethnic identity and ethnocentrism”) and finally to perception of individual variations within the group (after 7 years of age in terms of concrete operational thinking): the expression of high levels of outgroup prejudice has a peak between 5 and 7 years of age. During the infancy, ethnic stereotypes for ingroup and outgroup members are more rigid and resistant to change, while in preadolescence stereotyped beliefs become more flexible and open to

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change, also in relation to the counter-stereotyped information (see for gender stereotyping in Italian context: De Caroli & Sagone, 2009). For example, Doyle, Beaudet and Aboud (1988) found out that flexibility in ethnic attitudes (that is, the attribution of positive and negative traits to both ingroup and outgroup) increased with age; in addition, Doyle and Aboud (1995) demonstrated that the 9-years-old Canadian children displayed lower levels of ethnic prejudice (measured with PRAM II) than the 6-years-old ones and their own pro-Black/anti-White attitudes (assessed with MRA) increased with age consistently with the solution of conservation tasks.

To explain the development of ethnic attitudes based on group-identification it's possible to refer to the social identity theory (see Tajfel & Turner, 1986), that reduces the influence of cognitive factors on ingroup favouritism. According to this perspective, the more the children show an increased identification with their own ethnic group, the more they express a strong preference for their own ingroup (Cameron et alii, 2006; Abrams & Rutland, 2008). In addition, positive attitudes to ingroup members influenced the choices of best friends and playmates, in the sense that the more the children express ingroup preferences the more they choose peers belonging to their own ethnic group as best friends/playmates (Aboud, Mendelson, & Purdy, 2003; Lease & Blake, 2005).

The integration of the two previous perspectives has been provided by the social identity development theory elaborated by Nesdale (2004). The author proposed that ingroup favoritism and outgroup negative prejudice emerged in four phases: before they're 2-3 years-old, children do not discriminate (in terms of favoritism or rejection) their environment in relation to ethnic categories even though they are aware of their existence (undifferentiated phase); around 3 years, children begin to use these categories for identifying themselves with their own ethnic group (ethnic awareness phase); between 4 and 6-7 years, children tend to express a strong need for ethnic identity belonging to their own group and to show marked preferences only for members of ingroup (ethnic preference phase); beyond 7-8 years, children express evaluations toward members of ethnic outgroup in relation to the presence of ethnic self-identification with ingroup, stereotype threat effect, and ethnic ingroup norms (ethnic prejudice phase). The last elements proposed by Nesdale et alii (2003, 2005) could support the findings obtained in our previous researches (see De Caroli, 2005; Sagone, 2003) carried out with Italian children from 3 to 12 years of age both in ethnically homogeneous and heterogeneous school-contexts. In most of these studies, 8-9-years-old children who were exposed to "inter-ethnic contact" reduced social distance toward outgroup members (De Caroli, 2005) and pupils attending to heterogeneous school-context, compared to homogeneous one, expressed more positive social attitudes to outgroup in terms of preferences and rewards (see Sagone, 2003; De Caroli, Falanga, & Sagone, *in press*) at 3-5 years of age. Similar results were obtained by McGlothlin and Killen (2005) in a sample of European-American children aged 6-9: children attending ethnically heterogeneous schools were more positive about the cross-race potential for friendship than those attending homogeneous schools, confirming that intergroup contact experience is an important aspect of development of ethnic attitudes in school setting. In addition, the children's intergroup contact influences their perceptions of "similarity" among groups, although it's very important to deepen the knowledge of ethnic stereotypes referred to own ethnic group and other groups in order to justify these findings. According to Aboud and Levy (2000), with age, children perceived less similarity within the same ethnic group and more similarity among different ethnic groups, reducing the focus on ethnicity as a distinguishing feature for making social comparisons, and this evidence produces a significant positive effect on the decline of ethnic prejudice and flexibility of ethnic stereotyped beliefs.

Few researches were carried out to analyze the presence of ethnic stereotypes expressed by Italian children in homogeneous school setting, and this issue represents the main rationale for this investigation, supporting the findings of previous studies about the role of ethnicity in childhood (De Caroli, 2005).

