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# The relationship between stereotypes and prejudice toward the Africans in Italian university students

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## Abstract

This research explored ethnic stereotypes, levels of blatant/subtle prejudice toward Africans and the relationships between these two dimensions in Italian university students with and without friends belonging to other ethnic groups. The *ethnic traits and jobs choice* (De Caroli & Sagone, 2007) and the *Subtle and Blatant Prejudice Scale* (Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995) were used. Results showed that most of the students attributed positive traits to the Africans and negative traits to the Italians, and assigned prestigious-intellectual jobs to the Italians and practical-manual jobs to the Africans. University students with both low levels of blatant prejudice and high levels of subtle prejudice (*Subtles*) assigned more prestigious-intellectual jobs to the Italians and practical-manual jobs to the Africans than the others (*Equalitarians*). Friendship affected prejudice and, partially, stereotypes.  
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*Keywords:* Ethnic stereotypes; subtle and blatant prejudice; friendship; university students.

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## 1. Introduction

Ethnic stereotypes and prejudice represented two relevant issues in the analysis of social attitudes toward people belonging to other ethnic groups and in the explanation of inter-group relationships. Stereotypes were defined as opinions associated to a category (Brown, 1995) and constituted by simplified knowledge, referred to a social group, shared by most of the people belonging to a specific group. Prejudice was usually defined as refusing attitudes toward individuals belonging to a group simply because they belong to their own group (Allport, 1954). As confirmed by scientific literature (see Sears & Kinder, 1971; McConahay, 1986; Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995), ethnic prejudice could be expressed into two different forms: traditional prejudice, consisting in explicit rejection toward members belonging to other ethnic groups, and latent prejudice, linked to covert forms of discrimination and careful to live up to social expectations. Pettigrew and Meertens (1995) distinguished blatant prejudice (Bp), corresponding to the traditional forms of refusal, and subtle prejudice (Sp), related to latent forms of discrimination. The Bp was structured in the Threat and rejection, linked to the perception of outgroup as a great risk for ingroup, and the Anti-intimacy, anchored to the rejection of sexual contact or intermarriage with outgroup members. Sp was constituted by: the Defence of traditional values, linked to the belief that ingroup values were more relevant than outgroup ones; the Exaggeration of cultural differences, based on the perception of outgroup as very different from ingroup in cultural aspects like beliefs and religious practices; the Denial of positive emotions, consisting in the suppression of positive feelings such as solidarity and admiration toward outgroup. According to this model, it is

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possible to distinguish three typologies of subjects: *Equalitarians*, with low mean values of both Sp and Bp; *Bigots*, with high mean values of both Sp and Bp; and *Subtles*, with high mean values of Sp and low mean values of Bp.

Scientific research tended to clarify the relationships between knowledge of ethnic stereotypes and levels of prejudice, asking subjects to freely list the content of the cultural stereotypes referred to a specific target group (see first study of Devine, 1989; Lepore & Brown, 1997; Gordjin, Koomen, & Stapel, 2001; Akrami, Ekehammar, & Araya, 2006). In detail, Devine (1989) found that White university students, independently by levels of prejudice, reported the same knowledge of the cultural stereotypes toward Black people. These results were confirmed by outcomes reported in Lepore and Brown's research with White British psychology students and by evidences showed in Akrami's investigation (2006) that involved Sweden university students. On the contrary, in a study with Dutch university students, Gordjin et al. (2001) pointed out that levels of prejudice toward Moroccans and Surinamese were strictly related to the knowledge of ethnic stereotypes toward these groups; thus, highly prejudiced students mentioned more negative (e.g. criminal, lazy, aggressive) and less positive stereotypes than lowly prejudiced ones. The link between levels of prejudice and representation of outgroups, in terms of attribution of positive and negative traits, was confirmed in recent researches carried out with Italian adolescents (Falanga, De Caroli, & Sagone, in press) and young adults (De Caroli, Falanga, & Sagone, in press). It was noted that the positive representation of outgroups, respectively, the Africans and the Chinese people, analyzed using Semantic Differentials, positively affected levels of Subtle and Blatant prejudice toward these groups.

