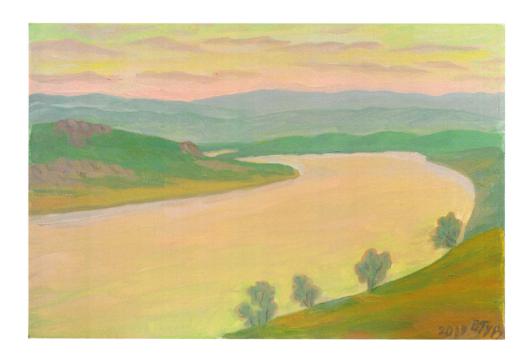# Psycho-pedagogical research in a Double-degree programme

edited by
Guido Benvenuto and Maria Serena Veggetti

Collana Materiali e documenti 53

Psycho-pedagogical research in a Double-degree programme

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Impaginazione/layout a cura di: autore/curatore

In copertina: Viktor Aleksandrovič Guruzhapov, *Studio* (2019), olio su cartone, cm 30 x 20.

To all the students who believed in this course of study and in an international perspective.

And to keep alive the memory of our collegue Viktor Aleksandrovič Guruzhapov, suddenly disappeared.

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11. Thinking intelligently to promote a democratic society

Giordana Szpunar

The present paper concerns the topics of prejudice and stereotype and the scientific and reflective attitude as a useful strategy for their reduction. The topic is particularly important because it is closely related to the issue of social inclusion and respect for minorities: in fact, prejudice and stereotypes are phenomena underlying discrimination attitudes and social exclusion processes.

Prejudice is defined by psychosocial research as "an individual-level attitude (whether subjectively positive or negative) towards groups and their members that creates or maintains hierarchical status relations between groups" (Dovidio et al., 2010, p. 7). Prejudice is characterized by three dimensions: cognitive dimension, affective and motivational dimension and behavioral dimension. The cognitive dimension includes stereotypes and beliefs and the way in which the human being perceives, knows and judges others. The affective and motivational dimension consists of feelings, emotions and motivations based on which the human being tends to judge outgroup members negatively, and to defend ingroup members. The behavioral dimension concerns attitudes, hostile intentions and actions that are carried out in line with shared prejudices and stereotypes. More specifically, stereotypes and beliefs, together with emotional responses, cause the hostile and discriminatory behavior. Stereotype, as the "cognitive core" of prejudice, is defined as "a set of qualities perceived to reflect the essence of a group", a set of "associations and beliefs about the characteristics and attributes of a

group and its members that shape how people think about and respond to the group" (Dovidio et al., 2010, p. 8).

Stereotype is the result of the categorization process: the world is extremely complex and full of stimuli; to simplify the complexity of the context and to order and classify objects, people and events, the human brain categorizes the stimuli, by similarity and difference (Cohen & Lefebvre, 2005). Categorization is a fundamental process to human cognition, because it allows to "organize and structure our knowledge about the world". In other words, it makes the immense diversity of individual entities that we encounter in daily life manageable, transforming the "world from chaotic complexity into predictable order". Social categorization is a similar process: on the basis of some social cues (e.g. ethnic traits, demographic features, social roles) we can make inferences about a range of relevant and important issues. We can predict behavior, intentions, skills, and personality traits of people. This allows us to always know how to behave and thereby reduce anxiety through a more efficient control and prediction on the context. Unlike categorization in general, social categorization leads us to position ourselves with respect to the category and to establish dividing lines between groups (ingroup and outgroup) (Bodenhausen, Kang & Peery, 2012, pp. 318-319). Therefore, social categorization also has an important function in the construction of social identity (Tajfel, 1981).