2. Methodology

The aim of this research was to explore the ethnic stereotypes and the direction of ethnic prejudice in 368 Italian children aged 4-12 attending to ethnically homogeneous school settings. We hypothesized that:

H1 - children will express positive ethnic stereotypes toward White targets (ingroup) and negative ethnic stereotypes toward Black targets (outgroup) concerning the attribution of both socio-cognitive and personality traits and of jobs;

H2 - children will express positive attitudes toward White targets (ingroup) and negative attitudes toward Black targets (outgroup) in relation to potential friendship, choice of playmate, addressee of a toy, and choice of an object' stealing author;

H3 - younger children will express more negative ethnic stereotypes and prejudicial attitudes toward Black targets (outgroup) than older ones.

2.1. Sampling

The sample was constituted by 368 Italian White children between 4 and 12-year-olds attending to ethnically homogeneous school settings and randomly recruited from three primary and three secondary public schools in Catania, Sicily (Italy). Participants were divided in two age-groups: 156 children of 4-8 years (42,4%) and 212 children of 8-12 years (57,6%), balanced for sex in each group.

2.2. Measures and procedure

2.2.1. *Ethnic traits and jobs choice* (see De Caroli & Sagone, 2007). The ethnic traits choice consisted of a set of 35 colored picture cards (size: 10 cm X 6 cm) for positive (e.g. self-confident, kind, sweet, defends the weaker, generous, honest) and negative traits (e.g. aggressive, bad mannered, submissive, ignorant, lonely, cruel, steals other people's things). The ethnic jobs choice consisted of a set of 32 colored picture cards (size: 10 cm X 6 cm) for jobs, with a short and child-friendly description of the doings linked to each job: e.g. driving a truck (truck driver), curing sick people (doctor), repairing broken-down cars (mechanic), cleaning the streets (sweeper), piloting an airplane (pilot), arresting thieves (policeman), putting out fires (fireman), taking care of children (baby-sitter), dancing on the stage (ballet dancer), being paid to clean people's houses (maid), treating teeth (dentist), selling flowers (florist), cutting and sewing dresses (dressmaker), and so on. The colored picture cards were randomly shown to each child together with the photos of one Black and one White target child, consistently with sex of participants (male pictures for boys and female pictures for girls). For traits, children were asked to choose who would be more likely to have a given characteristic (for instance, "who is more likely to be the self-confident one", Black or White target?) and, for jobs, children were asked to indicate who would be more likely to perform a given activity (for instance, "who is more likely to arrest a thief", Black or White target?), in both condition with the forced choice.

2.2.2. *Ethnic prejudice* (De Caroli, 2005). A set of 4 items was used to assess the choice of best friend (that is, potential friendship), choice of playmate, choice of addressee of a toy, and attribution of pen stealing. Participants were asked to assign the 4 items to the same photos of Black target child, White target child or both target children (flexible choice).

Participants were tested individually at school by an expert researcher after parental consent for research participation and explanation of general purpose of the current study.

2.3. Data analyses

Statistical analyses were conducted applying chi-square test with SPSS Version 15 (Statistical Package for Social Sciences). Age groups and sex of participants were used as independent variables, while frequencies of choices as dependent variables. No significant effect for sex of participants was obtained both in stereotyped beliefs and ethnic prejudice. All scores were expressed in tables with frequencies and percentages reported into parentheses.

3. Results

3.1. Ethnic stereotypes

Referring to the ethnic traits choice, most of the children attributed positive traits to White target children as talkative (White: 61,1% vs. Black: 38,9%), intelligent (White: 75,8% vs. Black: 24,2%), romantic (White: 66,4% vs. Black: 32,6%), self-confident (White: 57,1% vs. Black: 42,9%), honest (White: 56,5% vs. Black: 43,5%), keeps