Among variables influencing ethnic stereotyped beliefs and prejudice, interethnic contact plays an important role as reported by Rudman, Ashmore, and Gary (2001), Pettigrew and Meertens (1995), Voci and Hewstone (2010), and De Caroli et al. (in press). In detail, Rudman et al. (2001) demonstrated that specific educational programs based on interethnic contact reduced stereotypes and levels of prejudice toward Black people. Pettigrew and Meertens (1995) found that people with friends belonging to other ethnic groups obtained lower levels of Sp and Bp than the others. Voci and Hewstone (2010) pointed out that the interethnic contact reduced the levels of Sp components. Finally, De Caroli and her colleagues (in press) showed that adolescents and young adults with friends belonging to other ethnic groups expressed lower levels in both components of Sp and Bp than those without friends from other ethnic groups.

The absence of univocal findings in reference to the relationships between stereotypes and prejudice suggested the necessity to deepen these dimensions analyzing the role of interethnic friendship in Italian university students.

## 2. Methodology

The present study was aimed to explore ethnic stereotypes, levels of blatant and subtle prejudice toward the Africans and the relationships between these two dimensions in Italian university students with and without friends belonging to other ethnic groups. In detail, in line with findings of Gordjin et al. (2001) and Falanga et al. (in press), we hypothesized that *Equalitarians* will attribute more positive stereotypes toward the Africans than *Subtles* and *Bigots* ( $H_1$ ). In relation to friendship, we hypothesized that the students with friends belonging to other ethnic groups will attribute more positive stereotypes to the Africans ( $H_2$ ) and will show lower levels of Sp and Bp toward the Africans ( $H_3$ ) than the students without friends from other ethnic groups.

### 2.1. Participants

The sample consisted of 149 Italian students, attending the last year of Psychology degree at University of Catania. They were aged from 21 to 36 ( $M=25.38$ ,  $sd=3.16$ ) and divided into two groups: n.69 students with friends and n.80 students without friends belonging to other ethnic groups. Originally, the sample consisted of 153 students; four subjects were excluded because their scores in one or both subscales overlapped with the theoretical mid-point (see Manganelli Rattazzi & Volpato, 2001).

## 2.2. Measures and procedure

### 2.2.1. Ethnic traits and jobs choice

These measures (see De Caroli & Sagone, 2007), adapted to university students, were constituted by:

- 17 positive (e.g. self-confident, kind, sweet, defends the weaker, generous, honest) and 19 negative traits (e.g. aggressive, bad mannered, submissive, ignorant, lonely, cruel, steals other people's things);
- 17 prestigious-intellectual jobs, e.g. curing sick people (doctor), dancing on the stage (ballet dancer), piloting an airplane (pilot), treating teeth (dentist) and 16 practical-manual jobs, e.g. driving a truck (truck driver), repairing broken-down cars (mechanic), cleaning the streets (sweeper), and so on.

Traits and jobs were showed to each student together with the photos of one African and one Italian young adult. Students were asked to attribute each trait and job to the photos of African or Italian young adult using the forced choice method.

### 2.2.2. Subtle and Blatant Prejudice Scale

This scale (Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995) was applied in Italian context by Manganelli Rattazzi and Volpato (2001) and included 20 items, evaluable on a 6-point Likert scale. It was divided in two subscales: 10 items to assess subtle prejudice (Sp), structured in the Defence of traditional values (e.g., "Africans living here teach their children values and skills different from those required to be successful in Italy"), the Exaggeration of cultural differences (e.g., "How different or similar do you think African people living here are to Italian people in their religious beliefs and practices?"), and the Denial of positive emotions (e.g., "How often have you felt sympathy toward African people living here?", item reverse); 10 items to analyze blatant prejudice (Bp), articulated in the Threat and rejection (e.g., "Most politicians in Italy care too much about African people and not enough about the average Italian persons") and the Anti-intimacy (e.g., "I would not mind if an African person who had a similar economic background as mine joined my close family by marriage").