Social categorization gives rise to stereotypes. If stereotypes are mental representations of real differences between groups (e.g. cultural stereotypes about food preferences) then they perform the useful function of cognitive schemas, used by social perceivers to process information. Instead, if stereotypes are formed about various groups independently from real group differences (e.g. religion, gender, ethnicity) then they become a set of «beliefs about the characteristics, attributes, and behaviors of members of certain groups and theories about how and why certain attributes go together». Therefore, in the first case, stereotypes operate allowing easier and more efficient processing of information about others. In the second case, stereotypes have an enormous potential for error (Hilton & von Hippel, 1996). Moreover, when the stereotype corresponding to the category is associated with judgments on values, it can become an obstacle to social relations and mutual

knowledge, and dangerous and harmful for the community. Indeed, one version of the social identity theory (SIT) assumes that, because of social categorization, people show an ingroup bias, or tendency to favor their own group relative to outgroups (Tajfel et al., 1971). Moreover, people perceive greater similarity among the outgroup members. This similarity leads people to dehumanize outgroup members and justify intergroup prejudice and conflict and discrimination (Cortes et al., 2005). Dangerousness of stereotype increases depending on the degree of rigidity, social sharing, generalization and the intensity that characterizes them. Furthermore, stereotypes, when activated, are protected by a series of automatic and unconscious processes that make them resistant to change and more easily accessible. In fact, according to the theory of cognitive dissonance, people avoid information that increase dissonance on and favor information consistent with their attitude and behavior (Festinger, 1957). This activates selective perception processes, which lead people to seek consistent information not yet present (Selective Exposure; McGuire, 1969), to heed consistent information once it is there (Selective Attention; Olson & Zanna, 1979), and to translate ambiguous information to be consistent (Selective Interpretation; Vidamar & Rokeach, 1974). In turn, these selective perceptions' processes produce several automatic cognitive biases (intended as cognitive errors).

Discriminatory and hostile behaviors exhibited consistently with the stereotype are ethically reprehensible and have a negative effect on the stigmatized person. Identity threat is produced when a stigmatized person perceives stereotype as being potentially harmful to their social identity and as exceeding their resources to cope with those stimuli. Identity threat leads to involuntary stress responses such as anxiety, vigilance to threat, and decreased working memory (Major & O'Brian, 2005). Therefore, stigma affects self-esteem, school and academic achievement (Rydell et al., 2010; Aronson, Quinn & Spencer, 1998), and health (Allison, 1998). Moreover, stigma is related to reduced access to housing, education, and jobs (Braddock & McPartland, 1987). Stigmatizing attitudes are often directed towards

minority-groups members (ethnic minorities, disabled people, LGBTQ [1] people, women etc.).

For these reasons, different areas of human sciences have focused their attention on the origin and transmission of prejudice and the strategies for its reduction. One of the most active areas on the topic is psychosocial research. The different explanations of the phenomenon of prejudice prefer alternatively cognitive aspects or emotional aspects and consider alternatively individual or groups as subjects.

Initially, roughly from the 20s to the 50s, researchers considered social prejudice as an individual attitude, the result of a pathological personality. In the 70s the research focused on the ordinary aspects of prejudice, related to cognitive processes and group dynamics. In the 90s multidimensional explanations took hold; the new technologies, that measure and analyze mental processes, made it possible to detect implicit, automatic and unconscious aspects of individual attitudes.

The phenomenon of prejudice is generally characterized by two dimensions, the cognitive and the motivational. The main theories of the explanation of prejudice refer to social categorization, to individual and personality differences, to conflicts between groups, to the construction of social identity (Haslam & Dovidio, 2010).

Considering mainly the motivational dimension, some theories stand at an intra-individual level of analysis, explaining the prejudice through individual and personality processes, others are at a level of inter-individual analysis, explaining the prejudice through socio-economic factors or psychosocial processes.

The explanations on an intra-individual level of analysis are based on Freud's psychodynamic theory. In general terms, restrictions on sexual and aggressive instincts cause frustration and accumulation of emotional energy. This energy must be released, and this provokes aggressive attitudes towards the source of frustration or towards other targets (often people who are part of minorities or deviant categories). The discriminatory and hostile attitude towards minorities therefore depends on an authoritarian personality

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[1] Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transsexual, Queer, Intersex.