promises (White: 55,4% vs. Black: 44,6%), generous (White: 57,3% vs. Black: 42,7%), sensitive (White: 59% vs. Black: 41%), strong (White: 55,7% vs. Black: 44,3%), and sweet (White: 63,9% vs. Black: 36,1%), except for dominant (White: 72% vs. Black: 28%). On the contrary, the most part of children assigned negative traits to Black target children as crafty (White: 33,4% vs. Black: 66,6%), hungry (White: 25,3% vs. Black: 74,7%), ignorant (White: 31,5% vs. Black: 68,5%), lonely (White: 31% vs. Black: 69%), submissive (White: 23,6% vs. Black: 76,4%), bad mannered (White: 42,7% vs. Black: 57,3%), uses bad language (White: 43,2% vs. Black: 56,8%), steals other people’s things (White: 31,2% vs. Black: 61,8%), cruel (White: 41,3% vs. Black: 58,7%), shy (White: 43,2% vs. Black: 56,8%), and poor (White: 14,9% vs. Black: 85,1%). These evidences showed negative stereotyped beliefs toward Black targets and, vice versa, positive stereotyped beliefs toward White targets.

Significant effects for age-groups were found in most of the traits: younger children were more likely to express pro-White/anti-Black stereotyped beliefs than older ones, while older children were mainly more likely to display pro-Black/anti-White stereotyped beliefs than younger ones (Table 1).

Table 1 – Age groups differences for stereotyped beliefs (N=368)

Ethnic traits choice	4-8 years (N=156)		8-12 years (N=212)		Chi Square Test
	White Targets	Black Targets	White Targets	Black Targets	
Ignorant	9 (5.8)	147 (94.2)	107 (50.5)	105 (49.5)	83.20*
Whiner	43 (27.6)	113 (72.4)	138 (65.1)	74 (34.9)	50.64*
Courageous	124 (79.5)	32 (20.5)	71 (33.5)	141 (66.5)	76.33*
Busybody	51 (32.7)	105 (67.3)	119 (56.1)	93 (43.9)	19.87*
Self-confident	112 (71.8)	44 (28.2)	98 (46.2)	114 (53.8)	23.98*
Honest	131 (84)	25 (16)	77 (36.3)	135 (63.7)	83.05*
Uses bad language	31 (19.9)	125 (80.1)	128 (60.4)	84 (39.6)	60.09*
Keeps promises	125 (80.1)	31 (19.9)	79 (37.3)	133 (62.7)	66.84*
Conceited	47 (30.1)	109 (69.9)	155 (73.1)	57 (26.9)	67.06*
Defends weak people	123 (78.8)	33 (21.2)	55 (25.9)	157 (74.1)	100.71*
Quiet	123 (78.8)	33 (21.2)	68 (32.1)	144 (67.9)	78.75*
Kind	136 (87.2)	20 (12.8)	65 (30.7)	147 (69.3)	115.82*
Nervous	28 (17.9)	128 (82.1)	141 (66.5)	71 (33.5)	85.34*
Liar	27 (17.3)	129 (82.7)	143 (67.5)	69 (32.5)	90.92*
Generous	122 (78.2)	34 (21.8)	89 (42)	123 (58)	48.02*
Sweet	139 (89.1)	17 (10.9)	96 (45.3)	116 (54.7)	74.77*
Sensitive	133 (85.3)	23 (14.7)	84 (39.6)	128 (60.4)	77.35*
Strong	118 (75.6)	38 (24.4)	87 (41)	125 (59)	43.61*
Steals things of the others	14 (9)	142 (91)	101 (47.6)	111 (52.4)	62.54*
Cruel	20 (12.8)	136 (87.2)	132 (62.3)	80 (37.7)	90.62*
Athletic	116 (74.4)	40 (25.6)	80 (37.7)	132 (62.3)	48.42*
Bad mannered	16 (10.3)	140 (89.7)	141 (66.5)	71 (33.5)	116.26*
Aggressive	35 (22.4)	121 (77.6)	135 (63.7)	77 (36.3)	61.50*