## 2.3. Data analysis

Statistical analyses were conducted applying the following statistical tests: *t* for paired samples, *t*-test, and Chi Square using the SPSS 15. For ethnic stereotyped beliefs, the attributions of each trait and job to a photo (African or Italian young adult) were counted. Levels of Sp and Bp were rated by adding the scores obtained in the items constituting the two subscales; levels of prejudice for each of the five components were computed by summing responses to the respective items and dividing them for the number of total items of each component. High scores indicated high levels of ethnic prejudice. Using theoretical mid-point (equal to 35), subjects were divided into: *Equalitarians* (Sp and Bp <35); *Bigots* (Sp and Bp >35); *Subtles* (Sp >35 and Bp <35).

The friendship with people belonging to other ethnic groups was used as independent variable, while frequencies of choices of stereotypes and typologies of subjects were counted as dependent variables.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Ethnic stereotypes

In relation to ethnic traits choice, most of the students assigned positive traits to the Africans, such as courageous (83,9%), honest (81,9%), keeps promises (79,9%), defends the weaker (79,9%), quiet (76,5%), kind (80,5%), generous (85,2%), sweet (75,8%), amusing (76,5%), sensitive (77,2%). On the contrary, most of the students attributed negative traits to the Italians such as crafty (75,2%), whiner (87,2%), busybody (78,5%), uses bad language (84,6%), conceited (93,3%), bossy (83,9%), nervous (87,2%), liar (90,6%), steals other people's things (85,2%), cruel (89,3%), bad mannered (85,9%), aggressive (85,9%), except for poor (26,2%) and shy (38,3%) assigned to the Africans (Table 1). For the remaining traits there were no significant differences in the distribution between the Italians and the Africans.

Table 1 – Distribution of traits: total sample (N=149)

Positive traits	Italians	Africans	Chi Square Test	Negative traits	Italians	Africans	Chi Square Test
Creative	45 (30,2)	104 ( <b>69,8</b> )	37.75**	Crafty	112 ( <b>75,2</b> )	37 (24,8)	37.75**
Intelligent	55 (36,9)	94 ( <b>63,1</b> )	10.21**	Ignorant	92 ( <b>61,7</b> )	57 (38,3)	8.22*
Romantic	62 (41,6)	87 ( <b>58,4</b> )	4.19*	Whiner	130 ( <b>87,2</b> )	19 (12,8)	82.69**
Courageous	24 (16,1)	125 ( <b>83,9</b> )	68.46**	Busybody	117 ( <b>78,5</b> )	32 (21,5)	48.49**
Self confident	97 ( <b>65,1</b> )	52 (34,9)	13.59**	Uses bad language	126 ( <b>84,6</b> )	23 (15,4)	71.20**
Honest	27 (18,1)	122 ( <b>81,9</b> )	60.57**	Conceited	139 ( <b>93,3</b> )	10 (6,7)	111.68**
Keep promises	30 (20,1)	119 ( <b>79,9</b> )	53.16**	Bossy	125 ( <b>83,9</b> )	24 (16,1)	68.46**
Defends the weaker	30 (20,1)	119 ( <b>79,9</b> )	53.16**	Nervous	130 ( <b>87,2</b> )	19 (12,8)	82.69**
Quiet	35 (23,5)	114 ( <b>76,5</b> )	41.89**	Liar	135 ( <b>90,6</b> )	14 (9,4)	98.26**
Kind	29 (19,5)	120 ( <b>80,5</b> )	55.58**	Steals other people's things	127 ( <b>85,2</b> )	22 (14,8)	73.99**
Generous	22 (14,8)	127 ( <b>85,2</b> )	73.99**	Cruel	133 ( <b>89,3</b> )	16 (10,7)	91.87**
Sweet	36 (24,2)	113 ( <b>75,8</b> )	39.79**	Bad mannered	128 ( <b>85,9</b> )	21 (14,1)	76.84**
Amusing	35 (23,5)	114 ( <b>76,5</b> )	41.89**	Aggressive	128 ( <b>85,9</b> )	21 (14,1)	76.84**
Sensitive	34 (22,8)	115 ( <b>77,2</b> )	44.03**	Poor	39 (26,2)	110 ( <b>73,8</b> )	33.83**
Strong	50 (33,6)	99 ( <b>66,4</b> )	16.11**	Shy	57 (38,3)	92 ( <b>61,7</b> )	8.22*
Democratic	55 (36,9)	94 ( <b>63,1</b> )	10.21*	Talkative	47 (31,5)	102 ( <b>68,5</b> )	20.30**
Athletic	46 (30,9)	103 ( <b>69,1</b> )	21.80**				