(Adorno et al., 1950) or on a causal relationship of frustration and aggression (Dollard et al., 1939). These theories have been criticized because they do not explain some aspects of the phenomenon (for example the increase of prejudice in specific groups or in specific historical periods). However, they have had interesting developments in more recent proposals that underline the role of social norms and standards in the transmission of authoritarian attitudes (Altemeyer, 1998), correlation between characteristics of the personality in childhood and political orientation in adulthood (Block & Block, 2006), the influence of parenting styles and individual temperament on political orientation in adulthood (conservative or liberal) (Fraley et al., 2012).

The explanations on an inter-individual level of analysis claim that prejudice is a process that originates and develops at social level, within the functional relationships between groups. According to these theories the perceived group competition for resources implies efforts to reduce the access of other groups to resources. The attempts of a group to obtain favorable outcomes for itself are perceived by the other group as a frustration of their own goals. This competitive and conflicting relation between groups is expressed in discriminatory and aggressive attitudes towards the external group (Sherif et al., 1961).

From the cognitive point of view, the individual knows and understands the world by processing the stimuli and organizing them into categories by similarity and difference (Cohen & Lefebvre, 2005). Categorization allows to control the complexity of environment because we can insert a potentially unlimited number of stimuli in a limited number of categories. It is an indispensable tool, but it involves risks because social categorization, from which the stereotype derives, profoundly influences social perception, affection, cognition and behavior (Dovidio et al., 2010, p. 14).

Tajfel's theory of social identity is the one that has contributed most to keeping together the different levels of analysis (individual, interindividual, intergroup and social) and the different factors (cognitive and motivational) of the phenomenon of prejudice, representing it as an aspect of social cognition. Social categories feed on themselves so that perceptions are coherent with cognitive representations. Furthermore, the differences between the members

of the same category are underestimated ("they are all the same") and, at the same time, the differences between the groups are overestimated and amplified ("we are not like them") (Tajfel & Wikes, 1963; Tajfel, 1969). Intra-categorial assimilation and inter-categorial differentiation have two consequences: from a cognitive point of view, people remember more positive information about the ingroup and more negative information about the outgroup (Dovidio, 2010); from an emotional point of view, people develop a more positive feeling towards the members of their group (ingroup) than towards the members of the external group (outgroup) (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Social categorization automatically and unconsciously activates cognitive distortions (bias) which, in an attempt to gather information consistent with the stereotype, confirm and feed the stereotype itself (Devine, 1989). These processes influence the behavior of people who will be more inclined to help the ingroup members than outgroup members. Often stereotypes and prejudices lead people to take a hostile attitude towards outgroup members. It follows that people affected by injuries suffer a series of negative consequences in terms of psychological health, well-being and material access to resources: the attribution to an individual of negative characteristics discriminates him and negatively influences the perception of his social identity; the threat to identity generates stress responses and the activation of coping strategies that, in general, influence self-esteem, performance (at school, at work) and health (Major & O'Brian, 2005; Steele, Spencer & Aronson, 2002).

Moreover, since the 50s, psychosocial research has experienced several prejudice and stereotype reduction strategies. Some strategies are more effective on the affective dimension of prejudice; other strategies are more effective on the cognitive dimension. The main prejudice reduction strategies are four.

The contact hypothesis

Allport (1954) first proposed one of the most important and effective prejudice reduction strategies, trying to identify the conditions that favor the stereotypes change process: the contact hypothesis. The contact between individuals belonging to different groups, possibly characterized by real and thorough personal knowledge, long duration, status of similarity between individuals,

presence of a common purpose and therefore of a cooperative context, represents a powerful means to reduce prejudice, hostile behavior and conflict between groups, and to facilitate processes of acceptance and mutual understanding.