Note: Level of significance for * $p < .001$

In relation to the ethnic jobs choice, children mainly assigned jobs linked to very lowly relevant activities to Black targets, as beggar (White: 25,8% vs. Black: 74,2%), house servant (White: 42,9% vs. Black: 57,1%), and sweeper (White: 41% vs. Black: 59%). On the contrary, they attributed prestigious jobs and in every field to White target children: e.g. scientist (White: 72% vs. Black: 28%), film director (White: 70,1% vs. Black: 29,9%), pilot (White: 67,9% vs. Black: 32,1%), singer (White: 68,5% vs. Black: 31,5%), traffic warden (White: 83,2% vs. Black: 16,8%), judge (White: 74,7% vs. Black: 25,3%), teacher (White: 76,6% vs. Black: 23,4%), journalist (White: 63% vs. Black: 37%), policeman (White: 65,2% vs. Black: 34,8%), dentist (White: 80,4% vs. Black: 19,6%), astronaut (White: 60,1% vs. Black: 39,9%), and so on. In this case, results also displayed negative stereotyped beliefs toward Black targets and positive stereotyped beliefs toward White targets.

Significant effects for age-groups were observed in most of jobs (Table 2). Younger children were more likely than older ones to express pro-White/anti-Black stereotyped beliefs in attribution of jobs, while older children tended to show more flexible stereotyped beliefs compared to younger ones.

Table 2 – Age groups differences for stereotyped beliefs (N=368)

Ethnic jobs choice	4-8 years (N=156)		8-12 years (N=212)		Chi Square Test
	White Targets	Black Targets	White Targets	Black Targets	
Putting out fires	112 (71.8)	44 (28.2)	96 (45.3)	116 (54.7)	25.70*
Cutting and sewing dresses	102 (65.4)	54 (34.6)	105 (49.5)	107 (50.5)	9.18**
Building houses	114 (73.1)	42 (26.9)	100 (47.2)	112 (52.8)	24.79*
Cleaning the streets	79 (50.6)	77 (49.4)	72 (34)	140 (66)	10.33**
Judging suspects	151 (96.8)	5 (3.2)	124 (58.5)	88 (41.5)	69.82*
Making and selling sweets	117 (75)	39 (25)	94 (44.3)	118 (55.7)	34.54*
Making appointments	107 (68.6)	49 (31.4)	100 (47.2)	112 (52.8)	16.76*
Writing in newspapers	127 (81.4)	29 (18.6)	105 (49.5)	107 (50.5)	39.21*
Arresting thieves	127 (81.4)	29 (18.6)	113 (53.3)	99 (46.7)	31.30*
Curing sick people	154 (98.7)	2 (1.3)	87 (41)	125 (59)	132.29*
Acting at the theatre	113 (72.4)	43 (27.6)	107 (50.5)	105 (49.5)	18.03*
Going to the moon	120 (76.9)	36 (23.1)	115 (54.2)	97 (45.8)	20.03*
Being paid to clean houses	54 (34.6)	102 (65.4)	104 (49.1)	108 (50.9)	7.65**
Delivering the mail	136 (87.2)	20 (12.8)	85 (40.1)	127 (59.9)	83.06*

Note: Level of significance for * $p < .001$ and ** $p < .01$

3.2. Ethnic prejudice

Results indicated that above 50% of participants chose White targets as best friends (White: 51,1% vs. Black: 15,5% vs. Both targets: 33,4%; $\chi^2=69,95$, $p < .001$), both target children as playmates (White: 32,3% vs. Black: 14,2% vs. Both targets: 53,5%; $\chi^2=85,86$, $p < .001$), and Black targets as authors of pen stealing (White: 31% vs. Black: 54,9% vs. Both targets: 14,1%; $\chi^2=92,63$, $p < .001$), without statistically significant differences for the choice of addressee of a toy (White: 29,6% vs. Black: 36,4% vs. Both targets: 34%; $\chi^2=2,61$, $p = ns$).

Significant differences for age-groups were found (Table 3) in the sense that younger children showed pro-White prejudices more than older ones, especially for the choice of best friend, and anti-Black prejudices for the author of pen stealing. On the contrary, older children were more likely to display pro-Black prejudices for addressee of a toy and anti-White prejudices especially for the author of pen stealing more than younger ones. For the choice of playmates, children of both age-groups shaped their preferences toward both targets.