Note: Levels of significance for \*\*  $p < .001$ ; \*  $p < .05$

In reference to ethnic jobs choice, we noted that university students assigned mainly prestigious-intellectual jobs to the Italians, such as politician (89,9%), film director (73,2%), pilot (74,5%), traffic warden (80,5%), judge (77,2%), policeman (71,1%). Additionally, university students attributed mainly practical-manual jobs to the Africans as baby sitter (70,5%), dressmaker (79,9%), house servant (70,5%), beggar (78,5%) (Table 2). For the remaining jobs there were no significant differences in the distribution between the Italians and the Africans.

Table 2 – Distribution of jobs: total sample (N=149)

Prestigious-intellectual jobs	Italians	Africans	Chi Square Test	Practical-manual jobs	Italians	Africans	Chi Square Test
Scientist	93 ( <b>62,4</b> )	56 (37,6)	9.19*	Baby sitter	44 (29,5)	105 ( <b>70,5</b> )	24.97**
Politician	134 ( <b>89,9</b> )	15 (10,1)	95.04**	Plumber	58 (38,9)	91 ( <b>61,1</b> )	7.31*
Film director	109 ( <b>73,2</b> )	40 (26,8)	31.95**	Fireman	51 (34,2)	98 ( <b>65,8</b> )	14.83**
Painter	56 (37,6)	93 ( <b>62,4</b> )	9.19*	Painter	56 (37,6)	93 ( <b>62,4</b> )	9.19*
Pilot	111 ( <b>74,5</b> )	38 (25,5)	35.76**	Dressmaker	30 (20,1)	110 ( <b>79,9</b> )	53.16**
Singer	60 (40,3)	89 ( <b>59,7</b> )	5.64*	Mason	61 (40,9)	88 ( <b>59,1</b> )	4.89*
Traffic warden	120 ( <b>80,5</b> )	29 (19,5)	55.58**	Confectioner	47 (31,5)	102 ( <b>68,5</b> )	20.32**
Judge	115 ( <b>77,2</b> )	34 (22,8)	44.03**	Secretary	97 ( <b>65,1</b> )	52 (34,9)	13.59**
Teacher	89 ( <b>59,7</b> )	60 (40,3)	5.64*	Laborer	47 (31,5)	102 ( <b>68,5</b> )	20.30**
Journalist	102 ( <b>68,5</b> )	47 (31,5)	20.30**	Truck driver	51 (34,2)	98 ( <b>65,8</b> )	14.83**
Policeman	106 ( <b>71,1</b> )	43 (28,9)	26.64**	Waiter	53 (35,6)	96 ( <b>64,4</b> )	12.41**
Doctor	60 (40,3)	89 ( <b>59,7</b> )	5.64*	Mechanic	55 (36,9)	94 ( <b>63,1</b> )	10.21*
Actor	89 ( <b>59,7</b> )	60 (40,3)	5.64*	House servant	44 (29,5)	105 ( <b>70,5</b> )	24.97**
Dentist	94 ( <b>63,1</b> )	55 (36,9)	10.21*	Postman	88 ( <b>59,1</b> )	61 (40,9)	4.89*
Astronaut	97 ( <b>65,1</b> )	52 (34,9)	13.59*	Beggar	32 (21,5)	117 ( <b>78,5</b> )	48.49**
				Flower seller	49 (32,9)	100 ( <b>67,1</b> )	17.46**