Experiments conducted on the contact hypothesis over the years have shown conflicting results (Amir, 1976). A recent meta-analysis shows that the preconditions hypothesized by Allport, and other researchers after him, optimal to reduce prejudice, would not seem to decisively influence the relationship between contact and prejudice (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006). However, in many experiments, the contact is related to a more favorable attitude on the part of the majority group towards members of minority group, demonstrating that actually the contact, in some contexts, is an effective prejudice reduction strategy (Brown & Hewstone, 2005; Turner et al., 2007). The effectiveness of contact would be based on emotions felt for each other (anxiety, fear, sense of threat, anger). Therefore, the contact influences the emotional aspects of prejudice.

Empathy

Empathy is a process that allows deep understanding of the condition of another person and his inner feelings and experiences. Empathy consists of cognitive and affective elements: cognitive or intellectual empathy refers to the cognitive process; empathic empathy or emotion refers to the affective aspect of the empathic experience (Davis, 1994; Duan & Hill, 1996). The first means intellectually taking the role or perspective of another person; the second means responding with the same or parallel emotion to another person's emotion. Intergroup attitudes (or feelings towards outgroups) can be improved if people are encouraged to adopt the perspective of an outgroup member (Batson et al., 1997; Galinsky & Moskowitz, 2000; Vescio et al., 2003; Batson & Ahmad, 2009).

Categorization, decategorization, recategorization

The different categorization-based models of bias reductions act on the cognitive dimension of prejudice and aim to change the perception of the social context and groups. They assume that people can belong simultaneously to several groups. For example, according to the common ingroup identity model, stereotyping and prejudice

are significantly reduced when the members of the different groups are able to perceive themselves as members of a common group, to see each other's similarly, and to make friends with each other (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000). For recategorization and decategorization, reducing the salience of the original group boundaries is expected to decrease intergroup bias (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2009). To sum up, the different strategies based on categorization attempt to make explicit and enhance the complexity of individual identity that involves the simultaneous membership of everyone to multiple groups. This leads to:

- breaking the monolithic outgroup, so that intra-categorial assimilation and inter-categorial differentiation tend to fade (Crisp & Hewstone, 2000);
- making the definition of self complex, leading to the perception of greater social heterogeneity of the environment (Roccas & Brewer, 2002);
- creating more inclusive "we" (in place of representation of groups as "us" versus "them") (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000).

Self-Regulation of Prejudice

Self-Regulation of Prejudice (SRP) model (Monteith et al., 2002; Monteith & Mark, 2009) starts from the idea that stereotypes and implicit prejudices can be automatically activated, and they are used as a basis for the response to the situation (Devine, 1989). This response often results in a discriminatory behavior. If the prejudiced response and one's non prejudiced personal standard are discrepant, then self-regulatory outcomes are generated (Monteith, 1993). Awareness of discrepant response and self-regulatory outcomes lead to a behavioral inhibition, a negative self-directed affect and a retrospective reflection. This process results in the establishment of cues for control that should play a crucial role in possible future situations, activating a prospective reflection process that inhibits prejudiced responses and generates alternative responses (Monteith et al., 2002).

However, no strategy specifically considers the reflective skill. In this article we argue that the reflective attitude is a tool that could intervene effectively, right on the cognitive dimension of prejudice,

also promoting and supporting the other strategies of prejudice reduction.

The classical theoretical reference is John Dewey with *How we think* (1933), *Unity of Science as a Social Problem* (1938b) and *Logic, the Theory of Inquiry* (1938a).

Dewey devotes much attention to prejudice and analyzes it mainly from an epistemological point of view. The prejudice is "the acme of a priori. Of the a priori in this sense we may say what is always to be said of habits and institutions: they are good servants, but harsh and futile masters" (Dewey, 1906, p. 136). Prejudice is synonymous with belief, that is a type of thought that unconsciously assumes as mentally equipped what is transmitted through tradition, education, imitation and reaches conclusions in the absence of a mental activity that involves observation and collection and analysis of data (Dewey, 1933).