Table 3 – Age groups differences for ethnic prejudice (N=368)

Ethnic prejudice	4-8 years (N=156)			8-12 years (N=212)			Chi Square Test
	White Targets	Black Targets	Both	White Targets	Black Targets	Both	
Best friend	105 (67.3)	7 (4.5)	44 (28.2)	83 (39.2)	50 (23.6)	79 (37.2)	37.31*
Playmate	66 (42.4)	6 (3.8)	84 (53.8)	53 (25)	46 (21.7)	113 (53.3)	28.60*
Addressee of toy	68 (43.6)	32 (20.5)	56 (35.9)	41 (19.3)	102 (48.2)	69 (32.5)	36.94*
Pen stealing	15 (9.6)	131 (84)	10 (6.4)	99 (46.7)	71 (33.5)	42 (19.8)	93.04*

Note: Level of significance for * $p < .001$

4. Conclusion

This investigation was focused on the analysis of ethnic stereotyped beliefs and the direction of prejudicial attitudes about ethnic outgroup. On the basis of findings obtained in our previous researches (see De Caroli, 2005), we hypothesized that (H1) children attending to ethnically homogeneous schools will express positive ethnic stereotypes toward White targets (ingroup) and negative ethnic stereotypes toward Black targets (outgroup) regarding the attribution of both socio-cognitive and personality traits and of jobs; (H2) children attending to ethnically homogeneous schools will express positive attitudes toward White targets (ingroup) and negative attitudes toward Black targets (outgroup) in relation to potential friendship, choice of playmate, addressee of a toy, and

choice of object stealing author; at least, we hypothesized that (H3) younger children will express more negative ethnic stereotypes and prejudicial attitudes toward Black targets (outgroup) than older ones.

As confirmed by results, the general ethnic orientation exhibited by participants indicated the presence of positive beliefs toward ingroup members and of negative beliefs toward outgroup members: in fact, children attributed positive characteristics related to intelligence, sensibility, generosity, honesty, and sweetness to White targets (ingroup) and negative characteristics linked to loneliness, submissiveness, ignorance, poverty, cruelty, thievery, and rudeness to Black targets (outgroup). Concerning the ethnic jobs choice, children attributed only activities linked to very low social position and status in need conditions to Black targets and a considerable number of differentiated activities with high social-economic status to White targets. As hypothesized, in relation to age, results confirmed that children aged 4-8 were more likely to express pro-White/anti-Black stereotyped beliefs than those aged 8-12; on the contrary, children aged 8-12 were more likely to display pro-Black/anti-White stereotyped beliefs than those aged 4-8 in the attribution of ethnic traits. In addition, children aged 4-8 expressed marked pro-White/anti-Black stereotyped beliefs, while children aged 8-12 tended to exhibit a flexible ethnic orientation in the attribution of jobs.

With regards to ethnic prejudicial attitudes, tested through explicit measures of prejudice (see Rutland et alii, 2005), children displayed positive prejudices toward White targets preferred as best friends and negative prejudice toward Black targets selected as authors of an object stealing. Also in this case, significant effects for age were found out because of children aged 4-8 indicated White targets as best friends more than those aged 8-12; for playmates, children expressed balanced preferences both for White and Black targets; at least, for the author of object stealing, children aged 4-8 showed negative prejudicial attitudes mainly for Black targets and, vice versa, children aged 8-12 for White targets and, in a low percentage, also for Black targets.

These results represented a confirmation of data obtained in previous researches carried out in other homogeneous school contexts with Italian children (see De Caroli, 2005), in agreement with the cognitive explanation provided by Aboud and Nesdale's theoretical models for the formation of ethnic attitudes in developmental age. This scenario took place despite the two limits of the current study: the strictly homogeneous setting and the possible desirability effects elicited by the application of explicit measures of ethnic prejudice. We are facing an "ethnic cleavage" among young children probably supported by the type of both school environment and cognitive development typically focused on the egocentric view of world. Future researches could deepen the role of ingroup and outgroup representation with implicit measures (Rutland, Cameron, Milne, & McGeorge, 2005; Baron & Banaji, 2006) and the influence of outgroup stereotype threat on the expression of ethnic prejudice in children.

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