Note: Levels of significance for \*\*  $p < .001$ ; \*  $p < .05$

### 3.2. Subtle and blatant ethnic prejudice

University students expressed higher levels of Sp ( $M=33.98$ ,  $sd=6.10$ ) than those of Bp ( $M=20.26$ ,  $sd=5.63$ )( $t_{(148)}=31.69$ ,  $p<.001$ ), with significant differences in the three components of Sp and the two components of Bp. Thus, university students showed higher levels of the Exaggeration of cultural differences ( $M=4.24$ ,  $sd=.83$ ) than those of the Denial of positive emotions ( $M=3.18$ ,  $sd=1.05$ ) and the Defence of traditional values ( $M=2.63$ ,  $sd=.79$ )( $F_{(2,147)}=167.24$ ,  $p<.001$ ) and expressed higher levels of the Threat and rejection ( $M=2.11$ ,  $sd=.62$ ) than levels of the Anti-intimacy ( $M=1.90$ ,  $sd=.72$ )( $t_{(148)}=3.52$ ,  $p=.001$ ). The 59,7% of students were classified as *Equalitarians* and the 40,3% as *Subtles*; nobody was classified as *Bigot*.

### 3.3. Relationships between ethnic stereotypes and typologies of subjects (*Equalitarians* vs. *Subtles*)

Results pointed out significant differences in the attribution of jobs to the Africans and the Italians related to typologies of subjects. In this sense, over 60% of *Subtles* assigned practical-manual jobs to the Africans and over 70% attributed prestigious-intellectual jobs to the Italians; on the contrary, the *Equalitarians* attributed in balanced way the same jobs to the Africans and to the Italians, except for “working in factory”, assigned mainly to the Africans (Table 3). No differences were found in relation to ethnic traits.

Table 3 – Typologies of subjects differences for stereotypes: total sample (N=149)

Ethnic jobs choice	<i>Equalitarians</i>		<i>Subtles</i>		Chi Square Test
	Italians	Africans	Italians	Africans	
Scientist	47 (52,8)	42 (47,2)	<b>46 (76,7)</b>	14 (23,3)	8.97*
Plumber	42 (47,2)	47 (52,8)	16 (26,7)	<b>44 (73,3)</b>	6.35*
Mason	44 (49,4)	45 (50,6)	17 (28,3)	<b>43 (71,7)</b>	6.60*
Sweeper	48 (53,9)	41 (46,1)	22 (36,7)	<b>38 (63,3)</b>	4.29*
Laborer	33 (37,1)	<b>56 (62,9)</b>	14 (23,3)	<b>46 (76,7)</b>	3.13**
Dentist	51 (57,3)	38 (42,7)	<b>43 (71,7)</b>	17 (28,3)	3.17**
Mechanic	41 (46,1)	48 (53,9)	14 (23,3)	<b>46 (76,7)</b>	7.95*

Note: Levels of significance for \*  $p<.01$  and \*\*  $p<.05$

### 3.4. The role of friendship with people belonging to other ethnic groups

In relation to the role of interethnic friendship on ethnic stereotypes, significant differences were found only for the submissive trait, attributed by 53,7% of students to the Africans: most of the university students without friends belonging to other ethnic groups attributed the submissiveness to the Africans (with: 34,2% vs. without: 19,5%;  $Chi^2=7,03$ ,  $p=.006$ ). Therefore, in relation to the job of street cleaner, assigned by 53% of students to the Africans, most of the students without friends from other ethnic groups attributed this practical-manual job to the Africans (with: 32,9% vs. without: 20,1%)( $Chi^2=4,70$ ,  $p=.02$ ) and, in reference to the job of dancer, attributed by 53,7% of students to the Africans, most of the students with friends belonging to other ethnic groups assigned this job to the Africans (with: 24,2% vs. without: 29,5%)( $Chi^2=5,24$ ,  $p=.02$ ).