In his 1938 essay, *Unity of Science as a Social Problem*, Dewey is clear:

> "The scientific or reflective attitude is «freedom from control by routine, prejudice, dogma, unexamined tradition, sheer self-interest. […] It is the will to inquire, to examine, to discriminate, to draw conclusions only on the basis of evidence after taking care of gathering all available evidence. It is the intention to reach beliefs, and to test those that are entertained, on the basis of observed facts, also recognizing that facts are without meaning unless they point to ideas. It is, in turn, the experimental attitude which recognizes that while ideas are necessary to deal with facts, yet they are working hypotheses to be tested by the consequences they produce".[2]

And still "this attitude forms the sole ultimate alternative to prejudice, dogma, authority, and coercive force exercised in behalf of some special interest" (p. 280).

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[2] DEWEY, J. (1938b). Unity of science as social problem (p. 273). In O. Neurath, R. Carnap & C. Morris (Eds.), *Foundations of the unity of science. Toward an international encyclopedia of Unified science*. Chicago-London: University of Chicago Press.

In 1910, and then in 1933 (p. 200), Dewey tries to outline steps in the reflective thinking process. He suggests five phases of reflective thought:

"(1) suggestions, in which the mind leaps forward to a possible solution; (2) an intellectualization of the difficulty or perplexity that has been felt (directly experienced) into a problem to be solved, a question for which the answer must be sought; (3) the use of one suggestion after another as a leading idea, or hypothesis, to initiate and guide observation and other operations in the collection of factual material; (4) the mental elaboration of the idea or supposition as an idea (reasoning, in the sense in which reasoning is a part, not the whole of inference); and (5) testing the hypothesis by overt or imaginative action". [3]

The ability to train thought is not achieved merely by knowledge of the best forms of thought, but several attitudes need to be cultivated. In particular:
- Open-mindedness that Dewey defines as "freedom from prejudice, partisanship, and such other habits as close the mind and make it unwilling to consider new problems and entertain new ideas";
- Whole-heartedness as a "genuine enthusiasm" that "operates as an intellectual force";
- Responsibility that means to "consider the consequences of a projected step" and to "be willing to adopt these consequences when they follow reasonably from any position already taken".

Therefore, reflective attitude in this sense should support several processes.

The reflective attitude can lead to awareness of our own stereotypes and prejudices. In this way, it can help decrease accessibility and automaticity of stereotypes and promote ability to observe and collect data in situations.

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[3] DEWEY, J. (1933). *How we think: A restatement of the relation of reflective thinking to the educative process* (p. 200). New York: D.C. Heath and Company.

The reflective attitude can support and practice the ability to change our own point of view and to take other's perspective. In this way, it can facilitate the empathy processes.

The reflective attitude can make more flexible categories that we use to understand and interpret the world. In this way, it can encourage the activation of re-categorization processes.

Thus, the reflective attitude could be a useful tool to reduce the access to implicit biases and correct explicit biases.

Reflective thought is not an innate quality, though all normal people have the potential germs to become scientific in their attitudes. Thus, the ability to think reflectively must be educated.

Educating reflective thinking allows individuals not only to acquire the ability to solve problems, but also to reduce access to stereotypes and prejudice and this could be an important contribution to building a truly democratic, more pluralistic and inclusive society.

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In this volume we have collected the contributions of many colleagues from the teaching board of Double Degree Joint Master's Programme in Pedagogy and Educational Sciences and Training of Sapienza University of Rome and two prestigious universities of the Russian Federation: Moscow Federal University for Psychology and Pedagogy (MSUPE) and North-Caucasus Federal University (NCFU) at Stavropol.

The present anthology is meant to review the positions and studies that individual teachers from the different universities involved presented in recent years, during online courses, in the lecturing, in the meetings and to discuss their possible opportunities.

The volume puts forward this programme, to spread its structure, the theoretical assumptions and the various positions. The contributions are meant to testify a keen interest in internationalization that Sapienza is carrying out. The contributions collected give the reader a chance to share a common interest in the promising approach implied by the Historical-cultural trend in Psychology and Pedagogy of the Vygotsky's thought, which seems a must in psycho-pedagogical reflections, and in organizing and evaluating school activities.

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