For the levels of subtle and blatant prejudice, university students with friends from other ethnic groups reported lower levels of Sp ( $M=32.61$ ,  $sd=5.40$  vs.  $M=35.16$ ,  $sd=6.45$ )( $t_{(147)}=-2.60$ ,  $p=.01$ ) and Bp ( $M=18.27$ ,  $sd=4.50$  vs.  $M=21.97$   $sd=5.97$ )( $t_{(147)}=-4.21$ ,  $p<.001$ ) than the others. In detail, university students with friends belonging to other ethnic groups expressed lower levels than others in the Defence of traditional values (with=2.47,  $sd=.71$  vs. without=2.76,  $sd=.83$ )( $t_{(147)}=-2.27$ ,  $p=.02$ ), the Denial of positive emotions (with=2.86,  $sd=.97$  vs. without=3.46,  $sd=1.05$ )( $t_{(147)}=-3.57$ ,  $p<.001$ ), the Threat and rejection (with=1.91,  $sd=.52$  vs. without=2.28,  $sd=.65$ )( $t_{(147)}=-3.87$ ,  $p<.001$ ), and the Anti-intimacy (with=1.71,  $sd=.63$  vs. without=2.07,  $sd=.76$ )( $t_{(147)}=-3.11$ ,  $p=.002$ ). Additionally, the analysis of typologies of subjects showed that the 32,2% of university students with friends belonging to other ethnic group were classified as *Equalitarians* and 14,1% as *Subtles*, while the 27,5% of students without friends from other ethnic groups were classified as *Equalitarians* and the 26,2% as *Subtles* ( $Chi^2=5,17$ ,  $p=.02$ ).

#### 4. Discussion and conclusion

The findings underlined that most of the university students attributed mainly positive traits to the Africans and negative ones to the Italians but assigned prestigious-intellectual jobs to the Italians and practical-manual jobs to the Africans. The first hypothesis was partially confirmed ( $H_1$ ): university students classified as *Equalitarians* showed unbiased attitudes in the attribution of jobs to the Africans and the Italians, while the *Subtles* assigned mainly prestigious-intellectual jobs to Italians and practical-manual jobs to the Africans.

The interethnic friendship affected only the attribution of the “submissive” trait; students with friends belonging to other ethnic groups assigned less this negative characteristic to the Africans than students without friends belonging to other ethnic groups. In relation to jobs, most of the students without friends belonging to other ethnic groups assigned the practical-manual job of “street cleaner” to the Africans and most of the university students with friends from other ethnic groups attributed the prestigious-intellectual job of dancer to the Africans ( $H_2$ ).

Furthermore, as predicted in  $H_3$  and according to literature, results demonstrated the positive role of friendship in the reduction of prejudice in its subtle and blatant forms: university students with friends from other ethnic groups showed lower levels on both covert and explicit prejudice than the others, especially in the belief that ingroup values were more relevant than outgroup ones, in the suppression of positive feelings, in the perception of outgroup as a great risk for ingroup, and in the rejection of sexual contact or intermarriage with outgroup members. Moreover, most of the university students with friends belonging to other ethnic group were *Equalitarians*, while the students without friends from other ethnic groups were equally distributed between *Equalitarians* and *Subtles*.

Future research, carried out with other outgroups target, will deepen the characteristics attributed to various outgroups and the relationships between the analyzed phenomena.

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